Chapter Two
The Dying and the Dead amongst the Contemporary Kashivasis

It has been a common concern in anthropological writings on death to locate the practiced ritualistic modalities around a three-tiered movement, linear or cyclical, of the dying-death (dead)-after death (Hertz 1960; Van Gennep 1960; Mauss 1979; Das 1982; Weiner 1983; Parry 1994 et al). Further, given the eschatological specifications of a particular religious community, the dead could be installed in a morally envisioned hereafter of heaven or hell. Alternatively, the dead must wait to be reborn as living beings and thus creating the aforementioned cycle of death and birth or vice versa (Obeyesekere 2002). It is understood that the aberrant or untimely deaths are propitiated with a surplus of rituals, or else the survivors participate in ritualistic observations to distance themselves from the moral contagion of the ‘victim’. Needless to say the prototype for these contingent rituals is already laid within the regular observations of rituals, often present as the exception(s) to the rule(s) of timely death and death related rituals. To exemplify the above, I extend the discussions from previous chapters on anthropology of death citing the works of Veena Das, Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch amongst others, to bring to the fore, the complex elements involved in the instance of a Hindu death, cremated manually at Harishchandra ghat by ritual specialists. I also introduce the hospital, the Lolarka Kund and Kina Ram’s Aghorashram as three sites that empirically exemplify the link between death and sexuality. The movement from home of the afflicted to the hospital where the deaths seem to occur in contemporary Benares, forces me to revise the notion of both the idea of a ‘good’ death and that of a ‘Kashivasi’ — the designated dweller of the city. On another register, locating the life of the dead body, the morgue in the hospital and the cremation ghat become two specific sites of interest to me. I use the former to make a case for a repetitive symptom of the manifestation of an ontological gap between religion, ethics and science.

Towards the end of this chapter, I invoke this discussion in greater detail by particularly serializing the different possibilities of the movement of the dead from the moment of death to disposal. Here I use Lacan’s idea of ‘nodal points’ (point du caption)
to exhibit the link with language and ‘materialist theology’. Second, the space of cremation ghat leads me to anthropologically propose a contextually obverse relationship between death and prayer. While prayer, as I show, is characteristically defined by an element of ‘secrecy’, death on the other hand is a ‘disclosure’, a split opening that complicates the idea of the community. In this respect, I formulate how the Shavyatris — the men attending the funeral and cremation could be understood with respect to the idea of the community. In all these explorations, I methodologically deploy the features of multi-sited ethnography based on the vernacular adage of Sabko, ghum phir ke yahin aana hai! (After wandering, everyone has to come here, one way or the other) heard repeatedly at the cremation ghat.

The Notion of Sacrifice

In Structure and Cognition (1982) Veena Das discusses the efficacy of the domestic ritualistic observances centered around fertility, auspiciousness and happiness within the social construct of the household. She also carefully draws the distinction that death and cremation rituals are opposed to these domains and are externalized with respect to the sphere of the household. She bases her conclusions on a reading of Grihya Sutras undertaking a structuralist analysis of directional, spatial divisions and activities around the use of primordial elements by the householder. Das goes on to argue that “the death rituals do not form an integral part of the domestic rituals” (Das 1982: 8). She further mentions that the dying individual is taken out of the spaces of the household, where death is awaited and subsequently after the death, the person is further removed to the ghat. She elaborates and clarifies:

The Ashvalayana Grihya Sutra also advises a person who falls ill to leave his village and go elsewhere. If he recovers, he should return and perform a thanksgiving sacrifice. If he dies, his dead body should be cremated at a suitable place. From the internal evidence of the texts, as well as the structure of ideas, it seems erroneous to consider the cremation rites and rites to ancestors as belonging to a single class (Das 1982: 94).

Das however insists that the institution of fire is attached with the idea of sacrifice and thus when the “period of study” ends or a newly married couple enters a new house, the
setting up of the sacred fire is a ritual act that permits conjugal bliss (Das 1982: 92). In the same vein, she is of the opinion that the act of death, in which the cremation is ritualistically and holistically observed, the dead must be seen as a sacrificial self-victim (Das 1982: 118). Both these observations lead her to propose that life and death operate as two different tropes within Hinduism to the extent that the Durkheimian logic of sacred and profane could be restructured as that of life and death (Das 1982: 114). Following Robert Hertz (1960), Das sees the manifestation of this life and death distinction parodied in the application of the distinction of the right and the left handed ritualistic idioms. This has analytical implications for the oft-used pure-impure, pure-polluted categories in terms of everyday practices and the mythic reconsiderations of caste as well, to which I will respond a little later in this chapter. In the following section however, I contextualize it with ethnographic instances from Parry and Kaushik’s work.

Ethnographic Instances of Death in Benares

Jonathan Parry in Death in Banaras (1994) after a meticulous recording of the modes of bargains and exchanges through pari (taking turns) amongst different caste occupants recalls the death of an old ailing Khatik widow and follows the ritualistic observances by the mourners, both men and women. He qualifies the caste location with the remark: “The Khatiks are butchers and vegetable sellers. They are a low caste and most of my informants regard them as Untouchables” (Parry 1994: 152). Meena Kaushik’s thesis on Doms convincingly shows that notwithstanding the caste location, the idioms and the structuralist logic said to be present in ritualistic observances, could be seen as homological across castes (1976). For Parry, caste specificity is significant to explain the ‘celebration’ of the death of the widow in such a ‘triumphant fashion’, which he argues would not be the case for the upper castes’ folks. He adds, “though in the case of a ‘good death’ still a joyful occasion, no Brahmin would regard a loud speaker system and fairy lights as in keeping with its dignity” (Parry 1994: 155). Yet to a large extent, he argues in a similar vein as Kaushik’s thesis of homology across castes, even as his concern in representing this event of death is to map the expressions of grief. He starts rather abashedly, almost like offering a catch line, by claiming, “At death it is men who give birth” (Parry 1994: 152). Parry argues:
In nearly all communities, women are regarded as too faint hearted to accompany the corpse to the burning ghat, and it is exclusively men who assist at cremation. Even in the absence of a son it is almost invariably a man who serves as the dagiya (‘the one who gives fire’), and who performs the subsequent rites. What then is the role of women? The short answer is, to grieve (Parry 1994: 152).

The above validates my observation in the previous chapter that the life of the dead body at the cremation ghat is significantly more than just a mere entity worth of affect, for the few grieving relatives. It acquires a separate, parallel life and is not necessarily always condensed meaningfully within the ambit of the existential, biographical and the familial realm of affectivity. In this sense one can argue that the cremation ghat to a large extent is about this generic dis-connectedness, with the specificities of the moments of dying and the magnitude of death of a relative as experienced by the close relatives. As such, grieving is not part of the social expression at the ghats and most shavyatris adopt an industrious attitude of consummating the rituals together. So, I argue that the feminine and masculine principles may be present in the ways in which the ontological categories of elements like water, fire, air and earth are engendered in their ritualistic aspects. But as Parry mentions, women may be denied access to the cremation rituals and I would add that it is not just women, but children also do not accompany the male elders, unless the chief mourner is himself a child. However, I will return to this theme of grief later in the chapter. Let me, for now, cite Parry’s recording of the rest of the ceremony.

As death is declared late in the night, by morning there are rounds of lamentations, chest beating and hoarse crying by women, while the men “drifted off in little knots on the periphery of the compound and chatted quietly amongst themselves” (Parry 1994: 153). Interestingly, Parry notes: “from the moment of death until the funeral procession left for the cremation ground, the corpse had been laid under a canopy in the courtyard with the feet pointing south...”. This is in keeping with Das’s remark that the dead has to be removed from the defined spaces of the household and has to be gradually moved to the cremation ghat (Das 1982). In other words, the household is the realm of the ‘living’ and the realm of the ‘dead’ cannot be allowed to overlap that space. Parry observes that men decorate the bier with “red pennants, fruit, garlands, paper streamers and balloons”
with two ‘English bands’ playing in the background, and subsequently the funeral procession moves to the ghat. Later Kamla Khatik, the son of the deceased mother, offers the sacrificial fire and post cremation, everyone comes home with a special set of ritual observations with reference to Kamla. Parry notes that “over the next nine days, Kamla sat largely immobile and impassive, on an old sack in the middle of his courtyard, facing north and with a lota of water beside him” (Parry 1994: 154).

Elsewhere, Parry discusses the ritual practice accorded to Kamla in his position as chief mourner. The entire bereaved family is to have sattvik food without hot elements like spices, salt, and garnishing and even avoiding auspicious things like turmeric and Desi Ghee (clarified fat extracted from Cow’s milk). The chief mourner must follow even more ‘stringent’ rules. In his dietary restrictions or privilege, as it were, the chief mourner is seen to be eating for the cremated dead, while the dead wanders in preta lok (the netherworld), looking for the ritualistic installation in the pitr lok (the world of the patrilineal ancestors). Parry adds that “one of the most striking aspects of this identification is that he is said to eat for the prêt, who receives the food he digests. In the dialect of the Maithili community of Banaras the term for chief mourner is, in fact, mukhya pachak – chief digester” (Parry 1994: 199).

Meena Kaushik in her essay, ‘The Symbolic Representation of Death’ (1976) based on fieldwork among Doms in Benares reiterates the validity of the life and death distinction. She poses this distinction against Srinivas’s use of sanskritic and non-sanskritic division that he relates with the practices of the dominant (‘upper’) castes and the ‘lower’ (‘untouchable’) castes respectively. She puts forth the idea of ‘cosmology’ as a social construct that unifies all castes in the structuralist sense of the term and while there may be variation in rituals’ usage, the underlying logic remains the same. She equally disagrees with Dumont’s categorization of death related work as largely that of ‘pollution’ and rituals as mere instruments of removing the pollution as well as tools that help the mourners (re)integrate themselves with the rest of the community. Instead, she borrows Das’s categorization of life and death to illustrate two comparative instances of deaths at a dom’s family and a Brahmin family. Interestingly, she like Das also affirms that citation of scriptural verses during observances of rites must also be brought into analytical account in their forms of recitation and relation with the ritual action.
Describing the death in a Dom family, which is not very atypical from what Parry accounts for the Khatik family, Kaushik argues that the major difference between the ritualistic observances at the Dom’s death as compared to the Gauda (Brahmin) family’s death is that ‘vedic mantras’ are “recited throughout the whole ritual” in the latter case (Kaushik 1976: 276). There is a further difference in terms of the greater number of sraddhas that are offered to the dead amongst the Gaudas’. Kaushik states that it is common amongst many Brahmin communities to “prepare the fire for cremation at home, from the sacrificial fire (srauta fire) and [that] is carried to the cremation ghat in a pot along with the corpse” (Kaushik 1976: 277).

So after construing cosmology as a total social architecture, she argues that the meaningfulness of every particular ritual act could be derived by constructing the link between the universal and the particular. She goes on to delineate the presence of the lateral, spatial, culinary and acoustic symbolism involved in the ritual processes. The aspect of lateral has already been clarified to be the one, which involves idioms of left and right, in congruence with death and life. Similarly she argues cold and hot food is used to classify the life preserving and that which aggravates death or causes fatality respectively. This reference can be followed to look at what Maurice Bloch has to say on the culinary symbolism.

Bloch in an essay on the Merina of Madagascar, ‘Almost Eating the Ancestors’ (1985), cites the ritual eating of beef as a transubstantiated act of necrophagy. Both beef eating and necrophagy, he argues could be understood ethnographically if one locates them within two given myths. He says in his abstract to the essay:

These myths are seen as a general speculation on problems arising from the concept of descent which for the Merina is focused on their megalithic tombs. In the idiom of descent, being like ancestors is the ideal, but it also means being dead. For the living, therefore, there has to be something else: vitality. This is enjoyable, but morally ambiguous because it is opposed to ancestorhood and leads to putrefaction. Vitality is represented in these myths by cattle, and the violence with which they are killed in ritual becomes a way of conquering the moral ambiguities of vitality while still retaining its strength and pleasurability; while cooking beef avoids putrefaction (Bloch 1985: 631).
This, Bloch argues still doesn’t offer a solution to the ‘problem of descent’ and the metonymic turn between life and death still remains unexplained. In the essay while discussing the myths, which are not recounted here as this discussion does not permit it, he points to the significance of rice which stands as an icon for the food of regeneration and replenishment. He further points that the water within which the rice is cooked is in fact more sacred than the rice itself and the sacralization of the rice could be because it has an essence of that water. Water, or mahery, he observes “also has a negative side which makes adding it to [a] blessing problematic”. The semantic extant could be understood by an example, say when a newborn, who is considered as wet is seen to have turned dry through ritual action and then subsequently could be incorporated into the male or female’s domain. Bloch thus argues that the ritual of male circumcision irrevocably installs the male child into the domain of the male ancestors, who live in the dry part of the wet rice fields.

Clearly, what makes the wet dry is the transformative aspect of fire. And the land where the rice grows, which integrates, more than disintegrates the divide between water and fire is the soil that stands as the substance of relative permanence. Thus the ‘soil’ here is a symptomatic analytical category that does not permit the clear separation of the elements in their respective domains. It is this account that I seek to expand on, with regard to my ethnographic context. But before doing so, let me condense the discussions that I have evoked so far.

Revision and Reconceptualization

Reconsidering the themes mentioned above let me create a model of the structuralist analytics of death as an event. One may say that the constellation of idioms that I have selectively quoted above speak to each other in the way Lévi-Strauss conceives myths talking to each other (1963). It is a given that if the myths that the anthropologists analyze speak to each other, their analyses must also do so, even if in disagreements. It is also important to create this careful interweaving of the above mentioned themes because I do not wish to read and present my data as a ‘variation of practice’ only, while arguing that the theory or the structuralist imperative remains the same as elucidated by Das, Kaushik, Bloch and Parry. It is with this construction then that I would be able to bring to record
the institutional shifts that seem to have happened with regard to the emergent centrality of the hospital and the electric crematorium within the context of anthropology of death discussed here.

Could Life be Opposed to Death?

I wish to re-examine the opposition of life and death that Das creates in arguing that death and death rituals are separate from the sphere of the household, which is a site of fertility and congeniality. I propose to do this on two levels. The first, as discussed in the previous chapter is to evoke the centrality of the symbol of 'hand' in the division of right and left. The point is not simply to argue here that the division of right and left cannot be sustained by suggesting that both have the common material link of the 'hand' and 'handling' of any ritual complicates the dichotomous divisions. I am making the obverse claim that what actually causes this dualism, what maintains this “minimal difference” of “non coincidence of the One with itself”, of the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ is the traumatic hidden kernel, a foreclosed minimal tension (Zižek 2006: 11). In this context, one could say then that the idiom of this hidden register, this traumatic kernel could be the metaphor of death. However this could only be manifested by showing how death and sexuality, get associated with each other in a way that the ‘void’ produced by ‘death’ is constantly overrun by the ‘excess’ of sexuality. The same could be said for any homological dichotomy that is posed under the right and left handed distinction. This brings me to the second level of the discussion, where I show how exactly the modality of the working of this ‘minimal gap’ itself can be theoretically represented while locating the quilting points (point du caption of Lacan) of fertility-congeniality and death-sexuality within the realm of the household and that of the cremation ghat.

The Case of Fire: From Kitchen to the Cremation Ground

In reading the accounts of Parry, Kaushik and Fillipi (1996), I could not corroborate what I saw and what the Shavyatris at the Harishchandra ghat told me about the feature of Parvah (in Bhojpuri)/Pravah (in Sanskritic Hindi). In order to make sense of the same, one would have to locate the journey of the dead from home to the cremation ghat. If one were to create an archetype of few significant events leading to the cremation by taking
cues from Kaushik and Parry's accounts and by substantiating it from my own ethnographic recordings, it could be as following.

The Dagiya (the chief mourner, who offers the sacrificial fire) first gets a smoldering Gointha (cow dung sun baked into a fuel) from the household where the death has happened. He touches that to the feet of the dead and indeed this underlines that he is the one who has taken the Dag (has announced himself as to be the chief mourner by offering the fire to the dead/ has to be recognized as the chief mourner by his offering).

I noticed that many had substituted the smokey Gointha with the incensed Agarbattis nowadays, probably because the Gointha is not available so commonly and also it may burn off faster. Here then is a key link between the household and the cremation ghat or more aptly between the kitchen and the pyre. One may argue that the sacred fire that created and recreated the people everyday in their house is taken out and in it being taken to the cremation ghat, the mourning household must remain without fire. At the ghat, however, the futility of this fire is acknowledged by the mandatory bargain of the fire from the Dom.

The anthropological lesson from Lévi-Strauss tells us “metonymy corresponds to the order of events, [and] metaphor to the order of structure” (1963b: 27). Thus the borrowing of fire or the gift of fire from the Doms is a metonymic event, which is sutured in the process of cremation as a crucial ‘turn’. It is a shift in terms of the guardianship of the fire — from the women’s ownership which is flagged by the male householder as mourner to the Dom’s gift of fire that is to transform the dead. The cremation ghat as functioning with a deliberate non-familiarity of the affective links between the mourners and the dead could be affirmed here. The householder’s fire is denied the double act of sacrificial value, one of the kitchen and another of the cremation ground. This aspect of the anonymity or non familiarity of the dead body to the people at the ghat is also corroborated by the fact that the dead is referred as Maati in Bhojpuri by both the Shavyatris and the Doms. That is to refer it as a substance — not representing a ‘lack’ or a ‘surplus’ but simply the neuter earth. It has to be clarified though that the earth is not neuter in all contexts within the Hindu cosmology, in fact there are occasions when the earth is conceived as feminine, particularly within agrarian metaphors in relation to reproductive sexuality (See Das 1993:198-222). Thus, within the common phenomena of
engendering the earth, when there is a neuter representation, it has to be understood within the ideological framework of what Lévi-Strauss calls as a “zero institution” (Lévi-Strauss 1963a:131-163). A crucial entrapment of meaning that simultaneously allows ‘earth’ to exist as part of the institution of cremation, yet its’ existence is “non-determinate”, “without any positive content” (Žižek 2000:113). Even in the case of cremation, ‘maati’ signifies an effacement of the ‘particular’ features of the dead. The dead is no longer a relative with a proper name. However at the same time, there is also a recognition of the woman’s ‘maati’ and a man’s ‘maati’, during the time of pravah, dependant upon the sex of the dead, a certain flesh-bone is saved and immersed in the river. The point to be illustrated here is that even in the “sexuation” of elements there are occasions when they could be used singularly as “empty signifier(s)” so as to sustain the edifice of the “signifying chain” in general.

There is a relay of the fire from the household to the cremation ghat and perhaps back to the household with deference to the mourning period but in all three cases the fire is of separate origin, it has to be discontinuous. But how is this discontinuity punctuated? One of the common sights at the ghat at the arrival of the new bier is that the close relatives, starting from the Dagiya, half immerse the Maati and put water on the mouth of the Maati. This is, precisely, the moment of extinguishing the fire that was continuing from the household. Once extinguished, now the Dom’s fire could be offered as the Mukhaagni (fire in the mouth of the sacrificial victim), the sacrificial fire to the Maati. Again when the body has burnt, Pravah — the last physical remain of the dead that is saved from being turned into ash is thrown back to the river. This is to return the fire back to the river. This ritual act is mimed in the breaking of the Matki (earthen pot) filled with Gangajal (Ganga’s water) after the circumambulation of the Maati. Here one can make a distinction between temporalities involved. One is that of the erstwhile living being, who typically have had an investiture of the household fire punctuated by his birth, growing up, marriage, reproductive issues, their marriage and finally his death; the second is that of the brief period in which the fire from the cremation ghat divests that body from the affect of the germinal warmth of the household fire. The return from the cremation ghat invariably involves an investiture in a new household fire, afresh. This return of the fire has to be ritually condensed within the stipulated period of mourning for the Dagiya. One
could illustrate this argument from a very different register by quoting the Rg veda' hymn of the celestial architect Vishwakarma being exhausted by the act of self sacrifice.

The Signified and the Signification in the Rg Veda

Brahma, the self-existent, was performing fervid concentration. "In fervid concentration," he reflected, "there is no infinity. Come, let me sacrifice myself in living things and all living things in myself". Then, having sacrificed himself in all living things in himself, he acquired greatness, self radiance, and sovereignty. Satapatha Brahmana (SB) XIII, 7,1,1

Now the lord of creatures, having brought forth living beings, felt himself as it were emptied. The creatures turned away from him; nor did they abide with him for his joy and for his sustenance. SB III, 9, 1,1

Having brought forth all things that exist, he felt like one emptied out and was afraid of death. SB X, 4, 2, 2

When he had procreated all the beings and run through the whole gamut of creation he fell into pieces...when he was fallen into pieces, his breath departed from the midst of him, and when his breath had departed, the Gods abandoned him. He said to Agni, "Put me, I pray you, together again. SB VI, 1, 2, 12-13

When he had produced the creatures, Prajapati fell into pieces. Being reduced to a (mere) heart he was lying exhausted. He uttered a cry: "Alas, my life!" The waters heard him. They came to his aid and by means of sacrifice of the firstborn they restored to him his sovereignty. Taittiriya Brahmana (TB) II, 3, 6, 1 (Quoted in Panikkar, his translation 1977: 79).

Clearly what emerges by putting these two contexts together is not necessarily a validation of the ritual as an act drawn from the Vedic hymn but a hint as to how elements like water, fire and air are understood in terms of their capacities to create and recreate. That is to say, if transformative properties of these elements participate in the endless recreation of the already given, one could understand the meaning and moment of death in the ways in which life is conceived. After gleaning few important significations from the verses mentioned above, it is apparent that the exhausted self-sacrificed Brahma represents the archetypical Purusa. In a verse before this one, the one which is oft quoted to signify the dismembering of the physical self to create the four varnas, which is incidentally called as the Purusa suktas, the description of the Purusa starts with an efficacious note — of a person who represents the excess and surplus, which he uses to create lives in different forms.
A thousand-headed is the Man
With a thousand eyes, a thousand feet;
Encompassing the earth all sides,
He exceeded it by ten fingers’ breath (Panikkar 1977: 75).

This thousand headed man borne out of himself with the surplus of the ardor (tapa), through an act of ‘self-immolation’ creates all things animate and inanimate: animals, liturgical formulas, the four castes of men, the cosmic powers:

From his spirit comes the moon, from his eyes the sun, from his mouth Indra and Agni, from his breath the wind, from his navel the air, from his head the sky, from his feet the earth, from the ears the points of the compass — nothing, nobody is omitted (Panikkar 1977: 75).

This colonization and endlessly reflexive differentiation is undoubtedly done through self-sacrifice, and what way to ensure one’s dismembering that everything new, in its multiple forms still carries the same essence. This is one of the ways in which the Hindu cosmology can be compared with the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic, in so far as there is a repeated and unconscious return of the same element in every aspect of the Hindu ritual sphere. However, the inconsistency or what was termed as the ‘minimal gap’, that comes to be because of the hidden register within every aspect of the cosmology itself suggests that the ‘return’ of death mediated through sexuality destabilizes the link between the pre-ordained codes of social signification. It is here that the presence of the Real becomes unequivocally clear in so far as one knows that the Symbolic can never be addressed literally, it is always decentred.

Going back to the above-mentioned verse, one observes that the notion of reproduction involved here doesn’t invoke biological intercourse, which as I will show comes only later. It is the Purusa himself participating in the creation through sacrifice. And it is through this insight we can understand the significance of cremation as sacrifice and more importantly of man as the reproducer. Pannikar notes that the Purusa, is the “primordial man, the theandric principle” (1977: 84). Extending this observation, I claim that in the creation of the four varna based classification of castes, the feminine principle is not yet signified and this form is what Lacan would call as phallic organization of the Father. In other words, it is the quest for the order on which the symbolic is expected to
axiomatically persist. Let me quote an extensive excerpt from Lacan’s discussion on the relationship between the Father, signifier and death. He says:

If the symbolic context requires it, paternity will nonetheless be attributed to the fact that the woman met a spirit at some fountain or rock in which he is supposed to live.
It is certainly this that demonstrates that the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father.
Of course, there is no need of a signifier to be a father, any more than to be dead, but without a signifier, no one would ever know anything about either state of being...

He further relates this to Freud’s discussion of parricide by saying:

How, indeed, could Freud fail to recognize such an affinity, when the necessity of his reflection led him to link the appearance of the signifier of the father, as author of the Law, with death, even to the murder of the father – thus showing that if this murder is the fruitful moment of debt through which the subject binds himself for life to see the Law, the symbolic Father is, in so far as he signifies this Law, the dead father (Lacan 1977: 220-221).

In the context of our discussion, this death that enables the law of the father, is, as described above, through an act of ‘self-immolation’. Which further enables the father to reproduce himself endlessly — “nothing, nobody is omitted” — in what Lacan calls as the “repetition compulsion” (Lacan 1977: 112). The symbol that stands most lucidly for this aspect is the metaphor of the Name-of-the-father as fire (tap). This is further confirmed by looking at verses in which the ‘emergence’ of the biological woman is mentioned. Here are the first four stanzas of Agre from the Upanishads, as provided by Panikkar:

In the beginning there was nothing here whatsoever. All this was swathed in Death — in Hunger, for hunger indeed is death. Then he resolved to himself: “Would that I had a self!” So he moved around in worship. While he was worshipping, water was born. Brhadaranyaka Upanisad (BU), I,2,1.
In the beginning this was the self alone, in the form of a man. Looking around he saw nothing whatever except himself. He even said in the beginning: “I am” and thence arose the name “I” so even today, when a Man is addressed, he says in the beginning. “It is I,” and then adds any other name he may have. Furthermore, since before the world came to be, he had burned up all evils; he is Man. He who knows this also burns up whoever wants to be before him.”

BU I, 4, 1-5; 17

“He was afraid; so even today, one who is all alone is afraid. He thought to himself: “since nothing exists except me, of what am I afraid? Thereupon his fear vanished, for of what should he have been afraid? It is of a second fear arises.

He found no joy; so, even today, one who is all alone finds no joy. He yearned for a second. He became as large as a man and a woman locked in close embrace. This self he split into two; hence arose husband and wife. Therefore, as Yajnavalkya used to observe: “oneself is like half of a split pea.” That is why this void is filled by woman. He was united with her and thence were born human beings.”

She thought: “how can he unite with me, as he has brought me forth out of himself? Well, I will hide myself.” She became a cow, but he became a bull and united with her. Hence cattle arose. She became a mare, he a stallion; she became a she-ass, he a male ass. He united with her and hence single hoofed animals arose. She became a she-goat, he a he-goat; she became a sheep, he a ram. He united with her and hence goats and sheep arose. In this way he created everything that exists in pairs, down to the ants.”

He realized: “I indeed am creation, for I produced all this” — for he had become the creation. And he who has this knowledge becomes [a creator] in that same creation. (Pannikar 1977: 81-82)

What one has here, after the phallic creation of the world, is a heterosexual differentiation that ensues to the already created cosmos. An act of self-dismemberment that leads to reproduction of a second being as a woman, who emerges directly as a wife and not as a woman, homological to the Man. Notice also the site of anxiety over the presence of the second. At the first instance the fact that a second may exist apart from the phallic ‘theandric’ principle is a cause of ‘fear’ and at a later stage, a ‘second’ being produced of one’s own self becomes a company to stave off loneliness. This brings me to cite the instance where one comes across a complex attribution of property with regard to language when it is said within the Vedic revelation that “speech is his wife”. However this relationship of conjugality, which we already know is about friendship (with the ‘fearful second’ of the purusa) and communication, it is apt that speech, as a feminine principle acquires a life of her own. Though how the ‘feminine’ comes to have a life of
her own and a multiple one at that which is continually displaced from one register to another is not immediately obvious. Here one may disagree with Panikkar’s reading when he says that:

*Vac* is grammatically feminine and this fact has conditioned a great deal of thinking about the Vedic Word. If an ontology of sex has any meaning at all, it would find here a decisive basis. However that may be, *vac* expresses that total surrender to the source from which it springs which is characteristically found in the archetype of the feminine love, the feminine feature of love being that of finding not only fulfillment but being itself in the beloved. (Panikkar 1977: 89).

The characterization of the word as ‘feminine’ is a foreclosed event but what one can reinterpret here is the possibility of ‘fulfillment’ as an essential feature of the feminine. Again, Lacan’s maxim that there is no ‘sexual relationship ever, it is perpetually displaced in an excess driven “spurious infinity” may be useful here (Žižek 2006: 13). Thus instead of posing the feminine as the one who really ‘fulfills’ desire, one may argue that the metonymic basis of the sexual relationship between the ‘self’ (*manas*) and the ‘word’ (*vac*) is that there is never a possibility of fulfillment proper. It is in this sense language acquires both an autonomy and a subjective depth that the masculine principle lacks. Then while referring to the two metaphors of the feminine, word (*vac*) and water (*apah*) (Panikkar 1977: 116), I suggest that the complex drive of both could be captured through my use of *pravah* and *parvah* at the metonymic level. Primarily by showing through language (*point de capiton*, privileged signifiers) how in the Hindu ritualistic acts of cremation and disposal of the dead, a topological link could be established between ‘*pravah*’ (death drive) and ‘*parvah*’ (ethics). The following verse may further qualify the association between water, word and the feminine:

In the beginning there was only the *atman*, one only. He desired: “may I have a wife in order to have offspring; may I have wealth in order to perform a work!” For desire reaches this far. Even if one wishes, one cannot obtain more than this. Therefore, even nowadays, if a man is alone, he desires: “May I have a wife in order to have offspring; may I have wealth in order to perform a work!” As long as he does not obtain each of these [desires], he thinks himself to be incomplete. His completeness, however, is this: the mind is his Self [*atman*]; speech is his wife; breath is his offspring; the eye is his
human wealth, for he finds it with the eye; the ear is his divine wealth, for he hears it with the ear; the body [atman] is his work, for he works with the body. Fivefold, indeed, is the sacrifice, fivefold is the victim, five fold is the man. Whatever there is, the whole universe, is fivefold. He attains all this, who knows thus (Panikkar 1977: 82).

Apart from the materialistic grounding of ‘desire’ itself, one may note that there are constant references to water representing the feminine principle and fire adopting the stance of the phallic, while the wind actually creates a third principle which brings the elements like fire and water together (Panikkar 1977: 80). The fire is the ‘undead’ part, which recurs, while the water is assumed to be always present in its flow — pravah, through the material immortality of the movement of the stream and the use of words. It is this operative logic over which the symbolic exists. The difference between these two features, fire as the metaphor for the phallic and water and word’s metonymic association with the feminine principle, also appears stark to the extent that one cannot miss the contrasting relief created of a passive, matter of fact presence of the feminine principle in the background by the incendiary aggressiveness and transient character of — the phallic organization. The Freudian death drive contextualized in this sphere would mean that fire could stand for the recurring ‘undead’ masculine principle but from where does the ‘compulsion-to-repeat’ or ‘retreat’ come from? The answer may lie in locating the origin of subjectivity itself. Slavoj Žižek argues that in fact birth of ‘subjectivity’ could be ‘out of feminine depression’ (1994: 135). He says:

The elementary structure of subjectivity turns on how not-all of the subject is determined by the causal chain. The subject ‘is’ this very gap that separates the cause from its effect; it emerges precisely in so far as the relationship between cause and effect becomes ‘unaccountable’. In other words, what is feminine depression that suspends the causal link, the causal connection between our acts and external stimuli, if not the founding gesture of subjectivity, the primordial act of freedom, of refusing our insertion into the nexus of cause and effects? The philosophical name for this ‘depression’ is absolute negativity – what Hegel called ‘the night of the world’, the subject’s withdrawal into itself. In short, woman, not man, is the subject par excellence. And the link between this depression and the indestructible life-substance is also clear: depression, withdrawal-into-self, is the primordial act of retreat, of maintaining a distance towards the indestructible life-substance, making it appear as a repulsive scintillation (Žižek 1994: 122).
At this stage, following the previous discussions, let me now pointedly make my reformulations clear with respect to my use of concepts like cosmology, elements, masculinity, femininity, death drive and ethics so as to proceed further in the chapter to substantiate it with instances from the ethnographic context.

**Pravah**

First, in order to specifically show both the ‘repetition-compulsion’ and internal inconsistency of the Hindu cosmology I am using *pravah* as a category. *Pravah* the Sanskrit-Hindi word that is usually associated with the unbroken flow of the river is being used here in the context of cremation ritual, where it is considered as a definitive feature. As elaborated earlier, *pravah* involves immersing a small part of the body that is burnt and saved through the cremation, in the river Ganga by the *dagiya* (the chief mourner, who offers the sacrificial fire in the mouth of the ‘victim’). I have two observations to make here. One, the fact that the conduct of this ritual occupies a central position and all the social efforts of the *shavyatris* are devoted in observing it properly, makes it a privileged act of the Symbolic. It is however crucial to note that the small part that is immersed in the river doesn’t have a ‘face’ and thus its ‘properness’ is taken away. It is then an extreme example of what Julia Kristeva terms as the ‘abject’, that which can neither be addressed as a subject nor as an object but as a “border” that is “above all, ambiguity” (Kristeva 1982: 9). Insofar that this aspect cannot be ‘symbolized’, the *pravah* alludes to the dimension of the Real and affirms the connection between the Symbolic and the Real. The second point is that how does this seemingly mundane act of immersing a non-descript part of a cremated body by the *dagiya* marks the Hindu cosmology to the extent that the non-observation of this act signifies an improper disposal of the dead? The answer is in explicating the aspect of ‘death drive’ that I am transposing to the concept of *pravah*. Žižek argues that what separates human from animals is not a different totality of birth-procreation-death that may be directed towards a higher ‘spiritual gain’ but the “radical narrowing of focus, the elevation of a minor activity into an end in itself. We become “humans” when we get caught into a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it” (2006: 63). So it is in
this sense that the ‘self-propelling’ loop (the adjunct of Sabko, Ghum phir ke yahin ana hai! After wandering, everyone has to come here eventually!) of pravah comes to be and since pravah as a death drive is borne out of the unconscious its structure can be represented within language. It is here that Lacan’s point du caption — the privileged signifiers, becomes illustrative. If the pravah as a death drive borne out of the unconscious is going to eternally re-return, what happens to its form? Is it going to be the same in different temporalities and spaces, what when today with the electric crematoria the act of pravah in its ‘imaginary’ form of open cremation and immersion of the burnt bone and flesh in the river has become impossible? Here I insist on a difference between the Lacanian notion of desire and drive. The realm of desire is a continuously shifting ground where every metonymic turn marks a birth of new desire and that is how the cycle continues endlessly (Žižek 2006: 62). Thus what constitutes a ‘proper’ cremation in the age of hospital and the electric crematoria has to be understood in the metonymic turns of the modes that provide a very different ‘imaginary’ but sustain the homological link of the Symbolic-Real. In other words, ‘proper’ cremation may mutate its form, and precisely for this reason post-modern Benares can be described as the one which is caught in answering this demand of the Hindu desire, but what about the drive? The drive, ‘pravah’ on the other hand continues, as I suggested in the last section in terms of the exact link between death (void) and sexuality (excess). This is where then one has to bring in the elements like water, fire, air, earth and ether. The elements represented in language are marked by an investiture and divesture of meanings. The fire (agni) comes to represent the masculine principle, the water (apah) the feminine, the wind (vayu) the mediating agent, the earth as neuter and so on (See also the description above p107-108). In my ethnographic context the fire represents two important metaphors. One is the externalized abject thing, that of incendiary cremation fire that is based on the exchange from the controlled fire of the household and second is the internalized one that of tap — the ardour, that the ascetics are meant to have with which the symbolic gets sustained. Similarly the dead body at the cremation ghat represents neuter in the sense of being called ‘maati’ (earth) by the shavyatris and customarily not referred through terms of kinship or proper name. The water, of course is represented by Ganga, who again is associated with supposedly an exclusive property of providing nourishment and
satisfaction to both death (as hunger) and fire (as seed). The wind becomes significant as the controlled and precarious mediating agent between life and death as pran (vital force). Coming back to water as the feminine feature though, what one can draw as an observation is that contrary to ‘Ganga’ representing the ‘nourishing mother’ she could functionally be in an obverse position to the ‘immortality’ that pravah as the death drive represents. She could be what Ron Barrett (2008) calls as the ‘cosmic sink’ where every abject ‘thing’ in the Kristevan sense could be immersed and the Hindu Symbolic-Real may be sustained and also the ‘imaginary’ that is offered by Ganga as the “mirror” of Hindu civilization could be upheld. However, it is precisely the constituent aspects of the Real that characterizes the elements and their ‘uncanny’ character that prevents a perfect realization of any ‘right handed’ and ‘left handed’ classification. In fact this void itself becomes a generative site to call for such divisions and it maintains their differance but what it also does is that it provides an excess that is more than that can be handled. Thus it is by reconstructing the interplay of these elements that the contemporary relation between the Hindu household, hospital, electric crematorium and the aghorashram could be undertaken.

Parvah

This brings me to the second aspect. Gananath Obeyesekere, in his Imagining Karma (2002), a long treatise on karma and its implications in world religious systems concurs with other theorists that unlike other religions that have strict division of heaven and hell, before the advent of ‘samanic’ (Buddhism, Jainism etc.) religions of the Ganges valley, the Indic religions were not ‘ethicized’ in the strict sense. He argues while “considering the Rg veda” as “the oldest stratum of Brahminic religion” that:

The soul at death, driven by a chariot or on wings, takes the route of the fathers and reaches a place of eternal rest. The Rg Vedic notion of heaven is a paradisiacal one: “there is light, the sun for the highest waters, every form of happiness, the svadha, which is at once the food of the spirits and the power which they win by it, their self determination” (Rp, 2: 407). As is well known, the major deity of the Rg veda is Indra, who, along with other divinities, enjoys material luxury, intoxicants (sura), milk, ghee, honey, and the soma (the drink of immortality), as well as the delights of love. There is
also music and singing and a celestial fig tree where Yama drinks with the gods (Obeyesekere 2002: 99-100)

He notes that “this eschatology is paradisiacal, not a retributive, one”. And further argues that the “the Atharva Veda depicts at best a minimally or occasionally ethicized eschatology. Here also the otherworld is for all and is contingent on the performance of the correct rituals rather than on the moral nature of one’s this worldly actions” (2002: 100).

Later with the coming of the samanic religions, there are endless ‘contentious discourses’ within ‘Buddhist thought’; the methods involved could be compared with “eel-wriggling” and “hair splitting”, he says of these discursive exchanges (2002: 108). To sum up, he says that the ethicization that happened around this time should be characterized as “ethical asceticism”. He defines it by saying “asceticism is not necessarily ethical nor even necessarily salvific; often it is to acquire spiritual powers through bodily mortification” (2002: 117). Gradually, the discursive tropes were extended to the laity and that’s how the practice of karma should be envisaged. However he also insists that there are ‘aporias’ in the Karmic injunctions. In other words, not the entire social domain is captured by the ethics of social morality. The questions of misery, sadness, accidents, disasters and traumatic events are at the registers where Karma falters as a causal explanation. This provides me with an opportunity to make a case for a materialist theology that in other words exists as a symptomatic repressed aspect of the Hindu Symbolic-Real. I would define this in greater detail in the subsequent section on the Hospital but let me introduce a caveat here. I am using parvah (ethics) as the (semiotically alluded) unconscious of pravah to point to the possibility of another ‘ethics’ other than the prevalent one within the Hindu moral sphere. More so, at a juncture when Ganga the river itself is under the requirement of a proper cremation, this may be the best ethnographic instance of clarifying the link between the ‘cosmic sink’, the river Ganga and the death drive of pravah. As Lacan argues that drives are essentially ethical, I wish to show that with respect to Ganga, how a realm of ethics (parvah) could be found in order to reconsider the physical substance of the river as an element, not the river as a feminine abject body, which in any case would persist as a death drive. Speaking of the feminine, let me show in the next section the relation between femininity, fire (tap,
ardour) and what I have quoted above in the discussion by Obeyesekere as “ethical asceticism”.

*The Case of the Widows and the Sadhus*

Let me cite one instance from an ethnography on widows who have come to die in contemporary Benares. Baidyanath Saraswati in the foreword and introduction to the ethnography by Satyaprakash Mittal and Ramlakhan Maurya — *Kashi mein mokshakami pravsi vidhvayen: Dharmik samajik jivan*9 makes an illuminating observation (2005). He argues that the notion of *Kashivasi* is an entitlement reserved for only those who come from outside to die in the city. The rest who live there and conduct their daily businesses and do their services are not automatically *Kashivasi* (Saraswati in Mittal and Maurya: 20). Thus one can argue that nativity by itself doesn’t mean religious merit, it is the death-seeking migrants who define the city and this in a way also becomes the characteristic definition of the archetypical city itself.

Parry describes the early nineteenth century practice of people being brought on their deathbeds and being ‘exposed’ to hasten death at the ghats. He says:

> In the first half of the nineteenth century, Baptist missionaries in Bengal mounted a vigorous campaign against these ‘ghat-murders’, alleging that the practice hastened death in a majority of cases, and was consciously intended to promote in a few (Peggs 1848). Legislation was enacted to prevent such exposures (Bayly 1981: 172) (Parry 1994: 52).

In order to comment on Parry’s observation, let me return to Saraswati’s definition of who is a *Kashivasi*? As noted above, he argues that ‘belonging’ to the city of Benares cannot be ascribed to those who are born there and who carry on with their daily businesses, rather, the *Kashivasi* is the one who comes to seek death in Benares. Those seeking death in Benares can be categorized as *sadhus*, widows and the terminally ill aged people. Here, one can add that the ‘fire’ of the household or that of the kitchen is associated with the patriline. In case of the *sadhus*, their death rituals are observed when they leave the house, and thus they cannot be cremated and are immersed in the river without their bodies being burnt. It is clear that in their case, at the time of ritual immersion in the river, the representation of their patrilineal link is not required and anyone can immerse a dead *sadhu* in the river. Most appropriately, this immersion is
required to be observed by a moral community of *shavyatris* who are not filially linked to the *sadhu*. However, in the case of the widow and the terminally ill who wait for their death in Benares, there has to be a symbolic representation of the patrilineal kin and metonymically that of the kitchen fire. In other words, the widow cannot be immersed in the river. She has to be cremated after her death. In most cases, since the widow's own kin are not present at the time of her death she is cremated by a putative 'son', who offers the 'sacrificial fire' (*mukhagni*). In this case the moral community of contingent *shavyatris* that come together to cremate the widow is bound by classificatory relatedness and not simply that of religious affiliation as in the case of the followers of the event of the immersion of the *sadhu*. This however does not mean that the *sadhu* is not associated with the primal element of fire. In fact, what happens in his case is that he manages to transcend the logic of exchange of fire between the patrilineal kin (fire from the kitchen) and the Dom (fire from the cremation Ghat). This transcendence is the vocational requirement of the *sadhu*. Indeed *sadhus* are conceived to slow-cremate themselves with *tap* and the warmth of borrowed food. Thus when they die their corpses are immersed in the river. The ritual is called *jal-pravah* or *jal-samadhi*. This mode of ritualistic performance captures the primordial sacrifice of the *purusa*, who creates the world out of his own self-generated ardor (*tap*). As he lies exhausted, after having created the world, the water (*apah*) as the feminine principle offers to revive and regenerate his strength (see Panikkar 1977). Arguably then, one would theoretically assume that the 'woman' may not be granted this phallic position. This position is corroborated by the sociological study of Satyaprakash Mittal and Ramlakhan Maurya — *Kashi Mein Mokshakami Pravsi Vidhwayen: Dharmik Samajik Jivan* (2005). First, the woman seeks death as a *widow*, not as a woman. This corresponds to the imagery evoked earlier from the Rg Veda, where the company to the lonely *purusa* is provided by his half-split self, enacted as a wife, and not as a woman. More importantly if one combs the case-stories of the widows interviewed in Mittal and Maurya’s work, what emerges is that the widows did not will and wish to abandon their families and come and seek *moksha* in Kashi. This wish, to leave the house and become renunciate is institutionally reserved for the man. Sample some of the accounts of the widows that Mittal and Maurya describe through their use of interview
The aim of their study is to provide a sociological location of the widows in terms of their place of birth, familial history and duration of stay in Benares.

A widow from Ghazipur says that she came to Kashi looking for food and shelter as her son-in-law stole all her jewelleries. She subsequently worked as long she could and now begs and cooks for herself...

...(This) sixty year old widow stays in a Kothi of her maternal uncle who is the rajpurohit of the Nepal's king's kin. All of her four sons, died one by one and the daughters-in-law didn't treat her well and the school teacher brother could hardly manage his own house with his salary. So she came to Kashi...

... Ratnadevi became a widow at seventeen. She returned to her rich landlord father but after his death, she couldn’t participate in the property feuds and came to Kashi with her only son. She got a job at the fort of Maharaj Vijayanagram but her son had an illicit relationship with one of the palace women, this led her to come to Delhi and work for twenty years and when the eloped son returned to her, he took to drinking and gambling, forcing her to go to Hardwar and thereafter she came to Kashi (Saraswati, Mittal and Maurya 2005: xviii-xix translation mine).

Through this brief illustration I want to underline not so much the 'intention' of coming to Kashi, which may be very similar for common men as well as for those who may take to 'asceticism' and become sadhus. The issue that I wish to highlight is that the 'widow' cannot take 'jal-samadhi' and thus she cannot self-cremate herself. She needs someone to do this and that is why there are vidhvasahrams, where someone may adopt the putative status of a son and do the last rites for her. Saraswati tabulates the distinction between a widow and a sanyasi as following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Widow</th>
<th>Sanyasi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life of Tap</td>
<td>Life of Tap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abstinence</td>
<td>Sexual abstinence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Shringar</td>
<td>No Shringar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stays in the family</td>
<td>Is not related with the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shradha ritualistic mourning</td>
<td>Shradha is not observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body is cremated</td>
<td>Body is immersed in the water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sanyas</strong> is prohibited</td>
<td><strong>Sanyas</strong> is mandatory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Saraswati sums up his introduction by making a plea for the widow to be considered at par with the *sadhu*. He says:

The Indian woman’s persona is not limited to her physical body. Their *samskara* and ardor are characteristically spiritual and as they are, they represent supremacy in human history. The aged and wisely (*prachin log*, literally ancient people) in Kashi hold that if women compete with men for material benefits then not only they would ruin their hereafters’ they would create a moral harm to everyone else as well. Whether a woman is a widow or a *sadhwa* (saint), married or unmarried, her archetypical universalistic designation is that of a ‘mother’ (Saraswati in Mittal and Maurya 2005: 22).

Saraswati goes on to make the plea that the widow, because of her *tap* should be on the same register as the revered *sadhu*. In this epistemologically anti-feminist stance, where he naturalizes widowhood as a realm of austerity, Saraswati nevertheless is making a methodically similar argument of ‘equality’. At the political register he is operating from, he opines that the widow and the male *sadhu* share the same *tap* and that’s why they must be equated. The problem with this formulation is manifold. One, it denies the possibility of not only the woman but also the man from being identified with the feminine principle, which I have argued is that of feminine depression and the depth of subjectivity (see p. 114). This property is what I contextualize here as that of ‘*sat*’ or that of the Hindu feminine principle. The property of ‘*sat*’ is precisely the unromantic space of ‘feminine depression’. That “depression, withdrawal-into-self, [which] is the primordial act of retreat, of maintaining a distance towards the indestructible life-substance, making it appear as a repulsive scintillation” (Žižek 1994: 135). The obvious question that comes to mind is that how should one think of ‘*sati*’ as a practice then? Parry in fact quotes sati as a practice and wonders that just as people were being brought to Benares to hasten their death, was there a practice of sati too? And he finds to his surprise that the rate of Sati in Benares is less when compared to near by towns in UP (Parry 1994: 52). The problem with Parry’s record is that he does not go into locating *sat* as a property independent of ‘*sati*’ as a practice. He assumes that the immolation could be
construed as that of the woman getting the \textit{sat} through sacrifice. There seems to be for both Parry and Saraswati, a direct causal link between \textit{sat} and sati, and I have shown above that \textit{sat} is the ‘feminine depression’ as Žižek calls it, and can only be understood as that which gives birth to ‘subjectivity’ where “the subject ‘is’ this very gap that separates the cause from its effect. It emerges precisely in so far as the relationship between cause and effect becomes ‘unaccountable’ (Žižek 1994: 135). In other words, unlike the religious “ethical asceticism” of \textit{tap} that defines the \textit{sadhu}, the \textit{sat} doesn’t rely on a prescriptive link. I must also then clarify that while I locate the masculine principle as that of \textit{tap} and the feminine principle as that of \textit{sat}, I am not making the claim that masculine is a domain of the ‘biological’ man and feminine that of the woman respectively. In fact, the disjuncture between the two principles provides the ‘void’ and ‘excess’ to the subject as male and female who is ‘decentred’ with an ‘inconsistency’ that neither provides the scope of harmonious androgyny nor the transcendent effacement of the self into an absurd nothing. At another level, if the hoary idioms of \textit{tap} or \textit{sat} are actually transposed on the man or the woman the resultant feature may not be that of an aural persona, particularly at the time of death and disposal, but that of an abject figure, perhaps even more than the ordinary man or woman’s dead body.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Immersion of Male and Female Sanyasis}

When the ‘subliminal’ acts of differentiation are described, there is a ‘theological fetish’ about them. So, in my own mind, the idea of ‘immersion’ of a \textit{sadhu} was grandiose. It gradually diminished over time after seeing various ‘immersions’, but one incidence stayed in my mind. It was about being ‘witness’ to the entire scenery of ‘immersion’ of a \textit{sadhu}, from beginning to the finish. Few men and a woman, all dressed in ochre robes descended from the Harishchandra Ghat stairs, on one summer evening of June (13\textsuperscript{th} June 2009). I was told, later by the doms that they were from a ‘\textit{math}’ (Hindu monastery) close to Benares. The middle aged ochre robed men were supervising and the two young volunteers, also in the ochre, but with less grimness, were carrying a plastic bakelite chair from both sides. The chair had a rickety old man, shrunk to the spine, eyes’ glassy and chin stuck to the teeth like chapped gums. Clearly, this was the \textit{sadhu} who had taken to \textit{atm-samadhi} (self-entombment/cremation by self-immersion). In order to discern the
context, I asked one of the accomplices about what and how of the event. He, a tall purposeful, middle aged man, told me, pointing to the chair that the elderly sadhu had secluded himself and sacrificed (‘ann-panni ka tyag kar diya’) food and water for a week and finally took ‘samadhi’. Few doms, inspected the dead sadhu with curiosity but were not interested in participating in the rituals. The middle aged man and the English speaking woman, also sadhus — the main leaders of the group — took hold of a young dom and asked him to arrange things. The young dom, whom I knew, was initially reluctant but then agreed to call a boat and few ‘mallah’ (boatmen). Once the boat and the men came, they were entrusted the responsibility of lifting the chair with the dead sadhu and to plant it on the boat. Two of them came forward and did that, before transplanting the chair, they tied the dead sadhu with ‘rakhsha’ thread. So before the dead sadhu was taken to his final journey, he was appropriately prepared for the journey. Sitting on a red plastic chair, his hands were tied with red threads, legs knocked against each other — thin as sticks, the body was past the rigor mortis stage and had started decomposing. As a cover, he had a simple ochre piece of cloth flung on his groin. The boat sailed, with the senior managerial looking sadhus’ in it, including the young sadhu woman and they sailed to the middle and untied the chair from the boat and flung the dead sadhu with his chair. Sailing back was simple as there was little water in the river and the ‘deep’ part wasn’t far from the bank. While they were gone, some of the doms pointed out to me, that ‘See, tomorrow the chair will be gone to someone’s home, and the dead sadhu will float back to this or any other Ghat’. When the boat sailed back, the boatmen were asking for their ‘dakhsina’ (ritual alms), the managerial sadhu and the woman asked the boatmen ‘if they have lost all of their sanity’, ‘only then they could talk about such profanities’. Ultimately, the boatmen weren’t given any money and they were visibly upset but did not talk back directly to the sadhus. The doms, intervened for them but the two sadhus refused to participate in their conversation. The two young sadhus who had carried the chair proposed that everyone should bathe in Ganga and then go back to the Ashram. The tall sadhu said, ‘who will bathe in this river? ‘You two bathe, we will take a bath at the ashram’. He gave them fifty rupees each and asked them to return by late evening. When they left, the doms, as they regularly did for everyone, abused and ridiculed the sadhus. The boatmen, emboldened now, were screaming abuses. Then one
of the doms abused the boatmen back and told them to stop chattering and go back to pull the chair out of the water. When I asked the doms if the woman sadhu would be cremated the same way they answered in the negative. However the empirical truth seems to be different. Ram Alexander reconstructing the life of Shree Anandamayee ma through the diaries of her disciple Atmananda, an Austrian Jewish woman, who was called by birth as Blanca, amongst other things also narrates that both took to Samadhi and at least Atmananda was immersed in the river. In case of Anandamayee he recounts through the diaries that sensing death to be proximate, she along with Atmananda went to “Gaya to have her death rites performed by the pandits there in the traditional manner. This was her formal entry into sanyas, the final stage of renunciation in which one is completely dead to the world. She had already been wearing the ochre coloured cloth of a renunciate for sometime, but with this rite she made the final irrevocable step. Outwardly though she kept all this a secret” (Alexander 2000: 555). Finally, at her death, she took Samadhi at Kankhal, an ashram in Hardwar. After her, Atmananda when she died three years later, Alexandar mentions that her body was immersed in Ganga. “The body was brought to Ma’s Samadhi Mandir, where the ashram girls washed and dressed it in fresh clothes and placed her just in front of the Samadhi. An hour later she was placed in an open vehicle, with her body seated in a crossed legged position on a chair and covered with many garlands. Then she was taken in procession, in the traditional manner for a sannyasi, to a special area of the Ganges reserved for the submersion of sannyasis” (Alexander 2000: 561). I found a resonance of this instance and echo of the sentiment to be cremated through samadhi at an unlikely place — the yeshu ashram.

Little Sisters of Jesus in Benares

Further down from the Harishchandra ghat, towards the south, there is a rather non-descript ghat called Pandey Ghat. Climbing up from the ghat using the landmark of Vishnu Guest House, one enters through the guest house to an even more non-descript residential set up. It has a board hanging outside that calls it ‘Yeshu Ashram’. The ashram is that of ‘little sisters of Jesus’ that has Mary from Ireland, Lourdes from Kerela, and Gilene from Belgium. The culturally interpreted idea of the ashram emerges from the French catholic priest Charles de Foucauld (‘Brother’ Charles of Jesus) who took to the
life of struggle and everyday toil after the ‘Jesus of Nazarath’. In his repeated efforts to
asceticize his existence, he ventured to the mountains of Nazarath and to the Muslim
populace living there in late nineteenth century (see Antier 1997). He wished to win faith
of other people as an exemplar dutiful servant of God, invested in helping those, who
according to him were the “the furthest removed, the most abandoned”. He mentions in
one of his diary entries:

I don't think there is any saying in the Gospel which has had a greater effect on
me or transformed my life more than this one: "Whatever you do to one of
these little ones, you do to me". If one remembers that these are the words
of Uncreated Truth, and that they come from the lips that said 'This is my
body this is my blood', what a tremendous power impels us to seek and love
Jesus in these 'little ones', these sinners, these poor people. 14

In his exemplary urge to “shout the Gospel with his life” he was also heard by the one
who grew to doubt and hate him. 15 A register that later became magnified when the
priest, who was later ordained as saint, was assassinated. Also his work and religious
practice that existed in a singularity to him, have given way to more accentuated effects
with two main set of organizations: the “little sisters of Jesus” and the “little brothers of
Jesus”. The accentuation has shifted to a ‘life of contemplation, ‘manual work’, ‘service
to the poor’, ‘simple life’, ‘ a community of three-four living together’, ‘adoption of a
certain chrism’ etc. The emergence of the ‘little sisters’ is traced back to the religious life
of Magdeleine Hutin, a French born woman who followed the steps of Charles de
Foucauld. Born in 1898, she moved to the Algerian domains later in her life and founded
the community of little sisters in 1939 there. 16 As Charles, she devoted her life to the
service of the nomadic tribes of Algeria.

Talking about their ashram and the journey to Benares, the sisters pointed out the
ironic contemporaneous moment of the Pandey ghat. 17 Sister Gilene told me that few
years ago there was a fight on the ghats over Muslims coming here to visit the ghats and
enjoy a boat ride. Then, many of the ghats’ patrons stood their ground and did not want
their Ghat to be used by the Muslims overtly. Though the Pandey Ghat people came
forward and suggested that their Ghat could be used for boating by the Muslims. Since
then Muslim visitors frequent the ghat. She also mentioned that the other feature that
further contempororizes the Pandey ghat for them is the afternoon cricket there. It is called
T3 cricket and has a lot of young men from the ghats’ based families. Gilene rued that
their games are so noisy that suddenly the afternoons are not the same anymore. Not only
the contemplative moments have been sacrificed, they had to shift their celebration of the
mass to around 4.30 in the late afternoon as they could not concentrate before that. Mary,
who is oldest amongst the three and is hard of hearing, rued against Gilene that she is
complaining too much. Gilene, rounded off the discussion by saying “We feel happy
nevertheless for the young men, their shouts and screams provide an outlet to express
themselves, otherwise there are so many stories of violence and bad blood around here”.
The T3 cricket in itself is not simply this sublimated act of enjoyment. Many at the
Harishchandra ghat told me that young people were marked out for certain things during
the games. Very often the matches get reduced to caste registers and fights over runs,
decisions and eventual declaration, or over the distribution of prize money are quite
common. While listening to the interviews, I would often come across the background
chants of ‘ram naam satya hai’ and certain digressions with passing by amateur
cricketers known to the doms. The conversations are saturated with exaggerated narration
of tales of deceit, dominance, fights, abuses and most importantly an idea of ‘fun’ that
most shared.

In various other conversations, the sisters talked about their journeys. Mary recalled
how she as a teenager from an Irish Village in 1920’s had read about a nurse’s training
and religious service in India. She thought about it and wished to apply. In order to do so
she needed visa permission from the London office. She rode on her cycle to meet the
officer. While she cycled endlessly to reach London, once there, she was befuddled with
the traffic and the “rudeness” of every passer-by. As she reached the office, she was so
overwhelmed that she started crying in front of the officer. The officer after hearing the
whole story told her hard heartedly that if she cannot take the ‘order’ of the London city,
India would be a hundred such cities in chaos and more, how would she manage there?
Eventually she managed to get the permission and when she came here, met Gilene.
Lourdes politely refused to hold the interviews and would always be sewing or stitching
something but the stories about coming to India were structured around their encounters
with the modes of cremation at Benares. Both Mary and Gilene found these stories
disturbing to start with, but later Gilene suggested that as she felt integrated with the
people, she felt “moved” by the cremation rituals. She showed me the ‘sacred heart’ cross of Christ that one of their sisters had gifted her when they were in Karachi and pointed to the representation of the bleeding heart. Arguing, that this is the river Ganga to her. In all sadness, to Gilene, Ganga’s ‘decline’ and dirtiness appeared as signs of the time. As the conversations veered towards the preferred mode of cremation or burial, Gilene said that she would prefer to be cremated manually and not electrically. According to her the manual cremation was much more ‘humane’ as compared to the electric cremation which didn’t show the face being dissolute. She further said that, as the face disintegrates with the fire, you witness the same dissolution that the flesh undergoes through burial. Mary on the other hand argued that she has served all her life, so as the ‘sadhus’ are immersed in the river, she would also prefer to be immersed in the heart of the river. Or given the choice, she would want to be buried without a gravestone, “Only pressed in the mound of earth”. Lourdes from Kerala was amused at the conversation and looked fixedly at me, to find clues for my disposition towards such issues at “such an age”.

Govindababa

Govindababa is a Canadian national who was inspired by the beat generation poets like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and took the decision to come to Benares. Recalling the time he came, he says, “It was just before Rajiv Gandhi came to deliver the speech at Dasaswamedh Ghat”. Thus, he came across to me as a resident ethnographic ‘chronicler’ of what has happened to all the promises and plan of saving the river, as it were, from the declaration of Ganga Action Plan to the contemporaneous moment of Benares. Dressed in a characteristic saffron robe, bare chested, bearded, thin, tall, white man walking around the Assi, is known to everyone. He spends his evenings reading at the Harmony book store and also at times discussing things with the customers from different parts of the world. The owner of the bookstore considers their acquaintance to be a long one, when he was just a young boy working at his Father’s bookshop at the gate of BHU. Now, he has his own shop at Assi and both he and Govindababa are always together in the evenings.

Before I approached him for an interview, I remembered that I had seen a report in the Hindi Newspaper, Dainik Jagran, about him “jumping” his visa. As we talked over various issues in many interviews, he never appeared to be the same person that the
newspaper seemed to suggest. While talking about his inspirations, he mentioned that the beat generation poets ‘saw’ something more than their own generation or the generations were capable of but they failed to communicate the ‘sight’. He argued that the beat generation’s “hallucinatory clarity” should not be regarded as a drug tinted misadventurous vision. If the emphases were to be redrawn to the notion of “clarity” rather than the “hallucinatory” aspect, then the ‘leap of faith’ in another religion, culture, society becomes possible. While considering himself a Hindu now by name and mode of worship, he yet would exasperately claim that he fails to understand the Hindus, and certain idioms of the culture still, when he is old and he should be convinced that he has observed his calling satisfactorily. Most of this exasperation would come from the avowed Hindu disinterest in maintaining the civic services to a certain optimal condition. He would exclaim over the fact, that inspite of Ganga Action Plan, how the believers would continue to unabashedly throw polythene and sewage in the river and organisations like Sankat Mochan Foundation would have intermittent interventions and for most part they are involved in contestations that eventually lead to stalemates. He took me on various rounds to point out, how the ghat owned by the Sankat Mochan Mahant itself was under shambles. The path of the ghat is barely shielded by rusted iron grills and when the river floods, it is likely that no sign would be put and people would always be under the risk of slipping down.

On a religious plane, he suggested that he missed the same gravid pull of faith and ‘luminosity’ that Benares had, when he had just come and had decided to stay forever. Adding further that there are still people who ‘see’ that aspect, but there are few who return. Those who do, get attached to service bound institutions like Mother Teresa’s missionaries of charity or similar such trusts run by European governments’. The individuals do not in the same way take the absolute leap of adopting the religion, culture and a faith that is not reduced to service but is directed towards transcending religious difference at a singular level. Strangely, his choice of beat generation poets and Hollywood westerners’ with their guns, femme fatale and deaths remained his signifying plane. At a certain level, in terms of his theological convictions, there were too many dissonances for it to acquire any coherence, nor did he explicitly cite any religious person, who he seemed to follow. At certain junctures, he appeared like the ‘lost lamb’
who refuses to go back to the flock, but one who nevertheless expects or even anticipates the eager shepherd to come looking for him. On the other hand, his conviction of a Hindu way of life, had most pointedly directed him to think of death as a major preparatory event. In this regard, he appeared to have most clear plans. He had made his life increasingly more minimalist. He wished to have no worries of the world and in a certain exaggerated sense thought of the caste divisions as to be a ‘well laid out plan’. In a way then, this was his mode of ‘waiting’. While being probed on his preferred mode of being cremated, he said a bit agitated that “he is a sadhu and he should be immersed in the river”. He also spoke about the fact that he had interacted with the sadhus at Kumbh and many had told him that because of ardour of tapasya the sadhu’s body is hierophantic. It purifies the river rather than pollute it. So he argued that there is no contradiction in his reproaching the ‘authorities’ for failing in their jobs and him asking for a Jal-samadhi. He also pointed that though this is what would happen to him, if he were to choose, he would have taken to the ‘Sufi’ mode of being buried, under a tree, under the earth, that is raised above the body after the burial, with the occasional incense sticks lit there, he said, he would “feel most peaceful”.

Through the empirical complexity of these descriptions one notes that the institutional division of men only being granted jal-samadhi (immersion) in the river is contested and clearly the female ‘sanyasins’ could also desire and be granted that provision. Where the category of asceticism is concerned, even for Catholic Christians it may come through the interpretative register of Hindu sanyas, a similar desire gets reflected, for both men and women. Even though as one may note in case of Anandmayee that as a sanyasin, she is denoted by Ram Alexander as ‘Shree’ an honorary prefix attached to the purusha, worldly or divine. As opposed to the wandering male ascetic who independent of his marital status or familial position could become a renunciate, the ‘widow’ archetypically complicates the ‘family’. Thus, to argue as Baidyanath Saraswati does in construing the ‘widow’ at par with the male sadhu and thus observer of ‘tap’ is simultaneously to sustain the Hindu ideals of monogamy, stigma of widow remarriage and to make a virtue out of vulnerability of homelessness and lack of care, familial or otherwise. It is in this context that I posed that, while tap, could be undertaken by both men and women, similarly the feminine principle of sat also has to recognized. And on one hand it has to
be delinked from the practise of sati and on another has to be located as an aspect that complicates the Hindu sphere of household and family. Far from it becoming a fount of a practise like sati, it provides the subjective depth of the so called ‘night of the world’ to the Hindu familial sphere. It is in this sense that we come to think of the Hindu family at another register than merely that of household fire (kitchen) and conjugality which is “cosmically” sustained by the mediated exchange between the fire at the cremation ground and that of Tap (of the renunciate — sadhu or sanyasin).

At this point, I propose to provide the empirical and institutional complexity through which the Hindu family and its’ homologic registers could be traced in contemporary Benares.

*The Theoretical Context of Postmodern Benares*

One could pause to theoretically differentiate the ‘postmodern’ Benares from its other significations. If few features were to be listed which characterize a shift from earlier practices they would unambiguously be medical trips\(^ {18} \) from various districts of eastern UP to Varanasi. The other trends include deaths because of accidents, deaths in the hospitals as against at home, electric cremation through the fire generated electrically as compared to the wood being used to produce it and the river water visibly more polluted appeared as a common remark amongst the various interviewees.\(^ {19} \) However, my ethnographic observations compel me to emphasize that all of these aforementioned features could be subsumed under one major ‘Event’ as it were and that is the ‘death’ of Ganga itself. Let me contextualize this proposal theoretically.

That ‘death’ is an event, is both anthropologically and philosophically established, but how this ‘event’ can be conceptually understood is where I draw upon French philosopher Alain Badiou’s (2005) descriptions of ‘Event’. In that context the ‘event’ that I seek to unfold here is the death of the river itself, which changes the constellations of the ‘sacred complex’, emptying the designated ‘centre’ of the cosmology of Benares. In other words, the institutional shifts cannot be seen as if the sphere of sacred geography has just mutated to different practices through hospitals, electric crematorium and hotels. The point is that this is the moment when the reflexivity of the Hindu Symbolic in itself undergoes a critical ‘turn’. This death of the river in its significations cannot be merely
conceived as the visibly putrefying, viscous deposit of the city’s sewage and industrial effluents. It has to be conceived in the ‘failure’ of the machinations that lie planted at the ghats as ‘industrial wastes’, while they were to be ‘supplications’ for the revival of the river. The point is not also that the promise of technological modernity failed as a paradigm, it did not, and in fact the success of hospitals attests that as a paradigm. It not only succeeded but it created ideals to achieve and it is for this reason, I argue later in the chapter, that hospitals are the new realms of affectivity.

For the moment I return to Alain Badiou (2005) and try and project his idea of an ‘event’ in this context. He argues that strictly speaking, an event occurs within a ‘multiplicity’ of ‘state’ of things, which even in their normative instance are in an internal dynamism of shifts and counteracts. But how one can theoretically identify this as an ‘event’ is through the feature that introduces the ‘possibility’ of rupture from ‘normal’ state of things. This possibility may be conceived within various theoretical dimensions that may make an otherwise trivial phenomenon of utmost significance. In that context, there could be various claims to truth and how one must discern these claims from that one related to the event? I wish to clarify this point by giving two brief examples.

The first, one may argue is the case of the ‘Panchkroshi yatra’, a pilgrimage route that is historically contested and redrawn in the case of Benares. Its’ exemplification with the contestations is important because this circular route also lays direct claim over the cosmology of Benares. The primary example of such an authentication drive is the unraveling of the ‘archetype’ of the *Panchkroshi Yatra* of Banaras by Rana P. B. Singh (2002). He not only provides a self-conscious symbolic investiture of resacralizing the truncated and the forgotten signatures of the *panchkroshi yatra*, he creates a domain of ‘new Banaras’ that increasingly appears to be equal to the ‘cosmographic’ city. In the latter half of his book, Singh offers the potential pilgrims the logistical details of observing the pilgrimage. One may wonder, what exactly is the problem in this analytical attempt of ‘reconstruction’ of an ‘authentic’ Benares that Singh is undertaking? The answer lies in going back to the aforementioned discussion on Ganga. In other words, Singh’s *Panchkroshi yatra*’s central sacrality revolves around the significant presence of Ganga, and it is this meta-signifier that seems to be made invisible in his account, as if, it were to be present in reality just as in the cosmographic representation. Undoubtedly,
while Singh reconstructs the route of the *yatra* through historiographic analysis, the ‘pollution’ of Ganga seems to appear as a ‘thing-in-itself’ at times as if it does not exist and at other instances appears from nowhere and its effects are only limited to its own body and not to the entire cosmographic representations. In this case, then, the death of Ganga has to be construed as an event, in its precise scope of universalizing the questions of cosmologies of Benares for any incidental occurrence. This brings me to the second example.

Ron Barrett in his *Aghor medicine* (2008) reconstructs the Aghor practice from its so-called days of necropaghy and coprophagy. He argues that the reformed Aghorashram, under the guiding principles of Bhagwan Ram, the Aghors, shook off the antinomian practices of eating corpses and drinking alcohol to establish a clinic for leprosy patients. Thus the ones who were earlier conceived to be the heterodox and ‘out’ of the society, took upon themselves to treat those, who are ‘excluded’ because of their skin disorders and ‘venereal’ diseases (*gupt rog*) which are construed as a sign of the moral abjectness of the patients. Barrett in his ethnography uses the cosmological framework as per his convenience, in keeping with his theoretical provisions. However, what emerges in his elucidation could be considered here for two reasons.

First, while he talks about the Aghoris’ and their supposed reform, he fails to look at the ‘normative’ of the new paradigm of the ‘hospital’ representing a ‘moral good’ at the institutional level. Aghoris in their heterodox principles of inverting the pure and polluted of the Hindu domain, both communicated that caste order is a social construct and since they were the extreme practitioners of this inversion, they also legitimized the caste-based notion of purity and pollution. A shift from this kind of unambiguous space of existence within the Hindu framework to particularizing the practice in terms of alternative ‘medicine’ could be understood within certain modes of what Barrett calls as ‘reformation’ of the sect. However that ‘reformation’ in itself has to be seen within the modes of governmentality and postcolonial idioms of sanitary and the religious within the context of Hinduism. Thus, in order to refract this *différance* between the aghorashram and the hospital, I look at both of them and try and establish an analytical relation between the two in terms of institutions.
Second, Barrett gets it perfectly right, when he calls the ‘scared pond’ in the Aghorashram called Krim Kund as the “cosmic sink”. He rightly draws a conclusion that just as Ganga is treated as the one who can receive all the dead and the putrid things and still offer a redeeming grace of vitality to the bathers, similarly the Krim Kund offers life and regeneration while absorbing the maleficent. This insight is vital to my observations, because to my mind, here is an admittance of Ganga representing a feminine principle that takes all that is abject because ‘it’ already represents ‘abjectness’ in being ‘feminine’ (Kristeva: 1982). Thus the act of ‘depressive’ imposition of the ‘abject’ and the affirmation of the ‘life-substance’ emerging from the same body has to be differentiated. It is this split in the ‘subject’ that I wish to represent through pravah and parvah. This split gets partly illustrated for the Hindu subject in the next section where the hospital is located as the emergent link between the home and the cremation ghat.

*The Hospital: Na Ghar Ka Na Ghat Ka*23

The road that leads to the main entry to the complex of Banaras Hindu University offers a montage that few ‘roads to the university’ can match in terms of the institutional heterogeneity of services, resources and merchandise. More importantly, rarely would one have the sombre presence of funerary items being sold just fifty meters away from the gate of the university. In a row of three or four shops, the wooden biers are put out as shop-signs, while colourful scarves that are tied to the biers lie in the background shining against the relief created by the yellowed bamboo wood of the biers. There are a row of four shops close to the main gate of the university. In any one of the shops, one can find most of the materials required for funerary clothing of the corpse and cremation. For instance the pall of bamboo is the platform on which the corpse is placed. It is almost a six feet long wooden frame with two parallel bamboo poles separated by the distance of two feet. The space in between has smaller poles fitted in horizontally. These are five in number. The other important material given along with pall is a long single piece of white cloth, enough to wrap the entire body into it. Along with the cloth the mourner has to buy bundles of sutee or nylon cords that are available at the shops. The mourner is given huge numbers of incense sticks along with other things to be burnt with the body, wrapped in the white shroud. The things that have to be bought for the ghat are desi ghee (clarified
fat from cow’s milk), an earthen pot, a single piece of white cloth just like the shroud, and this must be worn by the chief mourner (dagiya — the one who offers the sacrificial fire). The feature that distinguishes these shops from others is their stock of colorful chunris\textsuperscript{24} that they sell to those who wish to decorate the bier in case the one who has died is a newly wed woman or an old person. The shops are run by Doms but they are not the ones who ritually specialize in cremating. They are in a row and clearly separated from the other set of shops and merchandise that are sold in the same market known as Lanka. There are similar shops at the Harishchandra or Manikarnika ghat, though unlike the University gate’s shops, at the ghats the majority of the shops are of funerary items and almost every household has a wooden makeshift shop (gumti) that sells these things. The crucial difference is that most of the shops at the ghats are tended by older women who sit out at the shops while the men may be working at the ghat. In contrast at the University gate’s shops there were no women shopkeepers. Also at the shops on the ghats, very few keep the wooden bier described above, they mainly have things required for cremation like ghee, chemicals, earthen ware and the shroud for the dagiya.

At Harishchandra Ghat, I asked respondents what was the difference between the doms at the ghat and the ones at the gate of BHU who own these shops. Shintu Chaudhary, explained to me that the doms at the ghat have their own shops and when they have their pari (turn), they also convince the shavyatris to buy the funerary items from their shops.\textsuperscript{25} He further told me that the ones, who have their shops at the BHU gate, are not in the true sense, strictly doms who specialize in cremation as a profession. They are in fact people who handle the hospital waste. After many rounds of conversations it appeared to me that though caste identity could be similar, both of these domains remain exclusive because they fight off the intrusion from either side. The reason why these shops have come up close to the BHU gate is because there are two hospitals within a range of half a kilometer. The first to be established was the Sir Sunderlal Hospital in 1926 at BHU, which since then has earned the reputation of being one that has the technical expertise to save those who are otherwise thought as ‘beyond the pale’, metaphorically speaking. Some respondents even narrate the miracle stories to claim that the hospital can retrieve the patient from the mouth of death as well. The rush of reaching the hospital however is not always met with the ‘saved’ but with ‘declared
dead’ epitaph also, which is articulated by the people in waiting as ‘docter ne jabab de diya hai’ (which could be read as ‘the doctor gave up on him’). This giving up, may not always be for a person who is dead. This is true as much for those who have struggled themselves into inconvertible movements towards death or those whose organs acquire a life of their own and do not respond to any affective or palliative care. Sir Sunderlal Hospital is not known by local people or patients in Benares by that name. It is known as BHU hospital and has become over time the centre for advanced care for the ill, for all of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The presence of this site has also helped various districts maintain their own hospitals as first-aid care centres or reference centres, so people from different parts of eastern UP are ‘referred to Benaras’ (Banaras le javo/ Banaras bhej diya). The one close to BHU Hospital and in close competition to it is called Heritage. ‘Heritage’ introduces itself in its brochure by citing Mark Twain’s observation to articulate Benares’ ‘primordiality’ — “Benaras is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together” and then adds that it aims to provide most ‘modern technology’ to this holy city. Clearly it is assumed that it is the institution of ‘care’ that facilitates the meeting point for these two extremes, with an apparent cultural neutrality and non-invasiveness of the technology itself. The brochure says it has completed fifteen years in 2009. This hospital with its’ facilities is similar to BHU hospital, except for the fact that it is more expensive than BHU and other hospitals in eastern UP. Most patients do not make any qualitative distinction between BHU and Heritage. It is just that everyone is not lucky enough to get a bed at BHU, which looks like a working ground of few good doctors tending soldiers in an increasingly lost war. In rush hour, it is a common sight to see people with their catheters inserted in their hands and saline bottles held by relatives, waiting outside for beds to be vacant, embodying the desolate landscape of the battle with disease or any other trauma.

The shift from the warmth of the kitchen to the hospital for the dying-saved is also posed as an entry of the new moral idioms of care by people themselves. Older people who would have been awaiting death by the accentuation of minor illnesses are now brought to the hospital. There is slowly an emergence of this new normativity of care. Susan Sontag’s thesis in Illness as Metaphor (1977) argues that particular illnesses become metonymical to traits that are not necessarily always negative, but certainly
produce alarm and disquiet. Such a representation separates the ill from her illness and while she is already displaced from her good health, she is expectant of an affective understanding of her suffering, independent of the origin and cause of the disease. She writes:

Other distortions follow with the extension of cancer images in more grandiose schemes of warfare. As TB was represented as the spiritualizing of consciousness, cancer is understood as the overwhelming or liberating of consciousness (by a mindless I). In TB, you are eating yourself up, being refined, getting down to the core, the real you. In cancer, non-intelligent ("primitive," "embryonic," "atavistic," ) cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the non-you. Immunologists class the body’s cancer cells as "nonself" (Sontag 1977: 67).

In this given ethnographic context, my argument is that while structurally the ‘dying/pre-death’ has been a stage attached with the institution of the family and the relatives, in the contemporary context, this moment could now be seen attached with the ‘care’ of the hospital. What is being said here is that the shift of the person from the realm of the family to the hospital for any illness is an act of affirmation against the karmic injunctions of what could have caused the illness. However, if an institution — modern medicine primarily — developed with the myth of having the ability to ‘understand’ and intervene into the requirements of the ill appears, it latently deflects the traditional discourses. But, is it able to live up to the myth? An informed response from the knowledge of the ethnographic context would be that since the hospital as an institution is functional and productive, it must have myths to maintain the promise of magical help and cure as well. In other words, while the hospital has come to homologically substitute the family at the time of dying and eventual death, is it also the case that the hospital has adopted idioms of a Hindu household and family? When I say household here, what I have in mind is that what happens to the fire that came from the kitchen and was exchanged at the ghat. Is there any similar mode that the hospital as an institution could be seen to have adopted? Similarly, when I say family here, the question I am posing is that whether the hospital finds itself in a situation where it can claim adoption of ‘affect’ as a value in the way the family does? It is with respect to seeking answers to these questions that the following discussion is oriented.
I am of the view that one can use Saraswati’s formulation of a Kashivasi as the one who comes here to die and not simply the one who is born here or lives here (Mittal and Maurya 2005: xx). Obviously, Saraswati takes the scriptural reference as the institutional site to say this, just as modern state would use constitutional reference to define the claims of citizenship. However, if one takes this definition further, then the ethnographic recordings suggest that Benares currently has a multiplying number of hospitals and nursing homes. The 1991 census data suggests that there are nineteen hospitals in the district, the 2001 District census of Varanasi does not give a collated figure of the private and the government owned hospitals but it is within the decade after 1990 that most private hospitals and nursing homes seem to have emerged. A sociological feature that was reiterated by many interviewees. They also pointed out that Heritage Hospital at Lanka and Singh Hospital close to the Cantt Railway station have both come up after early 90’s. They also emphasized that the main government hospitals apart, even the charitable hospitals are overbooked and add to this the trauma centres, which cater to the emergency cases of accidents. However, this depiction of Varanasi as a hospital city can hardly be over emphasized. The Government of India’s Report on Medical Certification of Cause of Death (2003) records that in Uttar Pradesh out of the total number of registered deaths i.e. 312402 only 1420 are medically certified deaths. The percentage of medically certified deaths to total registered deaths for Uttar Pradesh is then as low as 0.5 (2009: 10-11). The same ratio for the urban Uttar Pradesh is 1.4 (2009: 60-61). Though this is not the most direct way of locating the visitations to the hospital and deaths in the hospital, it does provide a clue to the fact that majority of people die at their homes. So, if there is a trend that I am claiming is there, this trend of visiting hospitals for grave illnesses and not waiting to die at home has to be noted in the conspicuous shift it marks in terms of cultural patterns. Similarly at the level of rural setups the availability of medical health care is abysmally low. The abstract of the 2001 District census notes that out of the total of 1327 villages (38 uninhabited):

There are 1,247 villages in the district which have been devoid of Hospital facility and 1,254 villages which are deprived of PHC (primary health care) facilities. Of these 505 villages have the facility of Hospital available within 5 kms. While in respect of 390 villages the inhabitants
have to cover a distance of 5-10 kms. in order to avail this facility. Similarly overwhelming number i.e. 352 villages have this facility at a distance of 10+ kms. As regards PHC 346 avail this facility at a distance of less than 5 kms., 554 at a distance of 5-10 kms. and the remaining 354 have to travel a distance of more than 10 kms. to avail this facility (District Census Handbook 2001, Part XII And B, Series 10, p40).

Clearly those who come from outside the geographical boundaries of the city have been touched by the call to care for their kin in a parody of urgency that is as intense but runs counter to the call of death itself. Here, then there is an ethnographic structural inversion of what Benares stands for in people’s practise and theory. This *kashivas* has to be followed closely to locate on the one hand the intricacies of the idioms of the theory and practise and on the other the existential future of the dying being saved.

The patient accompanied by relatives look for a hospital or if a hospital is found or is agreed upon, a seat is negotiated, appointments are awaited from mornings to evenings as there isn’t the institutionalisation of the bureaucratic ‘call and come’. It has to be emphasized that apart from the regular presence of the spouse or the parent(s) during *kashivas*, there are irregular and unexpected visitors to the patient. This is important to note for at least two reasons. One is that the idea of a family is founded on care and competence and that is, even when roles get subverted and reversed in the hospitals — for instance the common scene at the park in front of Heritage hospital, where the husband could be cooking and cleaning for the wife or children. Or another instance of the wife running around fetching medicines, food and in some cases money from relatives when the husband is hospitalized. This time of crises thus defines or redefines the affective spheres and the functional spheres of the families. Similarly it emerged from my interactions with the *shavyatris*, who were not involved in the cremation activities themselves that at the time of the funeral, primarily two things are observed, one who is to be the *dagiya* and second, women are not allowed to join in the funeral. Apart from this not only patrilineal kin, village residents and filial kin but even neighbours and acquaintance can join the funeral. Again, as the doms pointed out to me and as I saw myself there were instances when women had come to the cremation but generally they would be taken away at the time when the pyre is set ablaze. Thus it appears that both family and the *shavyatris* — as the immediate ‘community’ — are reflexive in practise
and what is crucial for us is to locate the event in the sense when this reflexive normativity itself is under strain. This is to some extent the case, when a death happens at the hospital and when the shavyatris may not even be there. However, we have to wait here, till the discussion on morgue appears, where I am going to show how the reflexive normativity of not only the family and the shavyatris breakdown but that of science too.

Going back to the kashivas, one has to emphasize that the stay in the hospital is marked by meditative visits to the temples for mangat. Also dissonance over the way a doctor’s abilities are put to test through the registering of the signs of recovery or worsening. Along with the speculation over the administration’s abetment in asking for unrequited tests to be conducted and moments of disbelief over the emergence of grave signs. It is exactly this complex presence of a displaced sense of existence that also makes people, awaiting their own recoveries or that of their relatives, espouse that the hospital with one single promise of cure, institutes a tribulation that exceeds the realm of illness and cure. While in the hospital people are na ghar ka na ghat ka (neither in the comfort of home nor in the certainty of death (ghat)) externalising an admittance that almost everyone knows the precariousness of the situation and has implicitly accepted the possibility of two fates that are available, that of waiting to return home or to die. That is, at some point one may seek an end to the kashivas. The conclusion has to be sought, be it the home or be it the cremation grounds. Home here is envisaged more as a myth, a classic example of how one imposes the need of the ‘imaginary’ on an institution whose Real, they themselves have experienced and are aware of its’ conflictual vicissitudes. Much like what Deleuze and Guattari would have to say on the idea:

Flesh is only the thermometer of becoming. The flesh is too tender. The second element is not so much bone or skeletal structure, as house or framework. The body blossoms in the house (quoted in Braidotti 2006: 210).

The anthropological interpretation would be that hospital is the perfect liminal institution here that reifies the home and the cremation ground as a site of imaginary health and affectivity and that of the traumatic Real respectively. And we know from anthropological writings that sites of liminalites are part of the structure, not out of them, or in other words to rephrase Victor Turner one can argue that the anti-structure is part of
the structure and not outside it (see Turner 1969). Thus, the question of the hospital actually being a centre that has taken over the Hindu domain of affect associated with the family and the household could be answered now. On one hand if one were to locate the hospital as the liminal category, it provides an analytical register of two exclusive domains, that of the cremation ground and the household. So, one may offer another way of reading the hospital within the Hindu symbolic. It could be seen as exposing the presence of the cremation ground within the family and vice versa. In other words, one can now claim here that the sat and the tap intersect each other and thus the family is not only the site of affect but affect itself is a register of bitter relatedness and not that of homily care and unspoilt pleasure.

To expand on this one has to pose the sharp ethnographic contrast of two events in the hospital. One is that of death and the other is that of birth. Let me show where the hospital figures in the elemental connecting link that is expressed in case of a household’s (kitchen’s) fire that is utilised for the conception and personification (through tap) and then is exchanged at the ghat for the fire to cremate the dead person. This, I would argue is metaphorically represented in the hospital by the co-existence of the newly born and the newly dead.

**The Event of Death in the Hospital**

The Hospital is like the game of cards called “Patience” that Lévi-Strauss describes with reference to the analyses of myth which has everything in the open, yet there are turns that surpass the meaning(s) of the previous arrangements (1963: 31). The moment of announcement of death is one of the most important events of the ‘contemporary’ which demands an introspective study all by itself. Here it could be merely stated that the decision of separating the living from the dead is caught into the contingencies of the ‘case’ itself. Even while admitting the patient there is a prudent call by the inspecting doctor. What people called as ‘doctor ne jabab de diya hai’, was a theme that had many variations, viz. ‘inhe ghar le jaiye’, ‘ghar me bata di jiye’, ‘inhe ghar ke logon se mila dijiye’, ‘bas ab ye aakhir hi hai’ etc. One may emphasize here that every event in the hospital is discursively contested, so the administration invests itself into evading the confrontations, once a patient has died. Heritage hospital has a regular staff at the ground
floor where bills and payments are made over the estimates related to the admittance and clearance of a patient. The staff here would not participate in any bargain but would direct the relatives of a patient to a designated manager, who may explain and convince and also sometimes provide certain concessions. One also has the provision of taking medicines on debt for few days and once the bill crosses limits of certain denominations as per the cases the attendant to the patient is asked to clear the bills before purchasing medicines or requesting administration of medicines to the patient. In case of emergency admittances, the patient is inspected and an estimate is given to the attendants. While in some cases life saving medication starts right away, in other cases, the attendants are asked to deposit a security amount. In all of these instances there are possibilities of verbal transgressions, there are intense negotiations and as the case progresses bargain on monetary terms and concerns around care of the patient acquires a more regulated participative dialogue. This again, is always charged and scenes of verbal conflagrations are not uncommon in the hospital. The most unpleasant of these conflagrations happen when a patient has died in the hospital and in order to get the dead body the attendants have to clear the bill, which appears to them as inflated and suspicious. However, the doctors are not the main participants in these exchanges, it is mainly the administrative and the nursing staff that gets implicated into responding. Clearly, the possibility of friendships, relatedness and spontaneous ethical initiates by the staff with respect to the patients also exist. This is also true in case of shared wards with respect to the attendants of the different patients themselves.

Let me chart out the generalized sequence of admittance of a patient till his death. Of course, the other option of him being released from the hospital is a similar sequence just that in the latter case the patient is ‘restored’ to his domain of home. At the emergency ward’s entrance of Heritage hospital the common sight was a rushed appearance of a patient either hurt and bleeding from an accident or a whole range of other set of terminally ill patients relayed by a set of relatives and well wishers. The accident victims from within Benares are brought occasionally by Heritage’s own ambulance that caters to what they call as “trauma service”, otherwise people bring the patients in private or hired vehicles. As the rush of a new patient and his attendants would become apparent, the staff at the gate would signal to the doctors and immediately there would be a briefing to
contextualize the case and then important decisions like admittance in general ward, Intensive care unit or in case of cardiac emergencies to the Cardiac Intensive care unit would be made. This is paralleled by a very reflexive but foolproof method of getting a form filled, furnished with the patients' details and a time bound assurance by the attendants when they can deposit the security amount. In some such cases in BHU Hospital after diagnosis and preferably an emergency treatment, admission may not be allowed because of paucity of seats. Such patients with their attendants making a call would either choose to go to another hospital or wait for a seat to be vacated. The same may happen in Heritage as well, though they are able to convince the attendants for a makeshift arrangement. For instance, if there is bed available in a private room that could be offered by the staff in place of a relatively cheaper option that the attendants would have preferred, the opposite of this may be equally true though. Once admitted, it is difficult to locate individual cases so let me cite the journey of one such patient whom I attended. This was my father admitted in the General ward for gangrene of the foot, caused by diabetes. Initially attended by my sister and mother, till I joined. His treatment over a week did not lead to a relatively better state of being and his feet considerably deteriorated with infection rising up to his knees and in general hampering his physiological ability to make blood as required by his body. Even with regular transfusion, when things did not improve the two attending doctors decided to amputate one leg. Once the leg was amputated, in less than ten hours he died. In all our frantic effort to sufficiently mourn the death, we were helped by members of the family and few extended relatives who had come to see after the amputation. The hospital staff covered his body with a bed sheet and transferred it to the morgue from a gate within the hospital, the other gate opened outside. Both gates were locked once the ‘body’ was put inside, this being the norm at the place. The morgue is called as ‘shanti-grihya’ (House of peace). That the morgue is associated with ‘peace’ is an anthropological insight to what ‘peace’ stands for in everyday life of people at the level of communitarian existence in any societal context. The basic material condition of human existence is then decentred from ‘peace’ in this strict sense. Life or the living is essentially hinged on the disquietude that involves desire, pleasure, sacrifice, anger and guilt rather than that of a necromantic ‘peace’. That is not to say that death provides the contours of human finitude. Quite on
the contrary as Lacan’s reading of death drive suggests, we as humans are denied even that consolation. The key linguistic signification of death is that one is going to ‘live’ immortally but improperly, only as excess or as remainder. Thus the body as soon as is declared dead, seems to acquire a new physical life. My father’s body bloated in few interim hours till we could retrieve his corpse to cry on and then cremate, the face had become radiant and the space of the amputated leg appeared to have come back in the phantom space created by the rolled bed sheet. Thus apart from the activity of decomposition that sets in a dead body, the other material event is the concreteness with which voids, gaps, apparition, memory, traces, spectres, spirits become more real than ordinary run of things. This is not to provide any mystical property to any of these features, rather it is to draw them away from a mystified blurredness that one needs to reiterate the solidity of these features in the symbolic spaces of language and images (Imaginary) sutured by the unconscious. However, one can pause here to make sense of the morgue as a space within the post modern cosmology of home-hospital-cremation grounds that I have presented above for Benares. How should one then institutionally locate morgue as an architectural and functional space? In case of the hospital as well, there is a disavowal of the morgue as a constituent unit of the hospital, exemplified in the brochure where the entire architecture and set of facilities are explained, however, the morgue remains invisible. Thus the morgue is a domain at which the hospital maintains its’ difference from the household and family in the context of the Hindu cosmological framework that I am discussing here. And at yet another level because of its disavowal of this unique domain the Hospital within the Hindu cosmology allows us to think of the ‘morgue’ as a symptom, which is independent and autonomous and can exist anywhere, in language and law as well as household and family. Julia Kristeva says, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection” (1982: 4). She further goes on to add, “it is death infecting life, Abject.” This moment is of interest to me and it gets contextualized when she adds, “it is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from the object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (1982: 4). This then could be taken against Kristeva’s own attempt to limit a discussion of being to suffering and death, to argue that ‘morgue’ with a ‘corpse’ in it is the space that provides
an originary register for an atheistic materialist theology. This "beckoning" that "engulfs us" is then not a parasitical predation of depression or death, it is rather its' opposite. Let me explain this further by citing two separate verses from the Hindu scriptures. The 'abstract' moment of after death described by the Mundaka Upanishad is as following:

That which cannot be seen or grasped,
Is without family or caste, without eyes and ears,
Without hands and feet, eternal, omnipresent,
All-pervading, most subtle — that is the Immutable,
Regarded by the sages as the source of being. (Mundaka Upanishad I, 1, 6-7)
(Panikkar 1977: 84)

Now contrast this with the famous verse from the one of the early chapters of Rg Veda. The purusha, the first man who is dismembered to create the 'concrete' sociological divisions between the living men.

His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms
Became the warrior-prince, his legs
The common man who plies his trade.
The lowly serf was born from his feet. (RV X, 90) (Panikkar 1977: 76)

Between what is referred to as the abstract, seemingly universal, "all-pervading, most subtle — that is the Immutable" spirit and the concrete particular of divisions of caste that as we know metonymically multiply in a historicized domain of Hindu life, the 'morgue' symptomatically could be taken to represent an exceptional parallel to the Hindu cosmology. This parallel, provides a glimpse to a spilt to the above stated 'abstract' and the 'concrete' and this moment of the abandon from 'science' and 'religion' thus becomes purely, atheistically of a universal ethics that has to be redeployed at every death so as to remain as the exception to the Hindu cosmological demand of harmony between the caste divisions and the immutable spirit. The morgue in this sense becomes a representative site of 'repetition' of "death" of Prajapati, the God who self-sacrificed himself in creation, it is the place that echoes the following materialist plea:

When he had procreated all the beings and run through the whole gamut of creation he fell into pieces....when he was fallen into pieces, his breath
departed from the midst of him, and when his breath had departed, the Gods abandoned him. He said to Agni, “Put me, I pray you, together again. (Taittiriya Brahmana II, 3,6, 1) (Panikkar 1977: 80)

This is then the moment when, the “Gods” “abandon” and even when the body is into pieces, the ethical materialistic plea of death drive, of Parvah emerges from ‘elsewhere’. Let me continue the journey of the dead body however. It is significant to note that both the hospitals do not have a shavvahan (ambulance to carry the dead to the crematorium) as some of the metropolitan cities have and there is an unspoken belief that once the relatives have been informed, the shavyatris would come. To have an ambulance to especially carry the dead is a manifest acknowledgement of the underwritten law of the hospital that, one would either go home from here or to the ghat. But since they have the ‘shanti-grihya’, that acknowledgement is already there. The reason for not having the shavvahan (ambulance to carry the corpse), is, as people told me, that it states an assumption that there are no near relatives or shavyatris to take care of the dead and to do the last rituals.

The shops of funerary items that I briefly described above come into play here. Usually, someone from their shops keeps a track of who has come to the ‘shanti-grihya’ or they are told by the hospital employees. Then the person offers help to organize the funeral to the first few relatives, who have come to tend to the dead. This ‘network’ has to be understood in terms of an informal but culturally well-organized domain of economic work of the tabooed and the liminal. Just as when a shav reaches the manual crematorium, there is well-entrenched network of which particular barber would tonsure the dagiya, which dom would give the funerary items and so on. It goes without saying that within the informal and subterranean there are further endless internal differentiations of the taboos and the transgressions of do’s and don’ts. My father’s corpse though was released from the morgue well after midnight, an auto driver approached with a shop keeper from one of the shops at the BHU’s Gate and the corpse was tied over the wooden bier. As the ‘body’ was taken to the Harishchandra Ghat there was some discussion amongst the doms about what kind of ‘maati’ (corpse, literally earth) this could have been. Subsequently after this discussion I became more alert towards this kind of conversations whenever a ‘body’ was brought to the ghat. Though
the doms do not maintain an official record of sociological details of who came to be cremated in terms of name, age, gender, place of birth, they concern themselves with the caste identity and the medical condition, which led to the death. There were some cases when a history of illness like that of cancer made the shavyatris more vulnerable and the doms more aggressive in terms of bargaining for a proper cremation, as doms would argue that ‘such’ bodies should just be thrown in the river and not cremated. Then there are bodies of people who have been murdered, burnt, or those who committed suicide, or whose bodies are dismembered, poisoned, putrefied, and decomposed, whose shavyatris may equally be hard pressed in getting a ‘proper’ cremation. The key point is that the doms are not indiscriminate and participate in a ‘bio politics’ that to my understanding has a complicated link with the medicinal discourses.

The Hospital, unlike the cremation ghat or the ghar is a scene of mixed responses to the dead. One could argue that the reflexive introspective questions of ‘why–me’? In terms of why ‘I’ am ‘chosen’ to be afflicted and why ‘I’ am going to die, while others survive are not entirely negated by the ‘hospital’, they are discursively displaced. This, in turn is the key operative logic of hospital as the practising unit of the scientific myth of immanent control over contingencies and mortality, to a stupor of acceptance of the pravah — “humne jo kar sakte the kiya”, “humne kuch bhi baki nahi choda’ etc.33

Needless to say, these emotive responses are varied because the hospital itself occupies and reiterates its’ liminality. Those consoling the mourners, would constantly tell the women to be taken home and men to ‘control’ themselves or ‘come to terms’ with the event, which if one recalls from Parry’s discussion of the death and grieving, is reservedly an event within the home. Thus, the hospital utilizes the metaphoric idioms from the family and the cremation ghat both. Let me take a divergence here and focus on the other side of death in the hospital, that is, birth in the hospital.

**Birth at the Hospital**

It is a paradoxical link that anthropology has maintained to be homological from Robert Hertz (1960) onwards that the dead and the just born are connected in more ways than one. A strictly Lacanian reading of that connection could be used to make manifest that
anthropological-cultural fantasy. A reading of Lacan by Žižek tells us that fantasies are traumatic, if they actually turn true (1994). He says that one must:

Get rid of the simplified notion of fantasy as an idealized image that conceals the underlying horrendous reality — the 'corporatist fantasy of a harmonious society free of antagonisms', for example. The 'fundamental fantasy', is, on the contrary, an entity that is exceedingly traumatic: it articulates the subject's relationship towards enjoyment, towards the traumatic kernel of his being, towards something that the subject is never able to acknowledge fully, to become familiar with, to integrate into his symbolic universe. The public disclosure of this phantasmic kernel entails an unbearable shame that leads to the subject's aphanisis, self-obliteration (Žižek 1994: 178).

Obeseyekere's (2006) insight on how rebirth is noticed by certain marks and in some cases by the 'memory' of the reborn about his last life is qualified simultaneously with the cautionary remark that most practitioners think of this in speculative terms. The point precisely is that it can only be speculative. If it were to turn real in terms of memory and the signs from the past it would be unbearably difficult for the family members to accord the status of an ordinary or a regular personhood to that individual. However there is a way in which this connection can be institutionally maintained and that is exactly by delinking the biographies of the dead from those of the born. Ensuring that devoid of the question of 'signs' and 'memory' both the just born and the just died can co-exist, one can account for the immediate removal of the dead into the shanti-grihya (the morgue in the hospital) and the new-born in the mother-child's 'ward'. One must also add here in the context of Hindu Benares as I followed from the interviews with the staff that manages the corpses in the morgue that children's corpses are not put in the morgue. This information in fact has to be supplemented by another similar maxim that children’s corpses are not cremated and are immersed in the river. Here, one may further emphasize that the 'speculative' link is made on the traces of physical signs and scars and in so far children’s corpses are denied the regular path, their corpses continue to split the idea of memory itself. It is the perfect excess of the 'pre-oedipal' that is denied a disciplined disposal and thus the unregulated remainder of this makes the perfect link between the newly dead and newly born in their respective places as to be inconsistent.
Parry (1994) and Das (1982) argue that the removal of the dead from the architectural domain of the household is characteristic of the Hindu house, where the dead is separated from the realm of the living. But I have argued above that the removal is not strictly sustained because the fire from the kitchen accompanies the dead. In the case of the hospital then when the dead is removed to the shantigrihya, there are no accompaniments; it is as if the dead emerges from the realm of homelessness. The morgue thus provides a rupture in these terms unmasking the mimicry of the hospital as the family and precisely in this rupture it provides a site of singularity that of a homeless subject. Thus the irony of the word ‘grihya’ involved in this proper name for the morgue is that here we have a possibility of completely different trajectory of the dead from the home (shanti grihya) to the cremation ground (ghat). This home, as it were does not have the ‘fire’ with which the kitchen based home is associated. Thus a cremation starting from the morgue would call for a radical theological juncture where the shavyatris may not have any fire to exchange with doms, as opposed to the instance when they come from a kitchen based home. This theological indebtedness is the true moment of universality as it reveals the doms as the singular actors who may help the shavyatris pass this moment of breaking down of the erstwhile theological linkages.

The two hospitals I have located ethnographically epitomize the coming true of the fantasy of ‘the newly dead and the just born coexistent’ by situating the labour rooms close to intensive care units in the same premises and in proximity to each other.

**The Third Event at the Hospital**

In arguing that the hospital pitches itself as a liminal institution between the ghar and the ghat, what one misses are the idioms of sexuality. If the hospital borrows methods of care and affectivity from the realm of home and family and that of methodical ‘work’ similar to the cremation Ghat, we know that both of these institutions are also intimately linked with expressions of sexuality. The family with its normative and transgressive domain of sexual relationships and the cremation ghat with extreme anti-fertility sexually charged rituals and practices observed by the left-handed shavite sects of the Aghori. How is it that the hospital manages to present regeneration and sexuality as a ‘lack’ and also as the ideological basis of the institution? I think the answer is that of course it has an
expression of sexuality, only it is not present in forms that are manifest. In the extreme pathos of suffering and pain of the patient, the attending staff's sexually coloured jokes and everyday comedy of errors that again acquire sexually charged innuendoes provide a crucial link in complicating the 'lack' and the restorative capacity with which the hospital functions. In the daily round of dressing the decomposing feet of my father there was a mandatory requirement of changing the white sheet over his body. The norm of changing the sheet was to put the new one on top and to pull out the old one from below. This exercise, on a daily basis became a site of joke for the young male staff, invariably they would do the pulling and pushing of the sheet in such a way that the body would be exposed for a brief moment and my father would reflexively try to move his hands to cover himself. The brief moment of the exposure would be marked by a roaring laughter by the attendants who were scheduled with the task. This laughter echoed in various other circumstances, but most manifestly, it was captured in the instances when the sedated patient himself or herself would become a participant in the cracking of the joke, not in it's enjoyment but by being in its exact obverse subjective position. Ethnographic variations of this were quite common, beginning with particular incidences of being examined, which is evocatively put as 'dekhna' — 'to see'.35 The hospital staff involved in managing the bandaging, clothing, changing of dresses of the patients unapologetically participates in the sexual banter. The key to understand this is to go back again to the definition of fantasy that I discussed before. While the hospital manages to ward off the link between the dead and the just born, it facilitates as an institution this phantasmic space of the ill and the healthy coming together in one imaginative semantic field. It is this jouissance, the painful excess that sustains the hospital as an institution. That is, fantasy is not outside the logic of the institution of the hospital, in fact it is on the side of the "reality" of it (Žižek 1997). It is this 'third dimension' of the hospital that sustains the out-of-the-ordinary coming together of the newly born and the newly dead.

*The Corpse Before, During and After the Cremation*

The body on a bier being carried by the few36 shavyatris that have come to the funeral tends to be a collective imagery, associated with the ritualistic movement towards the cremation ghat. Let me trace here the possible routes that they could take and how
institutional shifts can be located. The contingency of extreme weather, flooded river banks, familial reluctance or lack of money and unwilling shavyatris to negotiate the fees with the doms, could all sharply differentiate each cremation from the other. However, if one were to construe a representation of the norm, then it may appear as described below.

Since the electric crematorium at Harishchandra Ghat comes first while going towards the manual crematorium, let me describe the scene of cremation there. This ‘scene’ is reconstructed from what various informants told me and what I have ‘seen’ during the course of my ‘fieldwork’. The dead body is taken to the bank of the river, the head towards the water and the close kin to the dead offer mukhanajali (offering Ganga’s water to the dead kin’s face-as-mouth). My reading of this ritual act is, as the verse of the Devayajna \(^{37}\) argues that when the creator, the lord has self sacrificed himself, in exhaustion and death, he calls the primordial water, which comes to revive him and offers him a new birth. Similarly, over here the exhausted dead is revived by Ganga’s water. Then he could go through the sacrificial-fire of the pyre and sustain the cycle of creation ad infinitum. It should be remembered that probably this is the only ritual act following methods of manual cremation that seems to exist within the electric crematorium mode, because other rituals like circumambulation of the dead, breaking of the earthen pot and so on have become difficult to carry out. Interestingly though, many respondents told me that even for the manual cremation, the hav-bhav \(^{38}\) has greatly changed. People spend more on decorating the dead, the ingredients used to burn the body have multiplied – from desi ghee extracted from the cow’s milk to special chemicals used by the doms to stoke the fire, there is no reduction, as it were. After the mukhanjali, the body is taken through the staircase to the electric crematorium and depending upon the rush and number of bodies is placed in queue or is taken inside the premise of the crematorium. There the govt. employee (the crematorium is run by the Municipal Corporation Varanasi) strips the shroud and any other clothing that the dead must be wearing and then the body with the help of an assistant is put on the electric pyre and after checking the thermostat settings, the doors of the pyre are closed and the switch is thrown. The caste profile of the attendants calls for a greater description because if it were to be the case that ‘any’ attendant could touch the shav, it would have been a very different event altogether. However, I was told by the doms that in fact the person who actually ‘touches’
the body and inserts it in the belly of the furnace is a dom. Earlier, that ‘work’ was on contract and any dom could stand a chance, now it is regularized for the older dom, who has been working there for over a decade. The stripped clothes lie there and are mostly taken by the government employee or some other attendants may take it. This is communicated pejoratively by the respondents as sign of greed, but actually this is a practice older than the electric crematoria. At the manual cremations a similar practice exists and sometimes when the shavyatris would get the clothes of the dead, they would rightfully gift it to the doms. Within a couple of hours the body is reduced to ashes and since there is no architectural or legal allowance to collect the ashes by the dagiya, many respondents claimed, one has to bribe-gift the assistants to get the ash. Even then, no one can be sure that the given ash is of their dead only. This ash is taken by some and is put in the river, as a ritual act of pravah. The abstract nature of this ash and the collective that it both represents and gets represented by provides a crucial link for us to think of pravah and parvah again, the flow of things and an ethical rejoinder under any set of circumstances.

It is worth noting that between the mukhanjali and this sublimated act of pravah, what has undergone a drastic transformation is purely the physical ‘work’ of cremating the dead. To diverge a little and bring Žižek’s (2006) discussion on what he calls as the ‘memory traces of labour’ would help us understand the aforementioned drastic change. Žižek recalls one of Lukacs’s last work to argue that in its’ ironical way, one of the most subversive things within the strict socialist regimes, was simply to complete one’s work, which of course otherwise was the real theoretical ideal of socialism. He writes:

In his short book on Solzhenitsyn, one of his last works, Georg Lukacs offered an enthusiastic appraisal of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, a novella that depicted for the first time in soviet literature daily life in a gulag (its publication had to be cleared by Nikita Khruschchev in person). Lukacs singled out the scene in which, towards the end of the long working day, Ivan Denisovich rushes to complete the section of wall he has been building; when he hears the guard’s call for all the prisoners to regroup for the march back to the camp, he cannot resist the temptation of quickly inserting a final couple of bricks into it, although he thereby risks the guard’s wrath. Lukacs read this impulse to finish the job as a sign of how, even in the brutal conditions of the gulag, the specifically socialist notion of material production as the locus of creative fulfillment survived; when in the evening, Ivan Denisovich takes
ment stock of the day, he notes with satisfaction that he has built a wall and enjoyed doing so. Lukacs was right to make the paradoxical claim that this seminal dissident text perfectly fits the most stringent definition of socialist realism (Zizek 2006: 38).

Now how should one co-relate this analysis with the context that I am talking about, which is not strictly a so called “totalitarian” socialist set up but one of ordinary bureaucracy? The answer is that one can focus on what defines ‘work’ in it’s relation with the changing social condition(s) as a method to understand the tension between the shifting paradigms of labour practices, as it were. It should not remain implicit and ambiguous here that cremation at the electric crematorium is also based on ‘work’. The ethnographic instance of the Harishchandra ghat is as following. The electric crematorium relies on the doms as the specific handlers of the ‘polluting’ dead, even while the other government employees of the municipal corporation may provide assistance. Talking to the doms, one senses the anger and resentment present in their ‘specific’ work being institutionally snatched away from them. Their repeated complaint was that the electric crematorium takes away the vital aspect of cremation and that is burning the dead with a method that ensures the ‘product’. The conversations around this topic resembled the endless subtleties that are talked about while making a dish in the kitchen. They would mention, how every move is important, the heat of the summer causes the flame to rise, if the wind blows from a certain direction then one has to toggle the body from a strategic position, if it is winter and the air is moist, one has to use thinner wood and the burning wood should be turned at a proper position and so on and so forth. Following Zizek’s reference, if one were to go to Lukacs’ *The ontology of social being: Labour* (1980), his use of the metaphor of ‘metabolism’ for labour would further contextualize the discussion. He says that labour in its ‘rudimentary form’ stripped of the qualifications under which it may operate, is the “organ of the metabolism between man and nature” (1980: 40). He further says that at a certain level the logic of this metabolism is to create ‘use-values’ (1980: 47). But what could be the use-value in the context of ritual labour? Or in other words, posing it at the level of an epistemological question — how could the dead be transformed into a ‘value-for-use’? And here lies the answer to the question. The doms look at their work of cremation with the sophisticated saving of the
crucial part of the bone and flesh of the body that has to be ‘used’ for pravah. The point is that of course the doms have been traditionally designated to do this work so people come to them, but it is not simply over the sacrificial fire that the dom haggle so much, it is for the entire chain of events that may come about as a ‘satisfaction’ of a work-well-done.

We know from anthropological readings of potlatch that work is not always about creating – ‘use-values’. A methodical destruction is as much about creating ritual ‘use-value’. A ‘use-value’ that absolutely negates being extended into the circle of surplus value and that’s why as Bataille would argue, that in this case it is radically anti-capitalistic (Bataille 1985). What is the ‘use-value’ of labour in the context of the electric crematorium? It is divided between the hospital and the electric crematorium on two discourses - the hospital may ‘work’ on the body, before or after death, surgically or otherwise to create a ‘metabolism’, no longer between nature and culture but between object and information, or in other words between culture and knowledge. The electric crematorium’s use value is simply to have ‘good riddance’ of the environmentally polluting corpse and to save trees. It is significant to note that in the case of the hospital and the electric crematorium, there is an epistemological movement in how the dead is seen and ‘worked’ over in the contemporary context. It is in this sense that the link of the kitchen-cremation ground is now displaced by the hospital-electric crematorium.

Keeping this social setting in mind let me now describe the manual cremation Ghat. The body brought at the Ghat, the bier is kept on the ground and in all its loneliness it lies unattended, while the men who had carried the bier rest for some time. The shavyatris, who generally accompany the dead walking all the way, find places to rest. Some of them who are not to offer the mukhagni take seats in a little more relaxed and consoled way as compared to others, who seek to ‘get things done’. In the hot mid summer afternoons, many people use the shelters constructed for the shavyatris, which lie vacant otherwise or else some wandering sadhu occupies it as a stopover till others come by. Once the wood is bought and is being piled over for the pyre, the body is taken to the bank and close patrilineal kin offer the mukhanjali. Meanwhile, few negotiate with the dom and manage to buy the sacrificial fire for a sum, plus some quantity of grains. The body is removed from the bier and the bamboo poles of bier are put over the pyre itself. Other decorative
items like the shiny silver objects of decoration are taken off from the bier and the children who play around the cremation site take them after poring over their worth. The body is put over the pyre and the face is made visible. After the *mukhanjali* ritual, the negotiated fire is brought and is put into the pyre as the sacrificial fire or *mukhagni*. The shift from *mukhanjali* to *mukhagni* as I have argued before has to be seen as participation from one death to a new birth, from the world of living kin to ancestors. The individual dom who must be overseeing three or four pyres at the same time, comes at crucial junctures and stokes the fire. At times it involves bringing embers from one pyre to another and also a minor argumentation between kin of A with the dom or with the kin of B over the resources. But that’s just the context of ‘work’. As the body is more or less burnt, then the chief mourner, the *dagiya* is asked to take the remaining/saved flesh-bone and that is put to *pravah* or *parvah* in the river by him. After that he is asked to do a circumambulation of the hot ashes and break the *handi* full of water on the ashes over his shoulders’ without looking back at it. He is then expected to move away from the site and not look back at the broken *handi*. This means the completion and the symbolic exit of the *dagiya* from the ghat. He is then expected to go to another Ghat, take a bath and go back to the house of the dead from a route opposite to the one that the funeral came through. From *mukhanjali* to the breaking of the *handi* with the water, cremation is few hours long and a culturally devised grammatical practice.

There are times for some cremations and there are some times for all cremations that things go wrong. But the wrongdoing often doesn’t have a larger metaphysical discourse of fate attached to it. Usually it is nitpicking between men over their managerial capacities and knowledge about the customs and traditions punctuated with sighs of exhortations that — *ghum phir ke sabko yahin aana hain*.

*The Home and the Aghorashram: Two Places Where the Remains of the Dead Travel*

At this register there are two possible trajectories that could be taken with respect to describing the following up of the cremation. One is to follow the ‘conceptual’ journey of the flesh (saved in cremation) immersed in the river as part of *pravah*/*parvah* and establish a relation between that ‘particular’ and the river. The other is to follow the *shavyatries* to the *dagiya*’s house and record the rituals there. Since the second part has
been already recorded by many anthropologists, including Jonathan Parry (1994) and Meena Kaushik (1976) I would concern myself with the first feature. This means staying at the Ghat after the dagiya has left and to see if there is any other connecting link between the ghat and another place, apart from the families of the dead. The place that manifestly provides a hint for us in order to understand the linkages between pravah-parvah is the Aghorashram. Once the abject flesh-bone is tossed into Ganga, the literal-physical remainder of the murat – the form of the person, is rendered into an unidentifiable anonymous form that represents mrityu. This abject object, the Real of the elemental coming together of the fire, air and the water along with the mati is the ‘undead’ thing that maintains the larger symbolic structure of the said Hindu cosmology. Žižek in the following excerpt cites the example of the ‘living dead’ and the ‘remainder’.

My emphases here is to relate the two and make the claim that while the ‘living dead’ could be seen as pravah, the remainder is not something that is externalized but is part of the being of the ‘living dead’, it is the register of parvah (ethical double of the death drive). In other words, once this ‘unburnt’ flesh bone is thrown in Ganga, the entire threat that emanated by the dead is finally put to rest. But since this thrown part doesn’t actually die (continues as an essence in the river) it exists as the abject Real of the Hindu practice in the ‘pure’ lap of the river. Here is what Žižek has to say on the theme:

It is commonplace to state that symbolization as such equates to symbolic murder: when we speak about a thing, we suspend, place in parentheses, its reality. It is precisely for this reason that the funeral rite exemplifies symbolization at its purest: through it, the dead are inscribed in the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will "continue to live" in the memory of the community. The "return of the living dead" is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition. The two great traumatic events of the holocaust and the gulag are, of course, exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century. The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as "living dead" until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory. The same may be said of the "primordial crime" that founded history itself, the murder of the "primal father" (re)constructed by Freud in Totem and Taboo: the murder of the father is integrated into the symbolic universe insofar as the dead father begins to reign as the symbolic agency of the Name-of-the-Father. This
transformation, this integration, however, is never brought about without remainder; there is always a certain leftover that returns in the form of the obscene and revengeful figure of the Father-of-Enjoyment, of this figure split between cruel revenge and crazy laughter, as, for example, the famous Freddie from Nightmare on Elm Street (Zizek 1991: 16).

Let me then describe another link to the ‘living dead’, while following a different route than that of the shavyatris. Around late in the afternoon — the same time when on ‘the day of the dead’ in Mexico, the ribald and grievously sad get together to celebrate — a man with blood shot eyes and a pitch black beard comes to the Harishchandra ghat and after few furtive glances to people already known, draws a big life size wood plank from a burning pyre and puts on his shoulder, over his gamcha and walks back. The chosen wood plank is ensured to be the one, which has fat of the burning body spilt, mixed with the ghee poured to burn and has been touched by the fire here and there, with few ashen ember marks to be seen. Following the man, one reaches his destination — entering the gate that has huge skull installations at the gate and along the way to the interior premise of the aghorashram, set up by Kina Ram Aghor. The ashram has a dhuni, a fireplace that is always lit. This dhuni has several wood planks, most of which are from the cremation Ghat but have been brought by the truck, while the one just gotten by a careful selection is inserted into the fire in the middle. Before, I venture into an explanation of the dhuni and locate its’ concrete importance within the given set up, let me describe how the aghorashram has been perceived by several writers.

Parry while describing the Aghoris as pahunche hue (the one who have ‘arrived’) mentions their mode of reaching there through the ascetic practise of shav sadhna and also points out the various unorthodox practises with which the Aghories are associated, ranging from eating a putrid corpse to using their urine to sprinkle on the laity as blessing (1994: 251-271). He correlates, the Aghori’s sadhna as that which mimes the being of Shiv and for that reason is the exemplar of the transcendence of dualism. David Lorenzen in his Kapalikas and Kalamukha: Two Lost Saivite Sects, identifies a historical assemblage of traits imputed to these two saivite sects, which again ranges from consuming corpse to intoxication to an ecstatic joy over killing of a Brahmin (1972). The aspect of killing a brahmin, which is considered as the most heinous crime within Hindu soteriology, is not dealt with extensively by Parry. The other aspect that Parry misses out
is the element of hostility that the Kapalikas and the Kalmukhas are seen to have exhibited against the emergence of the Buddhist sects (Lorenzen 1972). The point is precisely that these genealogies of saivite sects tell us unambiguously that the aghories as later descendants are part of the Hindu symbolic to the extent that they wish to create a religious discourse out of what is otherwise an abject Real of the Hindu cosmology. That is, according to me they are unsettling the idea of Pravah and introducing another register of affectivity and order at the level of previously thought abject.

Ron Barrett again misplaces this concern in his work *Aghor medicine* (2008), where he pitches the aghorashram as a site of heterodox, alternative medicine, meant for the people of non-upper castes, who are afflicted with sexually transmitted diseases or leprosy (2008). His hesitant appraisal or denouncement of Parry’s description of aghories operates with the same repeated question i.e. whether Parry has exaggerated or ‘orientalized’ the aghor practise by attaching the explicit and extreme practises or otherwise? This embarrassment has touched the later practitioners of the aghorashram itself, who now claim that the ashram is not a heterodox place of consuming flesh and non-familial sexual interaction (see Ram 2007).

However, my argument is that the aghorashram today should be seen as, what Lacan calls, a ‘sublimated’ organization. The more, it makes every raw practise a symbolic event, for example – bathing in the krim kund stands for bathing with the ‘worms’, the more it continues the tradition that its’ own practitioners seek to shake off. The point is not whether there was ever a case of eating a putrid corpse by an aghori, the point is that there was no one else who could claim to do the same thing, and the institutionalization of the aghorashram survives on that non-symbolic aspect of the Hindu symbolic. This could be further contextualized by what Žižek says:

Lacan distinguished between ordinary and sublime body – a distinction that is perhaps best exemplified by the subjective position of a nun. A nun radically refuses the status of the sexual object for another human being – this refusal, however, concerns only her ordinary, material body, while enabling her to offer all the more passionately her sublime body, that which is ‘in her more than herself’ to God qua absolute Other (Žižek 1994: 179).
It is in this sense that one must understand the abstract and the concrete involved in the case of Aghorashram. My argument is that one has to see the act of incorporating the fire-wood from the pyre as a sublimated act of reincorporating the flesh-bone that was thrown in the river into a religious system of accepting the physical Real of the Hindu symbolic system. That is, within the Hindu paradigm of caste purity, here is the generalized use of any arbitrary dead’s person’s physical essence to re-integrate the dead within the realm of miracle-function. The excesses of Aghor practise are to be understood at two levels. First the physical elements involved are basically abject objects but importantly they are from the Hindu cosmology. I would show a little later how within the institution of Aghorashram, meat does not mean any meat, it is the fish’s meat and obviously so because they incorporate the essence of the water and also because the fish are vernacularly known as corpse eaters in the river (‘murda khati hain’). Alcohol signifies another element or it stands for the mimetic double of the deshi ghee and so on. Just the way the hospital’s grim daily conduct is based on the ludicrous imageries of jokes and double entendre, similarly the practise of the Aghor is bound with the phantasmic quality of the abject objects of the religious obscene — corpse, shit, urine, alcohol, menstrual blood, sputum, blood etc. The orientalizing impulse should be seen as one person’s dream as the other person’s nightmare and one person’s nightmare as another person’s unthinkable. The point, however, is to traverse the ‘ridiculous’ to see what is the ‘subliminal’ that sustains the institutional practise.

Part of the reason why the aghorashram is seen as an institution with the following of the non-upper castes’ (naanh-jat) is because it is easier to displace the obscene imaginaries to them. They already are seen as unobservant of the norms of purity and pollution and also may be seen as closely associated with the ‘polluted’. In practise, it reflects the collective fantasy of the Hindu symbolic based on caste dynamics itself. That is why the institutional tropes of excesses are sex, but not marriage; fire but not that of the kitchen. Similarly, intoxication that is practised by the aghories is not given to creation as the Vedic idea of soma but is attached with the precarious balancing of chaos. Just as the slurring of speech caused by intoxication is used to express a higher state in which the recitation of the mantras becomes an impossibility.
The fact that one of the most common purpose for which women come to the ashram is to be blessed with a son speaks of the regeneration of the patrilineal ideal of the symbolic order of Hinduism. As we know the symbolic 'need' to have a son is precisely to have someone to offer the sacrificial fire. Thus the metonymical association of the institution with the naanh-jat has to be rethought. The aghor 'subversion' has to be seen as an enactment of the phallic organization of the Hindu Symbolic. In other words, contrary to it being the heterodox, it may be the starkest example of the 'orthodox'.

Let me reconstruct the events, places and people of the aghorashram. Within the complex where the dead are circumambulated, there is the dhuni. The dhuni's ashes are used by the priest as prasad distributed to those who come to the ashram seeking blessings and cure or both. There is a shop now within the building of the ashram but outside the main complex, which sells the medicinal extracts. The prasad is the sublimated form of eating the dead and in this manner, the fundamental principle of the organization is intact. However one must note that this eating although is structurally similar to the eating rituals during pind-daan ceremony, the difference is in the pind-daan case, the regeneration is of the household, the family. Here, on the other hand the restoration and regeneration is that of the Hindu individual from his ill-stricken physical body afflicted with one illness or the other. But that is just the appearance, the real property of the medicine, as I stated above in the case of seeking a 'son', is to restore the normative of the Hindu symbolic. Again, seen from this point of view, the institution cannot be considered as that of the naanh-jat or that of non-sanskritic bases. It is also interesting to note that unlike Ayurveda, this form of medication doesn't have its' own science which is popularised, it is in fact based on the 'open-secret' of the ingredients with which it is made. The key feature to my mind that allocates 'therapeutic property' to 'aghor medicine' is what one of the aghor informant — postman baba, told me: an aghor ascetic doesn’t seek ‘blessings’ from god he snatches it. That is, the fact of utter devotion to the God is so clear in the aghor’s practise that it doesn’t meditate on its demands, it just asks for it, directly. ‘Tap’ or ‘tapasya’, which is said to be the Hindu ascetic ideal in its satvik form, is also the organizing principle for the efficacy of the Aghor practise, only the ‘positive contents’ are changed here. Let me take another divergence here and locate
the unique figure of Postman Baba before moving to a discussion of the dhuni and the krim kund.

The Postman Baba

Conversing with the Dom respondents at the Harishchandra ghat led me to people who were seen to be regulars at the ghat and had also become part of a kinship which went beyond familiarity and friendship. One common term that was used by them to describe this relatedness was that of ‘Gurubhai’. The Doms argued that anyone who called the cremation ghat his abode and was not a dom by birth can nevertheless be identified as a putative brother. The difference of course, is that of birth and practice. The doms born in the caste and occupation argued that they inherently were privileged by Lord Shiv’s grace as they were his brethren. However, anyone who similarly took to the worship of Lord Shiv, while recognizing the efficacious importance of the cremation ghat, was naturally their brother kin. The classes of practitioners, who worshipped Lord Shiv and took to the cremation ghat as their abode, were traditionally known as the Aghors. Aghors themselves could be theologically, within the shavite paradigm be called as tantriks, with a generic homology with the Shakti cults. The Shakti cults, symbolically involve depiction of goddesses who are excessive and anti-feminine in a popular sense. They are against fertility and reproduction, inhabit the cremation grounds, tread over male gods and in some extreme cases even decapitate them (Kinsley 1998). It is interesting then to note that the notion of ‘guru-bahen’ doesn’t exist and the empirical putative link to the woman at the ghat is thus non-existent. The idols and imageries of the feminine figures are understood by the doms through the idioms of wives, or more appropriately consorts and that of mothers. Accordingly, the personae of the goddesses at the Harishchandra ghat are imputed with the assertion of unrestrained sexual expression or that of sacrifice, care and violence attached with a maternal figure.

Thus one such ‘Guru Bhai’, who was constantly evoked in the interviews that I had with the doms, is the unique figure who they called as the ‘postman baba’. Unlike the other aghors who stayed on the ghat itself, the postman baba represented an unusual and a telling mediation between the regular everyday world of distributing post and being at the ghat in the nights. Ironically, this relation to the doms seemed incidental and while I
constantly probed about the postman baba's biography, they mentioned that they know little about him, except that he is married, has children and has a family. If having a job of a postman and being at the cremation ghat was one site of being, another site of being was of a family man, a reticent patriarch, who absented himself once in week from the night stay at the cremation ghat to go and visit his family. However, the more formal mediation that he was seen to be part of was that of gleaning half burnt woods from burning pyres. To accumulate them, he would be awake sporadically, the whole night at different hours of the night-rush at the cremation ghat. The wood he would have accumulated thus, he would take to Kinaram's *aghora ashram*. This regular supply is used to feed the perpetually lit *dhuni* of fire that burns at the centre of the ashram. The *dhuni*, as a site of sanctity because of its socially immortalized aspect of fire that is always lit, is also present at the premises of the Shiv temple at the ghat. However, it's most commonplace social use could be exemplified by the similar fire that is maintained by the dom-raja and is used as a ritual requirement at the time of cremation by the *shavyatris*.

After various attempts to meet the postman baba which could not be realized at the ghat, I decided to meet him at the post office. I had gathered that he worked in the central post office of Varanasi, which was located at Vishesvarganj. This is also the place where the *Kal bhairav*’s temple exists and so does the central police headquarters of the city. Given the myth that *Kal bhairav* is the guardian police deity (*kotwal*), who in nine different forms surrounds the city and keeps an ‘eye’ on every spectral and ominous feature; whenever a new police officer takes office here, he is required to do a *darshan* of the deity first and only then occupy his office.

While waiting for the postmen to return to report about their day’s distribution, I enquired from every in-comer if he was the postman baba. Most replied that they were babas’, had taken to one ascetic order or the other but few admitted to be associated with the Harishchandra ghat. Through many such identification rounds, I was directed to a bearded man sleeping with his head down on the report desk. He had worn layers of garlands that were woven with miniatures of human skull and had a black mark on his forehead. As I introduced myself, he recognized me as the one, who he had heard “was looking for him like a ghost” (*Bhut ki tarah phicche pade the, milne ke liye*). Through the
conversations and further following of his routine, the following biographical sketch emerged.

Around thirty years ago, as he joined the job of a postman, he had already taken to the Kinaram ashram. Not only was he a regular visitor there, he also wished to help the administration of the ashram. On one such day, he was noticed by the then head of the ashram — Bhagwan Ram. Aghoreswar Bhagwan Ram, stared at him and then called him for an introduction. In conversation, he broached the idea that ‘someone’ needs to take the call of getting the pyre-logs as service to the ashram. Postman baba, took the call and thus he instituted the duty on to himself and considered himself as the chosen one to do so. He recounted that he always felt that he needs to be bound with the institution in more tangible way and even though he didn’t articulate it, the Aghoreswar understood. He said at another instance that through the years, he has deeply reflected over being the chosen one. He has been overwhelmed at the realization that how the call of the duty of both the places is bound by similar religious maxim: transferring a ‘secret’ to an address. After that meeting with the Aghoreswar, he has also explained it to himself that howsoever grave misery of fate he may struggle with in his life situations, he would never go to the guru, because the guru already knows his travails. If he were to go and narrate his woes, it would be, in his mind, a suspicion of the Aghoreswar’s austere abilities. It for this reason he says, that there is a kind of mystical understanding between him and the current Aghoreswar, who succeeded Bhagwan Ram. Over time, his son and daughter-in-law have also become part of the ashram. While he continues to follow his daily routine, he is now also looking for a successor, who could take up the work of getting the logs from the Harishchandra Ghat. On pointing to his rigorous daily routine, he lists down more exhaustively his day’s activities. After coming to the post office, he draws the undistributed mails from the last day, takes new mails and sets out in the afternoon to distribute them. Comes back, around three-thirty in the afternoon and reports the undistributed mails to the clerk. Takes a short nap for some time and as the office shuts, he ventures out to the ashram. Has his late lunch here after a bath and prayer. He told me that very rarely he ate his lunch at the post office, most often he would have it at the ashram. In fact, it was not khana that was important, it was the Prasad cooked at the ashram that was important. The Prasad that was cooked at the ashram was primarily of
fish and rice. About which, as I have explained, the fish is considered to be sacralized in this context because it has ‘mahamaans’ (literally, great flesh). The greatness of the fish’s flesh comes from the fact that in the river, it feeds on the human corpse and sometimes on cow’s flesh as well, as the dead cows are immersed in the river. And second, it is cooked on the pyre-logs that are stored in the ashram. After having his Prasad, he rests for some time and then later in the evening does chores for the ashram like cleaning and sweeping etc. His residential set up is in one corner in the shed that is constructed for pilgrims to rest after their prayers and day’s puja. Around nine in the night, he sets out with a cart pulled by one of his disciples to the Harishchandra Ghat. It is important to note that the afternoon Prasad is not always available; it is contingent upon the fact that whether on a particular day there was a greater or lesser rush of pilgrims. At the ghat he immediately starts his work and is known to be very taciturn by the doms and the other regulars of the ghat. Just as the ashram, at the ghat too, he has a corner reserved to himself, where he lies down after the first round of gleaning the half burnt pyre-logs. Later in the night, he repeats the same cycle of collecting the wood and lying down intermittently. Early in the morning, he leaves with his cart to the ashram and offers the logs to the officiating priest of the dhuni. Then, in a few hours he leaves for the post-office.

In his narration, he sensed the complexity of precedence and his own singularity within the tradition of the ashram. He hinted that he is non-upper caste but refused to use the regular terms of denigration that are in place for referring to the non-upper castes that many informants occasionally used in a sense of self-deprecation. He told me that he has adopted the name — ‘RajaRam’ and refused to talk further about this aspect. In him being a householder, there was another contradiction because the genealogy of the ashrams’ gurus is based on the myths of austere chastity from childhood onwards. To the extent that even if an Aghor indulges in sexual activity, it is for siddhi and not pleasure or producing an heir. Rajaram talked about his wife, sons and the daughters-in-law as a responsibility that he identified with affectivity. While locating himself like this, he also differentiated himself from an aghor guru. Considering himself as just a worker in the ashram and neither hoping for a following nor a seat and reference in the ashram. At the same time, he emphasized that he has gained merit from doing difficult work at a difficult place assiduously. He argued that by just merely being at the cremation ghat every night
in last so many years, he has now perceptively ‘known’ things that for others don’t seem to exist as part of the Hindu symbolic. Apart from clarifying various versions of information that I had about the aghorashram, he emphasized on the efficacy of what he called as zid (stubborn insistence) of an aghori. He mentioned that an aghor, since he does a ghor tapasya (persistent and unflinching austerity) he has the right to ‘demand’ (snatch) things from Lord Shiv rather than ‘seek’ his blessings. It is for this reason that both the ones who practice aghor tap and those who come to have remedies for their familial and physical concerns find an answer. Then, he drew parallels between the always lit ‘dhuni’ and the always austere aghori, who does not have the slow tap of the yogi but internalizes the incendiary nature of tapasya. With this clue, here I return to the dhuni, but now within the context of the krim kund.

The Dhuni and the Krim Kund or the Sublimated Pyre and the “Cosmic Sink”

Ron Barrett (2008) considers the pool of water adjacent to the dhuni which is popularly called as krim kund at length. He captures the connotation perfectly by calling it as the ‘cosmic sink’, a place where you can ‘exchange’ your illness for good health (2008). The pilgrims do not circumambulate the pool but it has another ritualistic practise attached to it. From Sunday through Thursday, every alternative day of the week, early morning many women and men — married or unmarried — come to have a bath here. The bathing ritual would simply be a re-enactment of bathing in the river but there are two crucial distinctions which stop me from equating it simply to a bathing and cleansing complex. The first is the fact that the pool has static water so the usual explanation that is allocated to Ganga’s flowing water’s cleansing property or how the pravah manages to carry the dirt with every breath of the river current is not applicable here. The pool is a station. The second feature is that women and men are expected to leave there clothes after bathing and this is generally communicated as ‘sare kapde nahane ke baad chodhna hai’. Which of course means that, it has to be communicated that the undergarments are also to be left there. This norm is exceptionally uncommon. Many know that the langot (underwear of men) is commonly put as chaddhawa (offering) to the peepal tree or to Hanuman but it is unheard of that women’s undergarments are offered/left at a sacralized place. Even though the difference between offering and leaving is phenomenologically
variable, the radical institutional excess should not be missed in this case. I must also recall here that one of the norms attached with the dead person’s clothes at the site of cremation is that they are left there by the shavyatris. So should this feature be read as that a sick body (including that of an ‘infertile’ woman) represents a dead body whose symbolic appearance can be cast off by shedding the clothes and subsequently a new self appears? I think this would only be a partial explanation. The fuller version has to incorporate the answer to the question that what provides regenerative property to the kund? And that answer would start from accounting the kund as a station of the secretions of bodies and its accumulative logic sustaining the propensity of curative contagion. That everyone’s secretion mixes with the other and the pool acquires a generative essence because of the same. So when, the aghor gurus say that the source of water in the kund is Ganga itself, there are two possible ways to think about it. One is of course to think of the Ganga as a metaphor of the “cosmic sink”, second, if the kund is a practical ‘stand-in’ for Ganga, so a similar destiny of pravah would follow. Even if the river dies, customary rituals would still continue through the use of kunds. This informs us that contrary to what the aghor gurus may themselves say, the institutional logic of the ashram retains its own structural internal consistency.

The Trembling Sun and the Nightly Link between Death and the Deep Water

At this juncture, through the link of Krim Kund, I move to another Kund called Lolarka Kund, whose sociological contextualization may further clarify the symbolic import of Kund as a theological expression. The kund is located close to Assi Ghat and is mythologically seen as the site of confluence of the rivulet Assi with Ganga. Though Assi like Saraswati at Sangam in Prayag is almost non-existent now and the trail that runs close to adi Keshav temple can never make it to the Assi ghat physically. The kund is surrounded on all four sides with stairs that descend down to a well like kund, the fourth side has an opening for Ganga’s water to seep in. The kund has been mentioned in kashi khand and various other late puranas as a necessary pilgrimage bath for those who seek moksha (see Pathak and Humes 1998). However my interest in the site starts from the intimate theological link between the lolarka — literally, the trembling sun and the kund — the symbolic Ganga. The aspect of the sun being worshipped is a Vedic connection
that becomes manifest here but there are mythic discourses that speak of Shiva's victory over the sun god and thus the asylum provided here to the trembling (in fear) sun. Another account says that the sun, escaping the wrath of Shiv was enamored by the beauty of Kashi and in that tremble of joy he self-sacrifices himself in twelve adityas and the first one comes to be known as the Lolark (Pathak and Humes 1998: 210). Ratnesh K. Pathak and Cynthia Ann Humes write:

Lolark (from lola, “restless, trembling” and arka, “ray, sun god”) is so named for he was made restless from the heat of Shiva’s angry eyes. According to the myth, not only is the ancient Vedic deity Surya literally “put in his place” by the puranic god Shiva, but his efforts as preserver of varna-ashrama-dharma (duty defined by caste and stage of life) behavior are overruled. Although Surya was attempting to restore natural (the days and nights) and caste-dharmic order, as in the majority of the puranic lore, Shiva holds devotion and a new morality independent of caste to be a higher priority than fulfilling caste dharma. Finally, even the rays of the Sun are dim in comparison to the brilliance of Shiva; Kashi, the “city of light”, is not so because of the Sun, but because of Shiva (Pathak and Humes 1998: 210).

While this Vamana purana’s Sukeshi myth offers a theological redefinition of the Hindu cosmology, another myth from the forty sixth part of the Kashi Khand, redoubles that effort on another register. It says:

Shiv wished to draw the excellent Buddhist king Divodasa of Banaras away from the path of righteousness in order to capture Kashi. He sent various groups to accomplish this task, including Surya. Whereas in the Vamana Purana Sukeshi myth Lolark acts against the (righteous) demons and is subsequently punished by their lord Shiva, in the KKh (Kashi Khand), Lolark successfully avoids helping Shiva’s endeavor to encourage unrighteousness and remains unpunished because of the protection afforded by the sacred city (Pathak and Humes 1998: 211).

In Edmund Leach’s vein of ‘myth is the language of maintaining social controversy’ we have here fragments that define the reflexivity with which the Hindu cosmic sphere can be drawn and redrawn (Leach 1954: 85). However if one were to note the merging of the symbols or how the elements become anthropomorphic, here is the key to the same. The heat of the Sun is incorporated in Shiv and it can only be approached through Shakti, that is the water in which Shiv co-habits. In other words it is the meeting of the sun and
the water and the kinesis of tremble that projects an ‘undead’ event of intimate sexual union. It is this kinesis that may appear as the third dimension between the topological shared ground of pravah and parvah that may bring the “the indestructible life-substance”, the painfully excessive jouissance of life back to the world (Žižek 2006: 121). If one attaches this abstract religious Imaginary to Shiv and Shakti, then the same feature becomes personalized to the pilgrims through various myths that speak of this union. Ethnographically then it is not a surprise that the two main events that happen at the place, Lalahi and the Lolark Chath mela are festivals related with divine impregnation, cure for infertility, to seek a son in the family and longevity and beneficence for the sons’ already there.

If one were to locate the concrete adoption of the myths in people’s practices, it may be useful to describe the ‘marriage’ ritual observed here. There is “a “marriage” dip in the fecundating kund by the women alone” which involves “bathing naked in the kund (they must change clothing, enforced by the rule that they must leave behind their old sari), breaking their bangles, hugging the lingam, donning new bangles, and then leaving these trinkets behind in the kund” (Pathak and Humes 1998: 232). This ritual also has its earthly double and that is when the husband and the wife bathe together with the saree tied at one end to the husband’s Dhoti or Langoti. Apart from these enactments, succulent vegetables and fruits are used as chadhawa (offerings) to the lolark baba.

Clearly, if one looks at the coming together of the scriptural and the concrete, there is a ‘turn’ available to people with every metonymic link. Creation could be made analogical to reproduction; sexual intercourse could be a rite of divine impregnation and so on and so forth. However in this manifest celebration of sexuality-reproduction and fertility there is an assumed silence around the generative warmth of death that invariably rounds off the context. To that a hint is provided by Ratnesh K. Pathak and Cynthia Ann Humes when they suggest that “in the 1950’s, it became very popular for pakka or “genuine” banarasi devotees to worship lolark during the day and proceed to Krim Kund on the evening of the great festival for a night of singing” (1998: 238). They narrate a myth to corroborate the sanction of this practice, which they say has increasingly become more common and “a specific religious reason is offered today by the new rural participants in this pilgrimage circuit. They claim that Krim Kund has a special power to
heal childhood diseases; in contrast, Lolark Kund yields fertility” (1998: 240). The following is the myth:

According to folk story, once Baba Kinaram was passing through the lanes of Dalmundi, the “red light” district of Banaras. He was carrying a dead body on his shoulder that was so rotten its stench could be smelled hundreds of meters away. The king of Banaras at that time took offense and ordered his officials to remove the corpse. Furious, Baba Kinaram cursed the king and all of the dancers of the area: the king would not sire an heir, and the dancers would lose their capability to perform. In order to remove the curse, the dancers began to go to his ashram and perform in his honour. Some informants speculate that the king began the practice of first bathing in Lolark Kund for fertility and then proceeding to Kinaram’s place to ask that the angry ascetic remove his curse (Pathak and Humes 1998: 239).

Quite remarkably this myth could be read as Baba Kinaram’s effort to introduce the traumatic Real into the Symbolic-Imaginary mode of pleasure seeking and endless catharses in which the Hindu existence is signified. In other words, the pravah (unrestrained flow) of everyday mundane pleasure chase of the id is made to see the other side of the id and that is of the ‘undead’ corpse, the fertile decay which could eat up the living and the only way to regulate it would be to have parvah (ethical dimension) for the symbolic order. So my conclusion is that for Hindus, the death of Ganga is unthinkable. It is a ‘tabooed’ category over which the symbolic of the religion rests. Ironically it also means that the pure ‘mother’ can be treated as the utterly abject — which can take in all the dirt and excrement and can still remain pure. There doesn’t seem to be a religious discourse, scriptural or mythic that leads us to have ‘darshan’ of the fact of Ganga’s death. So the answer is in rereading the myth allocated to Kinaram. It is only in this kind of unexplained entry “passing through”, that the nightly link between death and the abject ‘mother’ can be perceived. So in contemporizing this myth if one signifies the rotten corpse, it could be precisely that of Ganga.
Endnotes

1 The anthropomorphism of living is extended here to the plant, animal, human or even certain intermediate form of these, where these three forms of life may be generic terms and could have internal differentiation in terms of moral signification of high, low and neuter birth (see Obeyesekere 2002).

2 The idea of ‘materialist theology’ is developed by a set of contemporary thinkers like Slavoj Žižek (2006) and Eric Santner (2001).

3 Point de Capiton is used in French by Lacan to suggest how the signifying chain operates by privileging certain signifiers over others. It has been variously translated in English as “upholstery button” that maintains the content of the quilt in its place, also as ‘quilting point’, ‘anchoring point’ and ‘nodal points’ (see Žižek 2003).

4 Note the repetition of the homological relationship between Purusa and the ‘woman’ mimed in the Lord and his ‘word’ as his second. “This, [in the beginning], was only the Lord of the universe. His Word was with him. This word was his second. He contemplated. He said, “I will deliver this word so that she will produce and bring into being all this world” TMB XX, 14,2

While elaborating this link Panikkar says: “the fact that vac is feminine is especially significant in the Brahmanas. She is supreme, but in a very feminine way; she is queen, but she has a king as a partner, for she is the consort of Prajapati, the creator. She has feminine characteristics of complementarity, a mediatorial role, and a certain feminine docility and obedience. She needs always to be uttered, by men, by Gods, or by the Creator himself. This element of submission is responsible, however for her decline. She gradually loses her primordial supremacy until she is defeated by manas in the Brahmanas and plays a secondary role in the Upanisads”(1977: 107).

5 Another interesting etymological link that emerges is, Panikkar’s insistence that maithuna (copulation) is the intercourse between the manas (spirit) and vac (word) (1977: 112). The state of longing for this intercourse is that of ‘hunger’ that connotes ‘death. This brings us closest to the Lacanian observation about language being structured like the unconscious and sexuality as central to this structuring process. Also, here is a corroborations of the anthropological observation that death and sexuality intimately linked.

6 Žižek argues that “the very “progress” from one form to another is motivated by the structural imbalance of the sexual relationship (Lacan’s il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel), which condemns any sexual practise to eternal oscillation between the “spontaneous” pathos of self-obliteration and the logic of external ritual (following the rules). Thus the final outcome is that sexuality is the domain of “spurious infinity” [...] (2006: 13).

7 Recall the lord’s — being reduced to ashes state— ‘When he had produced the creatures, Prajapati fell into pieces. Being reduced to a (mere) heart he was lying exhausted. He uttered a cry: “Alas, my life!”

8 Any abject object as characterized by the Symbolic has the dual dimension of a desirable attraction and an unbridgeable repulsion. In psychoanalyses, Freud’s idea of the ‘das ding’ or ‘the thing’ is interpreted by Lacan as the ‘minimal distance’ that separates us from the traumatic Real and ensures the sustenance of our daily life smoothly (Žižek 2005b: 90). I use abject here in the sense that this ‘horror’ associated with particular objects is shared as symbols within the Hindu Symbolic. So, it is not that these objects are essentially traumatic to human life in general, it is the ‘thing’ associated to them, the ‘unrepresentable’ excess, which makes them as part of abject objects.

9 The Hindi title of the book can be translated as ‘The migrant widows seeking Moksha in Kashi: their socio-religious lives’.

10 Their own description of methodology does not mention ‘case method’.
11 The moral idiom of the old women as to be taken care of by the family members is a mutually borrowed discourse in which both the family members and the (aged) widow herself may identify and this is one of the central arguments of Lawrence Cohen's *No aging in India* (1998).

12 See Verdery 1999 on the investiture of aura on to the dead; Kristeva 1992 on the dead as the abject, particularly dead bodies of the deified; Visvanathan 2007 on the radical ambiguity that the dead occupies if seen from the premise of mysticism.

13 *Raksha* is a multicoloured (conspicuously red with strains of yellow) sacred thread different from the pale coloured thread worn as *Janaū* by twice born castes' men. While the wearing of the Janaū requires the man to observe strict codes of purity, particularly with respect to sexual and the sanitary, with the thread of *raksha*, these requirements seem to be more relaxed. When I asked, why *raksha*, the multicoloured thread has been tied around the *sadhu*’s dead body, the doms told me that it is a thing to be celebrated that the *sadhu* has been granted Samadhi.


15 A reference to the probable Muslim assassins of Brother Charles.

16 See the official site of the little sisters: http://www.rc.net/org/littlesisters/

17 Interviews were held in June 2009 at the Yeshu Ashram, Pandey Ghat.

18 One cannot use medical tourism or pilgrimage here because in these cases as I was told the journeys to Benares are always in emergency, there isn’t a planning and long drawn cost analysis that precedes it.

19 I corroborate the fact about hospitals and accidental deaths with statistics little later in the main discussion.

20 Necrophagy is eating of human corpses and coprophagy is eating of feaces.

21 This was one of the central concerns of my M. Phil Dissertation (2005). In a chapter, I deal with the ‘sanitary and the sexual’ moulds with which an institution like the aghorashram had come to be associated within the colonial period. The postcolonial inheritance of the same ‘sanitary’ should be seen within the usual complication of theory and practise. However, that’s just not it. It is one thing to say that ‘governmentality’ induces a structural shift in the institutions, which is true. It is only with this kind of an idiomatic understanding that one can make sense of the fact that how ‘hospital’ has come to acquire such a great institutional value. The Hospital, at least formally doesn’t have any exclusionary practise in terms of caste identity either in providing entry to a patient or in giving shared residence to him. Also consider the fact that most ‘marwari’ families in Benares have set charitable hospitals for people from early twentieth century. In fact making Ghats, Hospitals and Widows’ houses were the only three charitable features that had acquired a cultural dimension of precedence and provision. Thus, the observation of Ron Barrett that after ‘reformation’ the sect has taken to curing people should be seen within this paradigm of how ‘hospitals’ became metonymic to social reform. The other aspect, which I didn’t consider in my M. Phil and which appeared through the PhDs’ Fieldwork is that even in this so called ‘reformed’ stage, one can clearly discern the paradigm of the ‘sanitary and the sexual’ with which the Aghorashram was attached in colonial era. The ‘positive content’ is not the only feature of an institution, its architecture, practises and myths are also part of its existence and the ‘shifts’ within the institutions cannot be simply registered on whether the ‘shift’ is in keeping with the myths or against it.

22 Julia Kristeva analysing one of her cases of what she calls ‘feminine depression’ says the following which could be used to illuminate and concretize the context that I am speaking of, characterising ‘feminine depression’: “A nothingness that is neither repression nor simply the mark of the affect but condenses into a black hole — like invisible, crushing, cosmic antimatter — the sensory, sexual, fantasy — provoking ill-being
of abandonments and disappointments. Narcissistic wounds and castration, sexual dissatisfaction and fantasy- laden dead ends become telescoped into a simultaneously killing and irretrievable burden that organises her subjectivity; within, she is nothing but bruises and paralysis; outside, all that was left to her was acting out of sham activism” (1989: 88). My sense of translation is that ‘pravah’ is the cosmic ‘antimatter’ as Kristeva puts it and ‘parvah’ is the act or the event of coming out of the ‘feminine depression’.

23 ‘Na Ghar ka na Ghat ka’ is an expression in north Indian modes of characterizing the ‘subjective position’ of the washerman’s (Dhobi’s) dog. Since the washing happens at the Ghat, the dog is naturally required to accompany the master there, thus the time spent at the house and the ghat are almost equal. Thus what is expressed by some informants (relatives of patients and patients themselves) here is the state of being torn between two places in the vein of ‘neither here nor there’. In the case of its metonymic use in the context of the hospital, its’ meaning acquires a different dimension, where ‘ghar’ (home) stands for health and comfort of the kitchen and the ‘Ghat’ stands for the fire of the cremation. Thus the ‘saying’ could be read as ‘neither homebound, nor deathbound’.

24 Pieces of clothes, double the size of a handkerchief dyed in bright red that have a silver or golden border. Some people also buy decorative materials, equally bright, made of paper that they put hanging out on the bier. Such decorative things, including colorful balloons are also available on these shops and they are generally bought when an old person dies. Though one may add a caveat here, there are varieties of ways in which caste and region specific requirements mark the funerary decoration (see also Parry 1994).

25 ‘Shavyatri’ has to be understood as a concept here in terms of – co-pilgrims to the dead. On one hand, this represents the fact that all these men are to observe the ritualistic norms of dietary restrictions and various other restrictions for differing time periods. The other representation is in terms of the Shavyatris standing for the ‘idea’ of the community that is based on blood, alliance and affect (outside strict norm of kinship). This is also the term used by both the Municipal corporation and the political ‘proper naming’ of the people who accompany the dead. They use ‘shav’ for the dead and for that reason the electric crematorium has a hand painted board that informs people about the ‘shav dah shulk’ (fees to cremate). In bhojpuri, nobody refers the dead as ‘shav’; they simply call it ‘maati’, which I refer in the chapter as ‘neuter earth’.

26 According to the 2001 census the number of Hospital beds available for every 10,000 population is 19 on an average for the municipal area of Varanasi Town. Within the eleven blocks five have more than 30 on an average namely Shivdaspur (CT) [36], Ramnagar (NPP) [38], Maruadih Railway Settlement (ITS) [51], Varanasi (NN) [18], and Baragon (CT) [19]. There are also five blocks out of the eleven that do not have any bed on an average namely Phulwaria (CT) [0], Gangapur (CT) [0], Kandwa (CT) [0], Kotwa (CT) [0] and Lohata (CT) [0]. (District census Handbook 2001, Part XII And B, Series 10, p 44).

27 See the forms attached in appendix prescribed to record death as a “Hospital event” and as a “Non Hospital event”.

28 This again was defined on the lines of caste. One dom informant told me that either women of the ‘lower’ castes’ come or of those people who are living next to the cremation ghat.

29 ‘Mangat’ is a formulaic prayer to the extent that the one who seeks a specific blessing from a certain divine hierophany externalizes the act by participating in particular offerings, which may also include presenting bangles, Janau (sacred thread), Saree and so on and also a ‘promise’ to return to the place, if the blessing is granted. The word itself is a derivative of the Hindi ‘mangna’, which means ‘to ask’. Later in the chapter I would show how the Aghoris’ conceive of this asymmetrical ‘exchange’ with the divine.

30 ‘Doctor ne jabab de diya hai’, has two key phrases, ‘jabab’ which means ‘answer’ and ‘de diya’ means ‘has given’. The entire phrase can then be said to mean in anthropological language ‘the Doctor has given his final answer, now every question (to him, about the patient and his prospects) is futile. Similarly, ‘Inhe Ghar le jaiye’ literally means ‘take him home’ but the anthropological import of the phrase is that like it
use to happen earlier if ‘you wish that your relative dies at home amongst the relatives, you should take
him/her, because there is no use in keeping the patient at the hospital, it is clear that s/he is going to die’.
‘Ghar main bata di jiye’, literally means ‘inform the folks’, ‘inhe ghar ke logon se mila dijiye’, literally
means ‘inform the close relatives, they should meet him now, as he may die soon’, ‘bas ab ye akhri hi hai’
literally means ‘this is the final moment’. All of these statements are on the same metonymic ground. In
anthropological terms the ‘illocution’ has the ‘patient’, ‘the close relatives’ and the
‘shavyatris’ in the frame of reference. The same could be substituted by the ‘subject’, ‘home’ and the ‘home-to-cremation
ground co-travellers’.

31 September 2005

32 I confirmed from various sources that in Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai, Ahmadabad, Bangalore, and Chennai
the vehicles to carry the corpse from the hospital are available. Though it is possible that such services may
be present in smaller cities, the chances are less.

33 Pravah is being used here in terms of creating a link between Ganga and the Hospital. Both are marked
by the idea of the ‘flow of things’ as well as that of Parvah — ‘the bobbling uncremated body that floats
up in the river’ is signification of ‘things that need attention’, things that require an addressal. ‘Humne, jo kar
sakte the kiya!’ literally means ‘we did all that we possibly could’ and ‘humne kuch bhi baki nahin choda’
literally means ‘we attended to all possible requirements, leaving no stone unturned’. The home as the site of the sexual activity is obvious. The cremation ghat is seen as regenerative because
its capacity to ‘consume the dead through fire’ and thus reproduce the cosmic aspect of birth through
death (Barrett 2008). The latter aspect is used as a principle by the Aghories.

34 ‘Few’ because in case of ‘bodies’ coming from the hospital, there are less number of Shavyatris who
manage to make it to the cremation.

35 It is through the combing of ethnographies like “Doctors and Society: Three Asian Case Studies India,
Malaysia, Sri Lanka” by T. N. Madan (1980), out of various others that I felt that the dimension of
‘fantasy’ in the hospital has to be incorporated.

36 ‘Few’ because in case of ‘bodies’ coming from the hospital, there are less number of Shavyatris who
manage to make it to the cremation.

37 “When he produced the creatures, Prajapati fell into pieces. Being reduced to a (mere) heart he was lying
exhausted. He uttered a cry: “Alas, my life!” the waters heard him. They came to his aid and by means of
sacrifice of the firstborn they restored to him his sovereignty” (Taittiriya Brahmana II, 3, 6,1) (Panikkar

38 ‘Hav bhav’ could be understood using of Erving Goffman’s ‘The presentation of self in everyday life’
(1959). When informants say that the ‘hav-bhav’ has changed, they mean that ‘the ways of conducting
things’ and things (funerary items) themselves have changed for manual cremation, over time.

39 In fact while calling it a ‘product’, it should bring the sharp contrast of a capitalistic commodity to one’s
mind. The doms through manual cremation have to ensure that a certain part of the body, depending on the
sex of the dead person should be saved for the final immersion in the river. However, neither this has an
outright scheme or code to save that part, nor it has any particular physical appearance that is preferred by
the shavyatris. Yet, the key to differentiate the electric cremation and the manual one is that the manual act
of saving the ‘unburnt’ bone with flesh is the act of Dom’s laboured creativity par excellence.

40 David Lorenzen’s effort to create a relatively ‘speculative’ history of the shavite sects of ‘Kapalikas’ and
the ‘Kalamukhas’ has to be lauded for its sheer anthropological linkages.

41 Literally it means, one has to leave ‘all’ the clothes here, after bathing and has to go back in new
clothes. Clearly, the point is that with the ‘death’ of the ‘illness’ you are reborn.

42 Vamana Purana is one of the so called left handed puranas.