The Ethnography of Tantra

Textures and Contexts of Living Tantric Traditions

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SUNY
PRESS

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Social Life and Experiences of a Tantric Goddess

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Bagalāmukhī is one of the ten great-goddesses (*daśa mahāvidyās*) in Śākta Tantra. She is also worshipped in pragmatic transactions that ultimately foster meaningful experiences and enhance personal devotion. And all this may happen online! WhatsApp, a social media platform, is transforming religious experiences by providing unprecedented access to Bagalāmukhī's puja space and ritual specialists; in this way, social media are a pathway to and a space for ritual engagement with the larger world of Śākta Tantra. In this chapter, Bagalāmukhī rituals and devotion are represented in varied media: oral (structured interviews and casual conversations), textual (devotional and ritual texts in vernacular languages), and digital (websites and WhatsApp). While this study analyzes all these media, special focus is placed on digital media to represent continuity and innovation as devotees interact with the goddess and her experts. While Tantric studies generally work with premodern textual data as their conventional canon, the study of devotees' relationships with the goddess Bagalāmukhī and her ritual experts using WhatsApp suggests a new avenue to explore contemporary, lived Tantric religion using non-textual, oral-aural, and digital-textual sources.

While some scholars and insiders question the legitimacy of digital experiences as religious, the informants who participated in this study do not, and a *selective* application of Ann Taves' ascriptive model for religious experience[1], in which "experiences deemed religious" are affirmed (Taves 2011, 14), legitimates devotees' statements as significant. Taves' ascription model assumes experiences are not inherently religious or nonreligious; rather, they are designated as religious or not by the experiencer. In this way, diverse experiences may be deemed religious—mystical, spiritual, transcendental, and so forth. Using the lens of the ascription model, comparisons are made to show that certain similar features are shared outside of a "pure" or normative religious experience framework. Taves importantly critiques *sui generis* models of religion that argue only experiences deemed religious by authorities are genuinely religious and worthy of studies. Tantra studies scholars might be tempted to dismiss Taves' model, citing cognitive reductionism and claiming her data from American Pentecostalism invalidates interpretative use for non-Western sources. I will demonstrate, however, that Taves' embrace and valuation of experience opens new avenues for analysis and data collection. This will be accomplished by analyzing experiences among Bagalāmukhī devotees.

While I conducted field research on Bagalāmukhī, I came upon her complex relationship with devotees when they engage her and her ritual officiants on the digital platform of WhatsApp. On-the-ground research was conducted over two years (2017–2019) in Kāmākhyā, Assam, India, but I continue to gather digital data using WhatsApp and by staying in touch with my informants remotely. My use of digital research methods is informed by the scholarship of Heinz Scheifinger (2013, 2020), Christopher Helland (2013), Heidi Campbell (2013, 2017), and Knut Lundby (2013).

To situate my positionality in short, I am a scholar-practitioner of Śākta Tantra from Assam. I adopted an "insider with an outsider lens" perspective, which enabled easier acceptance into these tight-knit communities than possibly an "outsider" anthropologist might receive. My ethnographic methods included conversations with devotees and ritual specialists, participant observation and recorded face-to-face interactions both in person and remotely (i.e., using WhatsApp), and a standard questionnaire. The boundary between the participants and the observer (i.e., this author) was not rigidly dichotomous. Great care was taken to sift through and separate th disclosed religious world of the devotees and the way the auth experienced the religious world of the devotees.

Most of the interviews cited below were conducted during th annual Ambubachi Mela in 2019. Attended by approximately tw million visitors (*The Diplomat*, 2019), Ambubachi Mela is a thre day, monsoon-season festival celebrating the yearly menstruation the goddess Kāmākhyā.[2] This large devotee population is gathere not only in one physical place, but devotees also use smart phon widely, making WhatsApp a powerful tool for data collection. Th questionnaire that was circulated to informants during the festiv consisted of the following questions: Have you heard of the godde Bagalāmukhī? If yes, have you either performed Bagalāmukhī pu based on requests received on WhatsApp, or requested Bagalāmuk puja, or know people who have requested Bagalāmukhī puja v WhatsApp? If yes, what was the purpose behind the puja? Whe was the puja performed (temple or house or a community center cremation ground)? Have you sent pictures and/or recordings of th puja via WhatsApp? Have you ever used WhatsApp live video share the puja with the devotees? Were you happy with the resul of the puja?

As I worked through the above inquires, the boundaries betwee the insider and the outsider often blurred. Through my ethnograph interactions, I navigated between the world of the scholar and th religious devotees I engaged with. These intersubjective experienc compelled deep self-reflections on how I experienced the religiou world of the devotees.

In this chapter, I will first explore the nature of religious exper ence in the history of the study of religion, making an argument th Taves' theories fruitfully interpret South Asian devotees' interactic with Bagalāmukhī in a digital realm. I will also survey the importai disciplinary shifts in digital religious studies that enable this vei project. Next, the section titled "Bagalā from Myths to Screens" di cusses the growing popularity of online Bagalāmukhī pujas and oth ritual services that expand on traditional depictions and appeals this goddess. The subsequent section, "WhatsApp, Bagalā!," focus on devotees' use of the social media platform WhatsApp and wh they declare to be advantages to online religious services. In oth words, I am using the emic category of religion, taking into accou

what devotees and ritual experts consider to be religious to study the religious space of Bagalāmukhī *while* I adopt the etic lens of experience, to analyze the experiences of the devotees. Finally, I conclude by examining the devotees' "experiences deemed religious"; that is, innovative, discrete interactions with the goddess. Further, these interactions over time may transition into more conventional understandings of "religious experiences." In short, experiences of the sacred through digital platforms for some can be as effective and transformative as the experience of the divine in offline, physical spaces such as temples, altars, and pilgrimage sites.

Mapping the Encounters

Religions consistently enable humans to "make contact" with something superhuman, something extraordinaire, transcending time and space, and this is reflected in scholarship on religions. Martin Riesebrodt, somewhat echoing Milford Spiro's (1966) religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings," defines religion as a "complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible" (Riesebrodt 2009, 74–75). Jeffery Kripal argues that religion enables contact with the "Other"; it is "any set of established stories, ritual performances, mind disciplines, bodily practices, and social institutions that have been built up over time around extreme encounters with some anomalous presence, energy, hidden order, or power that is experienced as radically Other or More" (Kripal 2014, 94). Religions enable humans to glimpse and recognize that Other-than-human via religious experience.

But what is "religious experience"? And what makes such experiences authentic? Wayne Proudfoot (1985) made a pivotal methodological intervention, arguing that scholars must aim for "explanatory reductionism" as opposed to "descriptive reductionism" in which scholars of religions painstakingly describe any religious experience precisely as the experiencer reports it and only interpret it after such careful description. Scholars must document devotees' experiences without passing judgment. From this perspective, digital Bagalāmukhī

and her followers are revealed as a vibrant development in Tantra and goddess worship.

But what is digital religion, and how can scholars study this innovative religious context? The topics for the study of religion and media are often divided into three categories: producers of content, media itself, and the effects. Horace Newcomb proposes that media culture be considered as a "cultural forum" where important ideas are presented, discussed, and evaluated (Newcomb and Hirsch 1976); I will extend this category to include social media engagements with the goddess Bagalāmukhī and her media artifacts. Religion and media analysis initially documented and analyzed the effects of religious broadcasting and televangelism in the 1950s, as pioneered by Barry Parker (1955) and continued in 1985 by Gary Gaddy and David Pritchard. By 1993, as explained by Hoover and Kim (2016, 122), the focus of these studies shifted away from televised sermons toward "practices and experiences of individuals in making religious and spiritual meanings," though this was rooted in "American religious culture, including its disestablishment, its pluralism, its adaptability, and its aspirations to individual empowerment" (122).

The field of religion and media today interacts and overlaps in a wide range of religions—well beyond American Christianity—and on multiple platforms (websites, social networking platforms like Facebook and Instagram, and encrypted platforms like WhatsApp). These democratic and diffuse shifts lead to newfound individual religious autonomy—"Individuals today increasingly think of their religiosity as an ongoing project of constructing an ideal faith or spirituality suited to their biography and their own needs" (Hoover and Kim 2016, 122). Autonomy as a value is on the rise, and people are seeking new platforms for religious experience and expression. In this digital realm, religion rapidly becomes a marketplace, leading to structural and economic changes; for example, when folks interact with a goddess via technological platforms, or when Bagalā goes on-screen online.

Traditional structuralist and functionalist approaches fail in these new contexts. The rapidly growing academic field of digital religion explores how living religious practices are impacted by digital media and documents the significant changes occurring due to that interaction. The digital is more than a medium of technology, for it

affects the ways people seek religions and do religions. As such, the religious and the arena of spirituality are changing. New phenomena generated by digital culture must embody culture, authenticity, authority, and experience(s)—all issues for which the term "religion" can stand (Hoover 2012). The digital encourages generative encounters in which novel forms of religious experiences arise—for example, through video games like "The Durga Puja Mystery," or by connecting faith through the use of virtual reality (VR)—which brings us back to Taves' claim that there can hardly be a single and universal paradigm to define *a* religious experience.

Bagalā from Myths to Screens

The so-called dot-com movement started in the mid- to late 1990s, initiating a shift in the ways cultural technologies, including religion, are transmitted, stored, cataloged, and disseminated. Helland (2007) proposes a distinction between "religion online" and "online religion." Online religion essentially represents how the fluid and flexible nature of the Internet allows for new forms of religiosity and lived religious practice online. Within this larger space, issues about tradition, authority, authenticity, and efficacy are fiercely debated. What is the actual influence of the digital on religions and religiosity? This investigative lens is called digital religion.

Studies on the Internet and religious traditions have flourished in recent decades. During the 1990s and 2000s, scholarship on religion and the Internet focused on basic questions How is religion represented in new media environments? How do religious groups use new media to serve their causes and needs? What challenges do new media technologies pose to traditional religious communities and institutions? (Lövheim and Campbell 2017, 6). The next phase of research was followed by more nuanced questions about identity and community-making via online interactions and networks.

Scholarship on Hinduism and the Internet addresses a wide range of relevant topics to this chapter. Emilia Bachrach (2014) focuses on the growing presence of gurus and their impact online. Vinay Lal (2014), Sriram Mohan (2015), and Sahana Udupa (2015) discuss cyberspace and Hindus, diasporic and Indian residents. Maya Warrier (2014) concentrates on the online presence of bhakti. Xenia Zeiler (2018) describes online Durgā puja, and I recently explored how the Internet perpetuates normative understandings of Tantra (Borkataky-Varma 2019). Nicole Karapanagiotis (2010) explores the virtual sacred space in the context of Vaishnava Hindus and asks some pertinent questions around rules and protocols of ritual purity. Let us turn to some specific media artifacts. Websites like onlinepuja.com, shubhpuja.com, onlineprashad.com, and epuja.co.in, as well as temple webpages like emeenakshi.org and kamakhya-temple.com, all bring the Hindu divine to the screens. Furthermore, pujas are facilitated online daily through social media platforms like Facebook live stream. Prominent examples include the Kali Mandir Ramakrishna Ashram and Puja with Mangaldeep. Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, in particular, are growing in popularity for securing ritual and worship services. The popularity of such digital pujas is not just marketed to Hindus, for they appeal to non-Hindus as well. In 2017, the widely publicized teen-music icon Miley Cyrus performed Lakṣmī puja during the Super Bowl (NDTV 2017). Other celebrities like Priyanka Chopra Jonas and Nick Jonas are tagged under ritual testimonials found on shubhpuja.com.

To appreciate the scope of pujas on the Internet, examining one particular website can be informative. Shubhpuja.com was founded by Saumyaa Vardhan, a graduate from Imperial College of London, and according to her website profile under "Our Craftsmen": "She has previously worked in London for over 7 years as a Mergers & Acquisition executive with KPMG London, EY London, and Rolls-Royce UK. Vardhan picked up not just a valuable education and top corporate experience along her journey; but also collected a maze of life experiences whilst retaining her belief in ancient Hindu philosophy. Honing her focus toward this philosophy, Vardhan founded Shubhpuja.com in 2013" (Shubhpuja n.d.). Vardhan's degrees are listed on the website, and they include "Advanced degree in Vedic Astrology, Numerology (Western & Vedic) & Vaastu Shastra / Feng Shui" (Shubhpuja n.d.). In 2018, five years after the site's inception, shubhpuja.com became the top Vedic-spirituality-based online venture, and 500 professionals, including Vedic Brahmins, make up their team. Tapping into a USD 30 billion USD Indian spiritual market, the site appears extensively in leading media channels and newspapers. The *New York Times* named subhpuja.com the "Uber for God" (Shubhpuja n.d.).

The role of smartphones and the expansion of the digital spiritual market in India today is being studied by scholars like Kathinka Frøystad (2019) and Varuni Bhatia (2020). Bhatia follows the circulation

of visual imagery of god Śani on the Internet, where Hindu devotees can not only find ritual experts, but also follow rituals and listen to mantras and stories all at the click of the button. Bhatia succinctly concludes her essay with these words: "In doing so, virality fundamentally contributes to the vitality and lifeness of the sacred object within digital Hinduism" (2020, 16). Now let us turn to the goddess Bagalāmukhī, whom we find readily dwelling on the Internet, and explore the larger question of religious experiences.

Goddess Bagalāmukhī is also known as Pītāmbarā-devī, "The Goddess Dressed in Yellow Robes." Like all *mahāvidyās* (a group of ten wisdom goddesses), Bagalāmukhī has several mythological story sequences. According to one of these, in the *Kṛta Yuga* (the first cosmic age), an incredible storm threatened to destroy the universe. Viṣṇu was disturbed. He went to a sacred pond, prayed to the goddess Tripurasundarī, and undertook austerities. Tripurasundarī brought forth Bagalāmukhī, who calmed the storm (Kinsley 1997, 199). Another myth, however, is the most popular among Ambubachi festival participants: The demon Madan undertook austerities that won him the boon of exceptional speech (*vāk siddhi*). He started abusing his powers and killing people. The gods invoked Bagalāmukhī, and she removed Madan's boon by taking hold of his tongue and paralyzing (*stambhana*) his speech. More generally, Bagalāmukhī is associated with "supernatural or magical powers, the ability to immobilize and attract others" (Kinsley 1997, 197). Paralyzing is one result of the magic rituals I describe in the next section.

Materials on magic, especially those circulating in the twentieth century, are published widely in Indian vernacular languages. Some publications contain extensive Sanskrit root texts, and others are entirely vernacular except for mantras. The main concern of these texts is magic rituals, rites that cause specific, usually aggressive, changes in the world, though texts may also contain devotional hymns, mystic mathematical diagrams, medical remedies, and even sleight-of-hand tricks. These sources should be considered secondary interpretations of prior Sanskrit texts; namely, what Aaron Ullrey calls "Magic Tantras" (Ullrey 2016). Almost all these publications have caveats at their beginning (and sometimes in text boxes throughout) that absolve printers, publishers, and authors from liability if successful rituals cause negative results or if rites fail and thereby cause harm to practitioners.

According to Ullrey, magic *tantras* are texts whose primary concern is pragmatic rituals. Three categories constitute magic rituals in South Asia: (1) the six results (*ṣaṭkarman*), (2) fantastic feats and enchanted items (*kautukakarman, indrajāla*), and (3) conjuring of (mostly female) entities who grant wealth, spiritual expedients, and worldly power (*yakṣinīsādhana*). The six results include pacification, murder, bewildering, eradication, dissent, attraction, and so forth. Fantastic feats include alchemy, erotic augmentation, revivifying the dead, and more. Enchanted items locate hidden treasure, enable the sorcerer to walk upon the water, and may divine the future. Conjuring calls forth and manifests deities or spirits, mostly female, who grant the petitioner wealth and powers (Ullrey 2016, 18–19).

The *Yakṣinī Bhūtinī Sādhanā aur Devi Siddhiyāṃ* is a modern book of magic in Hindi with select Sanskrit quotes and mantras. A long section within the book is about perfecting goddesses (*Devī siddhiyāṃ*), and Bagalāmukhī is the fourth goddess among Tārā, Dhumāvatī, Bhuvaneśvarī, Bagalāmukhī, Mātaṃgī, Chinnamastā, Ṣoḍaśī, Ucchiṣṭa Cāṇḍālinī, Ucchiṣṭa Gaṇeśa, Dhaṇḍā, Nityā, Karṇa Piśacinī, Haridrā Gaṇeśa, Annupūrṇā, and Durgā.[3] Repetition of the mantra "Oṃ hrīṃ bagalāmukhī sarvaduṣṭānāṃ vācam mukhaṃ padaṃ stambhaya jihvāṃ kīlaya buddhiṃ vināśaya hlīṃ oṃ svāhā" invokes Bagalāmukhī directly (Śobhanā 2004, 44). The mantra stresses her power to immobilize (*stambhaya*), an enemy's body and speech, to bind his tongue and destroy his mind.

Bagalāmukhī destroys an enemy by halting his speech, but also, it appears, by slandering his or her very name, presumably casting vile speech back upon the slanderer. Recall the goddess grabbing demon Madan's tongue to stop his mighty speech powers. One thousand repetitions on a rosary made of turmeric or some generally yellow rosary is prescribed to please the goddess. In this text, as in most depictions, Bagalāmukhī is portrayed as a furious goddess, and she is accompanied by a yantra (a magic diagram) with intersecting triangles and a dot at its center, surrounded by two rings of lotus flowers, numbering eight and sixteen petals, respectively. Opposite the yantra is a line drawing of the goddess restraining a human-headed figure by the tongue as she prepares to strike him with a club while water rushes about above him, connecting the story of Madan and the tale of calming a cosmic flood. She displays a flag inscribed with a swan (see figure 4.1).
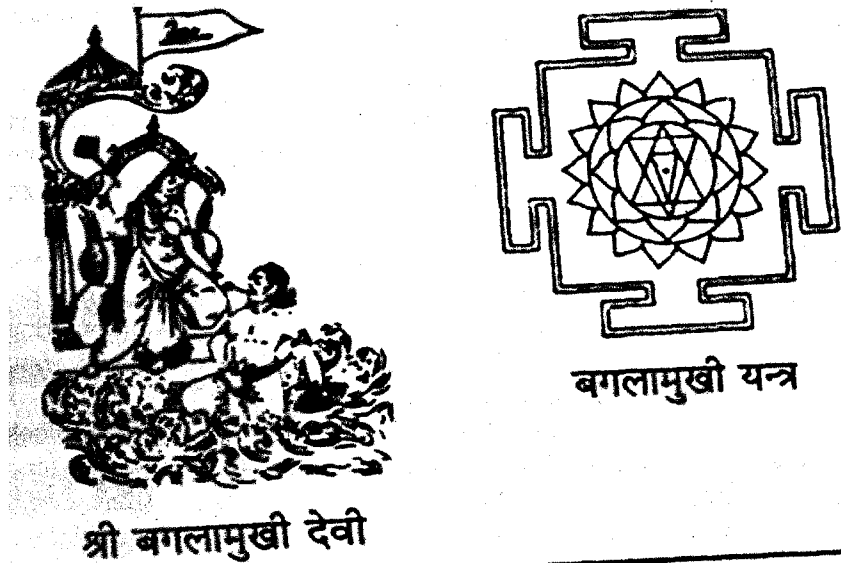
Figure 4.1. On the left, the anthropomorphic representation of the Goddess; on the right, her cosmic-geometric diagram or yantra. *Source*: Śobhanā (2004: 45).

Specific oblations to affect the six results (*ṣaṭkarman*) are also prescribed as the domain of Bagalāmukhī. Below are a few examples (see Śobhanā 2004):

> Honey (*madhu*)[4], ghee (*ghṛya*), and sugar (*śakkar*) mixed with sesame should be oblated to subjugate (*vaś*) humans.
> Creating discord (*kalaha*) [i.e., *vidveṣaṇa*]—Mix neem leaves into oil [mustard oil][5]. Oblating this causes mutual conflict [between and among the victims].
> Immobilizing Enemies (*śatru stambhana*)—Palm leaf, salt, and turmeric root [emend *halkī* to *haldī*] are oblated to cause the immobilization of an enemy. Aloe (*agar*), mustard seed (*rāi*), buffalo ghee, bdellium (*guggula*) are oblated at night to bring about the swift destruction of enemies.
> Eradication (*uccāṭana*)—Vulture and crow feathers are mixed with mustard oil which are oblated into a funeral pyre (*citā par havan*), causing eradication of enemies.

A large majority of the devotees and almost all priests either contacted or interviewed mention the *Ṣaṭkarman* rituals to be cen-

tral to Bagalāmukhī ritual space. Informants describe the goddess Bagalāmukhī as wearing yellow and having the power to paralyze (*stambhana*) speech, movement, and activities of the enemy. At the same time, she may grant the devotee the power of exceptional speech (*vāk siddhi*) by which the opponent may be defeated. Lived religion and printed magic sources are thereby consistent and connected. Paralyzing the enemy's speech while at the same time sharpening the devotees' tongue is an interesting interpretive move. Nevertheless, it was consistent among interviewees and magic sources. When asked why they offer puja to Bagalāmukhī, a wide range of reasons were provided, but all sought to address a dispute: divorce, property quarrel, financial problems, court cases, obstacles in the profession, troublesome in-laws, business deals not materialized due to lack of approval, and so forth. The complexity of the specified problem determined the length of the puja. For example, if the devotee seeks a promotion or to win a business deal, one to two days of puja is recommended and deemed enough. However, if the believer is caught in a web of disputes—property, marital, contractual, and so forth—extensive pujas are performed over three to fourteen days.

A quick Internet search for "Bagalamukhi puja" yields a few website results. Zeenews.com, a popular Indian news channel, under their program *Manthan*, aired an entire segment titled "Bagalāmukhī: History and Benefits of Praying to Her" containing the following description: "Bagalamukhi is one of the ten mahavidyas (great wisdom goddesses) in Hinduism. Bagalamukhi Devi smashes the devotee's misconceptions and delusions (or the devotee's enemies) with her cudgel. She is also known as Pitambara Maa in North India" (YouTube 2014). In another leading newspaper, *The Times of India*, an author describes the results Bagalāmukhī may confer:

> Removes the debts and enhances prosperity at home. • Fear of enemies is removed and the devotee experiences a great degree of comfort in mind. The enemies will no more be able to confront you. They will grow powerless when trying to act against you and their vicious plots will turn futile and ineffective. [. . .] • The devotee triumphs over lawsuits and succeeds in quarrels and competitions. • If there are fluctuations in your life, this mantra can help balance the positive and negative aspects and establish harmony in home and life. (Sathya Narayanan 2018)

Her worship remedies physical and magical attacks but also grants prosperity. According to Shivology.com, her puja "will remove the effects of black magic. Maa Baglamukhi is known to resolve ongoing court cases and all legal matters. It protects you from your enemies. You will get the divine grace and blessings of Devi Baglamukhi. This puja will help you to get good health and prosperity. It will also help you to remove all the obstacles from your success path" (Shivology. com 2018).

Devotees can place an order online from various websites for Bagalāmukhī puja. The prices are steep. Shubhpuja.com charges $196.98 for one day, and for seven days the cost is $459.63. Almost all websites post long testimonials and screenshots of message exchanges from Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. From Goa, India, one devotee writes:

> I can't thank Shubhpuja enough for the issues they have solved for me. I consulted shubhpuja.com for a complete diagnostic solution. I came to consult them after spending lacs of rupees (approx. 2.36 lacs) on a personal problem for which I could not find a solution for the last two years. [. . .]. First, they scientifically checked my horoscope and I was very surprised at the precision of their analysis upto each date. [. . .]. I did not believe in these things earlier. But decided to give it a try as I was finding no solutions for my problem. They organized the puja which was customized for my requirements. It was very professionally organized with top ingredients and pandits. For the first time in my life I could feel the vibrations within my body through mantra chanting when I sat for the puja. [. . .]. All of a sudden there were situations that developed on their own, which nobody including professionals had not thought about in my case. It happened on its own and was a solution created by the higher force for me. [. . .]. The problem could have costed me minimum 5–7 lacs more and would have persisted for another 7–10 years. I have saved unbelievable amount of money just through a consultation, small vedic pujas and colour therapy solution suggested by Shubhpuja. [. . .] Thank you for truly changing my life for good. (Shubhpuja.com)

Analysis of customer testimonials and reviews on other popular websites (including onlinepuja.org, onlinetemple.com, and divine-rudraksha.com) reveals sophisticated target marketing that appeals to a wide, global audience. The next example addresses the Indian diaspora.

> NRI people [Non-Resident Indians] performing a Puja in a proper way either becomes impossible or otherwise exorbitantly expensive. It is due to these situations that a concept of Online Pujas has been invented wherein a client residing abroad can book a Puja through our Online Puja service providers. Once the puja is booked, the client can get the Puja performed on their behalf that too in a perfect way and at affordable cost. Any Puja that is ordered Online is performed by a team of Brahmins (usually at least 3–5 Brahmins). Out of them, one of the Brahmins takes a "Sankalp" [intention] in client's name who has booked the Puja and then he performs all the recitals and rituals that were supposed to have been done by the person if he was himself physically present in the Puja. This means that the Brahmin who has taken the sankalp virtually represents the client who has booked the puja during the entire puja procedure. (divine-rudraksha.com 2016)

Such websites meet NRIs' needs in innovative ways (Borkataky-Varma 2019). Aggressive rituals such as *vaśikaraṇ* (subjugation, especially "love magic") and *sammohan* (hypnosis) are widely popular online, though in prior times they could be ordered through mail correspondence. Lee Siegel (2014) provides detailed testimonials and experiences about sorcerers and hypnotists operating online and over the phone. While discussing a sorcerer named Swamiji Mohan Kamacharan, Siegel lists Kamacharan's self-description: "Specialist in love and other problems, gold medalist of Tantra winner, and fulfill all your Love desire today. Get your true Love now and keep him or her faithful and devoted to you as long as your like" (Siegel 2014, 37).

Describing the effectiveness of online pujas, divine-rudraksha. com states the following: "We are pleased to declare that the online Pujas have already benefited a large number of people which is confirmed by the very fact that the same people have given repeated bookings for other Pujas after their initial order [. . .] beneficial and

effective is further ascertained by large number of feedbacks and testi-
monials sent by our grateful and esteemed clients" (divine-rudraksha.
com 2016). Social media platforms, especially WhatsApp, as we shall
see, enable even greater engagement among devotees and between
ritualists and clients compared to the websites above. This greater
engagement using social media and messaging applications increases
the notion of greater access to the goddess, which further enhances
"experiences deemed religious."

WhatsApp, Bagalā!

Messaging applications like WhatsApp, Viber, and WeChat are
extremely popular among smartphone users worldwide. WhatsApp
blends a short messaging service (SMS) and social networking. Users
send instant messages but also create and share user groups, called
WhatsApp groups, that spread widely. These groups are used for
varied non-text purposes such as sharing images, audio, and video
messages and media. Duncan Omanga (2019), in the context of
Kenya, writes: "WhatsApp and WhatsApp groups have lately become
important loci of sociality and political 'talk,' from mundane, routine
messaging to more organized, structured groups with a more or less
formal agenda. [. . .] As [a] social media platform, it is capable of
convening groups, for both spirited debates and routine conversations
with a typical WhatsApp group ranging from 3 to a maximum of 256
participants" (Omanga 2019, 176). In 2019, WhatsApp reached 400
million users in India (Singh 2019). Sharing pictures and videos of
festivals, temple visits, pilgrimages, and pujas is common. What about
the goddess Bagalāmukhī on WhatsApp? My ethnography reveals
that pujas are ordered over WhatsApp. All names are changed to pro-
tect the identity of the respondent, except if the name was published
by a website. According to one priest respondent:

> When you are stuck in a court case or a serious dispute, you
> cannot come to the temple. You may not be in Guwahati or
> India for that matter. What do you do? You can WhatsApp
> your personal details like name, *gotra*, date of birth, court
> date, the case details, and desired outcome. Depending of
> the desired outcome I will tell you what puja is needed,
> for how long, and substances required. For example, if

> you want *vaśikaraṇ* or *māraṇ* I will need hair, nail clippings
> or some fabric from the person's personal attire. You can
> courier that to me. I will tell you the cost of the puja and
> you transfer the money to my bank. My account can take
> money from anywhere in the world. After the puja I will
> send you a video of the puja and if needed I will courier you
> a *tabiz* (amulet) and/or ash or dried fruits. After receiving
> the package, you WhatsApp me and I will tell you what
> to do with the stuff I have sent you.[6]

All interviewees in Kāmākhyā preferred to directly order pujas using
WhatsApp rather than indirectly ordering rituals requested through
online portals. Ordering via a website, as opposed to direct WhatsApp
communication with a ritualist, creates an additional layer of separa-
tion from the priest beyond physical distance. WhatsApp is perceived
to be more intimate and personalized than webpages. Contact details
are saved in WhatsApp's phone book, and profile pictures appear next
to contacts' names, though some users prefer not to display these.
There are options to video call and/or voice call. At the time when the
interviews were conducted and even now, it is true for most people (in
this context) that the riding assumption while using WhatsApp is that
the messages are encrypted. Recent findings, however, have proven to
be otherwise. But that is outside the scope of this chapter. Users feel
more privacy and, thereby, comfort than other communication ser-
vices. Informants report their "secret" is safe on WhatsApp, which is
especially important when addressing or requesting aggressive magic
rites. Pronita Sarkar, a twenty-seven-year-old devotee, said:

> I use only WhatsApp to speak to *deo* [priest]. Black magic
> was performed on me by my husband's family and because
> of that my husband wanted a divorce, but I have not left the
> house. I also cannot come every day to the temple because
> my husband and his family will know that I am getting
> puja [Bagalāmukhī] done. *Deo* sends me puja videos. After
> I receive the blessings via the video, I delete them. *Deo* has
> given me *tābīj* [amulet] which again I wear hidden from my
> family. My relationship with my husband has improved a
> lot, but I think the best solution is for us to live separately
> from my in-laws. *Deo* has said that *devī* [Bagalāmukhī] will
> grant my wish, soon. I must have faith and patience.[7]

Stories like Pronita's use of WhatsApp come up repeatedly in the field. It is of no surprise, therefore, that most popular online puja websites now have a dedicated WhatsApp tab, showing that WhatsApp is influencing older, stand-alone, web-based ritual commerce sites. These websites also publish screenshots of WhatsApp text exchanges between the customer (devotee) and the provider (priest) to demonstrate the close connections between priests and clients. An entire section of "testimonials" on shubhpuja.com indicates personal conversations like checking weather, health, birthday wishes, festival wishes, and so forth. In addressing the specialists, both men and women (e.g., priest, astrologer, palmist, *vāstu* consultant) as "Uncle" or "Aunty," sharing events as they unfold, there is an important sense of urgency and a feeling of immediacy. Here are some sample threads.
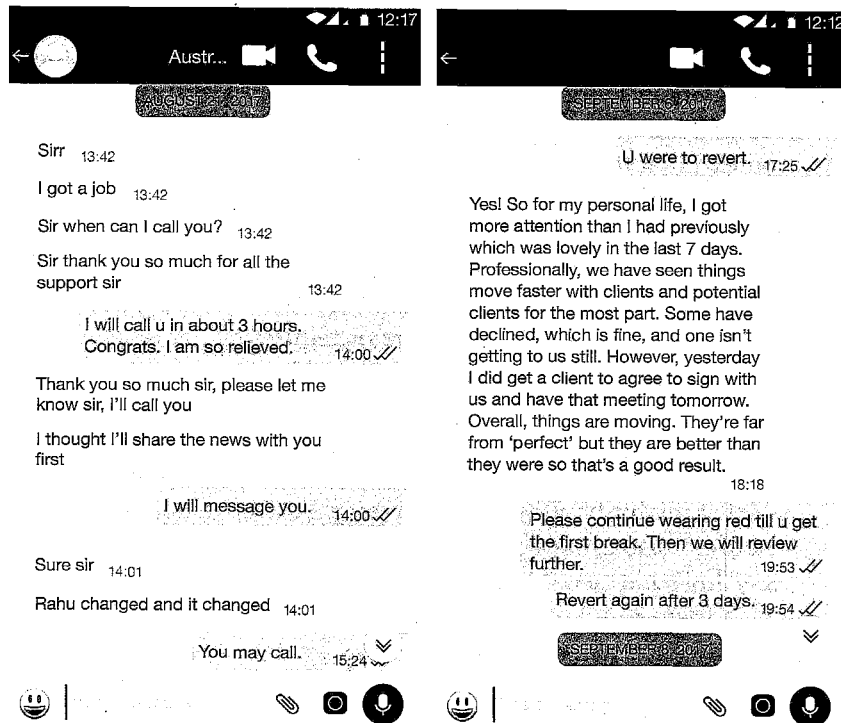

Figure 4.2a and b. Recreation of anonymized WhatsApp conversations between client and ritual specialist. Credit: shubhpuja.com, accessed on June 21, 2020.

Experiencing Bagalā on Screens

We opened this chapter with the question of religious "experience." How does "experience" operate in WhatsApp? In the context of Hinduism, experiences of the divine have been extensively written in the larger concept of *darśan* (in Hindi; *darśana* in Sanskrit). *Darśan* means "sacred vision" or "auspicious sight," sometimes achieved as the end product of pilgrimage, sometimes through seeing a famous or holy person or persons. Pilgrims are sometimes called *darśaniyas*—those who come to see (Vidyarthi 1961, 84–85). Diana Eck (1985) explains *darśan* whereby a Hindu does not say, "I am going to worship," but instead says, "I am going for a *darśan*," or, "I am going to take *darśan*." In this section, I am asking the reader to shift from considering *darśan* as *only* a physical-visual centric experience to also considering plural forms of seeking *darśan*.[8] That is the vision of the "divine" on screens is equally powerful, at least for certain devotees.

In the context of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and online *darśan*, Nicole Karapanagiotis (2019) concludes that there is no qualitative difference between being physically present in front of the deity in the temple and experiencing Krishna online. By extension, online rituals are just as effective and authentic as those solicited and performed in public. This is not completely settled, however. Questions of authenticity for online puja appear consistently in conversations with informants, and while the digital medium is rapidly growing, there are occasional doubts.

Heinz Scheifinger succinctly investigates *darśan* in online puja, and though he is not referring to WhatsApp in particular, his observations are instructive.

> The practice of *darshan*—the key feature of puja—can be successfully mediated via the Internet. While the other senses may not be stimulated in the way that they are when conducting puja in the offline setting, the importance of the sense of sight remains in an online puja. In both cases, a devotee is able to see and be seen by the deity. Therefore, in this crucial respect, the puja is not altered radically in its online-form [. . .] Hindu puja rituals that are performed online are not fundamentally different from traditional forms of the ritual and hence possess efficacy. (Scheifinger 2013, 126)

Darśan experiences online are perceived to be heightened, rather than lessened as one might initially expect. WhatsApp, likewise, heightens experiences by mediating increased intimacy between priest and client, let alone goddess and devotee, on the social media platform.

Experiencing a ritual through synchronous or asynchronous WhatsApp videos may lead to an enhanced ritual experience since it can foster greater intimacy, but also, paradoxically, because it creates additional levels of separation. The lack of physical presence keeps devotees and clients insulated from the actual ritual performance, which is especially desired when extreme methods or aggressive results, such as the "six results" (*ṣaṭkarman*), are sought. One couple, Ravi and Lakshita, sought the death of their rival (*māran*) as an outcome, and they sent the so-called enemy's hair to a ritual specialist.[9] They did not ask what and how the hair would be used. They did not request any videos. They did not ask any questions. All that mattered was the result.[10]

The sorcerer and client are intimate enough that the rite may be solicited and ingredients conferred, but the separation between the client and the physical performance of the ritual is crucial. For several months after I heard it in the field, I thought about that couples' statement describing a murder ritual. I repeatedly drew parallels to goats and goat meat, which were instructive in several hypothetical scenarios. In scenario one, a customer goes to a livestock farm, selects a goat, butchers the goat, and consumes the goat meat. In scenario two, a customer selects the goat, the farmer butchers it, and the customer pays for the goat and consumes the goat meat. Scenario three is a religious setting in which a devotee offers a goat sacrifice (*balī*)—in Kāmākhyā, for instance, as is common. He pays for the ritual, but he may choose to be part of the beheading or not. He may also take the meat home or simply ask for it to be distributed among temple priests and priest families or for it to feed the less fortunate. In Ravi and Lakshita's case, they did not want to know "how the sausage was made"; they just cared that the goat was transformed into a "sausage." WhatsApp enables clients to solicit, sponsor, and secure the results of ambivalent rituals, but the service insulates them from the "dirty business" of aggressive rituals, like witnessing how the sausage is made.

Devotees process the experience of interacting with priests and the goddess via social media. Mediated digitally, these are not tra-ditional "religious experiences," but they are "experiences deemed religious" according to Taves' ascription model. Different experiences demonstrated by interviewees show that experiences may shift from (1) a potent, discrete ritual instance, to (2) an understanding of the importance and effectiveness of ritual, and to (3) an abstracted religious experience of the goddess inspiring devotion to her.

For the first category, a specific experience is out of the ordinary, thereby "special." Devotee informants shared and continue to report embodied experiences—such as feeling vibrations or hearing or sensing the presence of the deity, smells, and so forth—during the puja or soon after. These embodied experiences are considered exceptional and intimate, often enhanced by the relationship with the priest and the rites' direct fit to devotees' needs.

Second, as cumulative abstraction, devotees' personalized experience is linked directly to ritual results. Witnessing results' fruition, the devotee makes a cumulative abstraction that the rites are effective. The devotee seeks the puja because she seeks an outcome, and when that outcome is achieved, her faith in the puja intensifies. When outcomes are not achieved, the devotees do not necessarily question the goddess or the puja; instead, they usually pin the blame on themselves. Priyanka Sarma, interviewed during Ambubachi Mela in 2019, had visited Bagalāmukhī every Tuesday at 7:00 a.m. for more than a year. She stated that she had not missed a single Tuesday, no matter what. She had been offering pujas, as suggested by the temple priest, and she wore yellow beads and yellow garments (inner or outer) every day. But her wish had not been fulfilled. When asked how she felt about the lack of benevolence on the part of the goddess, she said, "The fault is mine. I may have done some bad karma and have not accrued enough good deeds for *Mā* [honorific term for the goddess, here Bagalāmukhī] to grant me my wish. This only means I must try harder. Prove myself worthy of her love and blessings."[11]

In 2020, I asked Mohit Sarma, a priest serving in a Kāmākhyā temple to Bagalāmukhī, about failed outcomes, and he swiftly absolved himself: "The devotee did not receive the desired outcome not because of an error in my part of doing the puja or chanting the mantra. The puja failed because either devotee was unclear of his or her intention or lack of faith."[12] Mohit Sarma also alluded to fears about counter-puja offerings: an opposing party might have also performed pujas or performed counter-spells; consequently, pujas must be repeated.

Another devotee describes receiving positive results, and those results increased his belief in the rituals' effectiveness and affirmed his faith in the power of devotion to Bagalāmukhī. Rishi Das is a forty-four-year-old civil contractor who declares he is very happy with the outcomes of worshipping Bagalāmukhī. Das left his government job a few years earlier because he wanted to establish his consulting firm, work for himself, and not be salaried. For the first five years, he did not secure any contracts. His savings were depleted, and there were growing tensions at home. Das consulted several religious experts—including astrologers, palm readers, and sorcerers—and then decided to turn to Bagalāmukhī. Within a year of puja offerings, he landed his first contract. Das was reluctant to give details about what kinds of puja he had been offering and whether he had sent any bodily traces to an officiant, hallmarks of aggressive magic such as nail clippings, hair, or dust from feet or shoes. Since that success, he has been an ardent devotee of Bagalāmukhī. In March of 2020, when I interviewed Das, it was his twenty-third weekly visit to the temple without a single skipped week. He plans to visit the goddess until his last breath.

The combination of abstract experiences and concrete experiences is the third category. The experiences are considered generally "religious" and overlap with traditional conceptions of "the religious." Encountering Bagalāmukhī leads to a devotee performing regular rituals and fosters the belief that the goddess now loves and protects her followers. An American devotee whom I will name June was introduced to Bagalāmukhī through a public, online course taught by a scholar-practitioner. June is not South Asian, nor was she interviewed in Assam, but her experiences of goddess Bagalāmukhī map perfectly onto Taves' concept of abstract experiences. Before the course, June had heard of the *mahāvidyās* and was part of a Kālī *sādhanā* group led by a USA-based guru whose followers were largely westerners. During the course she felt "the call," and, in time, she became a devotee of Bagalāmukhī. As of May 2020, June had not visited any Bagalāmukhī temples or shrines yet, though she expressed her desire to visit India and Kāmākhyā in 2021.

Learning about Bagalāmukhī online was so transformative that June now maintains a Bagalāmukhī shrine in her home, with an image of Bagalāmukhī and a printout of her mantra. June chants the mantra, wears yellow beads, puts a small dot of turmeric (yellow) in her heart center, and is convinced Bagalāmukhī is her *iṣṭa devī* (cherished god-dess). June's discrete experiences, which so far have been purely digital, inspired deep devotion leading to abstract religious experience. "Experiences deemed religious" evolve into "religious experiences." In June's case, there is no difference between seeking the goddess, experiencing the goddess, believing in the divine through online platforms, and practicing in the physical temple. The virtual is authentic, as is the physical space of a temple—in our case, Kāmākhyā.

To conclude, while various media have been consulted for this study, special focus was placed on digital media to show instances of continuity and innovation as devotees interact with the goddess and her ritual experts. While Tantric studies is generally focused on the historical and philological analysis of premodern textual data, the study of devotees' relationships with the goddess Bagalāmukhī and their experiences, traveling all the way from the pilgrimage site to the screen of a smartphone, suggest a fruitful avenue to explore contemporary, lived Tantric religious experiences and ritual efficacy, especially in the ever-expanding context of digital media. Ethnographic research on the experience of Tantra in digital worlds provides critical insights into how the scholar and the communities we study negotiate what constitutes the sacred in cross-cultural and transnational virtual spaces.

Notes

1. Debates around religious experiences are not new. Historical to present times, scholars have either considered experience a legitimate category that calls for further research and contemplation or simply a figment of the imagination and, hence, dismissed. Robert Sharf (1998), for example, suggests that the category of "experience" is a modern Western invention and was nowhere to be found in Asian religions (Rao 2018).

2. This chapter exclusively focuses on the experiences of the Bagalāmukhī devotees through the use of websites and WhatsApp at Kāmākhyā. Historic and present-day scholarship on the rituals, Tantric traditions, and politics of power surrounding the temple and this goddess' tradition is not included. The work of scholars like Irene Majo Garigliano (2015), Sundari Johansen Hurwitt (2019), Paolo E. Rosati (2019), Jae Yun Shin (2016), and Hugh Urban (2010) should be consulted to arrive at a better understanding of the place and its relevance in the larger space of Śākta Tantra.

3. Sections of the text was generously shared by Aaron Michael Ullrey.

4. The term *madhu,* including *madhura* and *madhuka,* is to be understood as honey, but there is some ambiguity, as elsewhere these terms may refer to alcoholic liquids.

5. This technique is supported by my interview of Mahakal Tilkdhari in 2020.

6. Kushal Sarma, Priest, Bagalāmukhī temple, Kāmākhyā, interview with the author, June 22, 2019

7. Pronita Sarkar, Devotee, Bagalāmukhī temple, Kāmākhyā, interview with the author, June 20, 2019.

8. On visions as more than optical experiences, see Rao (2019, 191–92).

9. Ravi and Lakshita, Devotees, Bagalāmukhī temple, Kāmākhyā, interview with the author, June 23, 2019.

10. Ullrey confirms that body traces, especially footprint dust and hair, are common ingredients in murder rituals throughout the magic *tantras* (Ullrey 2016, 321–42).

11. Sarma, Devotee, Bagalāmukhī temple, Kāmākhyā, interview with the author, June 20, 2019.

12. Mohit Sarma, in conversation with the author, March 2020.

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