Visionary Experience of Mantra: An Ethnography in Andhra-Telangana

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Department of Religion in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The use of codified sacred utterances, formulas or hymns called “mantras” is widespread in India. By and large, scholarship over the last few decades studies and explains mantras by resorting to Indian sources from over a millennium ago, and by applying such frameworks especially related to language as speech-act theory, semiotics, structuralism, etc. This research aims to understand mantra, and the visionary experience of mantra, from the perspectives of practitioners engaged in “mantra-sadhana (personal mantra practice).”

The main fieldwork for this project was conducted at three communities established around “gurus (spiritual teachers)” regarded by their followers as seers, i.e., authoritative sources with visionary experience, especially of deities. The Goddess, in the forms of Kali and Lalita Tripurasundari, is the primary deity at all three locations, and these practitioners may be called tantric or Hindu. Vedic sources (practitioners and texts) have also informed this research as they are a part of the history and context of the informants. Adopting an immersive anthropology and becoming a co-practitioner helped erase boundaries to get under the skin of mantra-practice. Fieldwork shows how the experience of mantras unravels around phenomena, seers, deities, intentionality and results. Practitioners find themselves seers mediating new mantras and practices, shaping tradition. Thus, practitioners are the primary sources of this research.

This dissertation is structured in three phases: preparation (Chapters One and Two), fieldwork (Chapters Three, Four and Five) and conclusions (Chapter Six). Chapter One discusses the groundwork including a literature review and methodological plan—a step as crucial as the research itself. Chapter Two reviews two seers in recent times who have become role-models for contemporary mantra practitioners in Andhra-
Telangana. Ethnographic chapters Three, Four and Five delve into the visionary experience and poetics of mantra-practice at three locations. Chapter Six analyses the fieldwork findings across all three locations to arrive at a number of conclusions.

Chapter Three takes place in Devipuram, Anakapalle, where a temple in the shape of a three-dimensional “Sriyantra (aniconic Goddess form)” was established by the seer AmritanandaNatha Sarasvati. Chapter Four connects with the community surrounding the seer Swami Siddheswarananda Bharati whose primary location is the Swayam Siddha Kali Pitham in Guntur where the (image of the) deity manifested in front of a group of people. Chapter Five enters the experience of mantras at Nachiketa Tapovan ashram near Kodgal with Paramahamsa Swami Sivananda Puri and her guru, Swami Nachiketananda.

Across these three locations, which I find akin to “mandalas (groups, circles of influence, chapters),” practitioners describe their experiences including visions of deities and mantras, and how mantras transformed them and brought desired and unexpected results. More significantly, practitioners share their processes of practice, doubts, interpretations and insights into the nature of mantras and deities. Practitioners who begin “mantra-sadhana (mantra-practice)” motivated by some goal are encouraged by phenomena and results, but they develop attachment to deities, and continue absorbed in sadhana. Practitioners care to discriminate between what is imagined and what actually occurred, but they also consider imagination crucial to progress. Deities are sound-forms and powerful other-worldly friends existing both outside and within the practitioner’s (not only material) body. We learn about mantras received from deities, seen and heard mantras, hidden mantras, lost mantras, dormant mantras, mantras given silently, mantras done unconsciously, and even the “no”-mantra.
Chapter 6, *Understanding Mantras Again* is an exploration of the fundamental themes of this research and a conceptual analysis of the fieldwork, keeping the mantra-methodologies and insights of practitioners in mind—what are mantras and how do they work in practice, what is visionary experience in mantra-practice, what are deities and how do they relate to mantras, and other questions. I conclude with an overview and a list of the primary sources of this research—practitioners.
Dedication

For Bhagavan Sathya Sai Baba
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Mantra-practitioners are the crux of this research; they were generous with their time, shared information from their life with mantras and gave me the permission to use their narratives as my research material. There were also practitioners who did not give me permission to write about them— they too helped define my direction and choices, possibilities and limits. I interviewed a number of mantra-practitioners in and near Pune.
and at a number of places in Andhra-Telangana and about whom I have not written here. There were many who contributed in other ways—someone who knew someone with the phone number of someone else who was known to have a strong mantra-practice. To everyone who had a role to play in this research, a profuse thank you.

Many friends have inspired, supported and encouraged me over this time. In Iowa, conversations with Dr. Frederick M. Smith shaped my interest in a Religious Studies PhD, and Jan Myers and Natasa Durovicova persuaded me of its value. Friends in India, especially Subhasree Raghavan, Amit Bararia and Subbarayudu Kameswara, kept an eye on me as I traveled on fieldwork, often delicately inquiring after my whereabouts. Karuna Sivasailam wanted to know the answers to the questions behind this research so much that she read one of my early drafts. Thanks to her own sadhana, Bhavani Adimoolan’s research assistance on transcripts was fluent. John Nemo Bancroft, aka Jaideva, was my alter-ego through this time; he came along for the adventure, moving cities and countries and creating his own thoughtful participation—thank you, John.
Note on Translation, Transliteration and Names

The conversations and narratives of this fieldwork were in Telugu, English and Hindi, and very occasionally, people quoted from Sanskrit sources. Translating from Telugu and Hindi, I err on the side of the literal to help communicate the style, milieu and the individuality of the speaker. I retain key words or idiomatic expressions in the source language if they would be significantly lost in translation, followed by the translation within brackets. Thus, I retain Narendra Kapre’s expression “dhire dhire hava ban rahi hai,” and translate it: [there are winds of change]. Kapre’s expression in Hindi communicates a gathering momentum and a revolution taking shape, and readers who know Hindi can relish the precise details of the expression. Terms “sadhana,” “mantra-sadhana,” and “siddhi” are used so frequently in conversations here that I explain their full import early on, and then leave them as they are, without translation. Readers may refer to the glossary for all the important, recurring terms.

Text enclosed in * * indicates words spoken in English. Many informants spoke in a combination of English and Telugu, and it would not be comprehensible nor possible to indicate every shift with open and close quotes. Instead, I indicate significant words or phrases in the source language *like this* — this also draws the reader’s attention to the speaker’s characteristic voice or usage. In a transcript, when I have to retain the original Sanskrit or Telugu word, that word is in italics and my translation is in parenthesis (like this), and when I have to interject with a comment to aid communication, I use brackets [like this]. If I need to add words to help intelligibility, I add them (like this). In a transcript, I retain the Sanskrit forms of nouns so that the reader does not have to keep track of variants— thus, I change Telugu forms of “mantram” or “mantramu” and “homam” or “homamu” to “mantra” and “homa.”
Sanskrit terms and Telugu words are diacriticised the first time they are used— yajña (fire-ritual) and Vāc (Speech) and then subsequently written without diacritics.

Mantras are always in diacritics because pronunciation is crucial in the mantra-tradition. Several legends in the Indian culture tell of the disasters that befall an inadvertent mispronunciation, or an accent in the wrong place. Those who chant mantras also tend to chant a “kṣama-mantra (forgiveness-mantra),” seeking forgiveness from the deity being addressed for errors in pronunciation. I also use italicized diacritics for ritual terms, and when not using diacritics would generate an error in understanding— e.g. “māraṇa (murder)” vs. “maraṇa (death).”

Table 1: How to Pronounce Diacritical Marks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowels:</th>
<th>Meaning/Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a as in father</td>
<td>a as in father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i as in pit</td>
<td>i as in pit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ï as in creed</td>
<td>ï as in creed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u as in put or foot</td>
<td>u as in put or foot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ū as in brute or cool</td>
<td>ū as in brute or cool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e as in bay or fate</td>
<td>e as in bay or fate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ai as in sigh or aisle</td>
<td>ai as in sigh or aisle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o as in hope</td>
<td>o as in hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>au as in sound or flautist</td>
<td>au as in sound or flautist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r (which is a vowel in Sanskrit) similar to brunch, or rig</td>
<td>r (which is a vowel in Sanskrit) similar to brunch, or rig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m nasalise the preceding vowel so that om as in the French bon</td>
<td>m nasalise the preceding vowel so that om as in the French bon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ḥ softly echoes the preceding vowel

Consonants: as for English except for:

v as wall
ś as shame (whereas s as in so)
ṣ similar to dish
c as church or chutney
t as pastā
ṅ as sung
ṇ as canyon.

ṅ has no equivalent in English, but it is a retroflex, the tongue needs to curl backwards to touch the palate and then hit the back of the teeth.

d as in the, d as in dart

kh, gh, ch, jh, th, dh, ph, bh are aspirated consonants, the ḥ is pronounced along with an outbreath. This sound has no exact equivalent in English, but the following example will help approximate the sound. Thus, k as in skate but kh similar to Kate; g as in gate but gh as the country Ghana; ch as in much honey; and so on.

Such pressure is ‘off’ for all nouns frequently used by practitioners—“sadhana,” rather than “sādhana.” Also, names and proper nouns are transliterated without diacritics—I use ‘ch’ and ‘chh’ instead of the diacritical marks ‘c’ and ‘ch,’ ‘ti’ instead of ‘r’ and ‘sh’ for both ‘ś’ and ‘ś’ and ‘a’ for both long and short articulations of the vowel.

Thus, the scholar Bhartrihari, “Ishvar,” for “God” in Hindi, the deity Krishna, the temple of Goddess Sahasrakshi and the Gayatri mantra; however, within a mantra, these are written “Krṣṇa,” “Sahasrākṣi” and Gayatī.” Names of sources and literary works are also without diacritics, whether such popularly known sources as Ramayana and Mahabharata, or such scholastic sources as Vakyapadiya and Vaksudha.
So that the reader understands I am talking about a deity and not a person, I use descriptors “goddess” and “god” and “deity” before their names. I translate references to deities in transcripts as “He” and “She” to replicate the equivalent difference established by the respectful nouns and pronouns used for such references in Telugu—“Ammavaru (Mother Goddess)” and “āme.”

I include honorifics of renunciants the first time I mention their name (e.g., Swami Siddheswarananda Bharati); however, subsequent mentions are of their main name (e.g., Siddheswarananda). Following convention, I would address people as “Guruji,” “Swamiji” or “Mataji,” and, unless they were much younger, address most people with the respectful suffix of “-gāru” (the Telugu equivalent of the Hindi “ji”). In the transcripts, I use the name by which a person is known as that helps identify the speaker to the reader turning to a page at random (after having read it all sequentially at first, of course).
1. Preparation

The seeds of my interest in mantras were planted a decade ago, in 2005. Returning from Hong Kong to India after a career in media, I began to spend some time at an “ashram (spiritual commune)” where my parents lately lived—this was Sathya Sai Baba’s ashram in the village of Puttapar thin the state then called Andhra Pradesh, and now, Andhra-Telangana. Although Sai Baba’s spiritual teachings were pluralistic, one of his missions was to promote the Veda; therefore, students at his schools and universities learned a fixed set of vedic mantras as a part of their syllabus. These mantras were memorized and chanted on their own, detached from rituals. The word “veda” means “to know,” and the term “Veda” refers to a corpus believed to be the oldest source in Sanskrit, and considered divine revelation. This corpus is divided into four—Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda, and at the core of each of these is a collection of mantras (saṃhitā). A mantra is a sacred utterance, hymn, or ritual formula, and vedic mantras are in vedic Sanskrit. In the daily gatherings at Sai Kulwant Hall, the sound of mantras filled the air—many in the crowd chanted along by memory. Whereas in the rest of India, mantras are mostly heard at temples or on religious and mythological programs on television, they are ubiquitous in Puttapar thin. The shopping center played mantras on a loop and the shops outside the gates of the ashram sold handbooks of mantras. Twice-daily “bhajans (devotional songs)” began and ended with mantras for peace (“shanti”). Additionally, among the crowds who waited in the Poornachandra auditorium for Sai Baba’s twice-daily “darshan (vision),” many were occupied doing mantra-japa, a repetitive utterance of a mantra using a rosary (“japamāla”). In conversations with residents, I was struck by their dedication to “sadhana (personal...
spiritual endeavor or practice)” and their convictions about the efficacy of mantras. At the time, my own responses to mantras were aesthetic.

Outside my day-job, I was a poet, and an attention to sound was a characteristic feature of my poetics. Admiring the rigor of mantra-sounds, I wondered, what made the chant of Sri-suktam different in mood to the chant of Rudram? What were the differences between mantras and Sanskrit classical poetry? If I accentuated the “m” in the mantra utterance of “Aum,” I could feel the vibration on the top of my head; did the “a” and “u” also resonate in my body, and where? I was intrigued by popular mantras such as the Gayatri1— it was named after a female deity called Gayatri, but addressed a male deity.2 In Vedic recitations, it was sung in a jagged tone (“svara”) but commercial establishments in Puttaparthi played melodious versions in the voice of popular singer, Lata Mangeshkar. Hours of daily exposure to mantras led to memorization of such basic Vedic mantras as the Purusha-suktam3 where the cosmic Purusha was said to extend beyond the universe by ten-finger width— I admired the realistic precision and the montage of images; however, I did not find any practitioner talking about the aesthetics of mantras.

In 2010, when I began a PhD in Religious Studies, mantras became my first scholarly project. Reviewing the scholarship, I found the area of practice under-

1 Gayatri mantra is verse 10 of Rigveda 3.62.
2 This male deity Savitṛ is sometimes identified with the sun and sometimes with aspects of the sun such as light or vivification.
3 Widely used in rituals as well as recitation, Purusha-suktam (PS) is hymn 10.90 of the Rigveda samhita. The Sanskrit word ‘Purusha’ means “man” or “person.” PS is often called a “creation hymn” because it describes the sacrifice or dismemberment of a cosmic person as the basis of the creation of the universe.
represented, and mantra-experience, undocumented. My methodology became ethnography; it was when I was deep into fieldwork that I realized, the gaps in scholarship were also my own, eager to be bridged.

This chapter begins with a literature review that covers early and modern scholarship, finding a gap in the poetics of practice of mantras. This points to fieldwork as methodology, and I consider the merits and demerits of a range of positions vis-à-vis my particular topic. Considering mantra-practice as a part of my research methodology also helps realize that mantra-practitioners view themselves as researchers as they draw inferences from their own experience for more sadhana; this leads to a re-examination of how we define primary sources in scholarship. Next, I review problems associated with phenomenology in religious studies and through the lens of Indian thought and its systematic approach to experience and experiences. Defining the ethnographic region as Andhra-Telangana, I briefly locate its historical connection to mantras. Chapter Two recounts and probes narratives about two recent, late practitioners in the region who are believed to have seen mantras and deity. These encounters established a thematic precedent and served as a mental preparation for me during the ethnography; I hope they will do the same for the reader.

1.1 Frames of scholarship

Assertions and speculations about the origin of mantras, debates about their meaningfulness or meaninglessness, and commentaries and discussions (and rhetorical dialogs) about applications and interpretations have been ongoing for over two millennia. Assertions on mantras in early Sanskrit sources are ontological—mantras are considered natural, pre-existing sounds and hymns revealed to “rishis (seers).” Modern
academic scholarship either redescribes ancient Indian thinking or reframes it via such frameworks as structuralism, semiotics and speech-act theory and such categories as language, music or myth to help non-practitioners understand and appreciate mantra-practice. Finally, a growing body of research today aims to test or establish the results and efficacy of mantras.

1.1.1 Early Indian thought

It is possible that mantras were first used in rituals called “yajña (vedic fire-ritual)” or “homa” and later became a part of private recitation called “svādhyāya.” In a yajna, mantras are offered to deities along with such other offerings as “ghee (clarified butter)” to the fire-deity and messenger to the gods, Agni. Dharmashastras established by the early first millennium prescribe vedic mantras for various occasions and users, whether as a part of daily rituals (e.g. Gayatri mantra as part of the morning and evening rituals of “sandhya”) or for the occasional “samskaras (rites of passage).”

As a part of Veda, mantras come under the overall concept of “shabda-pramana (verbal testimony)” which means that the “shabda (word)” of Veda is authoritative on the basis of its own evidence. Shabda is one of the six types of evidence accepted by

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4 Early vedic commentaries indicate that mantras were within the context of the ritual yajña. Mimamsa Sutras 1.2.31 and 1.2.32 of Jaimini (ca. 400 BCE) note that while a mantra is used during the ritual act, it must express an assertion connected to ritual: “Apī vā prayogasāmarthānmantrō abhidānavaśā syāt,” and “Tachodayaṃ mantrākyā.” Ganganatha Jha’s translation of these lines— “The name mantra is applied to those that serve the purpose of denoting things connected with prescribed actions.” Ganganath Jha, Purva Mimansa Sutras of Jaimini (Allahabad: Panini Office, 1916; New York: AMS Press, 1974), 163. Citation refers to the AMS edition. 14th CE commentator Sayana includes two applications, ritual and private recitation. Sayana gives priority to the Yajurveda Even because of its use in rituals, while Rigveda takes first place for “adhyaṇya (study),” “pārāṣāṇa (reading aloud)” and “japa (repetitive utterance).” For a historical study of non-ritual application of mantras, see Dermot Killingley, “Svadhyāya: An Ancient Way of Using the Veda,” Religions of South Asia 8, no.1 (2014): 109-30.

5 Dharmashastras prescribe or describe ritual and social norms and include such sources as Manusmrīti, Yajnavalkyasmṛti and Naradasmṛti.
Indian philosophies. In turn, shabda-pramana draws from and is related to the idea of “shabda-brahman” and “nada-brahman” in numerous Vedic sources which mean that shabda is a manifestation or expression of Brahman, a term that refers to an absolute formless and nameless (and thus a) non-object (and mistranslated for convenience as “God”). Rigveda says there are as many words as there are manifestations of Brahman. Numerous sources call shabda the breath of Brahman. Therefore, mantras are not as much literary works, as they are an ontological testimony and evidence of Brahman. In the reverse direction, they work as soteriological devices. When mantras are isolated from the context of vedic rituals, they still carry the aura of this idea of cosmic expression. Every vedic mantra has three identifiers—“chandas (meter),” “devata (deity)” and “rishi (seer).” The presiding deity of a mantra may or may not be named within a mantra, and a mantra may also refer to a number of other deities. A mantra’s seer is understood literally—s/he is not regarded as the author of that mantra, but as the person who has come to know it through extraordinary perception. Across a vertical line of commentators in ritual commentaries, we find assertions of the equivalence between mantra and “devata (deity)”—“śabdamātram devatā” (deity is but mantra; deity is as much as, and no more than, mantra).

In the essay, “What’s a God?,” Francis Clooney takes up a study of lines in the Jaimini Mimamsa Sutras which discuss the term “devata (deity)” and engages with commentators on this topic across the centuries. The questions raised in this discussion are whether deities are recipients of the sacrifice, are they real, embodied beings, and are they more than the word that names them. Between the polarity of “shabda (word)” – by which a devata would be a term – and “arthā (meaning)” – by which a devata would be a real-world entity – the choice is moot as the mimamsa position subordinates deities to the ritual action. “What’s a
Mantras are also forms of shabda-brahman in the language philosophy of 5th CE Bhartrihari’s *Vakyapadiya* and the yoga theory of 2nd BCE Patanjali’s *Yogasutras*. “Ishvara (God)” for Patanjali, and “Brahman (God)” for Bhartrihari, are cosmic sources in whose hearts the mantra “Aum” flashes, and gives rise to the world. This is a process of consciousness and of the materialization of language. Thus, language can never be without consciousness or meaning. In the *Yogasutras*, repetition of mantras results in clear perception of Ishvara, and in *Vakyapadiya*, meaning is conveyed by the bursting of “sphota” – like a spore – which is held in a mantra, and perceived by a supersensuous entity called “pratibha.” Yoga commentaries assign syllables called “bija-mantras (seed-syllables)” to different “chakras (energy-centers)” of the human body. Thus, mantras impact and transform the mantra-practitioner because they are constituents of an intricate network that links the cosmological and physiological.

Some assertions in early sources point to ongoing debate about the status and role of mantras. Etymologist Yaska’s *Nirukta* (ca. 1st CE) contains a few lines (in section 1.16) refuting a certain Kautsa (in section 1.15) who claimed mantras “anarthaka (meaningless, purposeless).” Yaska argues that Veda uses the same words as ordinary language; thus, Veda has meaning. Also, mantras are a part of Veda; thus, they too are

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meaningful. This is a part of Yaska’s overall etymological project for vedic words— as he notes in *Nirukta* (1.15), “without etymology, the precise meaning cannot be understood.”

Early vedic hermeneutics called Purva-mimamsa\(^\text{11}\) codified in Jaimini’s *Mimamsa Sutras* (MS) (ca. 4\(^\text{th}\) BCE) – asserts that ritual injunctions which include mantras produce results regardless of the intentions of the speaker. This is called having “śabdī-bhāvāna,” not just “ārthī-bhāvāna.”\(^\text{12}\) BCE Sabara’s commentary on Jaimini’s MS includes rhetorical debates about mantras’ authoritativeness. The starting point for this is that MS sets up veda as “dharma (obligation, right action),” and dharma as known from vedic injunctions. This places mantras within a corpus that is (un)justified by circular reasoning. The opponent protests that mantras are unintelligible. The reason they tend to be in an invariant order is because they are not expressive; no wonder then that meaning is not taught to students who train in vedic chanting. If mantras have no meaning, they cannot help understand dharma. The defense then explains that mantras can be directive for they help follow the sequence of rituals, and attach to ritual procedures. Meanings of mantras can be deduced from etymology with the help of commentaries, lexicon and grammar. If mantras are not understood, the fault is that of the person who is idle or careless.\(^\text{13}\) Any mantra that seems meaningless ought to be taken figuratively. A “four-horned deer” is explained as the four priests who stand like the four horns of the sacrifice. Meanings of mantras are not learned because it has no

\(^{11}\) Mimamsa that discusses Vedic rituals was retrospectively called Purva-mimamsa to distinguish it from Vedanta (or uttara-mimamsa), a school of thought that discusses the Upanishads.


\(^{13}\) Some of these arguments are also in Yaska’s *Nirukta*. 7
bearing on the actual performance. Besides, understanding and remembering meaning is easy, it is learning and remembering the mantras that is difficult.\textsuperscript{14}

Mantras are also regarded as cosmic, originary sound in many other early Indian sources called tantras, which are today systematized as tantrism. In contrast to the Vedic convention where only male “brahmins” (priest-class)” are permitted to chant mantras, there are no restrictions for who may practice tantric mantras and rituals. Both vedic and tantric rituals include mantras and other offerings, but the mantras are different in vedic and tantric rituals. Tantric concepts propose a detailed process by which the originary shabda generates the material world.\textsuperscript{15} In 10th CE Abhinavagupta’s \textit{Tantraloka} all of cosmic creation is contained in and emanated by Shiva, reflecting and condensing on lower levels. Shiva and Shakti – who are also deities – are a dyad where Shiva is consciousness and Shakti animates this consciousness into the material world. Passing through resonance, Shiva’s creative energy of “nada (cosmic sound)” becomes a “bindu (dot)” of phonic energy and gives rise to “matrikas (matrix of phonemes),” which in turn results in the world of objects and meanings. In many tantric practices, the body is imaginatively dessicated, burned and annihilated and then reconstituted with the help of mantras before commencing the worship of and identification with Shakti. The syllables of the mantra are placed on specific areas of the body in a ritual called “nyasa.”

\textsuperscript{14} Francis X Clooney speculates that these debates may have been a defensive response to the rise of Buddhist critique of Vedic practices. \textit{Thinking Ritually: Rediscovering the Pürva Mimāṃsā of Jaimini} (Vienna : De Nobili, 1990).

Here, mantras are a transformative tool, they help the worshipper identify with the deity. Thus, mantra’s association with language has a long history.

Mantras include sounds and words; therefore, it is possible to discuss the prosody of mantras as well as aesthetics. However, this approach would have been considered entirely out of line by early Indian thinkers. Purva-mimamsa argues that humans are fallible, veda is “apaurusheya (authorless)”, therefore veda is infallible. This is not only a point about non-human authors, it refers to any author—veda is also “autpattika (uncreated).” Many early Indic references have “Vāc (divine Word)”16 as the originary source creating deities and humans as also the worlds they live in, while some sources have the creator Brahma producing veda.17 Either way, a non-worldly origin means mantras do not attract the same modes of evaluation as does literature. Mantra is not “kavya (poetry)”; kavya comes from the world of human craft. Indian theorists circumscribed aesthetic dimensions to kavya. When 4th CE poet Kalidasa invokes Shiva and Parvati in the dramatic poem Rāghuvamsa, he calls them parents of the world joined like word and meaning, and hopes to be inspired by them for the integration of word and meaning in his writing. Kalidasa then goes on to say that he, a mere poet, is not so presumptuous that he would dare write about the perfections of the Raghu dynasty, but preceding poets may have charted a path he can try to follow. Here the divine pair inspire by example—their “work” (creation) is cosmic perfection, and his work (the poem) is human imitation. Mantras have authority, kavya has authors.

16 Ibid., xiii.
1.1.2 Contemporary scholarship

Indologists consider mantras in two categories of vedic and tantric mantras. This is pragmatic, for mantras are a part of rituals and ritual traditions, and the vast repertoire of ritual and related philosophical literatures makes it difficult for any one scholar to straddle diverse traditions. Describing the concept and use of mantras, Jan Gonda (1905-1991) focuses on Vedic, and André Padoux (1920-1990) focuses on tantric sources. If mantras were to be understood from a range of perspectives within Indology, *Understanding Mantras* (1989) edited by Harvey P. Alper includes a specialist for each of them. Frits Staal writes on Vedic, Ellison Banks Findly on Rigvedic and Kenneth G.Zysk on Ayurvedic, mantras; Harold Coward explains mantras via the language philosophy of Bhartrihari and Alper via Kashmir Shaivism; Gerhard Oberhammer discusses the use of mantra in yogic meditation, Ludo Rocher covers the puranic period of the first millenium as exemplified in the Shivapurana and Sanjukta Gupta explains how the Pancharatra tradition differs from Shaiva tradition. Alper’s “Working Bibliography” of over a hundred pages in the same volume is exhaustive and needs neither imitation nor annotation. My purpose here is to discuss frameworks, categories

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18 Padoux’s thesis in French was translated into English in 1990 by Jacques Gontier and published as *Vāc*, although essays in French and English were in conversation with scholarship on mantras well before then.  
and methodologies under which mantras have been studied by modern scholars—this becomes useful both for what it illuminates about mantra-practice, and what it does not.

Beginning with an essay in 1979, and subsequently in several essays and book publications, Staal decodes the “rules” or structures of rituals (e.g., embedding, omitting, transforming and modifying) to conclude that rituals carry no intrinsic meaning and mantras are pre-linguistic, even regressive, utterances.20 Wade Wheelock (1985) looks at how mantras are used in definite patterns in vedic rituals as exemplified by a new moon – full moon sacrifice.21 Jayant Burde (2004) adopts Staal’s method to include mantras across non-vedic traditions and shows how they share patterns with other forms of music, dance and even gymnastics.22 Meanwhile, scholarship after Staal necessarily includes comment troubled by his proposal, from disputing his logic and speculating about his import to defending mantra’s meaningfulness beyond the semantic level.23 Scholarship on vedic hermeneutics and commentaries highlights the significance and meaningfulness of mantras within the tradition. Francis X. Clooney extracts the Jaimni Purva-mimamsa sutras from the interpretive layer of Sabara’s commentary, underlining a long tradition of intelligent debate about vedic mantras vis-à-vis their crucial role as injunctions for rituals24; Cesary Galewicz studies how 14th CE Sayana’s exegetical commentary on the entirety of the veda-samhita (the mantra portion

of the Veda) was a core political project of the Vijayanagara kingdom—an unmistakable marker of just how important it was to understand the meanings of Vedic mantras.\textsuperscript{25}

As frameworks applicable to language have become available, they helped understand the idea of mantra in fresh ways. Wade Wheelock (1980, 1982) discusses mantras via J.L. Austin and John Searle’s speech-act theory.\textsuperscript{26} In Alper’s 1989 anthology cited earlier, John Taber reconsiders and proposes some modifications to Wheelock’s analysis, and Ellison Banks Findly discusses mantras as performative utterances. In \textit{Bringing the Gods to Mind} (2005), Laurie Patton works with the cognitive theory of Turner, Lakoff and Johnson to theorize how Vedic mantra-practitioners may work with mental associations for pragmatic new applications across changing contexts.\textsuperscript{27} Sthaneshwar Timalsina uses cognitive theory as well as Indian aesthetics to appraise tantric language in \textit{Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach} (2015).\textsuperscript{28} Arguing against the convention and that 10th CE Abhinavagupta authored a treatise on tantra (Tantraloka) and commentaries on aesthetics (Bharata’s Natyashastra and Anandavardhana’s Dhvanyaloka), but never blended the two platforms, Timalsina steps in to read tantric “images” (i.e., deities) via Indian concept of “rasa (aesthetic emotion).” Robert A. Yelle in \textit{Explaining Mantras—Ritual, Rhetoric and the Dream of a Natural}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Galewicz2009} Cezary Galewicz, \textit{A Commentator in Service of the Empire: Śāṅkara and the Royal Project of Commenting on the Whole of the Veda} (Wien : Sammlung de Nobili, 2009).
\end{thebibliography}

Patton’s work is absent in Timalsina’s bibliography, indicating the divide between Vedic and tantric scholarship.
Language in Hindu Tantra (2003) and John R Freeman in “Pedagogy and Practice” (2010) work with Piercean semiotics and Michael Silverstein’s linguistic anthropology to show how words point to larger worlds.29 Yelle points out the limitations of J.L. Austin’s theory in the context of mantras and is concerned with how mantras explicitly aim to influence reality—discussing them as an intensified language that use such poetic devices as palindromes, alliteration, repetition, etc.

In “The ‘Magical’ Language of Mantras” (2008), Patton E. Burchett surveys magic as a derogatory category and how it perpetrates Enlightenment values of rationalism. Disapproving of the term, Burchett even pins the term firmly within scare quotes. He proposes calling mantras “natural language” in line with ancient Indian theory, noting in passing Robert Yelle’s implicit rejection of the idea of a natural language even as he explains it as a “dream.”30 Burchett’s critique is apt when it references the use of the term magic; however, modern scholarship on mantras does not use the term at all.31 This could be a simple avoidance of a problematic term, but it could also reveal a sympathetic attitude towards practitioners and could be aimed to correct colonial de-authorizations of ritual practices found in colonized cultures. Whatever the

31 In End of Magic, a book that also includes numerous anecdotes of mantra usage, Ariel Glucklich traces the history of anthropologists’ reflections about magic and notes how with the demise of J.G.Frazer, “the literalist-occultist path has been sealed off; except to researchers in the area of paranormal phenomena,” and “sociology and symbolism of magic have come to dominate academic interest.” End of Magic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83.
reason, if “magic” has been left behind, scholarship is far from discussing mantras as “natural” sounds.

Two other categories, myth, and music, also bring insights. In Myth as Argument (1996) about an ancient Indian indexical text on deities called Brhaddevatā, Patton shows how mantras are placed in a prominent and even an autonomous position by way of myths that function as arguments as well as commentary, tidying up, and reformulating canon.32 Guy Beck discusses the role of sound in religious traditions in Sonic Theology (1993) and focuses exclusively on the Indian tradition in Sonic Liturgy (2012).33 Revisiting Indian theories from Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishava34 sources as well as Bhartrihari, Beck shows how contemporary devotional singing is linked to classical Indian music that uses “ragas (melodic scale)” as well as to Vedic “svaras (tones).”

Among literature that describes the contemporary practice of mantras, Gudrun Bühnemann (Puja, 1988) writes on mantras in daily Hindu rituals of Maharashtra and Madhu Khanna on the Concept and Liturgy of the Srichakra (1986) based on 13th CE Sivananda’s works—these are descriptive of general practice and not meant to give us anthropological insights.35 In the field of vedic studies, the ethnographic method has been used by David Knipe, Frederick Smith, Timothy Lubin, and Laurie Patton.

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34 Vaishnava traditions honor Vishnu, Shaiva traditions honor Shiva, and Shakta traditions honor Shakti, as their main deity.
Drawing from interviews spanning over two decades, Knipe (1997, and 2015) presents capsule biographies of four generations of ten vedic families from settlements in coastal Andhra, and describes vedic ritual life, careers, attitudes—this informs sociology.

Frederick M. Smith’s 2001 ethnographic work is about changes or adaptations in vedic rituals, especially in contemporary Maharashtra. An ideological focus comes from Lubin, who looks at vedic ritual in the context of Hindu revivalism. Lubin draws our attention to how vedism and bhakti come together and how the rhetorical aspects of the packaging and promotion link the ritual to patriotic concerns, Hindu identity, and even ecological and scientific goals. All these ethnographies are focused on vedic sacrifice rather than mantras per se, and interested in social context and ideology rather than the practitioner’s perspectives. An exception is Patton whose ethnographic findings in “Cat in the Courtyard” (2007) are analysed via Charles Briggs to propose how verbal texts have a performative context with an emotional impact. Across this long period of engagement with mantras in the modern period, questions about contemporary practitioner’s experience have not really been raised.


How do contemporary understandings of practitioners compare with traditional Indian ideas? Are there seers today? Practitioners also live in the modern context and apply empirical parameters to many areas of their life; how do they deal with questions of verifiability for themselves? What kind of experience leads a rational person to embrace a lifelong mantra-practice? Do practitioners consider mantras, language, and do they care for meaning, or appreciate the aesthetics of mantras? How are mantras for different deities different in practice? What inspires steadfast practice? Is efficacy an expectation, and what do these expectations, or the lack of, do to mantra practice? Is there such a thing as a useless mantra? Do practitioners think they can stop the effects of a mantra? Are some mantras more speedy or effective than others? Is there room for uncertainty and doubt in mantra practice? Do mantras go out of date? What does the relationship between practitioner and deity hinge upon? Is it as simple as Alladin-rubs-the-lamp-and-genie-appears, or is the genie freer than that? How does practitioner know it is a deity (visitation) and not an imagined presence (like a hallucination)? Does the practitioner have the freedom to reject one deity and find another? Why is a deity-appearance so gratifying, especially if the deity is really no more than the projection of one’s ‘inner-self’? Once a deity has been accessed with mantra, who is the audience for the continued practice of a mantra? When mistakes are made in mantras, the practitioner utters a “kshama”-mantra seeking forgiveness for errors … do not deities know what is really meant? If a mantra does what it is expected to do, where is the need for gratitude, or even devotion? Can and does a guru take back a mantra?

Speeding towards the galaxy of scholarship, there is a world of a growing body of literature from mantra practitioners and sympathizers aiming to prove the efficacy of
mantras, and thus, a scientific basis for practice in a modern era. Not all of them are indigenous; and some are driven by nationalist ideology as critiqued by Agehandanda Bharati (1970) and Meera Nanda (2003). Such universities and institutes as Maharishi Institute of Vedic Science (Fairfield, USA), S-VYASA (Bangalore, India) and Vaidika Samshodhana Mandala in Pune, India, have been the base for several research publications. When research is conducted to test or establish the efficacy of mantras (e.g., yajna brings rain; mantra causes healing), we still do not receive insights into the nitty-gritty of practice and experience. Among the ambitious works in this group that I have come across is Toni Nader’s *Human Physiology* (2000) that aims to prove or translate equivalences between vedic material and modern science. Ideology and apologetics notwithstanding, this literature demonstrates an effort by practitioners to be accepted by modern norms of verifiability and communicate with scholars. On the flipside, modern scholars rarely consider the needs of practitioners as a part of their concerns.

In “Rite out of Place,” Ronald L. Grimes writes about a play titled after a polar bear, and a Byzantine screen through which it is observed. Grimes leverages this

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41 It is not possible to readily divide scholarship on mantras into academics vs practitioners, or theoretical vs. practical. For instance, the thoroughness and detail of such scholars as Frits Staal could only come from a familiarity with the practical aspects of mantras; his interventionist leadership has not only influenced but directly financed the performance of large-scale yajnas. On the other hand, the work of Swami Pragyatmananda is highly theoretical, even though it speaks within the Indian tradition of practice.

anecdote to think about the position of the religious studies scholar observing the enactment of religious life. The Byzantine frame becomes a means of working out alternative interpretive frameworks— aesthetic, religious, ritual and practical. A scholar too works with a screen, observing an activity at some remove from what he studies; the screen is theory, which is also the metaphoric move. Meanwhile, an improvisation artist observes the audience from behind the stage curtains, gaining a peculiar perspective, and later leaps into the role of a polar bear, triggering revelations for the audience and the playwright. The improvisation artist/ fool of the opening anecdote illustrates how traditional or predictable scripts may be overturned for new insights by a religious scholar. Both, says Grimes, are necessary.

1.2 Fieldwork

The need for fieldwork in mantras was indicated by André Padoux decades ago, in 1978.43

All the researches hereto enumerated, important as they are, still do not suffice for a complete understanding of the problem of mantra, if only because they remain on the surface: they limit themselves to reporting what different texts, schools, authors, say on the subject. They report a discourse, they contribute to clarify it, they unveil its relations to other discourses, or its historical origins and developments, but they do not explain it: what really are mantra-s? How do they <function>? What can one say about the mantric phenomenon as a peculiar type of human praxis and discourse? Those, indeed, are the most important problems.44

44 Ibid., 238-239
Padoux runs through all the possible but unexplored directions in the research of mantras. He begins with indological and scientific types of research, and within the indological, suggests inventories and indexes, historical and comparative studies, traditional theories, linguistic and even psychological studies. Finally, he recommends that mantras are “social facts” and therefore “to be approached from the anthropological side.”  

Many of his suggestions (whether following his cue, or not) have been fulfilled in the last three decades, but not yet anthropology.

1.2.1 Positioning

Anthropology emphasizes experience; there is no substitute to being inside the community being studied. One begins with Bronislaw Malinowski’s pioneering thinking in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) – the idea of participatory observation – and his example of venturing out and living with the Trobriand. But, eventually, the exotic veneer of Malinowski’s empathetic “off-the-verandah” anthropology was tarnished by his private diaries, published posthumously in 1967, which suggest that he was either a prejudiced racist or just a frightened outsider. In *Theories of Primitive Religions* (1962), E.E. Evans-Pritchard cautioned against anthropology that did not succeed in entering the minds of the people it studied and of scholars who come up with motivations more akin to their own cultures. Ironic, then, that Stanley Tambiah (1929–2014) critiqued

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45 Ibid., 239.
Evans-Pritchard for not living up to these very ideals. In a chapter in *Culture, Thought and Social Action* (1985), Tambiah explains that Azande analogical thinking is different from western methods of induction and verification. Evans-Pritchard and many western anthropologists drew from the pattern of how early Greek thought led to the development of scientific thought, i.e., how their “magic” developed into “science.” As a result, he says, Evans-Pritchard “misunderstood the semantic basis of magical acts” and tried to determine if it was empirical or mystical. If Malinowski was inside, but never an insider, Evans-Pritchard may never have entered the Azande mind.

Tambiah’s critique happens at a time when anthropologists seem to be over the romance of immersive anthropology and taking a more critical approach. Tambiah’s contemporary Clifford Geertz (1926-2004) achieved an “understanding of understanding,” a cultural hermeneutics, by choosing an interpretive distance. The issue, as Geertz says, is not moral, but epistemological. Discussing “experience-near” and “experience-distant” approaches, he cautions that it is not possible to know what “natives” are up to: “In one sense, of course, no one knows this better than they do themselves; hence the passion to swim in the stream of their experience, and the illusion afterward that one somehow has.” Also, experience-near means that “ideas and realities

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50 Ibid., 61.

are indissolubly bound.” It is near-impossible to extract any conceptual information from an experience-near location; experience-distant is more practicable. Geertz compares the goal to catching a joke, rather than achieving communion. Experience-near is not necessary for Geertz: “Accounts of other people’s subjectivities can be built up without recourse to pretensions for more-than-normal capacities for ego-effacement and fellow-feeling.”

The distance that Geertz pitches as deliberate or just unproblematic comes across as problematic in the case of recent anthropological works in Indian locations. In *Fruitful Journeys* (1988), Ann G Gold studies pilgrimages and their significance to a Rajasthani Ghatiyali village community. Gold explains her determination to get away from the imperialist malaises of anthropology’s past. She aims to “record, explore and work within indigenous categories,” and “understand text and context as mobilelly interlaced.” An informant tells Ann Gold that the narratives she is hearing is like “gur (cane sugar)” to the deaf and dumb— inexpressible. Gold then recalls Clifford Geertz: “I knew that I could never share nor replicate native visions.”

Gold surmounts this distance by relying on indigenous categories. Isabelle Nabokov expresses similar concerns in *Religion Against the Self* (2000) about possession and sorcery in Tamil Nadu. Nabokov finds western theory unhelpful— Tamil rituals do not fit into the three-stage model proposed by Arnold Van Gennup or Victor Turner, nor are sacred places distinct

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52 Ibid., 236
54 Ibid., 301
from the profane as proposed by Émile Durkheim. It is finally in ancient Tamil concepts of “puram (outside)” and “akam (inside)” that Nabokov finds resonance. However, Nabokov finds her position as an outsider appropriate: “But I could never internalize that reality, and in my case, felt it would be false, presumptuous, even transgressive to try.”

By contrast, a shared community is evident in the voice of Kirin Narayan who retrieves folk-tales from the foothills of the Himalayas for Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon (1997). Naryan shares author-credit with Urmila Sood, and calls her informants “collaborators,” letting them tell as well as actively interpret their stories: “Where actual people exist who are using such stories, I believe that we owe it to them to find out what they – as people of artistry and intelligence – might think.” Similarly, Leela Prasad shows no insider-outsider struggle in Poetics of Conduct (2007), a book about how the people of Sringeri construct normative values against a tradition of prescribed norms. Prasad also displays shared values— upon losing a ring, she offers “puja (worship)” to the deity of lost objects.

However, these examples cannot fall into two simplistic categories of exogenous and indigenous scholars with genealogies suggested by their names. In Writing Women’s

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56 In “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking,” A.K.Ramanujan observes that Indian thinking is particularly context-bound and contrasts it with western thinking which he calls context-free. In context-free cultures, he writes, counter-movements tend to be context-sensitive; one of the examples Ramanujan notes is the search for native categories in anthropology. Contributions to Indian Sociology 23, no. 1 (1989): 41–58.
57 Nabokov, Religion Against Self, 180.
59 Ibid., 219.
Worlds, Lila Abu-Lughod discusses the complexity of her position as a “cultural halfie.”⁶¹ In “How Native is a Native Anthropologist” (2012), Kirin Narayan recommends a reorientation in how anthropologists are perceived as inside or outside a community.⁶² Today, there is no guessing how an Azande scholar trained at a university in Paris might interpret Azande rituals; neither is identity so rigid, nor is anthropology a “western” method today. It is anthropological traditions that seem more diverse now, and informants, more “hybrid.”⁶³ Further, we must think about how ethnographers choose to locate themselves, the roles they are able to play in the communities they studied, and the results of their methods. Geertz’s “outsider” position leads to cultural anthropology, and he deciphers symbols and patterns of meaning. From Nabokov’s thesis about how possession rituals result in a rupture of personality, we may consider her position a prudent choice, safe distancing. Narayan is retrieving oral literature rather than observing culture, therefore she can let her collaborators do all the telling. There are two parts to the ethnographer’s work, even as they overlap—fieldwork and writing. Working within her own community, Prasad conducts an extensive engagement with theory for a reflective assessment which also generates narrative distance.

My own cultural identity was a little confused. Historically, I am post-colonial, but intellectually, not post-colonialist. Growing up in atomic power project colonies in

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⁶³ In *What is Existential Anthropology*, editors Michael Jackson and Albert Piette explain how American, British and Continental traditions of anthropological thought are distinct depending on the distinct ways in which anthropologists engage with philosophy. (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 1.
India, more adept in English than in any Indian language, influenced by French literature rather than Indian, not home-schooled in Hindu religious customs but familiar with a multi-religious and cosmopolitan ashram community, and then a non-resident Indian for over two decades, I may be called a “heritage-learner.” From the informants’ point of view, my face immediately identified me Indian, and my ability to pronounce gha, kṣa, jña and other sounds from the Indic syllabary suggested I was no foreigner. I remembered the protagonist of the 2004 documentary film, *Song of The Exile: Chinese restaurants* directed by Cheuk C Kwan, a film that traces the history of Chinese-restaurant owners in South Africa, Israel and Turkey. The restaurateur confesses that when he arrived in Israel, he didn’t know how to cook Chinese cuisine. His Israeli friends say, “never mind it’s easy, we’ll show you how – but you cook, you’ve got the right face.” Conversing about my interest in learning vedic chanting, a Pune scholar asked if I was a Brahmin (a caste, or “varṇa”). 64 There is a widely prevalent view that only male Brahmins are entitled to chant veda-mantras, and I wondered if he cared about traditional rules, or if he asked so he could respond to similar queries from others. “Brahmin,” I said, and he seemed relieved; if my desire to learn to chant veda-mantras clashed with my gender, it was at least in line with my varna. The combination of Indian, Hindu, and Brahmin set up a framework— freedoms and constraints, rights and responsibilities. Speaking from within a tradition would give me access, as well as scope to take some liberties when necessary; it would also carry restrictions and expectations.

64 A classification of people based on lineage and tendencies, translatable as “caste” — there are four varnas of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.
Despite the “right face,” I spent large swathes of time in fieldwork in 2012 and 2013 without making headway. Practitioners I interviewed would quote at length from early Indian sources—I was gathering material that told me no more about the experience of mantras than I would have gleaned from library research. It was not a cultural but an experiential boundary that I would have to cross.

1.2.2 Methodological challenges

Studying religious experience within the community of his family for *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005), Robert Orsi reflects on the religious studies scholar who struggles with the space “in-between” the subjective and the objective, with some suggestions for how a balanced position may be adopted. The position of the scholar is full of expectations—“people expect the researcher to condemn or condone.” While informants challenge an anthropologist’s distance, scholars suspect entanglement for its biases. Empirical work can seem to endorse the religious worlds it studies, and the scholar has to walk a tightrope, suspending judgment. How can s/he negotiate between the subjective and objective? Orsi says it is not solved by adding autobiographical prefaces or epilogues, he suggests “methodological experiments.” The scholar may want to be “more clear,” and even “disruptive” about the voices s/he includes; and “invite them to challenge our interpretations of them.”

To illustrate this openness, Orsi provides an example of a scholar he thinks has gone wrong, and a scholar he appreciates. Dennis Covington is of the first type, a journalist who comes close to

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becoming an “insider” when conducting research among snake-handlers in Georgia. At a particular point in his research, he faces the misogynist mindset of his subjects, and finds himself rejecting the entire experience he has so far been studying. By contrast, David Haberman, who writes about Krishna-worship in Western India, reserves his judgment when he finds himself skeptical about the emotional response of devotees to relics of Krishna’s footprints. Orsi quotes Haberman’s reflection that “multiple realities or worlds of meaning are available to us.” Orsi’s conclusion that scholar is bound to have a response – Covington felt revulsion – but this response needs to become “a pivot for reflection” rather than a moment for judgment. While Orsi advocates empathetic objectivity, he emphasizes that he is an agnostic. One of his informants asks him how he can study St Jude without praying to him. Orsi recalls this later (he calls it “Clara’s challenge”) and tries to pray, but does not succeed, and goes about thinking how to replicate the experience. Similarly, T.M. Luhrmann, in When God Talks Back (2012) plays mediator, explaining to non-believers how evangelical Christians can believe in God. Both these scholars discuss practitioners from a non-committal distance, and adopt a position that helps connect with informants as well as the academic community.

The very idea of judgment is questioned in Bruno Latour’s recent writing which is critical of scholarship itself. In “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam” (2004), Latour writes that scholars misconstrue themselves as scientists, and misconstrue science as objective. If a scholar plays jury by adopting objective, critical thinking, he says, “the

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66 Ibid., 201
Zeus of Critique rules absolutely, to be sure, but over a desert.” Set in the present, a narrative that pushes the limits of empirical parameters becomes susceptible to skepticism and may be recast as a ‘claim,’ but rejecting such a narrative does not contribute to scholarship either. The constructions and imperatives of scholarly considerations are already available to the scholar, with no risk of losing them; it is the practitioner’s world that can expand the scholar’s education.

A scholar who makes such a commitment is Karen McCarthy Brown for *Mama Lola* (2001). It is by enrolling as an initiate of the vodou priestess that Brown gains entry to the psychological world of vodou practitioners. McCarthy-Brown’s purpose seems sociological rather than conceptual analysis. But, she adopts a fictional form to narrate the stories about the vodou entities, so the reader is not sure of their status and the world of vodou practitioners is already undermined before it is shown. McCarthy-Brown does not mention her own experience, if any, and such silence suggests the problematics of so immersive a fieldwork. How, then, to “cross over” and arrive inside a culture or community, inside minds and even inside experience, and yet maintain transparence, objectivity, and conduct a conceptual analysis? How to gain the expanded understanding that Latour too advocates, and then cultivate the “desert”?

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1.2.3 Navigating subjectivity

Experience per se is valorized by the group of anthropologists including Michael Jackson and Albert Piette who explain their method in “What Is Existential Anthropology?” (2005). Although Jackson and Piette’s fundamentals are comparable with the thinking in the 1986 Victor W. Turner- and Edward M Bruner-edited anthology Anthropology of Experience (1986), there are specific concerns that mark their method differently. Discussing their method that necessitated a new terminology, Michael Jackson and Albert Piette identify “a refusal to reduce lived reality to culturally or socially constructed representations.” Even though they do not deny that processes govern lives, they insist that individual experience is continually shifting, and unique. Dubbing this kind of attention “existence” comes from an allegiance to and acknowledgment of their intellectual traditions and conversation partners. They hope the concept of existence will help overcome the “antinomies” between psychology and anthropology, the singular and shared, biological and cultural. Jackson emphasizes the inter-subjective method, and Piette emphasizes the singularity and subjectivity of experience. Jackson and Piette’s term works in the space between anthropos and ethnos, between ethnography and “phenomenography,” between ontology and epistemology. In Existential Anthropology : Events, Exigencies and Effects (2005) Michael Lambek notes how he never thought of his work as existential anthropology until invited to redescribe and contribute to this anthology, “Both/And,” What is Existential Anthropology, eds. Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 58-83, 59.

69 Ibid., 3-4.
70 Ibid., 10.
71 Ibid., 16.
Jackson sees an interplay between given life-situations and the human capacity to transform it. This puts the focus on practice: “the world is thus something we do not simply live and reproduce in passivity, but actually produce and transform through praxis.” Jackson seeks out “moments of being” that give him glimpses of what is at stake for the practitioner, this leads to what he calls an anthropology of events.

I took a lead from such a focus on experience and inter-subjectivity to expose the moments of experience of, the very grain of experience of, mantras. While locations impose some commonalities, every practitioner experiences and interprets her experience uniquely, and the narratives in this research are about moments of discovery. To emphasize individual voices of practitioners, I adopt a transcript-heavy approach.

In the essay where Narayan questions old definitions of a native anthropologist, she also calls for a “melt down” of the divide between narrative and analytical, subjective and objective:

One wall stands between ourselves as interested readers of stories and as theory-driven professionals; another wall stands between narrative (associated with subjective knowledge) and analysis (associated with objective truths). By situating ourselves as subjects simultaneously touched by life-experience and swayed by professional concerns, we can acknowledge the hybrid and positioned nature of our identities. Writing texts that mix lively narrative and rigorous analysis involves enacting hybridity, regardless of our origins.

It was hybridities that surfaced in my fieldwork and writing— the critical insider, description and analysis, and reflective experience. Early on in the fieldwork, I chose not to do fieldwork in Puttaparthi, as that would be too close to home and to my guru,
Sathya Sai Baba. Unlike McCarthy-Brown, I had multiple locations. It was visionary experience I was researching, not the life of practice, nor a single personality, and a single location or person would not suffice. I discovered a range of perspectives and distances; my interaction with the gurus and practitioners was different at different locations.

Whereas all ethnographic locations are referenced along with the bibliography as “participant observation,” it was of many kinds on-ground. At Devipuram (cf. Chapter 3), I intentionally subjected myself to rituals and courses of study; it gave me a taste of their mantra-process, and supplemented what I learned from interviews. Siddheswarananda (cf. Chapter 4) had a larger following compared to the gurus at the other two locations and my research here took shape around interviews rather than relationships. Nachiketa ashram (cf. Chapter 5) was where I did mantra-sadhana too, not just research. It was the place where I was persuaded to put aside my recorder and forget about research for short stretches of time. The three ethnographic chapters reflect such a range of positions. Writing about the approaches to mantras at Nachiketa ashram for Chapter 6, I took the opportunity to focus on the nitty-gritty of practice.

The focus on mantra practice and experience led to a break from ethnographic conventions in this writing. Often, discussions focused on mantras to the extent that there was no chit-chat about personal particulars. This also matched the focus on mantras practitioners had themselves. I rarely provide – and often, do not know – biographical details such as education, family, and social backgrounds. Many narratives here are like a series of snapshots—exhibit one, two, three, and so on. What stitches them together, then, is the inquiry and analysis.
I did not anticipate that I would go so far as to take “mantra-diksha (mantra-initiation)” at Nachiketa ashram. Becoming a genuine mantra-practitioner opened as if an inner door within myself, as well as within communities of practitioners—this could have been due to my own heightened appreciation of the poetics and experience of mantra-practice. But no practitioner is entirely and always a practitioner, and least of all, a person with a project and a permission-form. I did not downplay my scholarly motivations to co-practitioner informants. Some of them appreciated such transparency and were comfortable sharing their experience; others extended the hand of friendship upon condition that I would not write about them. Like McCarthy-Brown, while I too chose not to subject my own experiences to the reader’s gaze, I did not shy away from acknowledging them and to contributing some relevant details from observation of practice and effects. Most importantly, I saw how my own experiments with mantras, and critical approach was similar to that of regular practitioners, but different in that I had concerns of collective scholarship.

An old Indian story in several sources including the Mundaka Upanishad tells of two birds perched on a tree.76 One eats the fruit of the tree, while the other merely looks on. Commentary positions this as figurative—the bird that experiences the fruit is the person who participates in the world; and the first bird that looks on is the ātman (“self, or “soul”). What separates the two is “maya (illusion).” Commenting on this parable today, I would name the two birds “Objective” and “Subjective.” They are both present at the same time on the branch, and at any given moment, one can morph into the other.

76 Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.1-2, Svetasvatara Upanisad 4.6-7.
It is by dipping in and out both these positions that makes it possible to conduct analytical fieldwork.

### 1.3 Practice as research

When I conceived of mantra-practice as a methodology to research the experience of mantras, little did I know that it was exactly how my informants viewed their own practice. In their daily lives, mantra-practitioners were teachers, architects, marketers, businessmen and women, medical doctors and nuclear scientists—mantra was their private passion, a vocation. Practitioners who had been inexplicably drawn to mantras talked about themselves as seekers of truths beyond the physically evident world. Biographical particulars volunteered by them were entirely relevant to our discussion about mantras. Practitioners who had come to mantras for help with personal problems continued with mantra-practice after these problems had been resolved—and in their narratives, positioned these problems as interesting knots that had occurred so that they may turn to a mantra, or a guru for a mantra. Subsequently, the unfolding of a mantra in their life was a part of their adventure in actively shaping their lives, writing their lives with mantras.

The three central figures of this fieldwork rarely cited authoritative sources in our conversations. In my first meeting with Sivananda Puri, she told me that she too was researching mantras. Siddheswarananda Bharati experimented with rigorous disciplinary practices as a young seeker; rather than guiding his followers with what to expect in practice, he pushed them to form their own conclusions. Amritananda Natha Saraswati was a scientist who started by thinking God/Goddess unverifiable—paying attention to his own experiences led him to other-worldly realms. Sivananda Puri said to
me—“I didn’t read shastras.” Amritananda said to an interviewer, “I don’t follow shastras, I make them.” All three saw themselves as primary sources.

This may come across as transgressive in a religious tradition that defines itself with reference to an authoritative canon of revelatory material. However, as recent scholarship has shown, tradition is not as intransigent as it would seem. A quick review of discussions about the relationship between practice and theory, oral and written, and folk and the classical in Indian intellectual history will prove useful. Scholarship on Indian oral traditions of the itihasa-puranas (epic-histories) has long debunked the idea of an ur-text. A.K.Ramanujan wrote about “[t]hree hundred Ramayanas,” Velcheru Narayana Rao proposed revising the phrase “authoritative texts” to “received texts,” and raised the question of the contrivance of critical editions. A range of scholars have shown how shifting contexts and participating publics build a dynamic tradition that is open to change, and have challenged hierarchies of written as authoritative, and oral as folk, derivative or inferior.77

Traditionally, it was not theism but adherence to vedas that defined orthodoxy and heterodoxy. A person who accepted the “pramana (evidence)” of the veda was called an “astika (believer)” and one who does not, was called a “nastika (non-

77 In Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), Romila Thapar considers multiple versions of a single text to demonstrate how legends are re-interpreted in different historical contexts. Two anthologies edited by Paula Richman include essays that discuss the dynamic Ramayana tradition on-ground—Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia (Berkeley: Uni of California Press, 1991), and Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition (Berkeley: Uni of California Press, 2001). Among the essays included in Many Ramayanas, two that have become well-known are A.K.Ramanujan’s “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation” (22-50) and Velcheru Narayana Rao’s “A Ramayana of their Own: Women’s Oral Tradition in Telugu” (114-136); and among the essays in Questioning Ramayanas, one that brings new information into scholarship is “Lovers’ Doubts: Questioning the Tulsi Ramayana” by Linda Hess (25-48) where we see how people conduct their questioning of authoritative tradition.
believer).” Thus, among the “darshanas (schools of thought),” Buddhists, Jains and Charvakas (materialists from ca. 6th BCE) were nastikas. The tonal system which preserves an invariant vedic recitation is often cited as a formidable example of vedic authority.\(^78\) Undaunted, Louis Renou’s *Destiny of the Veda* (1965) is a bird’s eye view of centuries of multiple Indian traditions to illustrate how the idea of the Veda is more prevalent than adherence to its content. Brian K. Smith’s *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (1988) takes a different angle, and turns this into a positive outcome, repositioning veda as the “vedism” within later Hinduism, locating underlying epistemological principles and continuities. An anthology edited by Laurie L Patton, *Authority, Anxiety and Canon* (1994) focuses on specific texts and traditions to point out rhetorical strategies which allow variations from vedic authority to thrive, while purporting to carry on the tradition.\(^79\) Leela Prasad (2006) has shown how people interact with doctrinal content intelligently, concluding that there is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice.\(^80\) Jonardan Ganeri has shown in *The Lost Age of Reason* (2011) how deference has had the unfortunate result of downplaying innovation within the Indian tradition.

In “Theory of Practice, Practice of Theory,” Sheldon Pollock lays out a broad review of the concept of tradition and change within Indian intellectual history. In the ancient period, he writes, veda was called “shastra (codified doctrine)” and the

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\(^78\) Another way to read such a practice would be to imagine its contrary context, for a complex system of invariance must surely exist to combat the threatening presence of change.


“vedangas (ancillary vedic sciences)” such as “nirukta (etymology),” and “chandas (prosody)” were descriptive, with a taxonomical and non-legislative character. In the next phase, theory began to govern “prayoga (practice).” Pollock explains that the idea of a transcendent source of knowledge created a rule-driven approach. If all shastra or authoritative texts are no more than textualisations of transcendent knowledge, which is incontrovertible, then practice has no room to revise tradition. In the Patanjali Mahabhasya, a ca. 4th BCE commentary on Paninian grammar, there is an exception to this rule—instances that are not provided for in shastra are acceptable in practice if the “shishta (learned)” employ them. Pollock then examines the meaning of “shishta” and cites from later commentators in the 17th CE:

Where, however, a linguistic science posits as its primary axiom that for usage to be “successful” it must derive wholly from grammatical theory, the presence of “ungrammatical” but acceptable usage can only be accounted for by recourse to the existence of a new member of the speech community who in a way distinct from that of the other members—by transcendent yogic insight as of a ṛṣi [rishi/seer], for example—has mastered the grammatical rules and so can lead us to infer that he has access to a more complete grammar than others possess. This, assert the later commentators on the Mahābhāṣya, is Patañjali’s true position here.81

What is remarkable about this example is how later commentators re-interpret “a learned person” as a seer, a concept that we today would regard even more ancient than a learned person. It is also illuminating when we consider how this concept of a rishi comes from the 17th CE, which we now classify as early-modern. The interpretation contains an important clue to how change is possible within the Indian tradition. The

Indian philosophical tradition does not consider knowledge as human-made, but it also considers the actual source as vast, and accessible. Even though there is the idea of absolute, transcendent knowledge, there is also the idea that it is inexhaustible. Even if revelatory material is a priori and authorless, there are happy gaps— the source is inexhaustible, and a seer may have direct access to areas in these sources that have been untapped by his or her predecessors. Therefore the commentators reason that rishis would have access to a more complete grammar than their predecessors. This very example also dislodges Pollock’s thesis— while he is not wrong about theory preceding practice, he is not entirely right either. Practice is the source for past and future theories.

In “Pedagogy and Practice : Meta-pragmatics of Tantric Rites in Kerala” (2010), John R. Freeman takes the case of a tantric puja where novices learn and rehearse rituals directly from their teachers rather than from manuals. It is only after the ritualists attain practical proficiency that they take up the ritual treatises. Ritual practice, and a textualised source, co-exist, and intersect with each other - Freeman concludes that it is a “partial corelation.” When the practitioner performs the ritual, they may abbreviate a group of rituals in a gesture. Performative utterances themselves are referred to by metalinguistic descriptions. Ritual units are subject to “fusion, fission and ellipsis.” Freeman destabilizes understandings of the relationship between text and ritual practice. If novitiates transform texts or create new texts during practice, how much more so would a seer with the authority to determine what others follow?

In actual practice, a revision that claims to proceed with direct access to an original source is sure to proceed with more liberty for re-envisioning tradition. Seers will produce what Clifford Geertz calls “models of,” not “models for” reality. My
classmate from Srividya study at Devipuram, Arul Murugan, a welder by profession and a seasoned mantra-practitioner, told me he had come there for a course in order to learn from the person who had learned it directly from Goddess Lalita. At Ma-Yoga Shakti-Peetham temple in Nachiketa, the artist for the murals on the wall was Sivananda Puri. Nachiketaites understand that the mantras in the homas are directed by her based on her visions, and when she dresses up the goddesses for Navaratri, it is understood she is simply replicating how Kali-Ma appeared to her in person. The point is not whether or not such views are legitimate, but that this is how it works on-ground, in practice. Given such ability, if seers do not then go on to produce entirely new material, there is an argument for the ontological basis for existing material. Such a conception may also explain why information found in ancient Indian written materials is fragmentary and often incomprehensible without commentary. The dense, epigrammatic style of the Jaimni mimamsa-sutras makes more sense once we begin to re-envision them as notes, or out-takes of practice rather than as a second-order discourse or a reflection on custom.

In “Meaning in Tantric Ritual” (2006), Alexis Sanderson draws from Sanskrit works of Kashmir Saivism between 9th and 13th CE to explain the tantric system. Kashmir Shaivism exerted a strong influence across the Indian region including South India; therefore, Sanderson calls this “an excellent starting point.” Sanderson also notes the shortcomings of staying within their ambit. Scholars have been focused on the metaphysical and mystical elements of tantrism, and ignored much else:
When the prescription and theory of ritual have been neglected in the study of the learned works of the medieval period, it cannot be surprising that these humble manuals should have escaped attention altogether.\(^{82}\)

Sanderson’s point about what awaits scholarly study is valuable for the concerns of this research. The rituals of Sivananda Puri, the books of Siddheswarananda Bharati and Vadlamudi Venkateswara Rao and the manuals of Amritananda Natha Saraswati circulate today and are used as guides by their followers—unless scholarship gets out of the libraries of canonical sources from several centuries ago and in to the field, how will it speak to present concerns? How can classifications of tantra as kaula, vama and dakshinacara from ten centuries ago continue to be the basis and template of scholarly understanding, especially in the absence of contact with current practice? And how can there be meaningful contact with current practice without understanding the realities and concerns of practitioners?

When practitioners have moved on to more updated material, it becomes incumbent upon scholars to keep pace. While I had my own list of secondary sources, an academic conversation that I was a part of, I became sensitive to another conversation I was witness to—between practitioners and their textual references. Practitioners referred to other books by noted practitioners and thinkers because they regarded them as their predecessor’s practical notes. Their approach to these written sources was not that of homage, but of consultation. Just as one takes a pause when reading a book to look at the bibliography, I browsed the bookshelves of my co-practitioner-informants and noted what books they were reading. In the Nachiketa ashram office bookselves, I


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found books by Chandrasekhara Sarasvati and Sri Aurobindo, and often saw
Nachiketananda referring to them. In the office of the manager of Siddheswarananda
Bharati’s ashram in Courtallam, there were several books about Ramana Maharishi and
his disciples. A book on Daivarata was given to me by vedic ritualist Narendra Kapre.
Vadlamudi Venkateshwara Rao cited the Panchakshari Kalpa sutra. Amritananda spoke
about the Tripuratapini Upanishad and Parashurama Kalpa sutra, and the manual that
he created at Devipuram was his revised version of the Parashurama Kalpa sutra. Such
sources became a part of my bibliography in addition to early Indian sources and
modern scholarship.

1.4 Unbracketing ‘experience’

Whether or not phenomenology is classifiable under history of religions, there
has already been a history of phenomenology of religion in the western academy— it
has seen both a rise and a fall. Derived from the Greek term “phainomenon,” which
means “that which shows itself” or “that which appears,” this approach admits a
description and discussion of religious experience that may not be admissible in a
strictly empirical framework. After William James (1842-1910) underlined the ineffable
classification of mystical experience – “unplumbed by the discursive intellect” – and the
conviction of authority that it brings, such other thinkers as Rudolf Otto (1869-1937),
Gerardus Van Der Leeuw (1890-1950) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) focused on
description as well as classification of phenomena into typologies, and therefore became

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83 In Religion in Essence and Manifestation (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1967), Gerardus van der Leeuw
distinguishes phenomenology from history of religion, poetics of religion, psychology of religion and the
philosophy of religion and theology.
associated with the comparative study of religion. Looking back at their work today, it seems as though they aimed to demonstrate how different religions have the same experiential and essential basis, and that it is such experiences that define religion, rather than ideas. Additionally, there is a division between the profane and the sacred—the sacred manifests in “hierophanies” (Eliade), or “numinous” moments (Otto), and via such capitalized abstractions as “Power,” “Will” (Van der Leeuw), etc. Such an essentialist approach has been updated by particularity: Ninian Smart (1927-2001) emphasizes pluralism and the contextual nature of experience, and Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) sees himself belonging to the phenomenological tradition. Geertz underlines his difference: “phenomenologists concern themselves with general issues of meaning independent of any empirical case,” but his work occurs in the context of analyzing the material. A dialogical and narrativist model, and the view that experience is only accessible through modes, narratives and texts is shared by a range of scholars including Steven Katz (1978), Wayne Proudfoot (1985) and Gavin Flood (1999).

And yet, discussing “experience” as a critical term, Robert Sharf (1998) is humorously skeptical— “[I]f only I had a taste of the real thing, I would quickly and


humbly forgo my rueful attempt to explain away such phenomena.”  

Sharf’s argument is that phenomenology thrives alongside a trend of pluralism and cultural relativism. He also proposes that it is a historical anomaly, a “relatively late and distinctively western invention.” Relying mainly on Wilhelm Halbfass (1988), Sharf concludes there is no rhetoric of experience in Asian religions before the colonial period. Halbfass’s proposal was that such neo-Hindus as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Debendranath Tagore were driven by apologetics when claimed Indian philosophy was based on intuition, vision, and perception. In classical philosophy, “darshana” meant “belief-system” rather than vision; thus, even the materialistic Charvaka system was called a darshana. Reviewing Halbfass’s book, John Taber challenges the thesis—“how far wrong really were the neo-Hindus about Indian philosophy being rooted in vision?” He points out that in the Upanishads, teachings are attributed to sages with unique capacities of wisdom and insight. Taber presents a range of key thinkers in Indian intellectual history including 8th CE Shankara—“Since he emphasizes that scripture should yield a direct experience of the truth, it seems reasonable to assume he was drawing on his own experience.” My position is entirely in agreement with that of Taber’s, and not only because of the Upanishads; phenomena are ubiquitous in Indian mantra practice, and so is an -ology.

Conversations with practitioners invariably included reports of appearances by deities or their manifestations through signs and other phenomena. It is rare to find a guru or hagiography without reports of his or her extraordinary powers believed to

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accrue from mantras, and called “siddhis.” Miracles are also the raw material of Indian legends, they are understood as signs of the support and favor of deities or other non-human entities. If phenomena are plentiful, there is also a convention about what they mean, and a discourse. While this is not academic, it is systematic, and is a part of a tradition that may be traced back to early Indian sources. Siddhis are about the contravention of nature—there are eight siddhis including “anima,” the power of reducing one’s own body to the size of an atom, and “mahima,” the power of expanding one’s own body to an infinitely large size. Honorifics of gurus are markers of capabilities, and people understood these significations—for instance, a “Paramahamsa (supreme-swan)” is a person who has attained “nirvikalpa samadhi (complete liberation)” and is discriminating. In a drink of milk mixed with water, a swan is said to be able to drink the milk and leave the water, such is its ability to discriminate and separate the real from the unreal, the worthy from the unworthy, and the title refers to such a “tattva (quality).”

Accounts of phenomena in Indian sources are usually within a framework of soteriology. In Patanjali’s Yogasutras, phenomena are described as systematically as any technical manual for cooking, gardening or driving. The third section Vibhuti-Pada of Yogasutras, from Verse 16 onwards, enumerates yogic practices and siddhis—how the yogi gains a knowledge of the past and future, the ability to become invisible, to read the minds of others, and more. Experiences and siddhis function as credentials and are useful for the legitimization and evaluation of a practitioner’s status. Phenomena are every practitioner’s instant evidence that something is happening. They also indicate efficacy of practice—manuals of “japa (repetitive utterance)” describe what siddhis
accrue on how many counts of mantra-japa, and vedic sources prescribe yajnas for a range of results from rain to childbirth. Sources like these are so numerous, if modern scholars of Indian religious studies were to squirm about experience and phenomena, the result would be large gaps in our understanding of this tradition. While phenomena are usually private, there is a cultural interpretation already in place, a public language. Subjective experience is expressed in shared language and both are referenced against a doctrinal mapping, or draw from the same repertoire, so that the person who has the experience knows how to understand it.

There is a significant difference between “experience” and “experiences”—the former suggests wisdom arising from reflection after experiences, and the latter refers to phenomena which may or may not add up to experience. A Sanskrit and Telugu equivalent of experience is “anubhava,” which is strongly associated with existence, for the term comes from the verb “bhū” or “to be;” great people are called “mahanubhavuru,” i.e., a person of deep experience. Madhava-Vidyaranya’s retelling about philosopher-guru ca. 8- CE Shankara is translated by Swami Tapasyananda in Shankara Digvijaya.

When Shankara and mimamsa scholar Mandana Mishra engage in a debate, Mishra loses and as agreed, he has to become a “sanyasi (celibate renunciate)” and disciple of Shankara. Peeved, Mishra’s wife Ubhaya Bharati tells Shankara that he has to defeat her too, as she is Mishra’s other-half. In this second debate, she interrogates Shankara on the

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88 Sharf notes that all attempts to signify ‘inner experience’ are destined to remain “well-meaning squirms that can get us nowhere.” “Experience,” 114.
science and art of love. As a sanyasi, Shankara has no knowledge of this subject, and stands to lose the debate; Ubhaya Bharati gives him some time to respond to her questions. Shankara then uses his “siddhis (powers)” to leave his body, inhabit the dead body of a King; reviving it and gaining the necessary experience through “direct study,” he returns and - but of course - wins the debate.\(^90\) Besides presenting a startling, if troubling, case of insider ethnography for inaccessible topics, this shows us how experience is valued in Indian narratives.

But a negative assessment of experiences also prevails among practitioners. In Flute Calls Still (1964) when Indira Devi finds she has acquired precognition as a result of meditation, she ignores these effects.\(^91\) In Robert Svoboda’s book on Vimalananda (1986), when he describes the mantra-materialization of a “pishaca (demon),” he also shares Vimalananda’s warning that “Shaktis (goddesses, powers)” can misfire for novices; they may gain control over “shaktis (powers)” in this life, but in their next lives they serve these same Shaktis.\(^92\) Experiences for their own sake indicate short-sighted sensationalism, they retard further progress and distract the practitioner. Even though legends about gurus’ charisma tend to be about miracles, we are also told that they themselves would be disdainful of these occurrences. I recall what Subhadra-ma (aka Tapovani-ma in Uttarkashi of north India), a yogi from Karnataka, told me some years

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 113.
ago, when I asked about the miracles I had heard that she was performing— “It happens of its own accord, it’s not important.”

I found this stance about the unimportance of phenomena mainly among seasoned practitioners. In Hyderabad, when wrapping up after an hour’s conversation about Sri-Vidya (a Shaktta practice), I asked Vadlamudi Venkateswara Rao, tongue-in-cheek— “And you haven’t seen any deities, have you?” “OOhnono,” he replied, poker-faced, “thankfully, I’ve seen no deities, I am relaxed as can be.” In Telugu, he had been expressive—“nenu hāi gā unnānu,” the “h a l” onomatopoeically imitating a relieved sigh. Everyone in the room laughed. Meaningful grins flew across the room at this humorous but firm refusal to be drawn into mundane interests in deities and visions. The hierarchy is clear— the master or experienced practitioner has discrimination and is uncaring about phenomena, whilst the novice-practitioner is excited and encouraged by it.

Experiences and such minor siddhis as precognition are credentials for the legitimization and evaluation of a practitioner’s status; phenomena are every practitioner’s instantaneous evidence that something is happening. My exchange with Vadlamudi was a joke; conversations with mantra practitioners were not only about experiences but about aspects of mantra practice— motivations and processes, concerns and values.

Even as they disagree, Sharf and Taber both seem to regard religious experience as a lofty state, a climactic moment where some ultimate insight or knowledge occurs. My observations in Andhra-Telangana suggested that religious experience came on a graded scale. The idea that liberation is like a grand finale is widely prevalent, especially in relation to seers. Richard Cohen (2006) has pointed out that “enlightenment” is Max
Muller’s mistranslation of “nirvana,” which actually means “blowing out.” Muller was portraying Buddha as a man appropriate for the modern age, and expressing his convictions rooted in the European Enlightenment. Repeatedly, in India, I listened to descriptions of phenomena that had nothing to do with ultimate knowledge. In Puttaparthi, I asked Ahlad Roy, a kriya yogi, “are you enlightened?” He was reputed to receive visitations from ascended masters and I had heard he had experienced “atma-sakshatkaram,” which means a direct experience of the ultimate-self. He replied: “a little.”

One wonders if Sharf’s discomfort with phenomena is more at home within a theological framework of a formless and nameless God. In India, even God is on a graded scale—“Brahman” refers to a formless and nameless god, “Ishvara” and “Bhagavan” have a form and name, and deities are said to number 33,000. In such an environment, Schleiermacher’s “absolute dependence,” Rudolf Otto’s “numinous” and Gerardus Van der Leeuw’s categories such as “power,” “will,” “form” are much too general— one wonders if Indian sources could furnish deities for each of Van der Leeuw’s abstractions.

McKim Marriot and Ronald Inden’s (1977) anthology India through Hindu Categories is not new to scholarship in Indian studies, but the sheer importance of this work necessitates a recapitulation. The preface explains why there are no equivalent

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94 In the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (3.9), Vidagdha Shakalya asks Yajnavalkya how many gods there are. Yajnavalkya answers, “three hundred and three, and three thousand and three.” Not being satisfied with the answer, Shakalya repeats the question, and this time the answer is “thirty-three.” The interrogation continues, yielding a range of answers: six, three, two, one and a half, and finally, one, followed by an explanation that they are all manifestations, that there are thirty three main manifestations, and the others are only their glories.
western categories for many Indian conceptions and realities. Indian thinking does not distinguish between the material and ideological, or nature and culture; they are not in such mutually exclusive, oppositional binaries as material vs. spiritual, body vs. soul, true vs. false, fact vs. fiction, reality vs. imagination, action vs. thought, sacred vs. profane. While there are extensive classifications, they are not separated from each other. Thus, a body, by which is not meant a physical body, is made of “koshas (sheaths)” which are conceived as interpenetrating each other—“annamaya (food-filled),” “manomaya (mind-filled),” “pranamaya (breath/life filled),” “vijnanamaya (wisdom/science-filled)” and “anandamaya (bliss-filled)” – and this concept was often a part of conversations with mantra-practitioners. Where a person’s body is more than physical, the presence of non-physical entities is not extraordinary. When Robert Orsi writes about Marian apparitions to illustrate how an “abundance” of phenomena (echoing Otto’s “overplus of meaning”) await in a blind spot of the academic community, his voice is that of protest. Writing about mantra phenomena in contemporary India is in line with a discourse already present on-ground.

In More than Real (2012), David Shulman discusses Indian understandings of reality and how “imagination,” thought or desire creates reality. Shulman explains how “bhavana (ideation)” which derives from the verb “bhū” (“to be”) and “sankalpa (intentional will)” and “kalpana (imagination)” from “klp” (“to create) are projections that generate external outcomes. Shulman takes us through a range of examples across two millennia of Indian narratives (except for one chapter on Shakta practices) and focuses on the renaissance of ideas in 16th CE India. The same ideas and terms – kalpana,
bhavana, sankalpa - came up in my research among mantra practitioners also; mantras are creative media, they make and transform the worlds of the practitioners.

**1.5 Inside Andhra-Telangana**

In Basara, Telangana, nervous that I would not be able to extricate myself, I crawled cautiously into “Vyasa-guha (cave of Vyasa)” after my nimble, young friends from a veda-school I was visiting. In the far, dim corner, there was a statuette of a sage sitting cross-legged in meditation. “Vyasa-maharshi,” announced one of the boys. Basara was once called “Vyasar” after sage Vyasa who compiled the Vedas. Locals speak about how Vyasa left the sacred location of Kashi (i.e., Varanasi) in the north to come here and do penance in this cave by the banks of the river Godavari. Downstream, by the tank at the temple in Draksharamam, a sculptural panel features the legendary “sapta-rishis (seven sages)” who are Atri, Bhrigu, Kautsa, Vasishtha, Gautama, Kashyapa and Angirasa—it is why the location is called sapta-Godavari. In Andhra-Telangana, the ancient past is rich with rishis; and, as I was to soon find, so is the recent past, and even the present.

The fieldwork for this research was mainly conducted among those engaged in “mantra-sadhana,” a personal practice of mantras which may or may not include any other rituals and which is more associated with tantric and Hindu rather than Vedic

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95 The school is the Veda Bharati Peetham Veda Vidyalaya, founded by Swami Veda Vidyananda. This school is unique in that it accepts students regardless of caste and gender. This is also where I had the privilege of learning some basics about chanting vedic mantras in tones (svara-s).
religious practices. It is probably impossible to assert whether Andhra-Telangana is more tantric than any other part of India, but Shaiva and Shakta practices are popular, especially the Srividya tradition, and the region is home to a number of “Shakti-peethas (seats of Goddess Shakti).” Andhra-Telangana’s neighboring Odiya-speaking region which is well-known for Goddess-worship enters the narrative of this research via the account of the past life of one of the gurus. However, vedic tradition also surrounds the daily lives of the sadhakas in this fieldwork.

Historically, vedic communities settled along the banks of the river Godavari which flows all the way from western India’s Nasik in Maharashtra for over 900 miles into Telugu-speaking regions of south-east India. Studying the lives of vedic ritualists in the Godavari delta, David Knipe writes that Andhra has a third of India and Nepal’s “ahitagnis (vedic sacrificers)” and half of India’s “somayajis (Samaveda sacrificers).” Researching the experience of mantras, I met both vedic and tantric ritualists for they were each other’s neighbors in daily life; many concepts in the vocabulary they used seemed to come from a common repertoire. Section 2.1 describes the case of Maharishi Daivarata who saw mantras, and a brief account of the life and legend of Chandole Sastry, a vedic pundit with a Srividya (tantric) practice who saw the Goddess. The three fieldwork sites around which this research is focused are Goddess-centered in one way or the other, although they may all not be called “Shakta.” One of the themes of this

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book is also about such a blurring of categories in practice, and how traditions are instead created by what I will call (cf. 6.1) “mandalas (groups)”.

The primary language spoken across this region is Telugu, and an early Telugu grammar book, the Andhra-Kaumudi, speaks of the derivation of the word “Telugu” from “Telinga” and “Tri-linga,” denoting three “Shiva-lingas (icons of Shiva)” manifested at Kaleshwaram in Telangana, Srisailam in Rayalaseema and Draksharamam in Andhra—these three locations are also “shakti-peethas (seats of Goddess Shakti).” Telugu is replete with words from Sanskrit, and has retained the same alphabet (unlike Hindi which has dropped some of the letters). Sanskrit texts circulate in the Andhra region in the Telugu script, therefore, many Telugu people are familiar with Sanskrit religious texts and mantras even though they may not be able to read the Nagari script. This results in a population of Sanskrit pundits as well as Telugu-speaking laity with equal access to ritual literature. Those who have trained in veda schools become professional priests and are called upon to conduct such “samskaras (rites)” for the laity as a marriage or death ceremony. The laity also have their own “mantra-sadhana (mantra-practice)” including tantric mantras not overtly understood as tantric and extracts from vedic mantras. They tend to be followers of “gurus (spiritual teachers)” who, like the legendary rishis, are regarded seers.

An advantage of working with Telugu people was that I – a native Telugu speaker – did not have to translate concepts mentally as I conversed. Not that I felt conceptual distance in the location of my preliminary fieldwork, Pune, but not as many jokes and subtleties had whizzed about in Hindi, neither their nor my native language. In Andhra-Telangana, my communication challenges were after the fieldwork when I
was preparing transcripts and writing; that was when I would consider how to translate Telugu expressions as closely and accurately as possible into English. One or two conceptual points become important to note at this juncture. The specific verbs attached to mantra in Telugu indicate how people think about mantras. In English, it is more common to say “chant mantras,” and this indicates singing; in Telugu, we “do” (“chesenu”) or “put” (“vesenu”) mantras. When one person instructs another in a mantra, we do not say she “said” the mantra (“chepperu”), we say she “gave” the mantra (“iccheru”). Already, this indicates how a mantra is an entity, a thing, as well as an action, rather than a language to be spoken. Even when the verb “to read” is used, “chadavadamu” (and in Hindi, padana), it does not necessarily mean that the mantra has been read from a book or written source, for it may have been accessed from memory. In order to specify that a mantra was said aloud, we specify, “uccarinchenu,” or “I articulated it.” “Mantramu vinipincheru” means “s/he had me hear it” and this shows how the source of the mantra is not a composer or speaker, but an enabler.98 The central term of this research— “sadhana,” may be translated as “practice,” or “spiritual practice,” but that would not convey its connotations in Sanskrit and Telugu. “Sadhana”

98 Scholars have debated the politics of translating from colonized cultures into English. A.K.Ramanujan Interior Landscape : Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology (Bloomington: Indiana Uni Press, 1967), and Speaking of Siva (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973) discussed the conflicting allegiances of the translator, and noted that translation cannot carry over the culture as a whole, it is embedded in the poem. His effort was “to try and make a non-Tamil reader experience in English something of what a native experiences when he reads classical Tamil poems” (qtd. in Vinay Dharwadkar, “A.K.Ramanujan’s Theory and Practice of Translation,” in Post-colonial Translation : Theory and Practice, ed. Susan Bassnett-McGuire (London, UK : Routledge, 1998), 114-138. Critiquing Ramanujan’s 1973 translation of vacanas as orientalist in History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context: Siting Translation (Berkeley, Uni of California Press, 1992), Tejaswini Niranjana has urged translators to reconceptualise translation as a site for resistance and transformation. My own effort here is in-between—the necessity of communicating in English without disorienting readers (if you’ll excuse the pun), and concern for adequately appreciating the worlds of mantra practice.
is derived from the word “siddh (to achieve)” and carries the idea of earnest, hard work and of aspiring towards achievement in that work. In response to my question, “what is sadhana?,” Sivananda Puri replied, in Sanskrit, “sādhyate iti sadhānā”— sadhana is “that which is achieved.” The culmination of mantra-sadhana, is “siddhi” which means “power,” “mastery” or “achievement.”99 One imagines an athlete in training— no matter how many trainers she has, she has to train herself; every sprint helps build ability, and every performance calls for single-minded attention.

99 Gaining siddhi over a mantra means having the ability to harness its power.
2. Are there seers today?

Several months into researching the practice of mantras in Andhra-Telangana, among those with whom I became acquainted was Narendra Kapre, adept in Rigveda and Yajurveda. Visits to Kapre’s house in Hyderabad’s Padmarao Nagar involved wide-ranging discussions about topics past and present, from the legendary sage Dirghatamas to the current Indian Prime-Minister Narendra Modi. One such day, I argued whimsically with him: “If Vedas are “anadi-ananta (without beginning and end),” surely it ought to be possible to access them directly, even today?” Kapre stared back at me. I went on—“We say we now only have fragments of Vedas, the rest is “lupta (eroded)” or “supta (dormant),” but if that is so, it ought to be possible to discover? Can it happen even today?” Aaj bhi ho sakta hai? I added in Hindi, the language we had been conversing in along with English. I had asked the same question previously to a young vedic priest at Hyderabad’s Veda-Bhavan. He had replied, immediately and with certainty, “asambhav (impossible),” attributing it to the decadence of Kali-yuga.¹ So I was surprised when Kapre responded, in an authoritative tone, “it’s possible.” He then told me the story of Daivarata, who, in 1917, had a vision of Vedic mantras. He called Daivarata, “mahārṣi,” which is parsed as “mahā-rishi (great seer).”

Traditionally, the Indian culture has understood the term “rishi” literally. According to early Sanskrit grammar and etymology, objects take their names from a

¹ There are four yugas or eras in world history which mark a period of decline, and then repeat all over again. We are now in the fourth and most decadent, Kali-Yuga, not to be confused with Goddess Kali.
particular action which is the most important and most special to them. Thus, nouns can be derived from verbs, and “rishi” can be derived from “ṛṣ,” an obsolete form of the verb “dṛṣ,” or “to see.” According to Yaska’s Nirukta (2.11), “ṛṣīr.ḍarśanat”—it is vision that makes a seer. In Indian intellectual history, “darshana” also means a school of thought. Ancient Indian philosophies are classified into six darshanas. In daily life, “darshana” simply means “vision” or “seeing” and in the context of temples and deities, it refers to the mutual seeing between a devotee and deity. Many people close their eyes when they are directly in front of the deity—is this because the deity is seeing them, to aid mental attention in the absence or deprivation of optical vision, or because a mental vision begins where the optical vision leaves off? Scholar of visual and material culture David Morgan suggests that closing eyes in darshana may help “separate material and spiritual (optical and mental) vision. There is still a form of exchange, but one that crosses this bridge by virtue of sensory deprivation.” In a more heightened context such as that of soteriology or spiritual practice, “darshana” refers to extraordinary vision which may be of mantras, deities, information about past and future events, or in general the vision of objects, events and beings beyond the human range of perception.

This extraordinary vision is related to the idea of “shruti,” which literally means “what is heard,” connoting a revelation which can only be seen/heard by human beings, rather than composed by them. Vedas and tantras are both considered shruti in the Indian culture—CE Kulluka Bhatta wrote that revelation is two-fold, vedic and

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3 Email message to author, 29 May 2016.
tantric. If it is only seen/heard, who says or shows it? Veda is called “apaurusheya,” which means it is not by any “purusha (person).” In mimamsa, this is interpreted to rule out not only human, but also divine origin. Such an idea of authorlessness enables shruti to stay an invariant text, not open to revision. Therefore vedic mantras were and are taught orally, a system of “svara (tone)” helps ensure accurate transmission. Shruti is contrasted with “smrīti (what is remembered)” which are attributed to authors and include the Vedangas, itihāsa-purāna (historical epics), and various other shastras or doctrinal texts. Among these, it is the historical epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata that have a tradition of retellings. Where Ramayana and Mahabharata feature rishis, it is understood that these rishis are capable of receiving shruti.

Some scholars have regarded the proposal of shruti’s non-human origins a legend, or even a misconception. Frits Staal writes about Vedic shruti: “It nowhere says that the Veda is revealed or sruti, literally, “what is heard.” It is heard only in the sense that it is transmitted from father to son or from teacher to pupil.” Many scholars, from Karl Friedrich Geldner (1951-57), Louis Renou (1955) and T.G.Mainkar (1977) to more recently Yelle (2003), Patton (2005), and Jamison and Brereton (2014) refer to vedic hymns as “poems,” and to their speakers as “poets” – terms that are understood today in terms of aesthetics rather than of divine inspiration. The reason to translate “rishi” as “poet” may be traced back to the Vedic mantras themselves, which use ‘rishi (seer)’ and

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4 “Srutiś ca dvividhā vaidikāh tāntrikā ca” – Kulluka Bhatta in his commentary on the Mānavadharmaśastra, as qtd. by André Padoux in Vāc, 34.
5 Vedangas or ‘limbs’ of Veda are six: shiksha (phonetics), kalpa (ritual procedures), vyakarana (grammar), nirukta (etymology), chandas (prosody) and jyotish (astrology).
'kavi (poet)’ interchangeably. However, the idea of a poet in the vedic era is not a person who *composes* poetry, it is a person open to and seeking divine inspiration, and s/he may have become this way with earnest effort, or by going through adversity. Indicating such a shift, Jamison and Brereton do note in the introduction to their translation precisely how they mean the word “poet” — “The poet needed to be a master of many skills, but of all the skills he needed, the one that was most essential was knowledge.” In *Vision of the Vedic Poets*, Gonda writes that scholars often misunderstand terms because “probably as a rule unconsciously — founded on preconceived notions or suppositions anachronistically derived from modern conditions of life, our own Western traditions or agelong habits of thought.” He conducts an extensive philological survey of “*dhī*” to demonstrate that it connotes ‘vision’ in the Vedic samhitas, and that to ‘see’ was to ‘know.’

> [T]here was in those ancient times no hard and fast line between “religion” and “poetics”, between a “prophet”, a poet, a divine man, and a “philosopher.” [...] the man fulfilling it was to a considerable extent a tool of Power, emptied of himself and “filled with the god.”

Perhaps another reason to translate “rishi” as “poet” is that Rigvedic mantras do not portray rishis as sagacious people with superhuman abilities; instead, they portray them as hard-working people eager for inspiration. In RV 10.71 attributed to rishi Brihaspati and dedicated to Vac, who is sacred language or Speech, rishis have to work

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7 Ibid., 9. Whereas Gonda calls it “unconscious,” F.B.J Kuiper perceives a deliberate move on the part of western scholars to “secularize the Veda.” Kuiper’s essay is about verbal contests between Rigvedic poet-seers, and he specifically comments on Geldner’s use of the term “poet.” In fact, although the predominant and wider understanding within the Indian tradition is that rishis (seers) were visionaries, there are scholars within the tradition who thought the rishis craftsmen. “The Ancient Aryan Verbal Contest,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 4 (1960): 217-281.

for Vac’s favor, ‘sifting it as grain is sifted through a sieve’ (10.71.02) and by performing sacrifices (10.71.03). In many hymns, the rishi asks for inspiration, addressing deities Vac, Agni, Indra, Soma, Varuṇa, Mitra, and others. The Gayatri mantra (RV 3.62.10) also comes across as the individual rishi’s voice speaking on behalf of a collective, asking solar deity Savitar for ‘dhi (inspiration / intelligence).’ While inspiration is sought, it is not controlled by the rishi. Vac is compared to a woman who bestows favors, and she is whimsical: ‘those who see and hear Vac do not always perceive her, but to another she ‘unfolds’ (i.e., reveals).

When we consider the circumstances which make a rishi in Rigvedic hymns, we find adversity. Shunahshepa, a seer of the first mandala of the Rigveda, was tied to the sacrificial stake or post (yūpa). When, on the recommendation of the seer Vishvamitra, Shunahshepa utters mantras for Vedic deities, his ties then fall off and he is set free. Another seer is Kavasha Ailusa, the seer of the Akṣa Sukta mantra called the gambler’s hymn. Ailusa was a gambler and left by other seers to die in the desert. When he utters mantras, the river Sarasvati swells up to flow beside him. In these two cases, situations of risk and danger bring out the seer in an ordinary person. If the idea of a rishi/seer is allowed to include the concept of hard work – as also conveyed by the term “sadhana” – we can stay within the connotation of extraordinary vision (rather than poetic composition). When I asked Kapre if it was possible to have a vision of Vedic mantras today, he understood that I meant ‘receive’ rather than compose and in his narrative, emphasized the effort involved.
Scholarship estimates that Vedas were composed in different parts of what is now North India and Pakistan, between ca. 1500 and ca. 500 BCE. Some scholars highlight discontinuity—in *Destiny of the Veda*, Louis Renou traces the history of Indian religious doctrines and practices to argue how Veda is an eroded tradition, and that deference to Vedic authority is not matched by adherence to its content. Other scholars see continuities—Brian K. Smith repositions Veda as the Vedism in modern Hinduism, defining Hinduism as “the religion of those humans who create, perpetuate and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda.” Even though oral transmission has preserved Veda across the centuries, it appears that the extant Veda is only a miniscule portion of what was once known. Each of the Vedas has branches or recensions called “shakhas” and different shakhas were transmitted by different schools or families. There are thirteen branches known today; across the centuries, different literatures refer to many more branches—this was the allusion in my question to Kapre. If some of the Veda is lost, might it not be possible to find?

Over the last several months, I had met numerous vedic and tantric practitioners. Time and again, I was told that mantras are guaranteed to be efficacious because they

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12 Today, there are nine branches of the Veda (two of Rigveda, three of Samaveda, six of Yajurveda and two of Atharvaveda). The popular view on-ground among vedic ritualists is that there were originally 1,131 branches—this is based on a mention in 10th CE Bhagavata Purana’s verse 12.3. R.V.S.S Avadhanulu, *Science and Technology in Vedas and Sastras* (Hyderabad: Shri Veda Bharati, 2007), 41. Jan Gonda notes that we lack precise information on the branches (śākhās) in *Vedic Literature: Śaṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 31.
are not composed by human beings and have been directly seen and heard by rishis, or
given to rishis by deities. The image that comes to mind upon hearing the word “rishi”
is a man with knotted hair and pointed beard, sitting cross-legged under a tree and
teaching young, tufted brahmin boy-students in Sanskrit. Imagery of rishis standing
tends to be of two kinds—one hand facing up and out to bless, or an arm raised with a
finger pointing upwards as though to pronounce a curse, and this image is perpetrated
by media depictions of rishis in epic legends. Anecdotes I heard about rishis who saw
mantras and were visited by deities updated that image, transported the idea of a rishi
into modern clothing.

2.1 Maharishi Daivarata

Twenty five year old Daivarata was the disciple of Vasishtha Ganapati Muni
(1878-1936) who was the disciple of the seer Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) of
Thiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, a state neighboring Andhra. Ganapati Muni and
Daivarata would sit down to meditate on a daily basis, and Daivarata would go into
“samadhi (deep meditation)” for hours. One day in 1917, Ganapati Muni heard
Daivarata muttering when in samadhi. He observed Daivarata the next day too, and
when he realized that the utterances were in vedic meters, he began to transcribe them.
The process took three hours daily over sixteen days, and fifty “suktas (hymns)” with
448 mantras were documented in their entirety. The verses were in four different vedic
meters of Gayatri, Anushtubh, Trishtubh and Jagati, invoked forty-two vedic deities of
which Sarasvati, identified with the Goddess of speech, Vac, was predominant—none of
the mantras were traceable to any known vedic source. These are the details of the event
as narrated in Chandodarśana, a 1968 publication authored by Ganapati Muni and given
to me as a pdf file by Kapre. The book included the Daivarata’s verses and an introduction and commentary called Vāsiṣṭha-anvayabhāṣya by Ganapati Muni in Sanskrit with an English translation. Ganapati Muni emphasizes Daivarata’s “tapasya (intense spiritual practices),” which is in consonance with descriptions in vedic hymns. He describes how he transcribed the mantras:

Some of the mantras which came out of Daivarata’s lips could not be taken down on account of the speed with which they came; some were not distinct enough; some of the Mantras were only half or quarter. All such Mantras have been discarded. Only those Mantras which were complete, clearly audible, and which could be taken down in full have been compiled and commentary has been written by me for their elucidation. Similarly, the Suktas and Mantras and Anuvakas [sections] have been arranged in logical order according to Deities involved. And commentary written accordingly.13

Researching this story, I found that the seer’s fame had spread to the Sanskrit academy across India, producing a 1996 doctoral thesis by G.N.Bhat, followed by a seminar in Sirsi, North Karnataka, in 1997. The papers at this seminar, later anthologized, include critical appraisals of the Chandodarśana mantras vis-à-vis its conceptual and linguistic fit with the Rigveda.14 In another anthology, G.U.Thite studies the vedisms in Chandodarśana.15 Thite examines accents, refrains, consonants, nominal declensions, particles and indeclinables and concludes that Chandodarśana “has all the appearance of a Rigvedic Mandala [chapter].”16 Thite also notes such negative points as the absence of such typical Vedic figures as Vritra, Varuna or Ashvins and even Soma, leading him to the conclusion that “Chandodarśana is Vedic but not sufficiently

13 Ibid., vii.
16 Ibid., 43.
archaic.” This does not mean that he discounts its Vedic connections, and his concluding paragraph is surprising from a scholar reputed for skepticism:

I only hope that future history will not only accept Chandodarśana as Veda but will also associate it with some new ritual. The future generations are likely to learn this text by heart in its Samhitā-pāṭha and even with the other Vikṛtis [variations] like Krama, Jaṭā and Ghana etc. The future Mimāṃsakas [veda interpreters], too, will try to establish the apauruṣyatva [authorlessness] of this text and its authoritativeness.” 17

Thite mentions both ritual application and recitation (“svādhyāya,” cf.1.1); therefore, I construe his “hope” with reference to ritual application not as a comment about mantra’s primary role in rituals but as an indicator of Thite’s lifelong scholarship in rituals and his thesis that Vedic rituals do and will survive. 18

Kapre gave me extra-textual information including an account of how India’s first President, Dr Rajendra Prasad, had accidentally run into Daivarata’s notes in New Delhi, and was so impressed by the scholarship evident in the fragments that he visited Gokarna and gradually became Daivarata’s supporter and follower. Kapre had heard about this from a scholar-friend in Gokarna. The same friend had also told him about a campaign in progress to include the Daivarata mantras in the Vedic corpus. His friend’s view was that it should be added in the Atharvaveda mantras. Speaking in Hindi, the language in which he was more comfortable than Telugu, Kapre said:

There’s a debate about that. But to what shakha [branch] can these mantras be added? Everyone wants to keep their own shakha. Like the Muslims say, it is "final," not a sentence can be added or subtracted. Until now, it is not accepted by

17 Ibid., 43
the scholar community. *Magar dheerey havaa ban rahee hai* [But there are winds of change].

An unusual aspect of this phenomenon is that the rishi here is the young disciple Daivarata and it is his guru, Ganapati Muni, who takes on the role of transcribing, commentary and promotion. Three aspects were emphasized in Ganapati Muni’s introduction and commentary (in English and Sanskrit) as well as Kapre’s narrative—a special talent, the credibility of those who endorsed the seer, and earnest effort. The commentary by Ganapati Muni includes a chart of Daivarata’s horoscope, following a convention of displaying astrological predictions of greatness. As a respected scholar and practitioner well-known for having promoted Ramana Maharshi, Ganapati Muni’s endorsement of Daivarata already carries credibility; Dr Rajendra Prasad is an additional and weighty testimonial. The wheels of ideology are also at work in the transmission of this narrative because Daivarata is pitched as modern evidence for the timelessness of Vedic revelation. Daivarata went on to become a scholar of some repute, and his scholarship followed the theme of his visionary experience—*Vedarthakalpalata* (in Sanskrit) is an exposition of the Gayatri mantra, and *Vaksudha* (also in Sanskrit) is about the process of emanation of speech. Another book in Sanskrit, *Yogasudha* is based on his experience in the practice of yoga. A combination of scholarship and practice shaped his reputation.

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19 Kapre understood English and Telugu, and his native language was Marathi, from the state adjacent to Andhra-Telangana. When there was no other audience, my conversations with Kapre were in Hindi, a language he was more comfortable in compared to Telugu. The moment there was a visitor, usually a pundit (ritual priest), he would switch to Sanskrit which would become the common language for everyone present.

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When Kapre emphasized Daivarata’s hard work, he quoted from the Mahabharata—“Yugānte antarhitān vedān setihāsān mahaṛṣayāh tapāśa lebhire…” he repeated, “lebhire tapāśa.” Translated from the Sanskrit, this quote means: “At the end of the yuga (era), the rishis brought back Vedas and Epics through their penance.” The phrase Kapre repeated (“lebhire tapāśa”) is significant—i.e., it was by doing penance that the rishis had attained mantras. The Sanskrit word “lebhire” comes from the root “labh,” which means “to obtain,” “to get,” “arrive at,” or “achieve.” Mantras received in this form are the goal-posts achieved after an arduous journey, and they are also like a key that must be obtained to open yet another secret door. Kapre’s citation helps place the new event within the convention of “sadhana (spiritual effort)” which is all about hard work, and achievement. What was more pertinent to my research, though, was the methodology, or know-how of this event.

Nowhere in Ganapati Muni’s report is there any information about Daivarata’s process of darshana or seeing. What he documented had been muttered by Daivarata when in meditation; and yet, the assumption is that Daivarata had a darshana of mantras. Did Daivarata literally see the mantras, as visuals, images, in script, and if so, which script? Or, did he hear them, or also hear them—after all, Veda is called “shruti,” “that which is heard,” perhaps a reference to the oral pedagogical tradition, perhaps to the mode of reception by a seer. Ganapati Muni coins such words as “supersight” and “super-sensual” when describing how Daivarata had the mantra-darshana. “Super” implies an ability beyond that which is normally possible for a human being. Internal

21 This is verse 7660 of the Mahabharata’s Shantiparvan.
evidence in Daivarata’s mantras give us a clue to an elaborate sensory engagement in
the vision. In Chandodarśana II-11.1-9, Vac (Speech) pairs with “śrotra (hearing),” “tvak (touch),” “cakṣus (sight),” “rasanā (taste)” via “jihvā (tongue),” “nāsa (smell),” and “prāṇa (life-force).” The verse describes the “mithunam (pairing)” between Daivarata and Goddess Vac— “mithunam” is a word generally used to refer to sexual pairing, suggesting a comprehensive collaboration, a union between Daivarata and Vac that produces the self-referring mantra.

Why, then, is the special intelligence, intuition, inspiration or ability of mantra-perception usually associated with hearing and seeing, and rarely, with smell or touch? Eyes and ears are primary senses with which to perceive speech and writing, and mantras are also spoken and written, which could give rise to the conflation, or confusion in the use of criteria (associated with language) in scholarship about mantras. Within the tradition of mantra practice, verbs related to mantras very seldom pertain to with language. Practitioners initiated into a mantra “receive” a mantra, the guru who gives initiation “gives” a mantra, and the practitioner “does” a mantra. These are also the cues by which we understand that mantras are different from language. A parallel to this usage may be observed with verbs which refer to seeing— one asks a deity to “give” darshana, and one “takes” the darshana of a deity, for it is treated as a gift or capacity, rather than as an activity. Also, darshana is a special experience and an event; therefore, one may ask another if darshana is “finished” or if one “had a good darshana”? All of these imply that while darshana may be about seeing, it is not really about visual aspects.

None of the scholars evaluating the mantras from Daivarata discuss aesthetics— Daivarata is not regarded a poet-genius, but a receiver of mantras. Daivarata was well

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within the conception of the Vedas as revealed texts. He died in 1975; his life, writings and methodology a potential treasure for future study.

2.2 Chandole Sastry

The next seer I heard about is well-known in Andhra-Telangana for his friendship with the Goddess—the story goes that the Goddess frequented his home in her girl-child form of “Balā.” In his day, Tadepalle Raghava Narayana Sastry (1886-1990) came to be called by the name of his village—“Chandole Sastry”; today, it is the village that is known after his legendary devotion and “mantra-shakti (extraordinary powers from mantras).”

Chandole (or Chanduvole) is a one-main-street village south of Guntur, an hour by road towards Repella, and it was easy to find the Chandole Sastry family home. The seer’s home was traditional—a dirt yard in the front with two large Peepal and Neem trees nearly a hundred years old, a pump by the pathway so that visitors may wash their feet before they entered the home, a covered portico with an easy chair for the elder in the family beside a built-in concrete bench on the side for visitors. Chandole Sastry’s father Tadepalle Venkatappaiah Sastry started a veda school on the premises and which continues to this day, but the numbers have dropped from a hundred students during his lifetime to ten students today.22 I was accompanied on this visit by Rani Siva Sankar Sarma, son of late vedic ritualist Rani Appaji Sastry and author of The Last Brahmin. Rani was interested in this visit for his own research on Hinduism as “sanatana-dharma

22 Chandole Sastry’s grandson told me that there are over 2,000 Veda-trained men in the Guntur district, but no one was willing to give them their daughter’s hand in marriage. This had been detrimental to enrolment. Young women, he said, preferred modern young men without the half-shaven haircut of a pundit.
(ancient dharma).” As we waited for Chandole Sastry’s octogenarian son, Tadepalle Lakshmidhara Somayajulu, we spoke with his grandson Tadepalle Balakrishna Sarma.

The Tadepalles spoke in a dialect of Telugu that I knew very well, as my mother’s family was from Vijayawada. The moment I introduced myself, I was asked my last name and soon, there were no formalities. They knew some of my relatives (whom I did not know) and they knew Rani’s father. We could have been new to the village, paying our respects, somewhat helpless as the man with the story held us captive. Over the next hour, Sarma regaled us with stories about his seer-grandfather. Chandole Sastry was initiated in the Bala mantra at the age of five (in 1891) when he had his “aksharabhyasam (initiation in writing).” He did japa steadily, and when he was sixteen and Goddess Bala Tripurasundari began to respond to him. Once, during the Dussehra festival, they paid a bangle-seller for outfitting seven girls. The seller protested, insisting that there had been eight girls. A lucky man! the bangle-seller, he got to see (Goddess) Bala! There was a spot in the nearby forest where Sastry went for meditation. One day, when he came out of samadhi, it was late and dark. Suddenly, he saw Bala and asked her, “what are you doing in this darkness?” She replied, “aren’t you sitting in the dark too?” He returned home with the little Goddess Bala holding his little finger. Someone came to him once for help about a sick child, he wrote a recommendation letter on a palm-leaf with a “ghantam (stylus)” and told them to deliver it to Tenali Ganganamma (a village goddess, and a form of Shakti) and to say it was sent by him. He was “lokatitam (beyond the worldly)” and strict about his “anushtanas (ritual routines).” If he had fever, he would tell the jvara devata [fever-deity] to go over to the stick, then the stick would tremble. After he finished his karmas
he would tell the fever-deity, okay come’ on come back, and she / it (the fever) would return to him. He never took medicines. The religious pontiff Kanchi Shankaracharya visited to see him and called him a yogi who was really a sanyasi (renunciant) even though he was technically a householder. Chandole Sastry took samadhi (i.e., deceased) on 10- December, 1990. He was aware of this approaching date and did seven days of “prayopavesham (resolving to die through fasting),” he informed people about it in advance, and asked to be cremated rather than buried. When the cremation happened, the fire took the shape of Goddess in “virasana (a sitting yoga posture)” and went up, the rest of the remains were instantly ashen, without a single ember burning. This phenomenon had been photographed and published in the journal Andhraprabha, and Sarma made a point about the date of the issue: 8- Sep 1991.

Lakshmidhara Somayajulu had conducted a “somayagam (somavedic fire sacrifice)” in 1990, and did not hide his orthodoxy. He railed about Brahmin pundits who went overseas, lay Brahmins who did not do “sandhyavandanam (Gayatri mantra ritual)” and spoke about his father who had stood his Brahmin ground:

They offered two crore dollars, asked you to come to America. Father said, “No, my brahmanatvam [brahmin-ness] will go away, what is the use of two crore dollars, to burn! You’re trying to tempt me. Why two crores, you don’t need to give me even two paise.” So what Ammavaru [Mother Goddess] does in the middle [i.e., meanwhile], will he be greedy or not?

Somayajulu told us how his father studied Veda and Vedangas from his father, “tarka (logic)” and “vyakarana (grammar)” from other scholars, but also, he studied mantra-tantra-shastra from a Seetharama Sastry of Podili.

Chandole Sastry’s grandson, Sarma, was also a mantra-practitioner; he had received mantra from his grandfather, and did daily japa of the “shodasi,” the 16-syllable mantra of the Sri-Vidya tradition. He spoke about his grandfather’s practice:
Nobody knows about this peetham [seat]. It has been gudam [quiet/secret]. One hundred and fifty years ago Ammaśūru [Mother Goddess] asked and then came, she said “I will come to your house.” Grandfather said no-no-no. He did Ajapa-Gayatri (mantra). All deities come to that, and then the manasika [mental] puja happens and it’s done. He said to her, “don’t come, if you do, how will I do sakala-upasana [worship of all the deities]?

“Manasika” puja is done internally, in the mind, and “sakala” puja meant he was doing the puja to all the deities. Rani asked, “what is Ajapa Gayatri?” Sarma said, it is not done aloud, externally, done internally, in the chakras,” and he listed the sequence of chakras. Sarma explained that Veda is studied so that one gets to know the deities within oneself— “There are Shaktis, adhishtana devatas [established deities], it is to know them that there is Veda. When this is not known, they say in the Veda, that there is no use studying the Vedas that are in the books, the baita-veda [external veda].”

SARMA: You know that when they do the brahma-yajna and pitra-yajna [rituals honoring ancestors] they say “ṛco-aksare.” One man, a Veda Pundit, asked grandfather to say the meaning of “ṛco-aksare-paramevyaman.” Grandfather was silent. He (the man) asked, have you read commentaries, what are you thinking about? Grandfather said, I am thinking why you asked this question. Well, (the man asked) at least, have you figured that out? (Grandfather said) It doesn’t look like it will be figured/crossed for another two or three births. What it means is this: every person has Vedas. They are in the heart it is in the “daharakasham” [etheric space within the heart region]. The subtle akasham [ether] is there. There are deities, they are following this Veda. To know those deities we study the Veda.

“Daharakasha” is the tiniest space in which akasha is present, and it refers to the space within the heart and coincides with the location of the anatomical heart. Rani and I both spoke together in excitement.

RANI: They are in the daharakasham? Heart?

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23 Ākāśa, usually translated as “ether” is an element or substance that pervades the universe and is the vehicle or medium for life and sound. It is one of the five elements which are earth, air, fire, water and ether.
MANI: When there is no gain by just studying…?

SARMA: There is daharakasham, akasham, the deities follow the Veda which is there. The person who studies the veda and knows the devatas, samāsate … brahmamayam avutādu [he becomes full of brahma].

RANI: What is the mantra you were quoting?

SARMA: “Satam samāsate,” that’s how it ends. Veda itself tells us. The person who comes to know the deities, he becomes brahmamayam. Others who read it externally there is really no use of that. No one knows this meaning. If he (grandfather) knows, it is because he is Shankara. Avatara [incarnation] of Mother Goddess. Ardhanarishvara [Shiva] Shivalingam [Shiva’s iconic form].

MANI: Who gave him initiation?

SARMA: Mother Goddess. Even in nitya-puja vidhanas [daily ritual procedures] he created some new ones. No one in the outside world knows about it.

The hymn Sarma quoted was from Rigveda (1.164.39) and Shvetashvatara Upanishad (4.8): ṛco aṅkare pare vyomān yasmin devā adhi viśve niṣeduh/Yas tanna veda kim ṛcā karisyati ya it tad vidus te ime samāsate. Briefly, this verse notes that for the person who does not know akshara (syllable) in the highest vyomān (heart-space) in whom all the deities are supported/established, the Veda is of no use. Patrick Olivelle translates:

The syllable amidst the Rg, the syllable upon which all the gods are seated in the highest heaven – when a man does not know it, what will he do with a Rg. Seated here together are people who do know it!24

Interpretations of the terms “akshara” and “vyomān” are wide-ranging—Olivelle translates “akshara” as syllable, while Vinoba Bhave (1895-1992) translates it as the Aum-mantra. This hymn emphasizes experience, and it is not surprising that it is more

A commentary on this hymn by Vinoba Bhave presents a response to this hymn. Bhave comments:

Do not carry the burden of any Book – so say the Vedas themselves. The Brahman (the Absolute) alone is the original source of all the Vedas. The Vedic riks (hymns of Rig-veda) are not meant to be parroted. The Vedas exhort us to give up sectarianism and realize the Brahman. All the riks in the Veda, i.e., the Vedic mantras, are inherent in the sacred syllable or one Word— Akshara (a + kshara =not perishable), that is, the Imperishable, is the name of the Supreme Being who is hiding in the innermost recesses of the heart “What can one do with the Rig-Veda if one does not know that great Akshara on which the whole edifice of the Vedic riks stands?” — this is what the mantra means. That Akshara is AUM. […] On its realisation, the need for the Vedas naturally ceases.

Vinoba Bhave sets up an opposition between “Book” and “Brahman”— the mantras of the Veda come from the mantra “Aum” and thus, become futile if one does not “know” Aum and “realize” Brahman. In early Indian theory (cf. 1.1.1), the Aum-mantra gives rise to the world, and to Vedas. In the rest of the commentary, Vinoba Bhave discusses the importance of realizing this mantra. Citing the same hymn as Vinoba Bhave, Sarma explained his grandfather’s perspective as experiential against a context of Vedic priests who simply did “external” chanting. Sarma’s response to my question about initiation referred to Sastry’s direct communication with Shakti, which made him an authority for unprecedented rituals. I saw his epithets as hyperboles representing his high regard for his grandfather, but understood his import— it was because Chandole Sastry had experienced, actualized and internalized the Veda that his practice was realized in Sri-Vidya Goddess tradition. Sarma’s comment also informed another line of questioning.

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that had begun to develop in my fieldwork, whether mantra-practitioners thought
deities and mantras were inside, or outside.

Sarma also spoke of a new “kalpa (ritual liturgy and procedure)” authorized by
his seer grandfather around the Sanskrit syllabary.

Even in daily puja liturgies, he created some new ones. No one in the outside
world knows about it. We know about it. In Dusshera they do Sarasvati puja.
From akāra to kṣākāra, varnamala deities. There are some Brahmin aksharas, some
kṣatriya aksharas, some Vaishya aksharas, some Shudra aksharas. Until anī aha
and kā kha Brahmin aksharas. Rajulu [Kshatriya] aksharas are ta tha ṭa ṭha pa pha
ma. Then Vaishyas, Shudras. Akāra rupāya namaha. He (grandfather) created a
kalpa. Every word we speak is a vṝṇamatṛ deity. Which is why they say, “speak
in a sweet way.” If you waste Vac you will be born as a dumb person in the next
birth. And Sarasvati gets angry, (thinks) he is wasting Vac, in his next life should
not give him any Vac.

The mantras described by Sarma seem similar to the invocation to every letter of the
alphabet in the Akshamalika Upanishad. This was a novel concept that the letters of the
alphabet could be divided into types just like people. Would japa of particular letters
cultivate particular tendencies? It seemed like there was a basic confusion between the
two meanings of a word. Yet, how does one determine if this is not a new ‘theory’ for
future research? When asked, Sarma said there was no manuscript for this kalpa. But the
seer had taught it orally and it became a tradition at the annual Dussehra puja.

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The idea that anyone has extraordinary vision seems mystical, and scholars have
found ideological motives in both demystification and re-mystification of rishis. In
“Poets and Fishes : Modern Indian Interpretations of the Vedic Rishi,” Patton discusses
the work of modern Indian scholars of the early 20th century including C.Kunhan Raja,
T.G.Mainkar and Ram Gopal to let us see how they reclaim the mystical image of a rishi;
she suggests that this is a response to western demystification, and a precursor to a
postcolonial movement, and places it within the nationalist mood of their times. This fieldwork has shown how the idea of the rishi is not only situated in an ancient past; it is in the recent past and in the present. Andhra has many saints and sages from the last century and the names in conversations with informants included Mouna Swami (1868-1943), Tandur Abdul Karim Shah Vali (1870-1947), Malayala Swami (1885-1962), and Jillelamudi Amma (1923-1985) who was also the guru of one of my main informant-seers. Daivarata Maharishi and Chandole Sastry were two recent seers specifically related to mantras—Maharishi Daivarata discovered hitherto unknown mantras, and Chandole Sastry was familiar with Goddess Bala. Contemporary mantra practitioners hear these legends from the recent past. They may know someone who knows someone who was a contemporary of these seers and was eye-witness to a miracle, and they may also have encountered seers themselves. Daivarata’s publications are read by practitioners, and Chandole Sastry’s son has written books about his father. New mantras are attributed to both seers and they are new material for future scholars. After these two cases from the 20th century, finding seers among contemporary mantra-practitioners did not feel like such an anachronism.
3. Embodiment at Devipuram

This chapter explores the poetics of mantra-practice of people associated with the Goddess-site of Devipuram. The theme here is embodiment— the Goddess is embodied in the location, specific rituals initiate the process by which mantras and deities are embodied in the practitioner, and conversations illustrate how boundaries between the practitioner and deity seem erased. Practitioners featured in this chapter narrate how they became deeply involved with the Goddess and mantra-practice, and describe their experiences. These descriptions are also the material which contain information about the poetics of practice and experience. A ritualist describes how imagination plays a role in opening the possibility of visionary experience; an architect shares intricacies about his methodology of mantra-practice; a healer discusses the distinction between imagination and vision, and how he prepares to receive new mantras from the Goddess to help people; and the guru of this community, AmritanandaNatha Saraswati (1934-2015) – in one of his last interviews – responds to questions about the nature of mantras. These discussions with practitioners contribute to one of the key concerns of this research about how visionary experience creates authoritative sources, and in turn, shapes tradition.

3.1 The thousand-eyed Goddess

If you are a passerby in the sky and look down at the Sahasrakshi Meru temple in Devipuram, you would think it a diagram— interlocking triangles encircled by pink
petals and an outer square with four openings.¹ Called “Sri-yantra” or “Sri-chakra,” this diagram is an “amurti (aniconic)” form of Shakti in the Sri-vidya tradition; this means that that it is not a representation, it is Shakti herself. Approaching the temple from the ground, you climb three levels to go to the inner sanctum of Goddess Lalita. Different flights of stairs for entry and exit ensure that visitors also circumambulate the temple. The temple architecture imitates the three-dimensional pyramidal version of the Sri-chakra called a “meru,” which means “mountain” in Sanskrit. At the center of the Sahasrakshi temple is Goddess Lalita, comparable with the “bindu (dot)” at the centre of the Sri-chakra which manifests phonic energy in Shaktism (cf. 1.1.1). The ground level of this temple is dedicated to Shiva and features a Shivalingam (Shiva’s aniconic form) — viewed from above, this is reminiscent of the positions of these two deities relative to each other in popular iconography.²

“Sahasrakshi,” which is a descriptive name of Goddess Lalita, means “thousand-eyed.” Once I visit Sahasrakshi, Her eyes are on me for the rest of the time that I stay at Devipuram—whether I am at the Kamakhya temple, the Shiva temple, at the “yajna-shala (room for fire-sacrifices),” taking a walk on the grounds or even inside my room. Not a tally of the number of eyes of the Goddess, “thousand” is figurative and connotes that the Goddess is omnivoyant, which also connotes omniscience. Surrounding

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¹ The general meaning of a yantra is any instrument or weapon; in tantra, a yantra refers to a mystical diagram that possesses powers which can be harnessed by a worshipper. A ‘chakra’ which literally means ‘wheel,’ is also an enclosed shape or form, not necessarily circular, within which a ritual activity occurs. ² Shakti is typically depicted standing upon (the prone corpse of) Shiva. The Devi Bhagavata Purana narrates the story of Kali (i.e., Shakti) who continues to be in a rage after killing demon Raktabija. When Shiva approaches Her, she steps upon him in her continued rage. Another oft-cited explanation for the iconography is that Shiva is ‘shava (corpse)’ without Shakti, for Shakti is the animating power of Shiva.
Goddess Lalita in the temple-yantra are other goddesses called Khadgamalas. They are the deities named in the Khadgamala stotram or mantra and may be individually worshipped. In Devipuram, “puram” means place, abode, or even city; I soon discover, place is also “body.”

![Figure 1: Sahasrakshi Meru temple, Devipuram](image)

The architecture of a typical Hindu temple borrows concepts from the human form. Bharne and Krusche point out how a temple layout follows the concept of the seven “chakras (energy centers)” of the human body, with the deity consecrated at the heart-chakra. Also, “words describing parts of the temple are literal derivations of human body parts”— the temple tower is called “shikhara (head)” and the inner

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3 Photograph by Devi Bhakta, public domain.
5 Bharne and Krusche, *Hindu Temple*, 47-60, and 93.
sanctum, the “garbha-griha (womb-place).” Further, Indian architectural sources of vastu-shastra use for a blueprint, the form of a particular legendary male figure called the Vastu-Purusha. Discussing the concept, Bettina Bäumer connects the Vastu-Purusha with the vedic Purusha, a cosmic Man mentioned in the Vedas whose sacrifice and dismemberment generates the universe. Baumer cites from the 12- CE Ajitāgama about how the Vastu-Purusha is taken hold of collectively by the gods and thrown” all at once on to the surface of the earth.” Thus, in Vastu-shastra, dwellings are carefully constructed as to not “hurt” the vital joints of this Man. Baumer also finds that temple spaces enact a male-female relationship: “The temple symbolically represents, and makes possible spatially the meeting or union between Purusha and Prakriti which symbolically corresponds to the male-female relationship.” The Sahasrakshi temple breaks this format. Modeled after a Sri-yantra rather than a human figure, the Sahasrakshi temple is as if mapped on the body of the cosmic Woman.

3.2 The man behind Devipuram

The visionary behind Devipuram is a nuclear scientist called Prahlada Sastry who was renamed AmritanandaNatha Saraswati after initiation into the Shakta practice

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6 ibid., 40.
8 A Sanskrit text of Shaiva-siddhanta which includes information on the architecture of a Shiva temple.
9 Baumer, “Puruṣa,” 37.
10 Ibid, 37. Purusha-Prakriti are a dyad in Sankhya school of thought, where Purusha is consciousness or “self,” and Prakriti is matter, or nature. The vedic fire sacrifice re-enacts the sacrifice of a male archetypal figure, the vedic altar called ‘maha-vedi’ is thought to follow a woman’s figure with broad hips and narrow shoulders— J.C.Heesterman links this with ‘earth-goddess’ in The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 92.
of Srividya. In his memoir, Amritananda writes that at the age of seven, he “used to see divine figures like Krishna, Ganapathy, Hanuman and Saraswati […] in the patterns of leaves of trees.” When he was 11 years old, he had his “first spiritual experience” which he later surmises as a “Jada Samadhi,” and which he explains as that “wherein body consciousness is absent and any sense of “I and mine” is also lost when awake.” Over the years, he heard “humming sounds” and “300 Hz sounds” within himself, which motivated him to meditate.

After an M.Sc and a PhD in Nuclear Physics, Amritananda worked at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) for 25 years. He writes about himself as a questioning person with an empirical approach: “why should I believe what I don’t experience? God is not verifiable!” As he meditated, he also started to have extraordinary experiences and visions including one of Sanskrit mantras:

The next night I had felt as if a bomb was placed in my heart and I exploded into bits and pieces, thrown off to ends of galaxies. I saw a blank screen on which about 10 sanskrit stanzas were written. Before I could read the first half of a line, it vanished. I remembered that: it was “Isavasyam idam sarvam”.

11 Renaming marks a transition from one phase of life to another; in religious orders and spiritual practice, it marks a life-long commitment to the order or/and practice. Srividya practitioners engage with Shakti in Her particular form as Goddess Lalita Tripurasundari, with Her fifteen-syllabled mantra and Sri-yantra. Prahlada Sastry and his wife Annapurna trained in Srividya with B.S. Krishna Murthy in Mumbai, and were initiated (and renamed) after a yajna in Kollur, Karnataka. Devipuram official website, under “Srividya,” http://www.devipuram.com/about-devipuram accessed 1 April, 2015.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., “2 Balaji temple 1979.”

15 Ibid., “3 Explosion 1979.”
The line cited by Amritananda is the first verse from the Ishavasya Upanishad which states that all of the world is the clothing of Isha. In Sanskrit, “Isha” means “controller,” and is understood as referring to an omnipotent god. The same year, Amritananda had what reads like the narrative of a typical Kundalini awakening, a sensation that began at the base of his spine and moved up along his spinal column to his neck and upwards like a “volcano.” Alarmed, he turned to Goddess Sarasvati with a prayer, and writes about his thoughts at the time—“I realized then that it is most important to seek divine power to help in crisis.” It is after this that the story of Devipuram begins.

After a vision in which Goddess Bala instructs him to build a home for her, Amritananda performed a 16-day Devi-yajna (a large-scale ritual for the Goddess), and received three acres of land as a gift. By road, half-hour from the train-station of small-town Anakapalle, or forty-five minutes from the sizeable port-town of Visakhapatnam, this land is slated to become an international hub of Amritananda’s followers. Arriving here in February 2015, I found it thirty kilometers too close to the coastline of Andhra which was devastated by the Hudhud cyclone in October 2014. Fallen trees, damaged walls and broken-limbed sculptures are scattered over the property as reconstruction is ongoing four months later.

Amritananda describes the conception and construction of Devipuram like a collaborative project with goddesses. In the 1981 entry of his memoir, he writes about Goddess Kamakhya:

16 In yoga, the soteriological process is described as an awakening of the serpent-shaped kundalini from the muladharachakra at the base of the spine to the sahasrara chakra at the crown.
It was 12 noon. I heard the sound of anklets. I opened my eyes and saw a huge ball of light in front of me. It condensed into a female figure, her body made of lightnings, bedecked in bridal attire, who spoke thus to me. “Will you do puja to me? I am Kamakhya.”

Goddess Kamakhya told him to build the Sahasrakshi temple “like a pyramid, with all attendant deities, the main icon being Lalita on top of Siva creating new worlds of higher harmonies.” Each of the Khadgamala deities was seen by Amritananda in meditation, and briefed to a sculptor:

Then meditation on each deity of Khadga Mala, seeing Her form, posture and weapons, sitting with the sculptor and creating a beautiful female form, finishing the structure; all of these activities took 7 years.

At some stage in the process, goddess Hladini took over. “Hlād” means “joy” in Sanskrit, and is also the verbal root of Amritananda’s civilian name, Prahlada—no coincidence.

Bharne and Krusche describe the key players in the construction of a temple—the sthapaka (priest), the sthapati (master-builder) and shilpi (sculptor), all of whom rely on “shastras for guidelines.” Shastras are canonical treatises that have scriptural status; they are understood as revelatory material or as the objective wisdom of worthy ancients that holds true. In Devipuram, Amritananda plays all these roles, and he takes the place of “shastra (doctrinal authority)”—even the Khadgamala deities had to be seen by him before they could be sculpted.

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18 Ibid., “8 Kamakhya 1981.”
19 Ibid.
22 A humorous anecdote circulating at the Devipuram ashram was about a visitor who told AmritanandaNatha that his mantras and ritual procedures were not as per the shastras. AmritanandaNatha replied, “I don’t follow shastras, I make them.”
Two hundred meters from the Sahasrakshi temple and up a small hillock is the Kamakhya pitham where the story of Devipuram began. Like the well-known Kamakhya temple in Assam, the deity here is a consecrated “yoni.” A Sanskrit term for the shakti or generative center within everyone, both male and female, a yoni is represented as the image of a vagina. In 1983 after a Devi-yajna, Amritananda meditated at the Kamakhya. His experience is described in the official Devipuram literature:

One day, while in meditation he [Amritananda] experienced himself lying on the Peetam [pitha], while four others were performing a homa with the flames emanating from his body. And during purnahuthi [final offering] he felt a heavy object being placed on his heart. Awakening from his meditative state, Guruji [Amritananda] was prompted to dig that site. Unearthed from that very spot, he found a Sri Chakra MahaMeru made of pancha-loha [five metals].

This is not only an event that occurs in Amritananda’s mind when he is in meditation, for a meru is unearthed at the site. It is an exact fit to the Eliadean concept of heirophany where the sacred erupts into the profane world. Before the manifestation of the meru/Goddess, the area was an abandoned patch of land, profane at best. It is the eruption of the sacred here that prompts Amritananda to develop the site as Devipuram.

Illustrating Eliade’s concept of “eternal return” and the the “Purusha-suktam” of the Rig-veda, Amritananda’s vision re-enacts a mythical pattern. In the Kamakhya sacrifice, Amritananda is the “purusha.” In the PS it is the “sapta-rishis (seven seers)” who sacrifice Purusha; in Devipuram, the sacrificers are “four others,” we do not find

24 Mircea Eliade, Mystic Stories: The Sacred and the Profane.
26 Even though the cosmic ‘Purusha’ has been understood as a genderless, representative figure, as ‘Man’ rather than ‘a man,’ his masculinity is not to be ignored. In verse 5 of PS, Purusha produces the feminine principle, the cosmic egg, ‘Viraj’ and then unites with her.
out who they are. Typically, in the final ritual movement of purnahuti, the entire person is offered to the sacrificial fire with the mantra “purnamadah purnamidam.”

Amritananda’s narrative is also reminiscent of another vedic hymn, the Narayana suktam\(^\text{27}\) (NS), where the space within the heart is the location for the presence of the deity Narayana. The detail of this presence is described in physical terms—verse eight of NS ends with how everything is established or existent in this space (“tasmin sarve pratiṣṭhitam”) and verse nine speaks of the “mahān agni (great fire)” at this spot, at the center of which lives Narayana. “Pratiṣṭhā” is a technical term in Indian rituals meaning “establishment,” a “prāṇa-pratiṣṭha” means that a deity’s life-force has been established into an image. In Amritananda’s narrative, his heart is the site of the pratistha. We can assume a relationship between the “heavy object” and the meru which is found buried at that spot. Not only is the geography of Devipuram a manifestation of the body of Shakti, Shakti is established in and out of Amritananda’s body.

A backdrop to sites of Goddess-manifestation is the legend of Shiva’s consort Sati from the Mahabharata and several Puranas.\(^\text{28}\) When Daksha, Sati’s father, insults Shiva by not inviting him to a major fire sacrifice, a humiliated Sati immolates herself in the sacrificial fire. A grief-struck Shiva does the “tandava (dance of destruction)” with Sati over his shoulder. To jolt Shiva out of this distressed state, Vishnu hurls his discus-weapon, the Sudarshan chakra, severing Sati’s body into parts. Each of the sites in India where these parts fall becomes a “Shakti-pītha (seat of Shakti),” where Shakti manifests

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\(^{27}\) A hymn from the Yajurveda, also found in the Mahanarayana Upanishad, 3.1-12.

her power. While Andhra has its share of Shakti-pithas, the areas surrounding Devipuram do not feature in any of these canonical lists. The case of Devipuram may exemplify for some future scholar how canonical lists re-open to revision. In this location, then, where a scientist became a guru, where a yantra became a temple, I met a number of practitioners whose practice was all about embodiment.

3.3 Invitation to cosmic energies

At Devipuram, the Kamakhya pitha is not cordoned off from public access. On the contrary, visitors may be seated on the altar of the Kamakhya yoni-rock, the sacred “pitham (seat)” and receive a puja. The brochure at Devipuram declares: “You are the Devipuram, where Goddess lives.” The puja is called “Kalavahana,” which means “an invitation to the Kalas” which are cosmic energies. Worshipper and worshipped become one when the deity within oneself is worshipped, and when one’s own body becomes a temple that houses the deity of the self. In our very first conversation, Amritananda suggested that I have a Kalavahana. His exact words were: “Immersion… Kalavahana.”

Seated on the pitham astride a rock in the shape of a “yoni (womb)” on the floor of the Kamakhya temple, eyes shut, I listened to the mantras and sensed the ablutions being poured and smeared upon me. An elderly lady wearing glasses called Lakshmi,

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29 The number of pithas vary in different sources; for instance, Kalika-purana mentions seven pithas whereas the Rudra-yamala mentions eighteen. D.C.Sircar in Sākta Pīṭhas (New Delhi: MLBD, 1950) translates some versions of the 17th CE Tantrachudamani’s Pithanirṇaya (which means ‘decision on the pithas) which lists fifty-one pithas. A popular listing follows a hymn called the ‘Ashtadasha-shakti-pitha-stotram’ which enumerates eighteen Shakti-pithas, of which four are in today’s region of Andhra. According to this list, Shakti’s neck fell in Srisailam, upper teeth in Alampur, left hand in Pithapuram and left cheek, in Draksharamam. This is a source used by Siddheswarananda Bharati, the main seer in Chapter Four.

30 Laurie Patton studies a canonical index of deities to show how canon is edited to accommodate changing practices in Myth as Argument: The Brhaddevatā as Canonical Commentary (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996).
and a younger woman called Sirisha chanted the mantras and conducted the ritual. These mantras were primarily structured around the Sanskrit syllabary, each letter ending with an “anusvara” or “ṃ-ending.” As she invoked each syllable, she also touched particular spots on my body, I knew this was the process of “nyasa (placing),” the syllable was being placed in my body. There were other mantras but I could not remember them at all; it was as though the puja-bath of warm water had washed my memory clean. I could do little work back in my hotel at Visakhapatnam. Every time I closed my eyes I saw Khadgamala goddesses—shapes, outlines, parts of faces, movement. There was a lingering, palpable sense of softness. Surprised at how the Kalavahana puja impacted my imagination, I wanted a closer view of its liturgy and Srividya rituals. Prema said I could not simply be an observer in the Srividya courses, and suggested that I ask Amritananda. I wrote to Ramakrishna Kandarpa in the Devipuram administrative office requesting him to ask Amritananda’s permission if I could join the Srividya course for the purpose of research; he wrote back in the affirmative. Three weeks after my Kalavahana, I studied its liturgy and ritual procedure as a part of a course in Sri-Vidya along with three other students, Arup Kumar, Arul Murugan and Vinay B.31

Unlike me, my three classmates were wholly practitioners (though, with day-jobs). Vinay was an engineer in Hyderabad, Arup was a software engineer in Nasik and Arul was a welder in Trichy. Why did Arul need to come to Andhra and to Devipuram, when Tamilnadu must have plenty of Srividya teachers? “I wanted initiation from the

31 Not his real name.
person who has spoken personally to Lalita,” he said, referring to Guruji. Arup was facing problems that seemed insurmountable and had come to consult Guruji and to help himself by practicing Srividya. Vinay seemed inspired by his mother’s devotional practice, and wanted to learn the ritual. Across five days, we studied Srividya and practiced its rituals which included mantras for the deities Ganapati, Shyama, Varahi and Lalita. One entire day was dedicated to the Kalavahana liturgy and rituals. Our teacher Prema Reddy, a long-time practitioner of Srividya, knew the liturgy by memory, and indicated the placement of the string of syllables from the “aksharamala (Sanskrit alphabet)” on the body.

PREMA: Aṁ. Āṁ.
ARUP: Aṁ. Āṁ.
PREMA: No, it’s clockwise.
ARUP: Clockwise.

Kāṁ. It’s in the chest.

Prema enacted the placement of syllables on her own body, as we looked at a drawing (Fig.1) and imitated it on our own bodies. Imagine the petals, she said, as she touched each point on an imaginary collar low around the neckline, front to back.


And then on the Svāḥiṣṭhāna. Six-petal. From the right bottom to the top and from the left top to the left bottom. Yes, goes like this and this.
MANI: Not cross-section like this?

PREMA: No. It’s vertical. Until now we went horizontal, now it will go vertical. Okay?


ARUP: Left to right, na? Right to left?

PREMA: Clockwise. And then, Muladhara [chakra] maybe if I draw. ..

ARUP: Muladhara is not visible, right?

PREMA: Muladhara is where the garbha [womb] is.

ARUP: Is there any way to touch or something where we have to place the hand.

PREMA: Aṁh, touch is hard, that’s why, you keep your hand on your genitals, but keep your mind inside, end of the spinal cord, tailbone. That is the place, actually.


The first three syllables were bija-mantras, and we were invoking the “Agni-kalas” at the yoni, and after uttering another bija-mantra, “yaṁ,” paying homage to smoke.

PREMA: If you keep practicing the aksaramala on your body, whenever you say “yaṁ” you know where the “yaṁ” is.

In Shaiva tantras and in popular legends, a “kala” is understood as a practical art; there are sixty-four practical arts including dance, music, and a number of skills. In the liturgy of the Kalavahana, we invoked the Kalas of Fire, Sun, Moon, Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Ishvara and Sadashiva. Distinctions between these Kalas were unclear—how was Rudra different from Sadashiva, were they not both names of the same deity, Shiva? Each of these had sub-categories of what seemed qualities— “Preet (love),” “Vidya (learning),” “Pusha (health),” etc. Had there been no meaningful words at all, it would have been easier to accept the clusters as sound-clusters. At the end, we invoked the
Kalas into ourselves—we paid homage to the Agni-Mandala (the family of Fires), and invited Agni to reside in our bodies. But the entire cluster before that seemed to exist only so that the syllable “ra” was uttered.

\[
\text{Agniṁ Dūtaṁ Viśva Vaiṣṇava Viśvam. Asya Yajñasya Suķrtaṁ. Ram Rim}
\]
\[
\text{Ram, Raim Raum Raha, Ramala Varayūm, Agni Mandalāya Namaha, Agniṁ}
\]
\[
\text{Āvahayāmi.}
\]

![Figure 2: Syllable positions—workshop handout and my notes at Devipuram](image)

When I asked Prema about the connection between the syllables and the locations on our body, she looked at me quizzically. I made my question more specific. “Say, one mantra has more “ra” sounds, does the “ra” spot in our body respond?” “Yes,” Prema shot at
once, but then she did not come up with anything specific other than assertions about neurological effects of mantras. While I could accept this as a hermeneutic system in tantra, the painstaking detail with which the Kalavahana process was being taught and learned seemed to suggest a “real” basis. At the next opportunity, I asked Guruji, “How can I see the syllables in my body?” “Just imagine them,” he chuckled, and Prema guffawed. Did that response mean the syllables were there, and I could not see them, or that they were imaginary? Conversations with practitioners helped think through this important question.

3.4 Goddess Bala

Mani Prasanna’s name had been mentioned by a number of Amritananda’s followers; the Hyderabad “peetham (seat, temple)” was at a ground-floor apartment in a knot of building blocks in the crowded junction of Ameerpet. An image of Goddess Lalita’s eyes on the front door helped me identify it immediately. The living room was cluttered with ritual paraphernalia, and as we walked into an inner room, I noticed that there were others around—they did not look twice at me and I was not introduced to them. We sat comfortably elevated on a queen-sized bed for the chat, and began a focused conversation immediately; we spoke in English. Frequently smiling, and with a sweet-sounding child-like voice, Mani Prasanna did not seem to mind my rather direct questions as we talked. I asked her since when she was practicing Srividya, and why, and she said, “No reason. My experience. When I was a child I saw the Mother.” Perhaps in her mid-thirties now, Mani Prasanna first saw the Goddess when she was 14 years old. How did she know it was the Goddess? Did she have devotion to the
Goddess at the time? Laughing, she said, “Not really, only during exams when I asked for help.”

MANI PRASANNA: – When I slept, a woman woke me up and talked to me, I don’t know who she was. I was scared and wanted to go back to sleep and I never had any such discussions again. However, whatever happened in my life I remember some things happened in the same way she said and whatever I don’t remember I realize them at that particular time, when they are actually happening.

Mani Prasanna said that the Goddess told her things that happened to her in life later, and spoke to her for a half-hour.

MANI: Was she an older lady?

MANI PRASANNA: Around 50 years old.

MANI: Do you remember her form, what did she look like, what did she wear?

MANI PRASANNA: Yes I remember, she was wearing a sari, she was dark. Her hair was open and a lot of jewelry. And I remember the one thing she asked me. She asked – “how would you like mother to be like/to look like?” And I replied saying I would like to sleep in mother’s lap and chat. And after that I was sleeping actually. I was imagining I was in her lap. She was saying a lot of things but I don’t remember them at all.

MANI: Did she speak for a long time?

MANI PRASANNA: – May be like half an hour, but I was scared.

MANI: Were you sitting and listening?

MANI PRASANNA: – I was sleeping and I was scared. So, closed my eyes and I was wondering what was happening and who was speaking to me. That was my first experience.

At the time, Mani Prasanna said, she did not know who this was and only made the connection after a decade when she was visited again, after she met Guruji. In 2003, Mani Prasanna had gone to Devipuram with a friend to attend a Chandi-homa (Goddess Chandi is one of the forms of the Goddess). During the homa, she felt a sensation in her womb.
We did homa, and during that ritual, I had a feeling right here (places a hand on her belly, a little beneath the abdomen). After the homa, I felt something was moving inside me. Then I asked Guruji and he said that I am going to have a girl-child. But it was very funny and silly to me. I did not believe it at that time. But later my pregnancy tests were confirmed and then I believed and changed my mind.

One implication of this anecdote could be that this was a divine act and Goddess Chandi had entered Mani Prasanna’s womb. Whatever it may have meant, this occasion was the birth of Mani Prasanna’s relationship with her guru, Amritananda, and the beginning of her practice. It was in this meeting that Guruji gave her the Bala mantra—she began to do this mantra daily, and she and was soon visited by Goddess Bala who also gave her a lesson in tantric theory of the body as a site of mantras.

MANI PRASANNA: When I was doing the japa of Bala [mantra], I saw mother again, she came in the form of a little girl and said that she had no one and that she was hungry. And I said I will take care of you, I am here, your mother. I asked what she fancied, so that I could make her some food. She asked for something and I prepared and fed her. After food...

MANI: All this is in your dream?

MANI PRASANNA: No, not in a dream. In fact. When I was actually sitting. That was my first experience with Bala. Inside our home. I did not know how she got in. So after that...

MANI: No one saw her?

MANI PRASANNA: No, no one was here. I was alone.

After this, Goddess Bala talked to Mani Prasanna about mantras and body.

MANI PRASANNA: So she was saying then that as to why should we worship the body, why the mantra is required, if you need to go inside your body, every part of your body should be affected by the mantra. Only when that happens, you will be able to see the inside of your body. Otherwise, the body does not allow anything or anyone inside holding on to a concept called “ego.” I was wondering how does a child of three years know all these things?

She told me why the body should be mantra affected. The body should accept it. Every part of your body is a Shakti-pitham and you need to make those powerful. But your mind does not know that. But it will know when every part that is the Shakti-pitham gets enough power for it.
Mani Prasanna differentiates between reality and imagination across the two narratives—she fed Bala, but she imagined that she slept in Mother’s lap. Mani Prasanna’s childhood vision was that of a motherly goddess; ten years later, it is she who plays mother to little Bala and feeds her. Bala claims to have “no one,” thus appealing to Mani Prasanna’s caring nature and Mani Prasanna tells the Goddess that she will take care of her. The interaction over food creates intimacy, it is something that occurs between the Goddess and the practitioner. Mani Prasanna also receives coaching in tantra in this same vision.

It was not clear how Mani Prasanna meant “seeing inside” the body? On the one hand, I could think of endoscopes that looked into the inner surfaces of the body, or of microscopes which can look at cells. Because she had talked about her pregnancy, I thought about ultrasonic ways of looking inside. But Mani Prasanna was not referring to physical boundaries, and as our conversation progressed, it became clear that 1) when she used the word “body” she did not mean a physical body and 2) she had seen syllables in some non-physical aspect of her body. According to Mani Prasanna, every part of the body was already a seat of Shakti, but it was the mantras that helped energize them. This is similar to yoga-theory about the Kundalini and chakras—every person already has the Kundalini power latent in them, but it has to be activated.

Mani Prasanna leads a campaign to do Kalavahana pujas to women in many locations of Andhra, from large metros to small villages. When Mani Prasanna and co-pujaris visit a location, they do a hundred Kalavahana pujas for one hundred women daily, five at a time, twenty times a day. This is part of an “empowerment drive,” and Mani Prasanna and others believe that invoking the Goddess helps women realize their
latent shakti or power. We discussed the Kalavahana puja and the concept of the body as a yantra.

MANI PRASANNA: Once when I was reciting Khadgamala, I saw my body cut into nine pieces. Like a piece here, one here, and here, in a row, like a yantra. So then I got scared and I asked Guruji and wondered what that was.

He said “it appeared that way to tell you that there is no difference between you and the Sri-Vidya. “That is why she [goddess] did it like that. Then I understood, when I was told that way.” Then I began looking at myself, and the Sri-yantra, and figured out that there is no difference between the body and the Sri-yantra. The body is the embodiment, the form of Sri-yantra. When we try to understand further, the nine enclosures of the Sri-yantra are present in our body too. So then, I learnt that.

MANI: And aksharamala [syllables]?

MANI PRASANNA: I saw the aksharamala. When I saw the body cut, and also when I did (the mantra beginning with) Vasini. You know about Vasini – Kameswari - Modini…so I saw it revolving.

Mani Prasanna was referring to the line from the Khadgamala (mantra) where the eight goddesses of Speech (Vag-devatas) are invoked. Within the Khadgamala stotram / mantra, this line begins the worship of the seventh enclosure of the Sri-chakra. The goddesses of Speech preside over the alphabet and they are credited as the seers of the Lalita Sahasranamam mantra (LS), which means that they were the first to receive the LS and to transmit it to the world. Whereas most seers are exalted human beings, this is one example where deities take on the role of seer. When Mani Prasanna recited the Vag-devata line from the Khadgamala, she saw the syllables in her own

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32 Vasini, Kameswari, Modini, Vimala, Aruna, Jayini, Srveswari, Kaulini. The line from the Khadgamala stotram (mantra): śrīcakrā saptamdvāranadevatāḥ vasini, kāmeśvarī, modini, vimale, aruṇe, jayini, sarveśvarī, kaulini, sarvaroṣharaṇacakrasvāminī, rahasyayoginī...

33 Verse seventeen of the Soundarya Lahiri also pays homage to the Goddesses of speech, Vagdevatas. This verse is specifically for those who wish to excel as poets as it requests the Goddess for creative powers in language.
body. I told her the question I had asked Amritananda:

MANI: I asked Guruji what I should do to see the aksharamala in my body, and he asked me to just imagine …

MANI PRASANNA: It can be imagined. For example, “aṁ,” when you imagine “aṁ,” you need to imagine the “a” and the sunna [m sound] beside it. You can imagine it being written and one day, even when you don’t imagine, it will appear to you. The important thing is, we need to be connected to the deity all the time. If we have to stay connected, we need to find a way. We need to first feel the deity. If you don’t feel it, it can’t happen. That feeling is the imagination.

I had used the term “imagine” in English to mean unreal or imaginary, and I regarded “imagination” as creative thought, whereas Mani Prasanna linked it with an emotional state, with “feeling.” This was not a translation issue, but a conceptual one.

MANI: Imagination is not “kalpana” [imagination] but “bhavana” [conception, feeling]?

MANI PRASANNA: Yes. The more you feel Her [Goddess] by you, the closer she comes to you.

MANI: Now, for me, the bhavana comes from the heart, kalpana comes from the mind.

MANI PRASANNA: That is why the mind is not useful in sadhana [spiritual practice].

Analysing South Indian narratives from the 16th CE, David Shulman helps us understand the Indian concept of generative imagination:

The consequences of imagining in the south Indian style are mostly keyed to a realistic axiology. The world exists, as do the pieces of reality set loose in it by the imagining mind. Pure intellection has little to do with any of this.34

Exposure to the mantras at the Chandi homa was linked to Mani Prasanna’s pregnancy, and doing the Bala mantra was linked to a visitation from Bala, and that was only the

Mani Prasanna said she did “tarpana (libation)” and Kalavahana twice a day, it had become a habit, and it took her ten minutes for the entire ritual and mantras inviting the Kalas. Tarpana is a ritual in the puja where water is poured on to the deity with mantras. If the tarpana is done to oneself then this action is done at the chakra one focuses upon, by imagining the deity at that location. After three months, Mani Prasanna moved from bhavana or feeling to an experience.

MANI PRASANNA: When I was doing that, after three months, I had an experience. When I say “Brahmānām Avāhāyāmi,” I felt Brahma coming in. Similarly with Vishnu and whatever I was reciting, that particular deity was coming out from that particular chakra. First going inward, looked to me like He was washing/cleaning something, I don’t know, and then going in, I could see that. While I was doing it.

MANI: “He” -- that means..?

MANI PRASANNA: Brahma, Vishnu.... whatever I was reciting. The deity that I was inviting. So that is one experience with Kalavahanam. And then, once when I was doing the avahana [invitation] of Suryakalas, all of a sudden I felt Guruji has come and taken me to the Surya-mandala [solar realms]. He was showing it to me… I felt that.

MANI: What is the Surya Mandala like?

MANI PRASANNA: (laughs) I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know how to tell that. Each bijakshara [seed-syllable] like “ka,” “ba” was shown to me and how to reach from one to the other. Why is it placed that way, and he was narrating, guiding me through that, is what I felt. I felt astonished that I was looking at the Sun so closely.

MANI: By “Sun” do you mean a jyoti [a light]?

MANI PRASANNA: No, not jyoti, Sun itself. The form. And with “form,” I don’t mean a human form or something like that, it is light. Not like a lamp, but huge.
The question remained, and it took another six months before I could even try to suspend that which Mani Prasanna told me was useless in spiritual practice—the mind. It is another practitioner at Devipuram, Don, an architect from the USA, who tells me how the yantra as temple becomes a methodology to practice embodied mantra.

### 3.5 Goddess Chandi

Don is one of the architects involved with Devipuram’s low-cost geodesic housing project for the nearby villagers. We talked late in the evening at the “yajna-shala (a place for fire-rituals)” between the Sahasrakshi temple and the residential hall. The day’s mantras and ritual offerings were over, there was warm ash curling in the central pit, and a cool breeze floated in and out of the open-air thatched space. Except for a late bird with something to say, the air was quiet.

Don was introduced to the Devipuram community in the USA in 1991 in Rochester, NY, by Amritananda’s disciple called Chaitanyananda, better known as “Aiyya.” Aiyya was his colleague at an architectural firm, and over work-lunches, Don became orientated to a new subject: “he [Aiyya] would talk about metaphysical things, mantras and energy.” Did Don know what were mantras, at the time?

No, I didn’t. I had no idea whatsoever. And I started going every week and meeting him for lunch and the meeting started happening at his home and then he said “Ayya [friend], you have to stay for Puja!” And I had no idea what that was!

All of this was new for Don, who was born and raised Catholic, and jokes that he was a “just-in-case Christian”—“I’d go to church just in case they said I was a Jew and I

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35 See Chapter Five on Nachiketa ashram.
would burn in hell. In my heart I didn’t believe that was the case. In my heart, there was always something missing.”

So, on a Friday night, I came and I walked in, into the temple, which at that time was a converted to a car garage in his home, and there I saw about 25 to 30 people, all with brown skin, all … festively dressed and I sat down to something that I have never witnessed before, which was devotional worship of a nature that really hit me in the heart because these people were totally involved in the worship.

And for the first time in my life, I actually had the idea that God was something tangible, more than something abstract in a way and then I could visit, it could be there and listen and talk to you back.

After the puja, people would ask Aiyya questions, Aiyya would then ask Devi, i.e., the Goddess, and tell the group what Devi had said. Don began his own mantra practice in 1993 when he visited Devipuram and received the sixteen-syllable Maha-Sodashi mantra from Guruji. When I met Don in Devipuram in 2015, he had been doing the Sodashi-mantra along with a few other mantras for over twenty years. He said his japa was constant, like a “machine.”

DON: Oh it is constant. All my mantras are constant now. It doesn’t stop.

MANI: Do you have a svara or melody for them, are you singing them mentally?

DON: It is more like a chord! It is a distinct chord, it has a color to it. I recognize it by either a color or I recognize it by the whisperings of the chord or by the sound-form that I fall into repeating. But it is like I am echoing what is already there and when I echo it, it makes me focus. I do that a little bit and it basically takes over.

MANI: a resonance …

DON: it is already there. The machine is already running. For example, the machine is running as nun-nun-nun-nun and I repeat it in the same way – nun-nun-nun- un… and so I fall into it. Other than that, the machine is running. When I do Chandi, every time I walk, Chandi is invoked. So I can … if I start walking…I call them “burning the man.” Because every time I would do a mantra, I would try to commit it to memory, and I try to get a hundred and eight thousand repetitions as soon as I could.
This is how I understood Don: The mantra is already in Don’s memory. Then, when Don does japa, he simply follows the frequency of the memory of the mantra. Japa is non-stop for Don, like an involuntary activity. Some mantras have become associated with some actions, and Chandi has become the mantra he does when he is walking. This is how I understood Don after I had my own mantra-chord-experience. The mantra is already happening within. Then, when Don does japa, he matches his utterance to the note that he has heard from within himself. A part of Don does the japa constantly. The pace of Chandi mantra suits the pace of walking, or has become associated with walking, so that is what occurs when he walks. When the mantra that he does synchronizes precisely with the mantra within, light is emitted

But these accounts of doing mantras non-stop were mundane compared to Don’s next narrative about the body as yantra and temple. As an architect, Don was “fascinated” by the Sri-yantra, started learning how to draw it and “came to understand the location of the Khadgamala goddesses."

DON: having some understanding that the avaranas [enclosures] were the layers of the meru, coincided with the physical plane and celestial plane, but it also mapped out the various chakra locations of the body, for instance. So I said—ok! I am just going to stand inside the meru and I am going to put my mantra on every single location, all the way up, all the way up. And if they fell close to the right place, I was going to be happy.

MANI: So the yantra is your rosary!

DON: Yes! That always has been.

MANI: And then you turn around after it?

DON: I would come back down. So in the shower, in the morning, I am not kidding you, it didn’t make any difference how long I was chanting the mantra, I was in the shower, I would concentrate on all those locations, and if I lost focus, I had to start all over! And I had to go all the way up! And I had to go all the way down.
So Don was putting his mantra at ninety-eight points in the three-dimensional pyramidal yantra where the Khadgamala goddesses were located while ascending, and again, at ninety-eight points while descending. “Putting” meant that he was doing the mantra and as he invoked the name of each goddess, he was mentally focused on a particular point of the yantra which was actually also mapped on to his body. He said he did this “a hundred and eight thousand times, or more, for he did not bother to count.” I asked, how did he know it was that number?

DON: If you have a single bija mantra, it would take me six and a quarter hours to do a hundred and eight thousand in one sitting. And that is giving myself an extra ten or twenty percent.

MANI: You would go boom-boom-boom-boom?

DON: I was diligent to make sure that every recitation was in my consciousness and not just a habit. So you could do like – Hrīṁ, Hrīṁ, Hrīṁ Hrīṁ, Hrīṁ.. you can count how many “Hrīṁs” in a breath, and I would exhale Hrīṁ, inhale Hrīṁ, how many breaths I take in a minute, how many minutes in an hour, but then if I started losing focus, you can do four Hrīṁs for every one Hrīṁ. (Chants and shows, fast-paced). Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ, Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ. When I have sixteen in the pace of four. And pretty soon, they are not sounding like Hrīṁs anymore! So, to get your consciousness back, the HrīṁM, as long as you hold the aspiration in your head, and to do that it took extra concentration. And then if started losing focus again, I would do one or two – H-R-i-t-M.. and feel it in my mantra and feel it in my body, then I would go “Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ.” Pretty soon, the oscillations, the sound and the vibrations, everything that was starting to happen in your body was so profound that the time went by. The dimensions of the mantra would open up.

MANI: What do you mean by that?

DON: It is a three dimensionality! It is difficult to explain. May be it is going into different dimensions, but it is more than visual.

MANI: Inside your mind?

DON: Inside the body! Your body almost ceases to exist. Your body all of a sudden is a location. And in something much larger. And all of a sudden, in a location, you are a speck. You are like an atom. And this Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ-Hrīṁ sounds sending out and echoing back.. I mean there are aspects that are very similar to sonar… all of a sudden I am getting these perceptions of sonar, there is a blackness.
MANI: You are hearing it back?

DON: Perceiving it back! I am not sure I heard it with my ears. The sensation would be akin to hearing but the perceptions were definitely more than the five sense organs. And in that period of time, it also coincided with periods of time I was doing Panchadasi [fifteen-syllable mantra] that packets of information would come to me either in puja or in meditation. Like profound hits, like a torpedo head of all these energy and it would take a long time, days, for to play out on my video tape machine and it was like watching a video tape where it was pulled apart, slowed down so I could digest it.

MANI: Packets of information of the world, your life or?

DON: Everything! If I were to look at an individual, there were times when I would be able to look at an individual in not so much of I would look at the person, but somebody next to me said- “what’s wrong with that fellow?” I would look at the person and – “he has liver disease! And you know, there is some jaundice in there.” I could tell what was going on...

MANI: Without turning to mantra?

DON: Yes

MANI: But you attributed it to mantra?

DON: Absolutely.

Mani Prasanna had also spoken about seeing “inside” the body by putting the mantra inside. Don’s narrative here is similar, except that he lets us understand how going within the body actually loses the consciousness of its physical boundaries, he speaks about a “blackness.” Don also notes how the “hearing” is not really a “hearing” and mentions sonar, this was a point brought up by Appaji in Guntur (cf. 4.4) who said tantric mantras were sub-sonic and super-sonic. His surmise about “packets” of information was graphic.

Don’s motivations also began to emerge with this narrative. Since he did more than one mantra, I asked him about any differences in the practice and results of the mantras. Here’s a summary of what Don told me: Chandi helped improve perceptions, Maha-sodashi mantra brought an “element of clairvoyance” and with Pancha-dashi
mantra, there was increased physical aptitude, and an influence over the weather.” Was Don was attracted to mantras for the “siddhis (powers)” he gained? If he was, these siddhis did not seem self-serving:

DON: But Chandi is one of the things that I would really really love to use, and it invokes automatically when I am sending energy to somebody else that I love and you know I get telephone calls next day, “what did you do? I don’t know what you did but it helped me so much.” So, it is a very important mantra!

The Chandi mantra “invoked automatically,” in response to someone else’s need for “energy.” Perhaps any association with Goddess Chandi would be altruistic because of the legendary associations of the triumph of good over evil. In the Devi Mahatmyam,\textsuperscript{36} when an awe-inspiring Goddess Kali kills the demons Chanda and Munda, she is called Chandi, or Chandika. Don also talked at length about how the Pancha-dashi mantra had given him an ability to maintain equanimity in the midst of hectic projects that involved multi-tasking. Mani Prasanna had also mentioned the same point – minus the information about which mantra she was doing – and that she could be engaged with large projects and still be relaxed, she felt no panic when there were events, everything always got done. When I asked her what she thought she had gained by the practice, she spoke about contentment and equanimity. Both Don and Mani Prasanna spoke about giving over to the deities, deities as active doers, and of flowing with the Goddess’s will.

3.6 Goddess Lalita

If Mani Prasanna and Don happily discussed intimate histories of their mantra-sadhana and experiences, I guess it was because I was also a mantra-practitioner by the

\textsuperscript{36} Devi Mahatmyam, which means “The story of Devi’s Miraculous Power” is a central text in Goddess-worship and is a part of the Markandeya Purana, thought to have been transcribed in the first millennium.
Some years ago, when I met a long-time disciple of Amritananda in Durham, NC, I could barely extract a word out of him. Subbarao Kompella, aka Guru Karunamaya, was on a USA tour and had been invited to conduct a puja at the Duke University chaplain Usha Rajagopalan’s home. Karunamaya was known for his devotion to Goddess Lalita and said to enjoy the Goddess’s palpable presence. An anecdote describes how, when he was in dire straits during his early years as a sadhaka, the Goddess demonstrated her presence by exuding honey from her iconic image that he worshipped daily. At dinner after “satsang (spiritual gathering)” that evening, I sat beside Karunamaya and his wife Usha Ratna Kompella and tried to thaw ice. I told him I was researching mantras, gave him one of my books, and the next morning, emailed him as a follow-up. He did not respond to my email. Meeting again now – in 2015 – we struck a warm rapport; Karunamaya laughingly confessed now that back in 2011, he had thought me “just a researcher.”

Sharing some anecdotes from the fieldwork, I aired a nagging question about the reports of Goddess and mantra visions. How would one know that a vision was not imagination? Karunamaya distinguished between a “memory leak” and a “vision.”

KARUNAMAYA: One is *memory leak.* “I saw Mother-Goddess (Ammavaru) in a silk sari.” Maybe, it MAY be a *memory leak.*

MANI: Do you mean you have a memory of that?

KARUNAMAYA: You have a memory that Mother-Goddess is like that. But then, for a kitten or a baby lizard to come to me and say, “hey man,” I’m Mother-

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Goddess, for it to say that, and for me to understand that about it, say that
happens, which I have not seen or experienced before, is coming from …

MANI: somewhere

KARUNAMAYA: … from somewhere, like an alien message, that is a vision.

In fact, David Morgan’s proposal in *Embodied Eye* (2012) about how visions occur is
exactly how Karunamaya describes memory leaks and by which he means they are
imagined rather than real visions. Karunamaya told me about one of his first visions
which was in Tirupati when he was doing intensive spiritual practice. After a series of
ritual practices, he did mantra-japa for fifteen days continuously. Then, when he was
immersed in japa, (he saw that) a guru came up to him, patted his cheek affectionately
and said “this is what I want from you.” The visit was a commendation, Karunamaya
explained to me “this” meant such an earnest mantra practice. Five years later,
Karunamaya went with a friend to a beach town near the seaport of Vishakatpatnam
called Bhimli to visit an ascetic named Yogananda. After some conversation, Yogananda
said, “You didn’t recognize me, I saw you in Tirupati, do you remember?” Karunamaya
remembered at once—“at once, *yaadon ki baaraat!* [a procession of memories].”
Karunamaya then went on to talk about how ardent practitioners receive visions at
“brahma-muhurtam (auspicious time)” early in the morning. The term he used for ardor
was “ardrta” which literally means “wetness,” and is used to convey an emotional state,

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39 An idiomatic expression derived from a Bollywood movie of the same name, which literally means a
‘wedding procession of memories.’
40 Brahma-muhurtam is an auspicious time to meditate, and timed at around one and a half hours before
sunrise, many people believe this is when the mind is unperturbed, and when the gods and sages actively
communicate with human beings.
as when a devotee weeps longingly for a deity. The verification Karunamaya received from the ascetic confirmed his vision of the visit. By contrast, he said, memory leaks cannot be verified. Of course, such verification is only possible when the visitor is another contemporaneous human being.

Karunamaya also explained another detail about the methodology of vision. He told me that physical sight belongs to the waking state, while vision does not:

The difference between ordinary sight and vision is that you don’t need to use your eyes. Seeing is in the waking state. Then, 72,000 nerves, mind, five senses when they are all active, you are visible to me. It doesn’t have any jnana [knowledge]. By chance if there is jnana [knowledge] also, it is limited. But vision is higher than this. No mind there. With consciousness, without the need of sense organs, eyes are not necessary for vision. They see and they hear too, hearing without ears, seeing without eyes, touch without skin, that is vision.

According to Indian thought, everyone experiences three states of consciousness: jagrat (waking), svapna (sleeping), and sushupti (deep sleep). The fourth state of consciousness, “turiya (superconsciousness)” is that when the individual consciousness merges with cosmic consciousness. Karunamaya could have been referring to the dream or deep-sleep state, but because he says there is “no mind,” I assumed he referred to a turiya state. His clarification about the involvement of all sense organs in vision matches the internal evidence in Daivarata’s mantras (cf. 2.1). Like Daivarata, Karunamaya was also a perceiver of new mantras. I only knew this because some of the mantras he discussed on his Srividya-tutorial videos had seemed unfamiliar, or just strange. When I asked Karunamaya about these specific mantras, he did not hesitate to describe how they had come about. Here are two anecdotes from his narratives of mantra-darshana.

41 Several sources, including Māndukya Upaniṣad 1.3.
A young woman from Undrajapuram, near Tanuku in Andhra Pradesh began to menstruate a year ago, and did not menstruate again. An allopathic doctor had diagnosed it as a hormonal imbalance. Karunamaya asked the woman’s relatives who had approached him with this problem that he had never come across a case like this, but that they could phone after ten days. On one of the days after this, a new mantra flashed in his mind automatically when he was doing the Khadgamala stotram. The Khadgamala stotram, which literally means the “sword-garland invocation,” names each of the goddesses according to their place in the Sri-yantra. Karunamya’s narrative contains a meticulously detailed description of the process:

KARUNAMAYA: I told them I’m not used to it, call me after ten days. I don’t know ‘ma. Then one day while I was doing the Khadgamala – (next, he quotes the Goddess names from the mantra): “Kameśvari nityaklinne. Nityaklinna” … now it must go to “bherunde” right?42 Again I read it, “Kameśwart … nityaklinne.” Again I stopped there. It only goes until there doesn’t go forward! “Nityaklinna Nityaklin”— “wait a minute, this is the one. I called them immediately.”

He was unable to proceed beyond the name of Goddess Nityaklinna.

KARUNAMAYA: (lowering his voice meaningfully) “Nitya” means ever, “klinna” means flow. The one who controls the flow is Nityaklinna deity. *So write it down,* I said. “Aiṃ Hriṃ Śrīṃ Nityaklinnā deityyai namaha pāhimāṇi rakṣamāṇi.”

This last line was Karunamaya’s new mantra.

KARUNAMAYA: We have a new mantra. Here, Because it’s related to here (points at uterus area), putting the hand here (places a hand there) you need to pass the energy, just keep on reciting – how many days? – until you get the periods. You won’t believe it, correctly on the eight day!

42 The sequence Subbarao is referring to in the Khadgamala: Kameśvari, bhagamālinī, nityaklinne, bherunde, valmiivāśi, mahāvajrēśvari, Shivadēṣī, tvarite, kulasundari, nīte, nīlapatāke, vijaye, sarvamaṅgale, jvalāmālinī, cite, mahānīte …
After doing the mantra, the girl resumed menstruation on the eighth day. Why did he not just recommend a regular mantra, and why did it need to be revised and personalized? What necessitates a new mantra? Karunamaya’s response was surprising. He confessed with a shy smile that he wanted the Goddess to give him a special insight: “Adi yevaḍo rāsindi [That’s written by some other guy] YOU [Goddess] should tell me. Intavaruku raanadi ravaali [I should get what has not come until now]. Whether it’s just a meaning, or a mantra.”

Karunamaya’s second narrative was about a medical emergency. Three-year old Vaishnavi fell from a bed; a nail went into her brain and she went into a coma. Medical doctors in Nellore gave her 24-hours to live. A friend of a friend of a friend of the family phoned Karunamaya, “can you do something?”

I said all I do is puja for Mother. I don’t know anything. But, let’s see.

There is a mantra. It has to be changed. Mother will show. Now, whether that is subtle ego or what …

If Karunamaya is self-indulgent in his expectation for a new mantra from the Mother Goddess, she does not seem to mind. He receives a unique, modified form of the Maha-Mrityunjaya-mantra: “Jhūm saḥ mām pālaya pālaya tryambakam yajāmahe sugandhim puṣṭi-vardhanam urvārakaṁivabandhanān mrtyor mokṣya mṛtāt jhūm saḥ mām pālaya pālaya.”

“Mrityunjaya” literally means “victory over death,” and the prefix “Maha” means “great”— this is a mantra used to prevent accidents or when a person is seriously ill. Karunamaya then modified it further to make it specific for Vaishnavi by inserting her

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name in the accusative case to mean “protect, protect Vaishnavi”— “Jhūṃ saḥ Vaiṣṇavīṃ pālaya pālaya.” Since she was in a coma, the mantra would have to be recited for her by someone else. Karunamaya explained that “Jhūṃ” was an “amrita bijam,” “mrityunjaya bijam.” A “bija” is a seed, and in the language of mantras, a “bija” is a syllable that carries potential. “Amrita” is sometimes translated as “immortal” but literally, it is “a-mrit,” the opposite of “death.” What Karunamaya means here is that the sound or the syllable “Jhum” is the seed of this latent power of fighting death. Subbarao directed that the mantra be recited continually by anyone holding Vaishnavi’s hand, and that there be no weeping in her surround.

Karunamaya shared a narrative that reveals his process of gaining insight into a mantra’s meaning. A follower asked him why the name of the deity Vishnu was included in the Shuklambharadharam-mantra to the deity Ganesha.” In his characteristically plain-speaking manner, he said he had no idea, **“I have not studied Sanskrit or the Vedas or anything!”**

Then when I was brushing (my teeth) in the USA… Shuklambharadharam! (Subbarao declares this as though he is saying “Eureka!”). The meaning is this. Came from inside. “Shukla” means white, white means Brahma. So Shuklambharadharam refers to Brahma. “Shasivarnam” (means) the color of ash. The sanketam [sign] of Maheshwara [Shiva]. Vishnu-Brahma-Maheshwara. These, each becomes evident. “Chaturbhujam” [four-shouldered]. They become evident/recognized because of four Vedas. And how is the person who has read the Veda? “Prasanna vadanam dhyayet.” (Next, Subbarao translates this). He should always be smiling. Anandam. Sat-Chit-Anandam. [Truth-Consciousness-Bliss, a conventional description of the formless nameless divine]. That’s the form you must meditate on. When you meditate on that you won’t have an obstacle.

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44 The entire stanza of the mantra: Śuklāmbhara-dharam Viśṇu Śaśi-Varṣṇa Catur-Bhujam, Prasanna-Vadanam Dhyāyet Sarva-Vighnopashāntaye.
Ganesha is a deity who is legendary as a remover of obstacles, and Subbarao reasons his way to such an import. He makes connections between colors and deities—white reminds him of Brahma and the ashen color reminds him of Shiva. He then combines these deities with the name of the deity (Vishnu) already present in the mantra to derive a reference to the triumverate in the Indian pantheon of deities—Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. The reference to four shoulders is interpreted by Karunamaya to mean the four Vedas, and these three deities are made known by the vedas. Further, he leaps from this thought to the idea that the reader/chanter of veda is blissfully smiling. There is no apparent logic to the connections made by Karunamaya across the fragmentary nature of the verse. How do the three leading male deities of the Hindu pantheon connect with a mantra that is known to invoke an entirely different deity who specializes in removing obstacles? If Vishnu’s presence is inexplicable, Karunamaya makes it more so by now inserting two other deities. And yet, for him, this is what the mantra means now.

For Karunamaya, this is the meaning of the shloka as revealed by Lalita. Does this close off other meanings, past and future? In Bhagavan and Nayana, Shankaranarayan describes an occasion where a person called Padmanabha Swami asks the scholar-practitioner Ganapati Muni for the meaning of the Shuklambharadharam mantra in the presence of Ramana Maharshi, a renown saint, whom he refers to as ‘Brahmanswami.’

The Muni obliged and proceeded to explain the verse, explaining the words in such a way that they applied to the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Ganapati. ‘Here is a great Sadhu. I can explain the verse in relation to him also’, so saying, Vasistha Muni began again: ‘Brahmanaswami wears only a white loin cloth, so he is suklambaradhara, he is in consciousness vast, all-pervading visnu, his complexion is pleasing like the glow of the moon sasivarna and he is chaturbhuk—as he has eaten up the four, mind, chitta the memory stuff, intellect and ego – and remains as the Self all the time.’ Brahmanaswami said nothing but smiled approvingly.
Here, Ganapati Muni begins to explain the meaning with reference to Vishnu and Brahma along the same lines of Karunamaya’s discovery. After that, however, Muni explains the mantra with reference to Ramana Maharshi. Nowhere in this narrative is any report of an extraordinary experience or vision, nor of any authority vested in this meaning; it comes across as a clever interpretation. In the light of Ganapati Muni’s proposal of meaning, could Karunamaya’s meaning be considered an interpretation that does not erase previous, or preclude later, interpretations? Paul Ricoeur (1976) has discussed how words have a “surplus of meaning,” their meaning is not contained by the words or by previous interpretations, and discourse is always open to new interpretations through time, as the context of interpretation changes. If each seer – or commentator – has a unique interpretation, the mantra itself does not change. As people add their interpretations to the mantras, these become a palimpsest of new perspectives on the mantra, continuing the life of the mantra. However, Karunamaya described his novel understanding in terms of a vision.

Karunamaya attributes his methodology to his guru, Amritananda. “Our guru says, if you have a problem, don’t pick up a book to look for a solution. Just let it be. It [the answer] will come. That is the real application.” There is no hankering for an answer and the problem is resolved by an involuntary process; Karunamaya says it “came from inside.” There was something hilarious about the process he had shared, and I could not help but comment on that: “I love the part about you getting it while brushing your teeth.” Karunamaya chuckled and told me about a mantra he was told by Vemakoti Krishnayaji, a reknown pundit at Srikakulam. Instructing him about the procedures, Vemakoti said, “but, one condition, Subbarao-garu, for this, you must say it
when you brush your teeth, then it will be effective.” Karunamaya was only able to fathom this strange instruction after he got the meaning of Shuklambharadharam. I protested:

MANI: *Alla yella vostundi* [How can it come like that!]

KARUNAMAYA: Some activities are daily activities. Brushing, excreting, bathing, wearing clothes, putting on a tilakam, these are all *anusṭhānas* [ritual chores]. Whether you brush with Colgate or Neem twig, it’s *anusṭhāna*.

Now, that which we chant in the puja room that alone is being called *anusṭhānam* but, in fact, everything that happens daily it’s all *anusūṭhānam*.

This method of letting things emerge naturally is reminiscent of the French surrealists’ automatic writing and of Gertrude Stein’s experiments with involuntary writing. Gertrude Stein was involved with automatic writing experiments in the Harvard Psychological Laboratory under Hugo Münsterberg. The idea was to deliberately disrupt regular modes of conscious writing and unhook oneself from self-consciousness via distraction to access a “secondary personality.”

Andre Breton’s experiments were similar, he sought a transported state of mind and was interested in the swing between the subjective and objective. Breton narrates how Leonardo da Vinci invited his students to copy their paintings from what they would see when they stared at an old wall for a period of time: “The whole problem of the passage from subjectivity to objectivity is resolved there.”

What is it about staring at a wall, or such a daily chore as brushing teeth that enables “seeing” a painting or a mantra? Is it that it is


monotonous, likely to be conducted in a daze, or just that there is no thinking involved? I discuss this possibility at some depth in Chapter Five; for now, suffice it to say that somehow, the process of brushing teeth has taken Karunamaya into a state of mind where he finds an answer to his mantra-question, or quest.

The first mantra is as if discovered by him accidentally. Engrossed in sadhana, Karunamaya finds himself unable to proceed beyond Goddess Nityaklinna’s name in the Khadgamala stotram. This is a mantra he has done for years on a daily basis as a part of his “puja (worship)” routine, and he knows it so well that his utterance usually proceeds smoothly. When Karunamaya finds himself stuck, he takes it as a sign that it is Goddess Nityaklinna to whom he must turn with Vaishnavi’s problem. It is as if Karunamaya is taking a walk along a line-up of many deities and finds himself involuntarily stopping when he comes up to Nityaklinna. At first, he does not know why he has stopped. Moments later, reflexivity and interpretation surface, Karunamaya interprets this abrupt stop and sudden loss of memory as a significant signal that points him towards Goddess Nityaklinna. In the second anecdote, Karunamaya’s insistence that it must be a unique mantra given to him by the goddess herself reveals his personal relationship with the deity. His insistence at special treatment, and the confidence to make such a demand must come from his awareness of the intensity of his devotion. Karunamaya’s interpretation of his own motives is generous to a fault; he suspects himself of egotism even in the process of finding delight in a new mantra. In these accounts, we do not hear any detail about whether he saw the script of the mantra, or heard the sound of the mantra. In the second narrative we are only told the beginnings of the quest, and the confidence that “mother will show.” Goddess Lalita is credited as
the source for his new mantras. When I asked him, how did he know She was the
source, Karunamaya said, “who else would have told me!” This response and the
relationship with deity is similar to that in the narrative of Vasudevananda, a Hanuman-
devotee in the next chapter.

3.7 Goddess Kali

Practitioners chase after deities, yearning for a response, but Sheila’s account was
contrary to the norm— it was the Goddess who would not leave Sheila alone. I had seen
her conduct the daily rituals at the yajna-shala, and could tell that she was an insider at
Devipuram, but I had no inclination of what lay in store for me. We met in her room in
the residential block at Devipuram. Sheila did not know Telugu and I did not know
Marathi, so we spoke in English, a language we both knew. She spoke expressively and
occasionally used Tamil, Marathi and Hindi words.

Sheila – who does not give me permission to divulge her last name – has been
practicing Sri-Vidya for 25 years of which the first 15 years were, she says, “without
knowing.” She had five teachers, and each of them literally showed up at her door
saying that “She” – i.e., the Goddess – had asked them to come and give her
something—a mantra, an image, or a ritual instruction. Sheila was always fond of
bhajans even as a young woman. One day at a bhajan, every attendee received images of
Goddess Durga in the dignified form of “simhavahint (lion-rider),” while Sheila received
a terrifying image of Goddess Dakshina-Kali. Kali is typically depicted near-naked,
dancing wildly, wearing nothing but a garland of skulls and a skirt made of chopped
arms. Nervously, Sheila kept the Kali image in a closet rather than in her shrine. At the
next bhajans, the woman who gave her the image told her to put it inside the shrine.
SHEILA: I said ok. Because I didn’t want to offend her [the woman]. So I came, took out and put it and whatever shlokas [verses] I knew I used to chant them. And one fine day, in the evening, you know after, you lit the lamps, you know, this thing, I did that— (clears throat) and suddenly I can see — from the picture — behind the Devi, you know how the uh sun rays come out, like that it started to shine, I mean, glow. I got scared, amma! I asked my husband, you better go and bring that lady home. I don’t want to keep it like this.”

She continued:

SHEILA: So he went and she came, he brought that amma [lady], she came, and she asked me to get out of the room. We went outside. She shut the door and sat and saw that what it is and that, behind that, there are shlokas [Sanskrit verses], you can see all the syllables. But it was “ulta [reverse],” na! I couldn’t read. So she took out and saw what it was and she again she put it back.

MANI: She took out the … picture?

SHEILA: She took out the picture and she again sealed it.

MANI: Oh.

SHEILA: She took out the picture from the frame and saw what it was and put it back, put it in the same, and asked me to come, I went inside and she said “Amma, you don’t have to worry anything, she is blessing you! So just continue. Don’t be scared.” I said – “Amma, Kali!” (she said) “What is Kali? She is also Devi, don’t be scared.” I said “ok! If you are saying, I will do it.

This first phenomena is that of lines from the mantra written behind the image of the goddess, perhaps establishing the identity between the Goddess and her mantra. But that was not what disturbed Sheila; she was disturbed by Kali’s personality. The woman who had gifted Sheila the image of Kali reassured her that Kali was only a ferocious form of the compassionate Goddess.

Next, when Sheila moved to Delhi, one of her husband’s colleagues came to meet her, described the woman at the bhajans of his own accord and asked Sheila what mantra she had received. Sheila denied receiving any mantra, and he told her, “you got a silent Dakshina Kali [mantra].” Sheila did not know what that meant, so he explained to her that the woman had given her the mantra silently. Sheila said, “To be honest, I
never knew anything about all these things. She had given the mantra silently! Not verbally. You know there are different ways of dikshas [imparting mantras].

Obviously, this was not a mantra she could be aware she was practicing. The visitor then told her he had come to give her a mantra and asked her to fetch a pen and paper. He said Devi had put him to this task—“Because that Amma [the Goddess] was nagging me: “Go give her! Go, give her!” He asked her to do japa with this shloka [mantra], it was the first verse of the Saundarya-Lahiri, and promised her that she would have an experience. Sheila kept wondering, “what am I going to see! What is it? Who is going to come? Why he told me?” Nothing occurred for ten days. I reproduce this next part of the narrative:

SHEILA: So, ten days past. Nothing. (Laughs). So when he came I said, “you said I will experience something. But I did not see anybody, did not hear anything…nothing happened!” He started to laugh out loud.

He said, “Vaini! [“sister-in-law” in Marathi] Did I ask you to expect something? Did I tell you to look for something? No, I told you “just do japa. And you WILL experience something. So, stop looking for anything. He told me – just do it. I knew what was wrong and very third day, I got my experience. Immediately I sent my daughter. He was sleeping in the next apartment. I said – “go, go go! Get that uncle, quick quick!” So he came. And said – “yes! Now I can see you have experienced something! Ok, bring that paper and pencil again, next shloka I am going to give.”

So ok, the next shloka he gave. Now, I know the trick. DO NOT EXPECT ANYTHING! So, fourth or fifth day, again I got the experience. And I told him and he said “ok, now I think, I have to give you the whole thing!”

I said, “if you are going to dictate, then I am going to write, it is not going to happen. If you have any text give me, I will sit and write it and give it back to you.”

47 The three long mala-mantras of the Sri-Vidya tradition include the Khadgamala, Soundarya-Lahiri and Lalita-Sahasranamam.
The entire mantra came to Sheila in parts, and she was motivated by an experience. When I asked if she would share what had occurred, Sheila was hesitant, and said she was not sure if I would “get the picture.” “Try me,” I said.

SHEILA: So the first time, when I saw, ‘ma, I had a thali, a silver plate where I had kept all my .. small small murtis, and doing puja, and behind you know how its folded like this.. the plate is like this (indicates the shape with her hands) so behind the thing when you lit a lamp, you can see the eyes… beautiful eyes! I have no words to explain that.

MANI: Devi’s eyes?!

SHEILA: Beautiful eyes, nothing else…I So that is all I saw first time. So he [the messenger] said – you got a protection. She is protecting you. Till your last breath, you got protection. You don’t have to worry, afraid of, about anything. She is always with you. The next one [experience]— I don’t want to explain that! This first one— hope you got the picture. So that’s all. The second time, I had a different experience. So that’s when he gave me all the hundred one. That night he took me to the Delhi Shiva temple. So I went there, had darshan, came back.

How did Sheila understand the vision? Her visitor friend had said it meant the Devi was protecting her. Sheila’s first vision of the Goddess was that of eyes, and her response was ineffability—“there are no words to express that.” As evident from her expressive intonation in “beuuutiful,” this vision also becomes a memory that she relishes. The idea that disembodied eyes stare back from a picture can be spooky, and it is the “beauty” and feeling in the encounter that makes it appealing and memorable. What is highlighted by this vision is the darshan— not only has Sheila seen the Goddess’s eyes, the Goddess’s eyes have seen her, and Sheila has seen the Goddess seeing her. Such an emphasis on seeing is one of the motifs of the Goddess at Devipuram, her very name is “Sahasrakshi,” the thousand-eyed or all-seeing Goddess.

Sheila had declined to share her second experience, but continued with her narrative. She memorized the Saundarya-Lahiri in fifteen days, and performed a puja. At this puja, a couple who did regular puja to Raghavendra Swami (a 16th CE saint
believed to be an incarnation of the legendary Prahlada) asked if they could visit her shrine. She discouraged them, telling them it was no more than a closet and a table, not a shrine, but they visited anyway.

SHEILA: So they came, both came, she went to open the door and ... I had Kamakshi picture. And he came, asked for the karpuram [camphor], he lit the karpuram and did the arati [lamp] and you wont believe, amma, kuṇikuṇnam [red auspicious substance] started falling from her lap.

The manifestation of kumkum, a substance used in Devi puja and worn by women on their foreheads, is a kind of synecdoche, but it also becomes a sign of the Goddess reaching out to the devotees, expressing her blessings. This couple then gave her a Sri-chakra and an “ekamukhi rudraksha (single-faced rudraksha)” and two Devi-mantras.

Sheila’s overall narrative seems eerie because things do not seem in her control. Not only was she approached by strangers and given mantras, one visitor gave her a “silent mantra,” which was a mantra that she did not even know she had received. People asked to see her shrine when she did not know there was anything extraordinary about it. Goddess Kali seems to have invited herself to Sheila’s shrine, and Sheila is at first reluctant even to let Her stay there. Devotion was a part of Sheila’s inherent nature, but the motivation to do mantras was fueled by phenomena. If the mantras were on the reverse side of the photo-frame, her entire experience was also upside-down. How Sheila found her guru was also contrary to the regular flow of events. The normal pattern is that a seeker finds a guru and gets initiated and shown the way to a deity or some such transcendent goal. In Sheila’s case, the Goddess came to her and after a long-winded tease, also seems to have brought her a guru.

The next part of Sheila’s narrative is all about moving to the USA and having regular visits from the 16th CE saint Raghavendra Swami who helped her out whenever
she was in trouble. She narrated this detail just as ordinarily as one might mention a friend’s regular visits. Next, Sheila met a Devipuram practitioner, Aiyya, in Rochester who took a keen interest in her puja-practice. It was Aiyya who finally brought Amritananda to her home. On a visit to the USA, Amritananda asked to stay at her home, asked to see this Sri-chakra, and then said they would do the *Navavaraṇa*-puja.

Next thing she knew, Amritananda said he would initiate her.

SHEILA: That day we went from A to Z. One shot he gave me all the mantras—“Guru mantra, Ganapati, Subrahmanya, Bala, Laghu Sodashi, Laghu Chandi, Chandi, Ashvarudha… like all those. Total sixteen mantras. And Sodashi [mantra].

MANI: All of them? How will you practice all of them all of them together? One… each one once…?

SHEILA: That can also be done, or you take one mantra and do it 108 times, one *mala* [rosary]. Or you select which mantra you want, and do it.

One day Sheila was cooking and chatting about Raghavendra Swamy to Amritananda, while he sat and watched and listened. On an impulse, she asked him “the million-dollar question.”

SHEILA: “What is your connection between Raghavendra Swami and you?” And I am still cooking and he kept his hand like this (she placed a hand on her heart) and said – “I am Prahlada!” That’s it ‘Ma, whatever I was doing, I stopped that and I was standing STILL. I could not speak. Guruji then said, “Amma, sometimes, when people talk about you, you feel so nice.”

As Sheila told her story, her own bafflement was evident. I was baffled too, and now I had a new mythical scheme to play with—Amritananda as Prahlada-reincarnated. Who was Sheila in this scheme, could she be Prahlada’s mother, Kayadu? Peculiar details contributed to the build-up of my imagination including the memory of Amritananda’s desk at his home in Visakhapatnam, which was at the most unlikely place—by the entrance, or rather, by the threshold. I thought of the legend, and of the incarnation of Narasimha carrying demon Hiranyakashyapa to the threshold— the only
place where he could be killed, neither indoor nor outdoor. The story of Prahlada is also
in the Bhagavata-Purana and Vishnu-Purana. Prahlada is the son of a devout mother
called Kayadu and a demon called Hiranyakashyapa. When a pregnant Kayadu is
kidnapped by Indra (chief of the gods) and then taken care of by demi-god Narada, the
child in her womb (i.e., Prahlada) becomes – unlike his father – a devotee of Vishnu (the
Preserver, and one of the three major male deities in Hinduism). Finally, in a climactic
scene when Hiranyakashyapa challenges Prahlada to prove Vishnu’s omnipresence,
Vishnu leaps out of a pillar incarnated as ‘Narasimha’ (half-lion, half-man) and kills
Hiranyakashyapa. I thought of the legend, and then I visualized Amritananda sitting
right next to the entrance of his home, keeping watch as visitors like me appeared at his
threshold.

Figure 3: Goddess Sarvonmadini
3.8 AmritanandaNatha Saraswati (1934-2015)

I sat in a tub-chair beside a little computer-desk by the threshold of Amritananda’s house. His chair turned, he faced me and the entire time we spoke, he looked straight into my eyes and my thoughts could not wander. On both occasions that I spoke to him here, there was very little chit-chat and we talked immediately about mantras. The excerpt below is from the beginning of our second conversation, and Amritananda maintained a slightly different pace this time, taking several seconds before he responded to my questions. I was accompanied by Prema who had just then helped me decipher some of the garbled words on tape from my last conversation with Amritananda. I opened by asking why we needed mantras, and whose language it was, if it was a language at all. He answered after ten whole suspenseful seconds, “The language of the panchabhutas [five elements].” Numerous sources in ancient Indic thinking assert that the world is made of five elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether; they are within and around us. This concept also prevails in the Indian medicinal science of Ayurveda and is expressed in Indian arts. In mantra-theory and practice, the element of ether becomes crucial because its attribute is sound; any substance that is only composed of ether can only be heard, it cannot be felt, seen and tasted.48 As per Amritananda’s definition, mantras were naturally occurring sounds within and around

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48 Each of the five elements is associated with a particular sensory perception: earth with smell, water with taste, fire with sight, air with touch and ether with sound. This is actually in an aggregating order, therefore, a substance with the earth element may be heard, felt, seen, tasted and smelled; a substance with the water element may be heard, felt, seen and tasted; a substance with the fire element may be heard, felt and seen; a substance with the air element can be heard and felt; and a substance with the ether element can only be heard. Ether pervades space, and it is this that is the medium of mantra. The materialist school of Charvakas and the Buddhists did not accept ether as the fifth element, they said it was not perceptible.
us. Amritananda was using the term “language” but what did it mean that the elements had a language?

Similarly, now, Vayu [Wind] has a language. When there’s a toofan [storm], Waiiiiinnnnn Waiiiiiiiinnnnn that’s a language too, is it not?

MANI: Mm. (Meaning, sort of).

AMRITANANDA: The language spoken by wind. Bhumi [Earth] has a language too. The sounds of wings of birds flying. In water, [the creatures] that roam. Everything has got a – all these are the languages of the five elements. They are all mantras. Nothing’s not a mantra. Where they get the value, is that some specific neural responses. We pick them up.

If “nothing’s not a mantra,” that negates visions of mantras including those which Amritananda has spoken and written about. Either there are mantras, or there are not— unless both these are true within different parameters. Also, it is not as though we hear hymns in the sound of birds flying. As though reading my mind, he gave an example of the Ganapati mantra.

The important thing here is Glau. Ga. La. Say if I said Galagalagalaga. Water that flows upon rock, that goes Galagalagalaga. Galagala Godāri, … potunte (he says this in a sing song manner, as though an excerpt from a song) to that Galagala if we add Aumkāra that’s Glaum.

As we conversed, Amritananda continued to explain that certain mental states have to happen for us to utter a syllable. When we utter a mantra, the “formations excite the brain” and they have “a healing capacity.” I asked if they changed the very elements we too were made of, our own panchabhutas, and our subconscious.

AMRITANANDA: Our own panchabhutas, and we are responding to them. So, sounds of nature, which evoke certain images inside us too, they have been placed as mantras.

Did this mean that the mantras were not communicating with anyone or anything out there, such as deities, and this was all between nature and us? I was trying to understand the scheme. If the elements outside us “spoke” in mantras, and they spoke
to the elements which were already mantras inside us, why it was necessary to invite
deities which were also mantras to come within us?

AMRITANANDA: Oh. (Three seconds later) There are many of these, ready to
invoke the connection between us and the panchabhutas.

MANI: I see (not quite seeing).

AMRITANANDA: … called tanmātras. Tanmātras. śabdmu, sparśa rupamu, Rasa
Gandhamu [Touch, Form, Sap, Smell] Only when they are perceived by our
indriyas [sense organs] they give us the experience. By themselves they don’t.

Amritananda said they were there, but we could experience them via our sense organs
only if we invoked them. “Placed” was the verb he had used— so were mantras taken from
nature and placed, where and by whom? A 1980 entry in Guruji’s memoir suggests that
this is the task of a practitioner:

I make the yantra come alive by mantra, repeating it. Now I rediscovered the
magical formula of manifestation: repeated intention, till the hazy intention takes
a clear shape and manifests over time.49

This entry suggests it is the practitioner whose repetition of the mantra is a repeated
intention that manifests the results—whether a deity, or a desired result.

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In the conclusive section, “Understanding Mantras Again,” I draw from all three
ethnographic chapters to analyse the poetics of mantra-practice and visionary
experience; here, I make some observations and summarise commonalities in the
experience of mantras at Devipuram. Seeing is accentuated in this location of the
Godess whose very name is “Sahasrakshi”—my own initial response had been that of

49 Devipuram official website under “Guruji’s Experiences – 7 Intelligent triangles 1980,”
having entered her omnivoyant domain even before I had her darshan. In the narratives of Devipuram practitioners, seeing is not just an embodied, physical vision, it implies an acknowledgement by the Goddess, an entry into a relationship, and even understanding and insight. Sheila’s first vision was that of Goddess’s eyes and her visitors were interested in seeing the image of the Goddess in her altar.

Some mantra-practitioners here embody deity, yantra and mantra in ways that express their occupations. Don, an architect, meticulously supered the yantra and the Khadgamala goddesses upon his own body, and thus, his mantra practice would retrace the walk up and down the meru. Mani Prasanna realized that her own body was a temple-yantra right down to the details including the placement of syllables—it seems apt that she became a priestess of Kalavahana pujas later. It also seems apt that Mani Prasanna received the Bala mantra and saw the Goddess in the form of a little girl when she was pregnant and perhaps harboring motherly emotions.

Mantra-practice is second-nature to these practitioners. Don speaks about his mantra as if it were his pulse or heartbeat that continues, involuntarily, within his body; Karunamaya calls the Goddess his very life-breath; Sheila described a “silent-mantra” she had been given—which means she thinks she was doing a mantra without being consciously aware of it. Just like AmritanandaNatha Saraswati, the Devipuram practitioners seem to have become deeply involved with the Goddess without any apparent reason; and events seem directed by the Goddess. Mani Prasanna’s description of her own body cut up into triangles reads like a vision at another range, like seeing cells in a microscope. This vision gives her the insight that she is the embodiment of the Goddess, and that the divine resides within. Devotion and surrender fits in with the idea

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that the Goddess is in charge—Sheila only had an experience when she expected nothing. The Goddess is the key player here, and practitioners realize themselves as her yantras, or her embodiments.
4. Extraordinary effort in Guntur

Contrasting with the narratives at Devipuram, the followers of Guntur’s Swami Siddheswarananda Bharati have to work hard for their visionary experiences. Siddheswarananda’s name encapsulates the spirit of hard-work—as mentioned earlier (cf. 1.5), “siddh” means to achieve, to master and to be ready, after making an earnest effort. Also, a practitioner is called a “sadhaka,” which means “one who achieves.” The sadhakas of this chapter describe how they have repeated mantras millions of times before results were achieved. Mantras here are instrumental in achieving goals, whether achieving the vision of a deity, or solving a problem. Underlying these narratives is a belief in past lives and karma, which means that actions in the past (including past lives) influence the circumstances of the present; and mantras help change fortunes.

4.1 When the Goddess arrives

No auto-rickshaw\(^1\) driver from the city center of Guntur knew how to get to the temple called Svayam Siddha Kali Pitham and even in the small area of Kottha Pattabhipuram, passersby seemed uncertain there was any temple on one of the nearby lanes. I found the place finally; it was in a residential block. A typical Indian temple has a tall “gopuram (tower gateway)” at the entrance, pillars and open porticos on the periphery and an inner sanctum. At this temple, the front door of opened immediately into a large, dim hall. The slight glints of the golden arches around the stone statues of

\(^1\) An auto-rickshaw is a commercial three-wheeler vehicle, an inexpensive mode of transportation in India compared to taxis.
ten different forms of the Goddess called “dasha-mahavidyas”\textsuperscript{2} along the walls and tiny flames on oil-wicks upon traditional brass stands created a subdued effect. There was a calming aroma of incense, clarified butter\textsuperscript{3} and camphor. I found myself speaking in a low voice to inquire about the schedule. Goddess Kali’s image was in black stone, decked with flower-garlands and upon a pedestal. An unusually large image of a hooded-serpent made of a lighter colored stone was positioned in front of Goddess Kali, facing the visitor. A sense of the hidden pervaded the entire space as though it were a cave.\textsuperscript{4} There were objects of utility here and there, some people seated on the floor on thick, cotton mats and some elderly folk on plastic chairs including one woman doing japa, and another, knitting. Both people and deities seemed afloat in space.

“Svayam Siddha” literally means “self-made,” and the word-construction is similar to “svayambhu (self-manifested),” a descriptor used for Shiva-lingams that have manifested on their own, i.e., they are not human-made. The story behind the image of this particular Goddess Kali is that she first manifested 600 years ago in the Himalayas during one of the previous births of the primary seer of this chapter, Siddheswarananda Bharati, one in which he lived for 300 years.\textsuperscript{5} It was carried by Siddheswarananda during his travels, and eventually, was worshipped in a forest near Bhuvaneshwar, Orissa. When Siddheswarananda died in that life, it passed on to another yogi. One day in 2001, when this other yogi died, Goddess Kali (i.e., the image) came \textit{par avion} to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[2] “Dasha-mahavidyas” are ten deities who are forms of Goddess Shakti. They are Kali, Tara, Tripura Sundari, Bhuvaneshvari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi and Kamala.
\item[3] Clarified butter, offered in fire-rituals.
\item[4] In Sanskrit and Telugu, “gupta (hidden)” and “guha (cave)” are both derived from the verbal root “guh.”
\item[5] In the ashram’s official literature, including Ramya Yogini’s \textit{Mystic Monk of Courtallam}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Siddheswarananda. Right at that very moment, Siddheswarananda was at Srinatha Pitham in Guntur talking to a group of his followers. Witnesses to this event were not difficult to find; among the group then present was G.Y.N.Babu, an elite, well-connected man who serves on the boards of educational institutions and social organizations in Guntur. He said, “One moment, She was not there, next moment She was there.”

![Goddess Svayam Siddha Kali](image)

**Figure 4: Goddess Svayam Siddha Kali**

I had to ask, could someone have carried her in while everyone had their eyes shut? Babu pointed out that they were all awake and alert, listening to Swamiji (Siddheswarananda) talking. Later, when Goddess Kali was moved from Srinatha Pitham to the current location in the Svayam Siddha Kali Pitham, it took four people to carry her... i.e., she was heavy, and there no way someone could have lugged such a heavy statue without anyone noticing. Babu also told me that Svayam Siddha Kali had been growing in size since that day. Another witness to Kali’s appearance in Guntur, D.V. Apparao, aka Appaji, lived next door to the Kali temple. His report was not only
about witnessing, but also about a predictive dream. In 1963, Siddheswarananda gave Appaji a Svapna-mantra, or a dream-mantra. Doing that mantra sometime in the 80’s, Appaji had a dream: “I could see this house, and Swamiji staying in it, and that a deity came here. I told Swamiji about it. *Twenty years later it materialized.*”

4.2 A poet becomes a guru

It was not easy to gain access to Siddheswarananda; he kept a busy schedule. At first, I attended his talks and chatted with his followers. His talks were sprinkled with anecdotes from the epic-histories of Ramayana and Mahabharata and the ancient lore of the Puranas, snippets of conversations between him and deities and immortal sanyasis (ascetics), and revelations about the past lives of his followers some of whom included well-known politicians in Andhra-Telangana. Hundreds of people hung on to his words which were in erudite Telugu. Siddheswarananda is regarded a “mantra-vetta (a knower of mantras),” or one who has mantra-siddhis (powers from mantras). He was admired by his followers— one said, “there is not a deity he has not seen.” Another claimed Siddheswarananda resided in his heart— the word he used was “gundelu-lo,” a raw, palpable and anatomical reference to heart in Telugu compared to the softer and more ethereal word for heart, “hridayam.”

Accounts of Siddheswarananda’s practice and siddhis went hand in hand with praise for his poetic achievements. Siddheswarananda was a wrestler and poet called Kulapati before he became an ascetic. People I met in Guntur spoke glowingly about Kulapati’s poetry, especially of his inspired and spontaneous paeans to deities. In his early days as a practitioner, Kulapati visited Jillelamudi Amma (1923-1985) who lived in Jillelamudi near Guntur and was regarded an incarnation of Goddess Shakti. Kulapati
received mantra-initiation from her and wrote a thousand poems on her called “Ambica Sahasri.” Appaji spoke admiringly of Kulapati’s boldness, and how he would open with the Vairochani mantra at his poetic recitals, inviting the Goddess as one would a lover. There were also those who were nervous about Siddheswarananda’s prowess. One informant who wanted to speak to me, but only in confidence, said he had witnessed (people possessed by) “pishachas (demons)” screaming as they sat in front of Siddheswarananda; after Siddheswarananda wielded his mantra-shakti, they became entirely docile and were restored to their normal self. My literary friends in Guntur knew of Siddheswarananda as the yogi who gained “siddhis (powers)” by offering blood to Kali. They had read in a newspaper that he had obtained bottles of blood from a blood bank; when questioned, he had said, “Goddess Kali asked me to,” and explained his method as pacifist. I was cautioned by such notoriety and assessed him as a person who would not hesitate to break the norm; I was also struck by this act of commitment to a legendary convention of sacrifice achieved alongside modern norms.

Siddheswarananda seemed to share his know-how of tantric techniques and mantras freely, even too freely. Book-stalls at his lectures sold numerous publications with detailed procedures including precautions and risks. In Mana Samasyalu Mantra-Sadhanalu, which means “Mantra Practices for Our Problems,” Siddeswarananda recommends mantras for to find a life-partner, go overseas, cure headaches, correct misbehaving children, increase attraction between a married couple, help sell property faster, and many other such everyday goals. There are also mantras for various deities, i.e., mantras that will help gain the favor of those deities, and, under a heading of “Kshudra Prayogamulu (Wicked Uses),” mantras for a range of harmful activities
including “māraṇamu (killing).” Another book, *Tantrika Prapanchamu* (World of Tantra) clarifies the dangers of abusing the power of mantras in its preface: “Tantric texts also explain that with such abuse the practitioners dig their own graves.”\(^6\) In this book, Siddheswarananda cites examples from popular misconceptions and clarifies them citing tantric texts: “The Uchchishtha Ganapati mantra is feared; if you do that, they say you will not have children.” Then he quotes a verse from the *Rudra Yamala Kavacha Tantra*, which enumerates all the benefits of the mantra including children. Elsewhere, Siddheswarananda reveals how a yogi may conquer death using foreknowledge of the moment of death, and going into “samadhi (deep meditation)” so that the deity of death (*Mrtyu-devata*) is tricked.\(^7\) How did Siddheswarananda gain authority on the subject of mantras? The answer to this question also gives us insight into the practice of mantras among his followers.

Vadlamudi Venkateshwara Rao, a disciple of Sri Kalyanamandla Bharati (1883-1955), was Siddheswarananda’s classmate and confidant in Guntur’s Hindu College. They continued to be associated as professorial colleagues—Vadlamudi taught Mathematics, Siddheswarananda taught Telugu. Vadlamudi related some of his memories about Siddheswarananda’s trials as a practitioner; we spoke in English and Telugu.

VADLAMUDI: Extraordinary sadhana. If he sat in the morning he would be at it until the evening. In summer holidays - we were college students - in the summer, if he sat in the room he would come out only in the evening, there would be no food. He would do japa from morning to evening, in the evening he

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\(^6\) *Tantrika Prapanchamu*, 5. Trans. Alivelu Nagamani.
\(^7\) Ibid., 12.
would have milk and some fruit. Forty days. He would do [practice] all night long. Some days, he would get up at two a.m., keeping two pails of cold water outside, take a bath and do japa on shirsasana (head-stand). He took on such a difficult sadhana. What he is a man [what a man he is]. He did in so many ways. When he told his experiences, I would think, ammabaaboy (oh my god), where did you come from!

Vadlamudi said Siddheswarananda began as an ambitious “upasaka (worshipper)” of Goddess Radha-Devi. Radha is a consort of Krishna who is an incarnation of the deity Vishnu, and has love as her dominant characteristic.

In those days he (Siddheswarananda) would say, woefully, “the deities are not visible to me” (“Devatalu kanipinchatalledayya”). And then, one day, when doing daily ritual (anusthanam) he heard, “COME TO MATHURA. Do japa there for a week, you will (be able to) see me.” So said Radha.

Vadlamudi quoted Radha’s words in a commanding tone, and dropped his voice at the last three words, using an emotional, tender tone as though dramatizing it for me.

Mathura is the birth-place of Krishna and the location of his divine romance with Radha; as a sacred location, Mathura continues to be associated with legends of Krishna and Radha’s presence. Vadlamudi continued the story about how Siddheswarananda then went to Mathura, and did sadhana: “Seventh day morning, when he started, she came. Therefrom, he could see the deity. He sees with his eyes open. Doesn’t close his eyes. Don’t need to close.” Siddheswarananda’s Radha connection was presented in a less formidable mode by Amritananda’s disciple, Karunamaya, who was acquainted with him. Karunamaya told me that Amritananda would send anyone who wanted the Radha-mantra to Siddheswarananda because he had siddhi over this mantra.

Siddheswarananda was in a state of permanent Radha-related bliss, fully awake but fully connected to the divine. Later, Sivananda Puri of Nachiketa ashram interpreted this
comment as “samprajnata samadhi,” described in Patanjali Yogasturas and other yoga treatises as a fully-conscious transcendant state of bliss.8

Vadlamudi had innumerable anecdotes—“Yenni! (many),” “hundreds of instances.” Most of these narratives were in the problem-solution format—the lack of a boy-child, an unwed daughter, or an incurable ailment, and Siddheswarananda prescribed a mantra and a sadhana for a stipulated period of time which usually included japa and “homa (fire-ritual).” Vadlamudi is the author of many books on Srividya rituals and mantras. His book Śrī Lalitā Nāmārtha Manjūsa, which means “the treasury of Goddess Lalita’s names,” is a commentary on every name in the the long mantra and hymn called “Lalita Sahasranamam” (L.S), and in this book, he presents a number of new mantras that he writes are hidden inside the deity names of L.S. Regarded a seer and guru in his own right, his glowing praise reflected well on Siddheswarananda’s sadhana and prowess.

4.3 An atheist turns to mantra

Another boyhood friend of Siddheswarananda is Potturi Venkateswara Rao, an illustrious journalist and author of numerous publications. 81 years old when I met him in April 2015 at his spacious study in Hyderabad, Potturi described his journey from atheism to an intense mantra practice. He attributed the beginnings of his sadhana to a dream he had “twenty or twenty-five years ago,” when “somebody” gave him the Praṇava, or the Aum-mantra. Vedic sources describe Aum as the sound in the “akasha

8 Cf. 6.1.1 about how the networks of practitioners work across gurus and loyalties.
(ether) which is present at the beginning of cosmic creation and remains after creation is dissolved. Aum prefaces both vedic and tantric mantras and is called an originary source out of which emerges the discrete material world.

MANI: “Somebody” means … did you recognize the person?

POTTURI: No. I don’t know who it was. It was the riverside. Lots of people were moving about. “A sage with his disciples was coming from one direction.” I was standing to one side. I thought, well someone (yavaro kadā ani anukūnṇātu). He came near me. Why he came near me I don’t know. Having come, “he uttered that mantra in my ears. He kissed me on my forehead.” Why he did that I don’t know. I did namaste to him (nenu dannam pettenu). He went away. There was no conversation or anything like that. I tried to forget that.

MANI: Who was he?

POTTURI: “He was a rishi. Didn’t I say “saint”? (He had said “sage”).

How did he know it was a rishi? I asked if the person in the dream was in saffron (kashaya). Potturi said he did not remember, but he was possibly in a “some *loin-cloth,* some matted hair (jadalu).” Potturi also wore saffron— a light saffron “kurta (shirt)” over a deep saffron “dhoti (wrap).” Along with a chain around his neck which was a string of pearls but looked like a rosary, he looked like an ascetic himself. The nooks and corners of his study had statuettes of Natarajas, Ganeshas and numerous trophies, all in an unkempt, careless manner, which gave me the impression of some sense of indifference to a world of representations. As we talked, Potturi emphasized that he could not forget this dream. “I tried to forget about it. But often that mantra was coming into my mind.” “For years, I was trying to brush aside. But it was persisting.” Six or seven years ago, he mentioned the dream to Siddheswarananda who recommended that he might want to do mantra-sadhana of the pranava (Aum-mantra). Potturi then began this mantra-sadhana, and on the 30th of March 2015, he completed three crore japas, i.e., 30 million repetitions of this mantra.
Completing 30,000,000 japas in seven years or 2,555 days would mean that he did 11,741 japas daily, or 108 japa-malas (rosaries) daily, since a typical rosary for mantra-sadhana has 108 beads. Potturi said he was always engaged in this activity. “I keep on doing it. I have a japa-mala, and keep counting. In the bus, in the car, in the train…” Potturi showed me his diary where he notes the number of japas—they were all round figures; when I remarked about that, he said he only counted 100 per rosary for easier calculation. Whenever he reached a significant milestone, he found, it would coincide with an important occasion. When he had done “50 or 75 lakhs,” i.e., 5 or 7.5 million, he had darshan at the Tirupati temple with the family, and the day he completed ten thousand rosaries (thirty million repetitions of the mantra, per his calculation) turned out to be Jillelamudi amma’s birthday. Why did Potturi wait so long to do this mantra, and how to explain such intensity after commencing this sadhana? Potturi replied, “I was an atheist. Now I’ve changed.”

MANI: How did you become an “astika (believer)”?

POTTURI: Because of Jillelamudi amma. When I was – in 57, or 58 - I am 81 now – in 1957/58 I lost one child. My daughter. Not even a year (old). I was upset. Is nothing in our hands? *Well, I didn’t change even then. But someone suggested, including our Swamiji* (i.e., Siddheswarananda). Why don’t you see (Jillelamudi) Amma. More for my wife’s sake. My father-in-law also suggested. I took her even though I had no belief (“nammakamu”). I told Amma too I don’t have any belief. She said: “it’s not necessary, son, there’s no need to believe.” Then many things happened that science cannot explain. Then I thought, there is something. There is something which science cannot explain. Then I started changing. Slowly changing. Even now – not really (believe in) deities – I think we don’t know.

Potturi credits his transformation to Jillelamudi Amma, the Telugu saint who also initiated Siddheswarananda. As young men, Siddheswarananda and Potturi were among the numerous people who visited her and were influenced by her charisma. While Siddheswarananda went on to become an adept in mantra-usage and guide
numerous practitioners, Potturi’s sadhana remained private, leading him more and more inward. As he continues to talk about his transformation over the course of his sadhana, he also confesses a deep detachment from worldly matters, and the total lack of desires. I then probed, what was the intention or wish on his mind, when he did mantra-japa?

POTTURI: I am wishing for the end of janmas (*janma-rāhityam*). "I have no desires. By chance if it is so." Even that I don’t know. That there are janmas.

MANI: What is “rāhityam”?

POTTURI: Not being there. "Termination. Of the series."

MANI: Moksha (liberation)?

POTTURI: That’s one meaning. That’s one meaning. If I think, what is it I’ve achieved. In this when a stage comes, say 50 lakhs, 75 lakhs, going to Tirupathi and getting god’s darshanam (seeing the deity) – these kind of things would happen. Coincidence. I can’t say that is what will happen. For example when I completed 3 crores I was in Jillelamudi. That too was not calculated. I went there. (To the) Samadhi [burial place].

By “series,” Potturi is referring to the series of lives, the cycle of birth and death, or transmigration. There was finality in his use of the word “termination”; I tried to interpret it positively, i.e., as a soteriological or salvific desire, but he refused.

Potturi’s mantra-sadhana was different from the many others I had been learning about. He took up mantra-sadhana on Siddheswarananda’s suggestion, but had received initiation in a dream from a rishi he did not recognize. Over the years, he had found himself transformed, and took delight in serendipitous moments of coincidence on a daily basis. Across decades, he was working for a goal – “termination” – a goal that he could never be sure of having achieved. In our conversation, he had hinted that even though he was no longer an atheist, he still did not believe in deities. I thought it logical that a person who did not or could not relate to a deity would do the Aum-mantra, a
mantra associated with the formless, nameless Brahman, and shared my reading with him in our continuing emails. He replied, **“Regarding concept of divinity you are 'correct.'”**

4.4 **Experimentations with mantra**

Another mantra-practitioner with a dedicated practice that (- as he emphatically stated) was not related to belief was Appaji. I met Appaji at his home next door to the Kali temple. Appaji’s conviction about the efficacy of mantra and homa was like that of any other mantra practitioner, but he spoke about technicalities rather than the transported state of devotion or the love of deities. “Homa (fire-ritual with mantras)” is the easiest way to approach deities; parayana (reading aloud) and japa help in later life, homa is like a surgery. Appaji’s conviction about the efficacy of mantras and homas was like that of any other mantra practitioner, but he spoke about technicalities rather than the transported state of devotion or the love of deities.

Like many practitioners had noted, Appaji too said that deities were sound-forms of mantras, but he furnished detail. While the mantra produces the deity, a variation in the mantra could result in a different form of the same deity.

APPAJI: The combination of sounds gives us the shape of god.
MANI: Yantra?

APPAJI: No not yantra just the shape of the god. Kali mantra Kṛīṃ Kṛīṃ hrīṃ hrīṃ hum hum gets you the shape in black –with shulam [spear] and sword – she is coming to support you. But Kṛīṃ Kṛīṃ hum hum hrīṃ hrīṃ gives us Kali with varada and abhaya mudras [boon and fearlessness mudras], protection.

Appaji spoke with the certainty of a researcher who has documented the results of an experiment. The two different forms of the deity were significant because they indicated different outcomes, even if only subtly different. The first form was a deity who would
intervene in the practitioner’s circumstance, and the second form was a deity who would create fearlessness in the practitioner. Vadlamudi also told me about such a phenomena, and had cited a “prachina grantha (old manuscript)” called the Panchakshari Kalpa Sutra (PKS) which outlined how different syllable combinations had different results. He told me it was an ancient text and did not know if he had a copy. Later, I found a pdf on the internet—it was a 1914 publication but did not indicate authorship, nor if it was an older work (from an oral tradition) that had been documented in writing. A Sanskrit text in Telugu script, it was framed as a conversation between the rishi Agastya, and the deity Skanda, who is the son of the deity Shiva. Skanda instructs Agastya in the secrets of the permutations—he utters the mantra, gives it a name and specifies the benefits of doing that mantra.

Skanda: [...] If you do (japa of) “Shivayanamah” it is called “Saumyapanchakshari,” one may do this japa to gain “shanti (peace).” [...] If you do “hrim” twice before the Panchakshari, it is the Ājñā-panchakshari and gets rid of “bhuta-pretas (disembodied spirits).”

If you do “Mavayanashi”[a permutation of Namashivaya] it is called “Sarvapanchakshari” and you get “khadga-siddhi (command over knives).”

“Shivayanamah” and “Mavayanashi” are permutations, and we learn from the PKS about the strict invariability of a mantra—a different arrangement of syllables has entirely different effects. Such a source gives us an understanding of the kind of information that circulates today, and which practitioners may follow, or likely pick up and try. In a mystical text of unknown author and date, one does not know if the
conventions of antiquity have been adopted for authenticity. Such a doubt also reinforces the importance of a living guru for mantra-practitioners.

Appaji related another anecdote about seeing different forms upon practicing different mantras:

APPAJI: In the beginning, Guruji gave a mantra, but he did not tell me what shape it is. He told me, practice it and come and report the shape. *Aum Namah Shivaya* was included in the mantra. In the beginning I would see the Shivalingam. A big Shivalingam. Later it started deteriorating and a shape came on top of it. I could see a *sarpa* [snake].

Appaji’s experience illustrates that visions may be imagined based on suggestions. If vision may be imagined, understanding may also be misplaced.

I thought something is wrong with me. Because if you see snakes they say it is sexual, so I stopped [doing the mantra].

Swamiji asked me, what happened, I told him. He said it is naga-mantra, *nagastra mantra* [snake-mantra, snake-weapon mantra]. I did it for five-six hours in the night-time after nine-thirty. Including *Smashana*-mantra [cemetery-mantra]. I found that I had control over snakes. People would bring them to me. Even if someone hits the snake if I said the mantra it cannot rise. I started betting with friends. Guruji asked, “what are you doing?” I said, “it’s working!” He told me snakes later become planets and then they trouble you, you are playing with snakes. Hereafter you should not use any mantra for your own purpose.

Appaji learns three different lessons from this early experience. Firstly, he learns to refrain from hasty imagination. The presence of “*Aum Namah Shivaya*” within the mantra had become a suggestion that influenced Appaji’s imagination and he saw a Shivalingam, the aniconic form of Shiva, where there was none. However, this error taught him the importance of keeping the mind alert and free of influences that would shape imagination in advance of a real experience. Distinguishing between imagination

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9 I am aware of a book about yoga written and published in 2013 for which a Sanskrit scholar was hired to write “sutras” in Sanskrit so that it gave a semblance of authenticity to the work.
and reality or experience is a major concern of practitioners, and I discuss this point at some length in the conclusive Chapter Six.

But experienced people often forget that they too were once amateurs, and Appaji was no different. As we chatted away, he ranted about how breath-control exercises led to delusions and many women became hysterical when they attended yoga classes. I asked, “how do you know yoga makes women hysterical?” He said “it is because of pranayama, when they do breathing control, the brain is stopped, they become hysterical. They hear gajjelu (anklets), they see this deity, that deity, it is all rubbish. “Do you mean that they are lying?,” I asked. “It is a psychological disorder. I do not believe in bhakti (devotion), only in mantras,” Appaji said, and added, “women also have more faith, more illusions also.” Appaji seemed to distinguish between a masculine, objective method that utilized mantras to invoke and command deities, and a feminine, emotional method which was to appeal to deities for help.

Secondly, Appaji learns not to be predetermined about the nature of mantras—the mantra that he had imagined was related to Shiva was really related to snakes. Thirdly, he learns not to misuse the power acquired from mantra-sadhana. Appaji spoke about the Nagastra mantra as if it were a weapon to use to subdue snakes. This contrasts with Indian epics where the “Nagastra” is a snake, or a snake-weapon used against enemies. “Astra” means a “weapon” and in the war-scenes of epics, heroes activate or animate their weapons with mantras when unleashing them upon enemies. On the sixteenth day of the Kurukshetra war in the Mahabharata, one of the warriors, Karna, tells his charioteer Shalya that he has a weapon which takes on the form of a snake, proving deadly upon impact. In this speech, Karna speaks about how he has
worshipped his Nagastra weapon, saving it for the special occasion. Karna and Appaji both treasure their Nagastras, anticipating some future use. In the Mahabharata, Karna promises his mother Kunti that he will only use the Nagastra once against his brother Arjuna. Karna’s charioteer Shalya advises Karna to aim the Nagastra at Arjuna’s chest, but Karna aims at Arjuna’s neck. Krishna, who is Arjuna’s charioteer, lowers the chariot, and the weapon topples Arjuna’s crown instead. Just as Karna wastes the Nagastra, Appaji wastes the Nagastra mantra.

Siddheswarananda writes in his book Naga Sadhana that mantras related to snakes are used to cure skin diseases and some other ailments. Appaji misuses the Nagastra mantra when he targets snakes for amusement. Siddheswarananda warns Appaji that the snakes will take revenge on him after they become planets in their future lives—this is another theme common to the Mahabharata, and to beliefs in the Indic tradition about transmigration and karma. In the concept of karma, it is the individual who is responsible for his or her own fortunes and misfortunes; past misdeeds have repercussions, and good behavior is rewarded. Somewhere along the cycle of births and deaths, today’s downtrodden can become tomorrow’s avengers—hence the imperative to be ethical and conscientious. Mantras fit into this scheme by helping intervene in karmic justice, and that is also why working with mantras is fraught with risks. Appaji spoke about a deity he had invoked, and an unforeseen outcome:

APPAlI: (Goddess) Pratyangira has no shape. It is a flame. People say she has a lion-head, because “sahasrasintha-vadane” [“thousand-lion-face,” description from a hymn]. They worship her to help in several things. I don’t believe it.

MANI: Huh? (A quizzical look)

APPAlI: Pratyangira is mainly to give suffering to enemy. We used to do Prayojika homas (goal-orientated homas). Once someone came and asked for
Pratyangira homa. I did it. Three days later he came back and said that five people died in a car accident in his enemy’s house. From then on I don’t do it unless it is compulsory. I felt I was instrumental. Is it to kill the enemy or to kill the enmity? We don’t have the right to kill.

Appaji spoke anxiously about this experience. I interpreted the point about the lack of a shape as a marker of the ferocity or malevolence of Goddess Pratyangiras; she was so “negative” that she did not even have a shape. Appaji’s conviction about the efficacy of mantras was not just a happy innocence for he had dealt with the responsibility of agency. An analogy Appaji gave me was that of a knife—we can use it for surgery, or we can use it harmfully. So it is the practitioner who has to have the discrimination; by contrast, deities are less discriminating.

Appaji’s assertion about bhakti and mantras was rational. If mantras and rituals produce results, there may be no need for bhakti (devotion). If deities are indifferent, there would also be less reason to idealize them and perhaps even less justification for bhakti. Moreover, if mantras created deities, perhaps that also reduced the status of the deity, and put the control and power in the hands of a practitioner. Appaji’s comments indicated how he considered deities instrumental:

APPAJI: Even physical creations, comes in tantra-shastra.

MANI: Materialization?

APPAJI: Yes. 99% is already manufactured. They touch it once. Then when they want it the deity gets it for them. All right I can even say the name. It is (goddess) Matangi. She can do it. She will get it [i.e., the object that seems to have been materialized].

Goddess Matangi is one of the dasha-mahavidyas, or the ten forms of Goddess Shakti. Appaji’s lack of devotion did not make him irresponsible; on the contrary, he was very conscientious. Because a mantra is potent, a practitioner has the responsibility to not misuse the mantra. Appaji also emphasized the role of the mantra-practitioner’s will:
In fact, 80% of the job is done by sankalpa [intention/wish]. If you come to me for homa, I believe the distance should be less than three feet. Easy to transfer thought. So if you have a purpose, I make the sankalpa on your behalf. My mind must be clear. If I get another thought, I say, not now, come back later.

4.5 Devotion as investment

While Appaji distanced himself from bhakti (devotion) as he understood it, Swami Vasudevananda was devoted to the deity Hanuman. A part of Siddheswarananda’s ascetic order and reputed to be clairvoyant, Vasudevananda told me that he has not studied Indian astrology and said he barely knew basics about the planets; in fact, it was Hanuman who would speak in his ear. “If you tell me your name and “nakshatra (birth-star),” soon as you tell, then He comes into my ear, tells me everything (about you).” How did he know it was Hanuman at his ear? Vasudevananda said, “Know? The one for whom the “upasana (worship, service)” is, He would speak, who else? I am an ordinary person. But at that time, He. Everything is His.” Vasudevananda used the word “āyana” a respectful form of the third person singular pronoun in Telugu for “he.” We spoke in Telugu, and he occasionally used English words.

Vasudevananda began his journey as a mantra-practitioner at the young age of thirteen when his paternal uncle gave him the naga-mantra. Why? “Well, it’s a village, snakes, *vipers*, they’re plenty. And my uncle was getting old and wanted to pass it on.

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10 Hanuman is the son of Anjana and Vayu (God of Wind). In the Ramayana, he plays a key role by helping Rama cross the ocean to rescue his wife Sita, who has been kidnapped by Ravana. Hanuman’s devotion to Rama and Sita is legendary.

11 “Nakshatra” is a term from “jyotish (Indian astrology)” referring to the “lunar mansion” in the sky through which the moon passes at the precise moment of birth. A lunar mansion is one of many divisions of the sky through which the moon travels; each mansion is identified by a prominent star. This is similar to the concept of zodiac signs which are based on the apparent path of the sun through the sky in relation to the constellations. Nakshatra helps calculate the positions of the planets at that particular time.
After I learned it, first for some five or six years, I *stock-piled* japa, then I started to put it.” What does it mean to “stock-pile” a mantra? Vasudevananda clarified, “If we have to go to a bank we need money in the *account,* right?” Before he could use the mantra, he had to have earned and accumulated the “shakti (power)” of that mantra in his mantra-shakti “account.” The idea that mantra-shakti is a reward for service or penance, and that this reward is like credit which can be stored for future deployment has many precedents in Indian epics. In the Mahabharata, Sage Durvasa gives Kunti a mantra with which she can compel any deity she chooses to father her child. She uses this mantra at once to invoke Sun, who fathers Karna, and then saves the mantra for future use.

Having already heard Appaji’s narrative about how he tried to subdue snakes, I visualized Vasudevananda in front of a snake-basket attempting to petrify a snake. However, the Naga-mantra was apparently entirely different from the Nagastra mantra that Appaji did, it was used to heal people suffering from snake bite. Vasudevananda spoke about extracting snake-poison with this mantra.

VASUDEVANANDA: No. The poison. With the mantra it comes out.

MANI: Out.

VASUDEVANANDA: Out.

MANI: After it has bitten

VASUDEVANANDA: Yes

MANI: After it has bitten, with the mantra—

VASUDEVANANDA: —then it is cured, he gets up and goes home. When it bites he has no *sensation, unconscious.* So if a mantra is put, then they, wake up a little, and then after an hour, they do namaste and go.

Vasudevananda said it could take fifteen minutes for a Naga-mantra treatment. Exactly what did he do in those fifteen minutes? Did he do mantra-japa? Vasudevananda said,
“Uhn, japa, and blow,” and blew twice in quick succession to demonstrate, “like that (allaa) with the mantra.” These were procedures his uncle had taught him. The mantra was uttered upon a “turayi” i.e., a white cloth that was knotted and tied to a specific part of the patient’s body. “If the bite is on the right side then (we tie it) on the left hand. If it has bitten on the left hand, then (the cloth is placed) on the right leg. *Alternation.*”

Every day, four or five villagers would be bitten by snakes, and come to Vasudevananda for mantra-treatment. There was also the mantra called “Gāruḍam” which was more powerful than the regular naga-mantra and which he “took out” in more serious cases. (Note the verb here, which suggests that a mantra is a weapon or instrument taken out of an arsenal). Soon, villagers would bring him sick infants, or cows that did not give milk, and Vasudevananda would put a mantra and give “vibhuti (holy ash),” and the problems would be solved.

In 1970, when Vasudevananda was in college, he received a handbook in the mail from an unknown addressee. Opening it, he found that it was the “Hanuman Chalisa,” a hymn in forty stanzas honoring the deity Hanuman believed to have been authored by 16th CE saint, Tulsidas, and in a dialect of Hindi called Awadhi. Vasudevananda’s handbook also listed results of chanting the mantra 11 times, 108 times, and so on. Vasudevananda began to do the Chalisa 11 times daily for two years and became an ardent devotee of Hanuman; he would go into a trance when he sang at “bhajans (devotional singing).”

VASUDEVANANDA: In bhajans during a Hanuman song, I would get punakam [a possessed state]. In those days, five or six people would hold me. Tight. It would come, intense.
His transported singing caught the attention of who sought him out and gave him mantras including the Hanuman mantra and the Rama mantra, which he also began to do. Why did Vasudevananda simply do these mantras given to him? Vasudevananda simply shrugged his shoulders as though to say he had no idea. Inducted by his uncle into the practice of mantras at an early age, perhaps Vasudevananda did not have the occasion to question his practice.

Ten years after Vasudevananda had begun the Hanuman Chalisa, he began to have extraordinary experiences during mantra-sadhana: “I would get anubhuti [experience] when I was doing japa, like this (draws in front of his eyes, horizontally) a *focus, light,* of intense brightness would come.” Moving his hand from left to right in front of his eyes, he dramatized the phenomenon: “Ilaaaaa (like thaat) it would come and go away. Like thaat (again gesturing), a Shivalingam would come.” In 1995, he was told by a guru that he had (done) lots of “upasana (time in service)” and that he had “Vāk-shakti” (i.e., whatever he said would occur). Vasudevananda was surprised—“Is all this “shakti (power)” in me? I would think I have nothing! (Laughs). It developed like that.” Even though he had years of experience helping others with the Naga-mantra, he never considered that as his shakti, only as mantra-shakti. A single recitation of the Hanuman Chalisa takes around ten minutes, and a practice of eleven daily recitations even for two years is no mean effort. Vasudevananda’s mantra practice continued for an entire decade before he had encouraging visionary experiences and it was twenty-five years before he even thought that he had extraordinary powers. This was a long-term investment that had yielded dividends.
The Indian tradition has examples of devotees who have proven their devotion and then feel it’s time to cash in on their investment. The story of 17th CE Ramdas from Bhadrachalam in Andhra demonstrates just such a reckoning. Originally named Kancherla Gopanna, he was a state employee who collected tax revenue from the publics and diverted it to the construction of a temple to his favorite deity, Rama. Songs that Ramdas composed in prison are popular in Andhra, even more so after a film made in 1964 (and remade in 2006). A legendary “kirtana (devotional song)” named “Ikshvaku kula tilaka” enumerates the goodies he has given Rama and his family. The song ends with him asking Rama, “did you get these goodies from your father-in-law?”

I had the opportunity to see Vasudevananda’s clairvoyance at work when he inquired about a particular detail related to a couple I knew and which perhaps only the immediate family knew about. I called them, and that afternoon gave him the relevant information from their horoscopes. Vasudevananda comments were searingly accurate, he recapitulated accurate information about them. He asked if the woman in the couple was a Rama devotee (- she is), and told me to tell her to drop Rama and catch hold of Hanuman— Hanuman would put in a reference for her with Rama and it would solve her problem. He then gave me some “vibhuti (holy ash)” to take back to them, and to ask them to wear it for forty days (on their foreheads). They did, and their problem was solved.

Using a refrain, “Oh Ramachandra!” each line enumerates a gift that Ramdas has given Rama. The first line: I gifted you a good-looking, glittering plume with which you proudly go about. Do you think you inherited all this treasure? The last line: Did you inherit all this treasure? Did your father, King Dasaratha, gift you all these ornaments? Or, did your father-in-law, King Janaka, send them to you, Oh Ramachandra?
4.6 Persistence pays

Many practitioners do not have a special relationship with a deity at the outset, and they embark on mantra-practice because they face problems they believe cannot be resolved any other way. Lakshmi, a retired teacher from Visakhapatnam, was denied her pension due to some bureaucratic tangle and fought back with mantras. This practice became a full-time engagement for five years and with progressively increased hours spent in japa and homa until Lakshmi was, she said, “exhausted.” Many years before Lakshmi faced this problem, an ascetic had given her the Hanuman-mantra, but she had not done it in earnest. In 2005, when she approached Siddheswarananda with the problem, he asked if she already had a mantra. When a Guru gives a mantra to someone, other Gurus hesitate to intervene; when Lakshmi insisted that Siddheswarananda give her another mantra, he gave her a “combination” mantra which revised her old mantra. He told Lakshmi that she had to first gain control (vashamuvchesukuni) over the demon Ghantakarna before she could win Hanuman’s favor and asked her to do a hundred thousand japas and a “purascharana (a set of rituals).”

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13 Ghantakarna is depicted as Vishnu’s gatekeeper at the Badrinath temple in the Himalayas. Searching for textual sources proves futile, as there are many sources and versions of this story, typical of Indian legends. One source is the Harivamsha, a supplement to the Mahabharata. Here is the story Lakshmi told me: Ghantakarna’s devotion to Vishnu was so intense, he could not tolerate it when other people remembered Shiva and attached bells to his ears so that he would not hear Shiva’s name. Ghantakarna also refused to worship Rama, and this was unreasonable, for Rama is actually Vishnu’s incarnation. The next big event in Ghantakarna’s story is a battle with Rama’s devotee, Hanuman; they fought long and hard with no outcome. Vishnu personally visited them locked in battle; he explained to Hanuman that Ghantakarna was his devotee, and explained to Ghantakarna that Rama was really his own incarnation. At the end, Ghantakarna acknowledged Hanuman’s superiority and became his devotee.
How would Lakshmi know she had control over Ghantakarna? Lakshmi said that if she saw Ghantakarna, she would also have control over him and then she would get Hanuman also. A purascarana usually works in proportions—a routine of 100,000 japas goes along with 10,000 offerings with mantras (āhuti) in a homa, followed by 1,000 libations of milk over the yantra [tarpana], 100 libations of water over the yantra [mārjana], and food [bhōjanam] for ten people. Lakshmi began to do these rituals with the aim of seeing Ghantakarna. She said, “only if you do all this you will get “adhikaram (the right)” – well, adhikaram doesn’t mean wonders occur, you simply get the right to ask for a favor from the deity, you’ve earned the “arhata (worth).” This extensive practice yielded no results, and Lakshmi went back to Siddheswarananda to discuss the lack of progress.

Siddheswarananda then told her she had lots of obstacles from her previous life, and that she really needed to do the Vijay-Ganapati mantra. Ganapati, aka Ganesha, is the elephant-headed deity who clears obstacles. Lakshmi began this mantra-japa intensely. “I did 3,000 daily. Sometimes even 5,000. I sat and did without moving. 5,000 japas means nearly 50 rosaries.” Lakshmi has a friend and confidante, Dhanalakshmi, with whom she had traveled to visit Siddheswarananda. Dhanalakshmi felt so sorry for her that she wanted to join forces, and Siddheswarananda approved. Both the Lakshmis were at Siddheswarananda’s ashram for sadhana in Courtallam when I met them, and we talked together. About the collaborative mantra-practice, Dhanalakshmi said, “it’s like putting ten sticks together, stronger than one stick.” Lakshmi said, “you can pass on *fifty percent* of the practice to another person.” After this set was completed, Siddheswarananda told Lakshmi it was not enough, she had a lot of (bad) karma, and
needed to do homas with at least 2,000 offerings with mantras daily. Disappointed but persistent, Lakshmi stayed home and did her sadhana for three months. She was at the end of her energy:

LAKSHMI: I was done for! I used up all my shakti. I was exhausted. We did forty days. Then when Swamiji came in Chaturmasyam [a season for rituals that begins in June] to Visakhapatnam he said we should all do the homa for Kali Kalabhairava [the two deities] for the good of the world. Then, Lakshmi (i.e., Dhanalakshmi) said don’t become “desperate,” we are all doing it, you too come and do it, even if hard or pointless. So I too went, I used to do a private job, I had no pension, I had so much difficulty, I would finish my job and run there and join them.

DHANALAKSMI: Nor would we eat, just take tiffins.

LAKSHMI: And when doing that Kali Kalabhairava homa, I came to know that a little, step by step, it (i.e., pension papers) is moving. Then again I began Vijay Ganapati (mantra) at home. One day, what I did, on a Tuesday, I did homa, it was 4.30 in the evening, I said, Ganapati-deva, I have done a lot, I must get a phone call that all my papers are through—and I got a phone call, at once!—saying “Madam, your papers are through.” We went and told Swamiji, he said, very happy, (he said) “sadhincheru” [“you have achieved it”].

After she received the phone call about her pension, she went to

Lakshmi thought the first mantra had not worked because it had not really been from Siddheswarananda—“I told him I was doing it [Hanuman mantra] and he changed it (to the combination-mantra) and gave it back to me.” But the Ganapati mantra worked well, and Lakshmi knew it was working because she had numerous extraordinary experiences and felt sensations of the mantra in her body. She spoke about this mantra when discussing the how she felt the differences in range of mantras:

LAKSHMI: I did all these (mantras), sometimes I do eleven rosaries, or I turn (the beads) 108 times and let it [the mantra] go. But the one mantra I held on to was the Vijay Ganapati mantra. What Swamiji said, do any one mantra seriously. Even if you do all the mantras hold to one deity only. It seems that deity thinks, well, the other one is handling this so I don’t need to … so to this day I do Vijay Ganapati mantra. Because of that I have had LOTS of experiences. Because of that mantra, while doing japam, the vibrations in the body, I cannot describe it, from beneath from the earth too, Ganapati is the governing deity [adhistana-pati] of the muladhara chakra (at the bottom of the spine). He keeps pushing upwards.
DHANALAKSHMI: That’s correct, today as I did that I felt it

LAKSHMI: At the Nadi Ganapati (temple).

DHANALAKSHMI: From the spine it crept up.

LAKSHMI: It is He [Ganesha] who is pushing. Oh he pushes, how he pushes illaaga illaaga illaaga [like this, like this, like this] the vibrations.

Eventually, it was not Ghantakarna nor Hanuman whom Lakshmi appealed to and connected with, it was Ganapati. As Lakshmi described her physical sensations, Dhanalakshmi corroborated them. They had both been doing japa at the Nadi Ganapathi temple in Courtallam, a temple that has become famous for the stethoscope-tested “nadi (pulse)” of the Ganapati image. The story goes that when this image was installed and ritually animated, some skeptics commented disapprovingly about the inordinate time and expense over a mere stone idol. Maunaswamy, Siddheswarananda’s predecessor, refuted this charge, medical doctors were brought in and when they examined the idol, a pulse was recorded from the heart of this Ganapati image. Since then, this temple became known as the Nadi-Ganapathi temple.14

Siddheswarananda’s use of the verb “sadhineru” is telling—literally, it means “you achieved it,” and shares the verbal root with “sadhana.” We see in this narrative how sadhana is much more than a “practice,” it is a rigorous effort towards an achievement. Siddheswarananda had told Lakshmi, “fight it!,” and it was a five-year long fight. Lakshmi’s narrative illustrates how difficult mantra-sadhana can be as well as how people are willing to take on its challenges. A practitioner who undertakes mantras

14 This narrative is widely reported in Telugu publications. It is also on the Siddheswari Peetham official website, and in hagiographies of Mounaswami, the first pontiff of the Peetham which later passed on to Siddheswarananda.
to solve a problem is motivated by hope, and works within the framework of a few beliefs—karma, the powers of mantras and deities to counter karma, and that a focused effort can solve unsurmountable problems. Lakshmi did not regard this effort as excessive, she said—“intense sadhana pleases the deities and only then the job gets done, and sometimes the task is difficult, because it has been accrued from karma of previous lives.” Repeatedly over those years, Siddheswarananda advised Lakshmi that she was fighting her own karma. “You caused much suffering to someone in your last birth. Now if your body suffers, they will be contented. So make your body suffer, and your karma gets reduced. Your sadhana gets reduced.” Lakshmi did not know how to understand this concept, and asked Swamiji: “I don’t know what is my past life, I don’t know what’s the next life when I die, now all I know is this life, and for me to hold on to some karma that I supposedly have from before, what do I do? What can I think about something I don’t know?” Lakshmi also asked Siddheswarananda to look (into her past) and tell her what was her obstacle. Siddheswarananda declined and told her that as she continued to do japa, she would automatically get visions about the extent of her previous sins as she continued to do practice, “just like one saw a movie reel.” As her sadhana progressed, Lakshmi did get numerous clairvoyant visions, some of which which she patiently shared with me, but (I thought prudently) none about her past life.

One of her anecdotes was about when they went to Vellore. In her meditation that day, within minutes of starting her japa, she saw water, and inside the water, a Shivalingam. “Inta [this big] Shivalingam (Lakshmi spread her hands to indicate the massive size of this Shivalingam). She had the same vision that night, and commented about it to Dhanalakshmi. The next morning, her friend’s brother visited and told them about a
temple in the area called Jala-kantheswara lingam, a Shivalingam in water. Lakshmi construed this to mean that Shiva had called her:

> He was telling me, “I am here, you come.” When we went – what (size) I had seen, that was what was there. It seems it was once inside water, there was also a plank to get to it. Water all around, and Shiva inside. Now there is no water. The priest told us when we asked him. What to say about this? I did not imagine it, right? I didn’t know there was a temple there, right? When I told Swamiji he said it’s a divine experience, when you do japa, you get experiences like that.

Siddheswarananda told Lakshmi to ignore such experiences and to stay focused on the mantra practice until she was more advanced. As discussed before (cf.1.4), in a culture where phenomena help ratify progress, they are also to be ignored for deeper and more transformational results.

Lakshmi and Dhanalakshmi’s practice did not stop after this. They continued to do such mantras as Kali, Kalabhairava and Radha Krishna. Sometimes these were for friends in trouble or sometimes for “loka-kalyanam (for the good of the world),” and on the whole, there was also a soteriological motive. They told me about pilgrimages they had taken to such places as Varanasi and Brindavan, each time choosing a destination that was related to their mantra. Dhanalaksmi said, “We did Kali-Kalabhairava (mantra) and went to Kashi, when we did Anjaneya (mantra) we went to Rameshwaram. Radha, (and went to) Brindavan.” Some of the mantras they received were at their own behest, some were given by Siddheswarananda, and some mantras were offered by him to volunteers. Dhanalakshmi spoke about the “prema-tattva (loving feeling)” of the Radha-Krishna mantra that both of them experienced when they visited Brindavan.

DHANALAKSHMI: Radha-Krishna mantra is *sattvic* (pure, light), body feels happy. Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu whose characteristic quality is love and he is usually depicted with his lover his lover Radha, the love-play of Radha and Krishna is legendary in the location of Brindavan.

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LAKSHMI: But if you do Kali and Kala Bhairava mantras, it is not like that. They are both – even to look at are ferocious – they are really not ferocious. It is to scare enemies. (They are actually) embodiments of peace. We get courage, we get confidence. Kali and Kala Bhairava mantra we get josh [vibrance]. When you do the Hanuman or Vijaya Ganapati mantra, you have no fears.

Lakshmi’s narrative also illustrates the crucial role of the guru in mantra-diksha. She was unsuccessful when she did a mantra that had not been given by her current guru and had to change the mantra. Practitioners consider their guru as the person they have access to and who has direct access to deities. These gurus are believed to have succeeded in their sadhana and are now willing to help others make similar progress. Cancelling old karmas is also a part of the soteriological endeavor, because only when the karmic “account” is nullified, a person is free to leave the cycle of birth and death.

4.7 After many lives

If Lakshmi’s past lives were the opposite of exemplary, Ramya Yogini’s past lives are worth flaunting. In “Mystic Monk of Courtallam,” a book about Siddheswarananda,
Ramya describes her own past lives. I excerpt a few lines to illustrate the fantastic nature of the narrative:\textsuperscript{15}

5,000 years ago, my name was “Shyama,” I was Radha’s friend. After Krishna went to Mathura, Radha-devi went away, to do tapas (penance). Then, I’ve come to know, I did service to Siddha-naga. When that birth was completed, I went by the name of Hiranya-Devi, I was “Siddheswari-devi” a family-deity. 3,000 years ago, I was [by the name of] Nagavali, the wife of a Brindavan gentleman called Pravarasena.

After that, by the name of “Anuradha” I was Bhuvaneshwari-devi, a family deity. In the 6th century, I was a virgin-goddess in the Himalayas. At the end of that century, due to the curse of a Maharshi, I was born in the Buddhist Shakhya-clan. During delivery, (my) mother died because of a tiger; I, who grew up among monkeys, was released from the curse due to a Siddheswara yogi called Padmasambhava. As “Bhemle Sakhyadevi,” Padmasambhava recognized my Vajra-varahi-shakti. Due to the Vajra-Bhairava sadhanas done by him, I got a body as brilliant as the Indra’s bow.

Whatever Ramya may have been in her past lives, she has already lived two different personas in this life, for Ramya is a medical doctor turned mantra-practitioner. She told me how she received mantras directly from the deities Kali and Kala Bhairava, ferocious forms of Shakti and Shiva.

RAMYA: In my 16th year, Swamiji (Siddheswarananda) gave me the Kali mantra. I would sit in the temple in front of the vigraham [image] and do japa. One day in the evening, a deity came out of the vigraham and made me hear a mantram. (Ramya waved her hand in the air as she said this, enacting the movement of a form stepping out of the idol).

MANI: What did she look like?

RAMYA: Semi-transparent.

MANI: Was it the same mantra as that which you were then doing?

RAMYA: I cannot tell you that.

When an image is consecrated as a deity, that deity resides in the image; the consecration ritual is called “prana-pratishtha,” which means “establishing of life-force.” I assumed that the semi-transparent figure who stepped out of the image was Goddess Kali. Ramya did not say it was Goddess Kali who gave her the mantra, only that a deity came out of the image and did so. Later in the conversation, Ramya told me that not all visitations are by deities themselves; often, it is a representative, someone lower in the hierarchy of the world of deities. Thus, an image of a deity may still function as a portal through which deities enter the world of humans. Ramya did not say the figure uttered a mantra. She said “mantram vinipincindi,” which means “she had me hear a mantra.” Although Ramya was forthcoming about the phenomenon, she was secretive about the mantra itself.

Practitioners tend not to divulge mantras given by a teacher, human or divine, as though doing so would take away some of the power gained from that mantra. Also, tantric sources will often not spell out a mantra; instead, they will convey it through cryptic language (sandhābhāṣa). In this instance, though, my probing was simply poor etiquette, even if I had the excuse of research. It made sense that a practitioner would not divulge a mantra gained after arduous sadhana; on the other hand, if it was meant specially for Ramya’s progress in sadhana, it would be of no consequence for anyone else. Ramya had received the Kali mantra from Siddheswarananda, so I guessed that that was the japa she did as she sat in front of the deity image. It would be logical that the next mantra she received from Goddess Kali was not the Kali mantra.

16 See 5.8.1 for a discussion on mantras whispered into the ear.
The second occasion Ramya described followed an identical pattern—she was doing japa in her room when the deity Kala Bhairava appeared and gave her a mantra.

RAMYA: In the Chaturmasya Diksha [a religious event] at Shravana Paurnami [a seasonal festival when initiations are done] one early morning, I could see before me, (the deity) Kala Bhairava. He gave me a mantra. That mantra should not be chanted when in grihastha [householder-life].

MANI: What did he look like?

RAMYA: Kala Bhairava is a ferocious form of Shiva. Just as it says in the Kala Bhairava Ashtakam [a hymn] ... red hair, red eyes, in a drunken state and dark. But deities can appear in any form they choose.

MANI: Did you know for sure this is Kala Bhairava?

RAMYA: Yes.

MANI: You just knew it?

RAMYA: Yes.

Ramya only clarified the appearance of the deity in response to my question, but she did not need to rely on appearance to recognize that this was Kala Bhairava. In interviews, I found that practitioners sometimes expressed doubts whether or not they had really seen a deity, but they never expressed doubts about the identity of that deity. Somehow, a sense of certainty and of knowledge, understanding or insight seems to be at the heart of the vision, which is a visual form of this insight. At Nachiketa ashram (see Chapter Five), Swami Nachiketananda tried to help me understand such a conviction by citing the experience of a dream. He said, when we see a person in a dream, we tend to know who it is even if s/he may look like someone else—it is similar with visions in meditation. Thus, the sensing mind can see through false appearances. Recognition implies a prior knowledge of the object, and Ramya’s recognition of Kala Bhairava
cannot be explained except perhaps through one of her own narratives about her past life connections with deities.

Ramya explained that receiving this mantra from Kala Bhairava was transformative – “I was changed by the mantra” – it was after this that she took “sanyasa (asceticism)”. Ramya brought up the issue of credibility on her own:

After five-six days I went to Swamiji (and said) who will believe this! This is my personal experience, people will say it is hallucination. (People will say) we are doing sadhana for years, and how is it, this young girl says (the deity) Kala Bhairava himself came! Swamiji said, you ask Kala Bhairava that question.

After that Pournami diksha [initiation on full-moon day] on the eight day, we did a homa. Everyone was there, Kanta Rao, Poorna Swami … Swamiji suddenly said, look under the fire, Kala Bhairava wants to give you something. A rudraksha17 [a rosary bead] it came out of the fire. Caked in mud. Moon-shaped eka-mukhi rudraksha [single-sided bead].

Poorna Swami confirmed this account with me later. Ramya showed me her gold neck-chain which had for its pendant, a large single-faced rudraksha bead. I knew single-sided rudraksha malas were worn by practitioners who would lead a solitary life, but no more than that. The reason she had told me this story, Ramya said, was to illustrate how response comes from deities. “If we ask, it reaches them and they react. Especially faster if you are doing their mantra.”

After Ramya received the mantra from Kala-Bhairava that early morning, she was restless to report this to Swamiji. In deference to his schedule, she could only speak to him after nine in the morning. Concerned that she might forget the mantra— “after all, it’s not as if we have pens and papers under our pillows” she said, smiling—she

17 Seeds of the Rudraksha tree (Elaeocarpus Ganitrus) are used in rosaries. The most popular rudraksha is the five-sided pancha-mukhi.
began to chant it for a couple of hours. When she went to see Swamiji, it was he who asked her first about the episode. By then, she was all set to take sanyasa—“By then, the choice was made. When the deity himself comes and gives you, what is there to worry about!” I asked her if that was the “niyama,” the rule in her spiritual discipline for that mantra, or had she lost interest in “grihastha (householder life)” after chanting the mantra? Ramya’s response was not about making any choices—”I was just like any other 25-year old brahmin girl. I had no idea this is how I will change. Transformation happened on that day. A change came about. It cannot be described in words.”

Ramya’s experience of mantras as transformative went along with a sense of responsibility. Like Appaji, Ramya felt that a practitioner needed to be discriminating and mantras ought not to be used for destructive purposes, “if one reaches a certain stage, that won’t happen.” This was also a pragmatic approach for the deity was ultimately in charge. Ramya shared an anecdote, withholding names, about a mantra-adept who tried to use his powers against another mantra-adept. The deity punished the practitioner by stripping him of all his powers. Whereas Appaji’s narratives focused on the mechanics of mantras and his discoveries, Ramya’s narratives were about engagement, transformation, and relationships with deities. “It’s not just the mantra, but the “bhavana (intention).” We have to think of the bond we want from the deity.” The vision of a deity or a fulfilled wish is only a beginning. “Experience is not only about the darshan of deity … when the job is done, there is the realization, the sense of gratitude.” Ramya offered an alternative point of view to Appaji’s idea about indiscriminate deities—“with mantra sadhana, one can do anything that is normally impossible, but I will add one clause, i.e., if the deity wishes it.” It was not adequate to have an intention,
the mantra-practitioner was not in command, he or she was only a supplicant. I shared the example of the Pratyangiras homa Appaji had told me about, where the matter had got out of hand. She shrugged—

We cannot say how the deity will solve the problem, we cannot ask for specific suggestions. It is her decision how to protect. We can ask them, we can beg them. So, for example, Goddess Pratyangiras. Self protection = destruction of enemies). So if we ask for protection, who knows how she will solve the problem. She protects, she gives wealth, it is unpredictable how she will solve the problem. We can take a problem and put it in front of the deity.

Ramya presented deities as sensitive, understanding beings. I asked her if deities understood the intentions of mantra-practitioners

**MANI:** Two people use the same mantra, they have different purpose, the devatas understand?

**RAMYA:** Yes

**MANI:** Then why mantra at all, why not just intention?

**RAMYA:** Can do, nothing against it. It is just that mantra is the shortest, easiest, fastest way. Easily possible. If we take the formless it takes time to concentrate, but if a mantra, it is fast, energy. High voltage energy.

Many mantra-practitioners in this research assert that mantras can be substituted by intentions. In particular, Chapter Five raises this question in the context of those who practice silence instead of mantra, and I discuss this in the concluding Chapter Six.

How does a practitioner know which route to adopt and do all practitioners stand an equal chance? Ramya listed—"Three things, our sadhana, “samskaras (impressions)”\(^{18}\) of past lives, and “guru-kripa (the favor of guru)” all of these create a relationship with deity.” Thus, all practitioners are not equal— “some may see the

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\(^{18}\) This is a part of the concept of transmigration. It is believed that people retain the impressions from their experiences of one lifetime and carry them over into their next life. These impressions may be manifest as tendencies or characteristics of their personality.
mantra-deity after a lakh of japa, others may get there with only the turning of one bead.” Ramya gave the example of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, who only had to do one mala, and the deity of that mantra would appear. The concept of transmigration is an integral part of the journey that is mantra sadhana. Some arrive at sadhana in their current life with a long credit earned in previous lives, and some may even have to reverse debts or negative credits from previous lives. After reaching a certain point where results begin to occur, a practitioner’s successes came “faster.” “After one mantra devata is seen, it’s faster, seeing other mantra devatas.”

I asked Ramya about intervention in nature with mantras. Ramya could not understand why anyone would not want to change their situation if they did not like it. “If Nature is perfect,” I said, and she interjected, “I would say balanced, not perfect.”

RAMYA: Mantras are for using, we are not disturbing Nature, what human beings have done to Nature, we are getting it back.

This topic also came up in one of my discussions with Siddheswarananda. He gave the example of a river—“Don’t feel it as a disturbance. It is not a disturbance at all. If a river is flowing will the river feel bad that “hey, he’s taken my water!” Not at all. There is shakti in Nature. It is not an interference.

Nature was inexhaustibly generous in these narratives. Rama told me about a woman who did a mantra-ritual for her daughter who had skin disease. She “extracted” the disease into red water colored with kum-kum, an auspicious substance, and was supposed to pour it upon the roots of a tree, i.e., back into Nature. Accidentally, this water fell upon her foot, and within days she had the same disease on her foot. In this anecdote, not only did the mantra extract the disease, but the extracted disease had to be redirected into a substance or receptacle that had the power to absorb and nullify it.
Since the water falls on the foot, the foot becomes infected; had it been poured on to the roots of a tree, it could have been absorbed by Nature.

4.8 Calling deities

In photographs, Siddheswaranada came across as an expressionless icon; in person, he had the gentlest expression I had ever seen. He spoke in a soft and gentle voice. His eyes seemed liquid, as if a gel was permanently smeared on top of them. I noticed his hands, with soft and with tapering fingers. He answered all my questions on mantras patiently. Unlike his followers who spoke about particular deities with whom they had transacted, Siddheswarananda presented an overview of deities. What also emerged in the conversation was a history of the relationship between humans and gods. He described where they live, described the hierarchies of gods and demi-gods, told me that the gods have “tejas-shariras (bright bodies, or bodies of light)” and that they had shapes similar to us. There was nothing speculative or hypothetical in Siddheswarananda’s tone.

I asked him if deities were within us or outside us and explained several reasons for my question. In yoga and tantra, for instance, I said, Ganesha was associated with the muladharachakra (at the base of the spine), so it seemed as though we were invoking a deity or energy within ourselves; but, in all the legends Ganesha was a personality who lived in “svarga (a paradisical realm).” I told him about the confusion caused by some commentarial interpretations to early sources. My long-winded question received an elaborate answer.

SIDDHESWARANANDA: They are outside, they will come inside if asked. Air is outside, it is also inside. Because it is there, doesn’t mean it cannot be here. Deities, they have shapes, they have realms, they have places, living spaces, they come into us sometimes, if sadhakas call. Anyhow, since the human body is just
like a deity’s body, that there are deities in it is a kind of a truth/reality. But really, they exist, "they are separately there, they exist, with lives, with bodies," but those bodies, we cannot see, cannot be seen by our physical eyes, only with divine eyes, they are there, they will be there, they will be there in all the realms.

Siddheswarananda used the Telugu word “śarīra” for body, and it becomes crucial to understand that this word does not refer to the material body only. As explained previously (cf. 1.4), the Indian concept is that a human being has many bodies or sheaths of which the physical is one (also see 4.5 for a related discussion). Here, Siddheswarananda is speaking about the bodies of deities, and he notes that they cannot be seen by the naked eye. He continued, quoting from the Puranas – which are tales of gods, kings and genealogies dated to the 1st millennium – and listed the various kinds of other-worldly beings.

It has been stated clearly in the Puranas. The suvarloka [heaven]. "They will be there" with bodies made of light. In the region below that will be vidyavaras, apsarasas, yakshas, rakshasas [different beings] they are all in bhuvarloka [middle regions]. We are in the bhuloka [earth]. If they are called, if they are called by those capable of calling them, they will come. "It is their will and pleasure." If they are pleased they can be seen by us. This is a truth. The Greek philosopher Plato said once, there is divine creation in divine realms, this human creation is only an imitation of that. "It is only an imitation." So, they are there. Looking at those bodies, Brahmadeva [the creator] created these bodies just like that, devatas [deities], anyone at all.

Siddheswarananda cites Puranas and Plato as authoritative sources, but he interjected the statements with his own assertions— "really, they exist," "this is a truth." Next, he said that the deities have human-like forms, as pictured in Indian legends.

SIDDHESWARANANDA: “Why do you think these bodies are like that, two legs, two hands, they have them like that. Since when do they have that? "From unknown times, unimaginable." So, each time the creator Brahma “yathāpūrvaṁ akalpayat” [imagined / created the way it was before]. "It was like that before, he’s doing that" [...]

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Among people, people who want to make themselves full of the divine, they imagine/feel the deities within their what-mandalas (tbc from recording) and “they will make it real.”

So. They are there, they will be there, they are in us, if we ask them to come into human beings they will come, if we call them they come. Among people, people who want to make themselves divine (devamayam gaa), they feel (bhavinchukuni) the devatas and “they will make it real.”

If deities are already inside us, why do we need to place them at different locations of our body or bodily space as in the Kalavahana puja at Devipuram? Amritananda had said one had to simply imagine the syllables (which are also deities) before one could see them, and his follower Mani Prasanna had iterated the same point (cf. 3.4).

MANI: I see. Now, when we do nyasa (placement of syllables on the body) that we ca..ll (Siddheswarananda echoes, “yes call”) the deities into us… is that kalpana [imagination]?

SIDDHESWARANANDA: Kalpana only. Whatever you consider, whether deity is there or not, at first you don’t know. You do the mantra. You try to see the deity. “First you imagine. That imagination becomes true. (MANI: I see) It is your personal affair. They are doing their own thing. But, you frame a body by your imagination. They will come into that frame, when you prepare. So, if you imagine/create (kalpiste) appropriate situations for them to come, they will
come. What “kalpiste” means is you do so because of your shakti. And what’s the shakti, it’s the mantra. "Imagination." Mantramu, bhavana [Mantra, ideation]. Mantramu, bhavana. Both these should go together. You should keep doing the mantra. One should "imagine" how the deity is (he uses feminine or neuter gender here, “yatā untundo”). Even if you don’t imagine, the deity comes, because of the mantra. But if you "imagine" she / it will come a little faster. You prepare a frame.

Siddheswarananda’s point stresses imagination and feeling (bhavana), just like the Devipuram practitioners. The practitioner had to do the mantra with feeling, use her imagination, and sooner or later, the real visionary experience would occur. Was that the only way to have a visionary experience? What about all those saints we hear about who have sudden experience of gnosis? I gently broached this matter too.

MANI: Now, between us and that realm, the mantra, like a bridge, say …

SIDDHESWARANANDA: yes

MANI: Without that, is there a way to make a connection?

SIDDHESWARANANDA: Yes it is, yes it is,” in sadhana, mantra-vihina [without-mantras].

Siddheswarananda then talked about how human beings and deities became distanced from each other in history.

At the beginning of creation, deities came to earth, they lived here. After some time – they [our ancestors] told (us) in the Puranas – on the banks of the Devika river. After they lived here, some among them felt “let’s stay here.” (MANI: huh). Felt let’s stay here. And at first there were contacts between these and those above. Those [deities] used to come and go, these [i.e., deity-friends of deities] used to go, but after staying here for a long time, in their descendants, the earth’s atomic particles got into their bodies and they could not go up. When they called, they would come. After some time, some ages, when *thousands of years, lakhs of years* passed, them coming when these people called stopped.

Now some of those with shakti among them said, ayya [sir], you’re not coming when we call, before when we said “come Mahendra” you would come, now you’re not, humans need you, our shakti has become weakened (MANI: I see), so how will you come fast? Then, when they said that, (they said) we’ll give you mantra, if you do that mantra, we will come.
What interested me was how Siddheswarananda used the word “up” to indicate the realms of the deities. Whether this was sky, heaven, or simply a comparatively better place, according to him, it had been lost to human beings. Luckily, there was mantra.

* * *

The narratives of this chapter illustrate how mantras are instrumental, and used by practitioners to connect with deities to achieve some goal. Mantra-sadhana calls for dedication, stamina and endurance. Even though devotion is evident in the discussions on Radha-mantra and Hanuman, mantra-sadhana here seems arduous rather than joyous. Practitioners are willing to wait for years, even without the motivation of extraordinary experiences, to see the results of their endeavors—Vasudevananda waits for ten years, “stockpiling” his mantra. The astounding numbers quoted by practitioners represent the inordinate effort they have put into mantra-practice.¹⁹ These numbers are the equivalent of investments, and the results are as if earnings, or a return-on-investment.²⁰ The concept of mutual exchange is common in Indian religious practices, especially in vows and pilgrimages where the suffering of the devotee or pilgrim builds religious merit. While a deeper discussion of this practice is not possible here, suffice it to note that it is not a debt (as it is, for instance, regarded in Christianity), but a forward-payment—I note this in particular because an advance payment tends to go along with

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¹⁹ Not all practitioners approve of such feats—Swami Madhavananda at Thogutta called such practitioners “leaf-counters.”
²⁰ Such a practice is common in Hindu and other religious traditions. In Hindu practices, we see how the tougher the pilgrimage, the more desirable the journey and the more rewarding the outcome. The concept of mutual exchange is also in Vedic yajnas, where the gods are fed and in return they look after the “order (ṛta)” of things in the world. The concept of “dana (charity)” in exchange for religious merit is prevalent in many religious traditions, and Christian practices of penitences and indulgences are also comparable.
an expectation. Narratives of feats of mantra-repetitions suggest that the goal is extraordinary, and it is really the practitioner who takes the credit for achieving results, even though they may say that it is the deity who does the favor. After practitioners gain experience and become seasoned seers, they have access to deities and begin to play the role of mediator, helping other practitioners. Here too, some practitioners seem to be in a position of power, as though the deities have no choice but to respond to mantras—Appaji was more sensitive to questions of risk and responsibility because he placed the onus of achievement upon himself. By contrast, Vasudevananda and Ramya were more relaxed because deities decided the outcomes.

Mantras are considered instruments for both good and evil purposes. The goals of practitioners are varied—Lakshmi wants her pension, but Potturi wants nothing by way of material benefits. Transformation occurs as a direct outcome of mantra-practice in Ramya’s and Potturi’s narratives. Vasudevananda and Appaji use their expertise and access to deities to help others. All the practitioners regarded mantras, and mantras in rituals, like surgical weapons to combat diseases—Appaji used the term “surgery,” Vasudevananda spoke about taking out poison with the mantras, and Ramya’s anecdote of the skin-disease also seemed to excise the diseased skin with mantra-empowered water. Practitioners were conscientious about not misusing mantras, but the very tenor of Siddheswarananda’s literature made it clear that there was scope to put mantras to destructive use. This was not an environment where mantra-sadhana was just done by rote; there was a methodology of trial and error, and a process of discovery. Siddheswarananda had refrained from telling Appaji the identity of the Nagastra mantra. He did not give Lakshmi answers to her questions; instead, he told her to persist.
with her sadhana and she would be able to see her past lives “like a movie reel.” When full-time disciple Ramya (and disciple across lives) asked how she could prove she had been visited, Siddheswarananda redirected her to Kala-Bhairava, and told her to ask him directly. Each one of the practitioners was a seer in his or her own right, working with an experienced seer whom they regarded guru.
5. A poetics of practice in Kodgal

This chapter about mantra-sadhana at Nachiketa Tapovan in Kodgal focuses much more on the nitty-gritty of practice than the previous two ethnographic chapters. Why are mantras repeated? How does mantra-practice connect to the tradition of meditation and how does it silence thoughts? What is the role of silence and inner silence in mantra-sadhana? Why does visionary experience conform to cultural norms? These are questions I was able to probe alongside my own engagement in practice, for I took mantra-initiation here. There are two gurus at this location of Nachiketa Tapovan in Kodgal and they have different approaches to how mantras work; accordingly, their guidance to practitioners is also different. The topics of this chapter are also explored through the experiences of two practitioners.

5.1 Nachiketa Tapovan

Eighty kilometers to the south of Hyderabad on the highway after the Balanagar crossroads, stay peeled to the left side of the road. Take care not to miss a milestone on the roadside with blurry lettering: “Rangareddyguda.” Turn left at once into a narrow dirt road and past the railway crossing and then keep going ten, or maybe fifteen, or maybe twenty kilometers past some fields and Banjara villages of Potlapalli, Kallepalli and Thirumalgerry. Then ask anyone, “ashram?” Follow people’s directions and you’ll see it soon enough—a red-walled boundary and large iron gates that are shut. If you have a phone number, you can get someone to open the gate for you. Here, forty-five

1 Nomadic Rajasthan group.
acres of land house an ashram that does not charge visitors to stay, a large temple with no set schedule and a free primary school for the neighboring tribal children. The school is called “Veda Vyasa Vidyalaya,” after the revered seer of Hindu tradition accredited with the compilation of the Veda and the authorship of the epic, Mahabharata. The main guru here is a maverick sanyasi, Swami Nachiketananda Puri, who tries to convince his followers that they are their own gurus.

After some preliminary chit-chat, Nachiketananda took me to a sprawling temple made of a reddish stone called “Ma Yoga Shakti Pitham.” There was no one there except three kids at play who ran towards us, screaming “Aum Namah Shivaya!!!,” and hurled themselves on to Nachiketananda with the liberty of familiarity. I learned that the temple was inspired by a story about how Swami Vivekananda brought together concepts of a church and a temple for the Ramakrishna Math in Belur, Karnataka. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886) was a Bengali saint reputed for his deep devotion to Goddess Kali. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), credited with promoting Indian spirituality to the West, was Ramakrishna’s disciple. One would classify Nachiketa ashram as Shakta since it adhered to the Ramakrishna tradition; in fact, it was a synthesis, just like “Hinduism.”

On the temple walls, there were reliefs of “yogasanas (yoga postures),” “mudras (hand gestures),” a japamala, an Ardhanarishwara (half male, half female deity) and

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Nachiketa ashram does not belong to a formal lineage or religious order. Swami Nachiketananda was a volunteer by the name of Vishwadeep at Vivekananda Kendra when he met the future trustees of the ashram, who were Ramakrishna devotees. Their collaborative ashram trust had a goal of spiritual education (rather than religious activities). It was only when Nachiketananda’s disciple, Sivananda Puri wanted to take sanyasa, and insisted that she would only accept initiation from Swamiji, that he was compelled to join an ascetic order—Nachiketananda took formal asceticism in 2011 in the Dashanami tradition in Haridwar.
sections from the Sri yantra (aniconic Goddess). Circumabulating the main temple on the outer platform, we crossed small temples of a strange assortment of deities set into turnings and corners. Nachiketananda told me that these deities had been chosen for their connection to the chakras, the energy centers of the body. The reader may be familiar with the concept of chakras, as a recurring reference in many conversations previously (e.g. p.88). Nachiketananda told me that the deity Ganesha empowers the Muladhara chakra, the deity Rudra empowers the Manipura chakra, the deity Balaji the Swadhisthana chakra and the deity Krishna the Anahata chakra. The three main temples inside are also a part of this chakra progression—Ramakrishna, Kali and Shiva relate to the Vishuddha chakra, Ajna chakra and the Sahasrara chakra respectively. In yoga-theory, these are the seven energy centers that are activated as the “Kundalini” energy inside the spinal cord rises, and also results in visionary experiences. Worshipping these particular deities, therefore, is a way to systematically direct attention to one’s own energy centers.

When we approached the Ramakrishna temple, Nachiketananda asked if I was willing to sit in the Ramakrishna temple to meditate, and we could continue our meeting after that. Even as I found it an odd request, I thought he must have his reasons and agreed. He asked me to close my eyes. I felt the sensation of his hand over my head as he muttered a Kali mantra. Nachiketananda’s intense, low voice reverberated in the empty hall. He said I could stay inside the temple as long as I wished, asked me to keep my eyes open, and closed the heavy, temple door behind me.
My conversation with Nachiketananda later that day was just as off the grid as the ashram space; he disrupted the very definition of a mantra. We spoke in English:

NACHIKETANANDA PURI: Any syllable, any letter, you take, it’s a mantra. The sound is mantra. It is through my experience, what I am speaking. Anything is. Even, you frame a very big sentence, it’s (a) mantra. You don’t have anything to contemplate, it’s still a mantra. So, it is not something particularly, when like it is written in the shastras so and so it is called as mantra. There is nothing like that. So mantra could be anything. Even just gazing at something. Is the process of that mantra. So something happens. That is mantra.

MANI: So the function of mantra is...“something happens”?

NACHIKETANANDA PURI: Yeah, it takes you from one shore to other.

MANI: I see?

NACHIKETANANDA PURI: It is like a vehicle. Mantra is a vehicle. See, you came all the way from Hyderabad in a car. That’s a mantra.

MANI: Wouldn’t you call that a yantra? (*yantra* is a “device” or “instrument”).
Nachiketananda claimed that mantras, yantras and mandalas were all really “one whole thing” and were only divided to help us understand better.

NACHIKETANANDA: There is in Mahabharata somewhere... (He quoted the Sanskrit quatrain 3 with this meaning — ) There is not a single root which cannot be used as medicine. Similarly there is no syllable which cannot be used as a mantra.

Already frustrated by what I regarded a wishy-washy universalizing spiel, I tried to push the discussion.

MANI: Then, how come a Bollywood song cannot be a mantra?

NACHIKETANANDA PURI: Who said not?

MANI: Can it be?

NACHIKETANANDA PURI: Yes, it is!

Nachiketananda’s stance on mantras was a let-down, but his disarming sincerity and bold innocence reminded me of the legendary personality of Nachiketa—the young boy from Kathopanishad who visits Yama, the God of Death with searching questions. Perhaps sensing my response to the mantra-related discussion, Nachiketananda urged me to meet his key disciple, “Mataji,” who was away right then, but would have much more to say about mantras. Mataji Paramahamsa Swami Sivananda Puri was the ashram’s “adhyatmik praneta (spiritual leader)”; a few weeks later, I met her in Hyderabad at the home of the ashram founder in the upscale area of Jubilee Hills.

3 The entire line: Na akṣaraṁ mantra rahitaṁ, na vā mūlamanaṣṭadhaṁ, ayogya puruṣah nāsti yojakaḥ tatra durlabhaḥ.
5.2 Immersion in the ocean of mantra

Nothing like my imagination of a motherly or elderly “Mataji (mother),” the sprightly, and even impish, 25-year old had much more to say about mantras than did Nachiketananda— mantras were her raison d’être. Sivananda was ten years old by the name of Bhavani when she received her first mantra from a wandering ascetic. She does not remember his name, nor where he had come from and why. At the time, Sivananda said, there were “problems” at home, and it was to solve these that he gave her the “panchakshari (five-syllabled) “Aum Namah Shivaya.” He asked her to do this mantra for 21 days, and it worked. In her late teen years, Sivananda became the disciple of Nachiketananda, who introduced her to “kriyas (yogic practices),” but it was japa that engaged her fully. During mantra japa, she would often slip into the state of “samadhi (trance),” sometimes for twelve hours at a stretch. When I first met her in Hyderabad, she took no time to warm up and within the first ten minutes, she had told me she was receiving mantras from “siddhas (celestials)” who visited her. The excerpt below is from part-way through our conversation; we spoke in English and Telugu.

SIVANANDA PURI: It was so intense, the japa, though I did the yogic practices, I used to really listen to the celestial sounds. It was in my right ear, it used to go on all night sometimes. Such beautiful mantras. It was like no one can chant. No one can chant. So my faith in mantra was established. Now I am in mantra and mantra is in me.

It was many months before I could understand the import of what she had just said. Immediately, though, I focused on what I could probe further. I asked, in what language were the mantras, and she said they “would all be in Sanskrit.” What kind of mantras

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4 Adding “Aum” adds up to six syllables, but it is still called Panchakshari or the five-syllabled mantra.
were they? Sivananda said they were Vedic mantras, but in “a different svara [tone]
altogether.” Sivananda was referring to the rising (“udātta”), falling (“anudātta”) and
mixed (“svarita”) tones, which are integral to vedic mantras.

SIVANANDA PURI: Sometimes I listen in a female voice, male voice. Sometimes
the voice was so different and I used to be so excited and I used to get up in the
night and I used to start my sadhana. I had such beautiful visions about mantra.
and now also...

MANI: visions about mantras, meaning?

SIVANANDA PURI: Yeah, you can even see mantras. Oh.. it expresses in a
different way to each individual. It is not a rule that everybody should hear it,
everybody should see it.

MANI: So you think mantras are .. somewhere else.. which is .. also here?

SIVANANDA PURI: No, I felt they are in the universe, They are in the cosmos, I
myself got tuned to it. And I reached to the frequency where it was there. And I
just was like... that’s what now also.. it... I find that... no words to express
mantra. It is my life. That’s how I define it.

Sivananda said she was listening to celestial sounds “almost regularly, every day, whole
night”—these were mantras as well as music.

SIVANANDA PURI: Yeah Music. Different musics.. Sometimes I used to hear
drums, veena [a stringed instrument]— it is not the veena that I hear usually,
sometimes I hear Sanskrit mantras, chanting and chanting.. I never found it in
any texts or Upanishads also, such a beautiful.. some one is chanting.

Together with hearing these sounds, she also had dreams where she was taught mantras
and mudras – by “siddhas (celestial beings).” Who are celestial beings and what do they
look like?

SIVANANDA PURI: Then I have received so many mantras in my dreams. And I
started doing. Then I also saw siddhas in my dreams. They would teach me
different mudras and initiating me different mantras. Suppose I would practice
one mantra, clearly what I have to do and not do, how…. They would tell me
how to do..

MANI: What would they look like?
SIVANANDA PURI: Initially they would come in the human form, sometimes, like a light, sometimes like transparent bodies, sometimes, like half the body, it was all different.

MANI: So they also have access to the mantras and ... they are using it...?

SIVANANDA PURI: In fact they are always chanting mantras. And they are always are looking for right disciple whom they would initiate. I was initiated by different sadhus [ascetics] in my dream. So I was initiated into one mantra and I was asked to practice it for 21 days and after 21 days another mantra would be ready for me to practice. So it is a sequence of mantras.

Sivananda said that she was given different mantras each time, and they could be “sometimes three words, one word, one sound, yeah sometimes one sound, two, sometimes three, four, five, sometimes ashtakshari [eight-syllable mantra].” She then talked about the set of rituals she was engaged in, and I asked her from where she got her procedures. She replied, “I don’t know. I didn’t read any shastras (religious books).”

Sivananda’s comment about not reading shastras was said simply, without pride or apology. I guessed she had read popular spiritual literature, for she used such terms as “cosmos” and “celestial sounds,” but her responses were descriptive and emotional.

Why did a mantra need to be done hundreds of thousands of times? Why did her visitors care if she had done her mantras or not? What was the relationship between mudras and mantras? What was her motivation for japa? What did she mean by “mantra is in me, I am in mantra”? Was this just an expressive way of saying she was immersed in mantra-sadhana? Sivananda looked like a child. Thin, diminutive, near-engulfed in a dark-red sari, she had literally hopped into the armchair and crossed her legs—she looked too young to speak about “mantra-shakti.” Sivananda had been the first mantra-seer I met in this fieldwork. When she warmly invited me back to Nachiketa ashram for Navaratri, I accepted.
5.3 Openness to the divine

“Navaratri,” which means “nine nights,” is a pan-Indian festival dedicated to Goddess Shakti who has a different form and name on each of these nights (and days). The nine goddesses, configured differently in different regions and traditions in India, are Siddhidatri, Shailaputri, Brahmacharini, Chandraghanta, Kushmanda, Skandamata, Katyayini, Kalaratri and Maha-Gauri. Each day is also associated with specific colors—people may follow these themes for the clothes they wear on those days, or for how they dress the Goddess. Rituals for these nine nights and days are guided by the astrological calendar (“Panchanga”) which recommends auspicious schedules based on the movement and favorable positions of the stars and planets. Shailaputri’s day has “Ghatasthapana” which establishes the pot that is the Goddess, Katyayini’s day has the Sarasvati puja, and the eight day (“ashtami”) has the “Ayudha puja” which is a ritual honoring of all instruments from tools to vehicles.

At Nachiketa, everyone waited eagerly in the mornings for the temple doors to open, revealing the appearance of the Goddess on that day. I found a Telugu brochure in the shelves of the back-room of the temple which was a useful guide to the forms and personalities of the goddesses. The details were either gleaned from, or corresponded to, the Sanskrit hymn called Nava Durga Stotram. The very first verse in this hymn is about Goddess Shailaputri: *Vande Vāṇchitalabhāya Chandrārdhakṛtasekharāṃ. Vṛṣārūḍhāṃ sālādhārāṃ Šailaputrīṃ yaśasvinīṃ.* I translate: “Homage to Shailaputri, mounted on a bullock, carrying a trident, a half-moon on her head, giver of fame and desired profit.” The goddesses have distinct forms—Shailaputri rides a cow and Chandraghanta rides a
tiger; Shailaputri carries a trident in the right hand and a lotus in the left hand and Chandraghanta has ten arms, carrying a sword, trident, mace, pot, lotus and bow.

Every evening at the “yajna-shala (yajna-room)” during Navaratri, there was a homa led by Sivananda. She followed the basic structure of a tantric homa, but seemed to apply her own liturgy. She used different mantras on each day of the homa, and sometimes, she would repeat a line without break. She seemed to have some counting scheme, for as she used a little rosary in her left hand. Her rendition of the Kali-mantra was particularly piercing. As she chanted, the syllable “krīm,” her voice was sharp, audible over and above the group. All of us chanted in pace with her, and when she stopped, we quickly stopped too. “Krīm svāha - krīm svāha - krīm svāha - krīm-svāha krīm-svāha krīm-svāha krīm-svāha krīm-svāha krīm-svāha” — it went on like this, and with each “svāha” the people closest to the fire offered the kindling-dust (“samidha”) to Fire-deity Agni.

During the homa on the day of Goddess Chandraghanta, a teenage girl called Anu began to breathe hard, rocking her body. When the very last movement of “krīm” began, she lay back and began to do a series of “mudras (codified hand gestures).” Those who sat next to Anu moved away, clearing space for her. Anu’s movements were graceful, slow and smooth, like a dance. Trustee and practitioner Vasundhara walked across to the opposite side and began to take photos. Occasionally, some distracted attendees turned their heads to watch Anu; others carried on as before, chanting along with Sivananda, and making offerings to Agni with each “svāha.” My phone-camera did not capture very much in the late evening light, so I put it away and watched. After the homa, Sivananda continued to sit, eyes shut, hands in the “chin”-mudra, where the tips
of the thumb and forefinger touch, expressing union with the divine. The whites of her eyes began to show. There was pin-drop silence in the yajna-shala. Anu continued to do mudras. Sivananda’s face grew darker than usual. As the fire began to subside, someone added kindling, and Agni lingered.

Some days later, when we were in Hyderabad, I asked Sivananda, “Is Anu aware?” She said, “No, she doesn’t know what she is doing, you can tell, her eyeballs are completely still.” The other person who was present at this conversation, Mr. Reddy, said, “It must be past-life impressions (“samskara”), maybe she goes into a trance and then the past-life memory surfaces.” I look towards Sivananda. She disagreed, “No, she is responding to the mantras, she is so accepting, it is beautiful.” Reviewing the video later, I noticed that Anu’s pace was slower than the mantras, but she seemed to follow the chant’s punctuations when she completed one mudra and began another. I asked...
Sivananda if she knew which mudra was in response to which mantra; she nodded. I met Anu some weeks later for an interview. Did she know what she was doing? Anu responded, clearly: “*Yes.*” She said she did not know if she was *conscious* but she knew she was doing mudras. Sometimes she could hear what was happening in the environment. No, she was not asleep. No, this was not the first time. The first time she began to do mudras was at Navaratri homa in 2013. She was in meditation during the homa and as she continued to sit after the mantras were all done, her hand started moving on its own, doing mudras. She had meditated since she was very young. “I know what I am doing. I do new ones each time. I don’t know why I do them. They [hands] move without my thinking.” I asked if she had tried to stop them. Firmly and clearly, Anu said, “No.” I then tried to discuss the mudras themselves. She said she did not know what mudras she was doing, and that Sivananda had told her they were the mudras Ramakrishna Paramahamsa did.

May we classify Anu’s state during the homa as “possession”? Anthropologists have concluded with negative as well as neutral understandings about possession states. Janice Boddy provides a broad definition: “an integration of spirit and matter, force, or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least, negotiable.” In *Religion Against the Self* (2000), Isabelle Nabokov presents an unfavorable picture of how the personality of a possessed ritualist is ruptured, and permanently

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Sivananda does not problematize the incident, for she spoke about it as a healthy, positive outcome of Anu’s openness. Her explanation of “accepting” and “openness” does not point to possession by some other entity; these are Anu’s personality traits, and favorable at that. Moreover, Anu does not disclaim responsibility or ownership of the self—“I know what I am doing.” For an understanding of Anu’s self-possessed response, I turn to Frederick M. Smith’s exhaustive study, Self-Possessed (2006). Discussing possession in tantra, Smith notes that 11 CE Kashmir philosophers Abhinavagupta and Kshemaraja described mudra as a state of possession, and how the body becomes possessed by mudra and mantra. Smith’s broader proposal in this study is that the very notion of the self in South Asia comes with the idea of porosity and permeability. He includes devotional states in this study and illustrates how “āveśa” (possession, entry) becomes connected to “bhāva,” an emotional expression of intensity and longing described by devotional (“bhakti”) poets. We do know that bhakti is on Anu’s mind, for she attributes her response to her *deep feeling* for Ramakrishna, and Sivananda had endorsed this connection by telling her that these were the same mudras done by Ramakrishna, thus ratifying her feelings. Researching this further, I found narratives of Ramakrishna’s spontaneous mudras and photographs in the public domain, one of which I reproduce in Figure 8 below. Smith differentiates between bhāva and āveśa:

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6 Nabokov, Religion against the Self.
8 Ibid., 377
9 Ibid., 355.
The difference between āveśa and bhāva seems to be that āveśa is a state of “open” absorption, in that the elements of the experience as well as the identity of the experiencer can shift in different directions, while bhāva denotes a specific experiential state in which the identity of the experiencer is not necessarily threatened.

Figure 8: Ramakrishna Paramahamsa

Anu’s state during homa fits Smith’s description of bhāva. What interpretation might Anu have of the phenomena? I probed gently—did Anu have any thought about why this might be happening? Perhaps I was looking for such emic explanations as past-life;

10 “Ramakrishna at Studio,” www.commons.wikimedia.org, public domain.
however, Anu said she had no idea and had already said she did not know if she was “conscious.” Looking within her environment, I noted how Nachiketananda often spoke about making the attempt to bridge the conscious and unconscious. As a practitioner progressed, he said, s/he would be conscious of even the dream-state. Anu only did the mudras when Sivananda did homa. She told me that she did not close her eyes in school group-meditations as she was scared this would happen again, and others would think badly of her. This, I thought, was evidence of authenticity; it implied that she doubted if she was in control, or/and that she did not feel safe enough to slip into a “deep” state in her school environment. A skeptical interpretation of Anu’s response might see it as contrived, or explicable. A psychoanalytic interpretation via Freud that this was some repression surfacing under conducive pressure would find support in Anu’s socio-economic background. It would also be possible to study her expressions as language, similar to Pentecostal xenoglossia. A recent study of this phenomena is by Josh Brahinsky (2012) who proposes that “religiously inflected sensory aptitudes and perhaps even mind-body relationships emerge through a process of careful cultivation and nurturance.” While these explanations would not be invalid, they would not help understand why Anu performed or chose to perform mudras, and how the mudras matched the mantras.

11 A variant of Pranayama breathing taught at Nachiketa is called “Nachiketa Chaitanya Kriya.” Swami Nachiketananda tells practitioners that this will ‘wake’ the body and mind, but also to help link the conscious and sub-conscious parts of the mind. If this is practiced at night before going to sleep, he says, one stays aware of realizations that one has in the dream-state.

Mudras have a long tradition of denotative meanings and prescriptive usages in the Indian tradition, and in Hindu rituals. One of the most visible mudras in Indian culture is that of the folded-hands which accompanies the greeting of “namaskar” or “namaste.” Some mudras popular in iconography of deities and sages are the “abhaya (have-no-fear)” mudra and the “varada (I-give-boons)” mudra. Explaining the significance of mudras to tantric rituals, André Padoux cites a definition from the Sanskrit tantric source of Mahanayaparaksha— “[mudras] make known the nature of reality”— and then discusses the distinction between mantras and mudras:

We may consider these formulas [i.e., the definition above] as largely arbitrary since they are based in part on a play of words; we must, however, retain the distinction they set between, on the one hand, the awareness and, on the other, the visible expression or sign of the essential nature, for this is certainly the manner in which mantras and mudrās are understood and experienced by those who use them.

Thus, a mudra is understood ontologically— a deity with the power and inclination to protect expresses this inclination with the abhaya-mudra, and this inspires fearlessness in those who approach the deity in that mudra. By “essential nature” is meant the natural physical expression. A simpler way to understand this concept is to conceive of closed-eyelids as the mudra of a sleep-state. The tantric source Yoginihridaya (YH) 1.57-71, also translated by Padoux, describes how the divine energy takes the form of nine mudras

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13 Mudras are also used in yoga and dance arts; an early documentation is in the classical text on dance-drama, 2nd CE Natyashastra compiled by Bharata.
15 Ibid.
during the process of creation. Correspondences between mudras and mantras, mudras and deities, and mudras and chakras are codified in various manuals of tantric rituals.

A compendium of mantras that I found at the homes of many practitioners in Hindi and Telugu translations, Mantramahodadhi (which means “the great ocean of mantras”) explains the term “mudra” as derived from the verbal root “mud (to rejoice)” because the practitioner who does mudras makes the gods happy and is released from sin.\(^\text{16}\) Mudras are done in rituals because the “natural” is considered a link between the physiological and psychological—one leads to the other. Just as an emotion, thought or psychological state is believed to be naturally expressed in a mudra, doing the mudra is believed to lead to that psychological or emotional state. Agehandanda Bharati refers to a compendium called Mantramaharnava (which also means “the great ocean of mantras”) which he has seen used by most practitioners in Mumbai and central India. This source connects specific mudras to deities:

Eighteen mudrās in the worship of Viṣṇu, ten mudrās for the worship of Śiva; seven mudrās for the worship of Gaṇeśa; ten mudrās for the worship of Śakti, mudrās for the goddess Lakṣmi, five mudrās for Sarasvatī, one mudrā for Vahni (the god of fire, Agni); miscellaneous mudrās; etc., etc.\(^\text{17}\)

Brahinsky might call such a compendium a manual for “nurturance”; for Indian practitioners of mantras, it is a taxonomy of naturally occurring forms. Mudras were also prominent in the images of many of the goddesses at the Sahasrakshi temple in Devipuram. These mudras were sculpted to match the Devipuram guru and seer


\(^{17}\) Bharati, *Tantric Traditions*, 123-128.
Amritananda’s visions. The photograph in Fig 2. (in section 3.3) is that of Goddess Sarvonmadini – a name that means “totally intoxicating” – as seen and re-visualized by Amritananda. She is described in Yoginihridaya (64-65a), and Padoux describes this mudra as “a flashing flame.” I had asked Amritananda if he thought mudras were arbitrary and conventional, or natural, intrinsic gestures. He replied: “Natural, and created also.” When Anu’s hands moved “without” her “thinking,” could she have unconsciously tapped into a repertoire of culturally nurtured expressions in her memory? Answers to these questions can only be speculative at best; what is more practicable is to reflect on what Anu’s mudras could have meant to her and to the people around her.

According to Sivananda, Anu was responding to the mantras; but Anu believed it was a connection to Ramakrishna. It is not possible for the observer to adjudicate which narrative is correct; it is possible one of them knows better and it is possible that both are correct, especially if Ramakrishna is also responding to mantras. It is clear that Anu likes herself in the state in which she does mudras as she does not try to stop herself, and we do not know if she can stop herself if she wishes to. Anu’s fear of meditating in other spaces tells us that she is not, or not entirely, in control of her response. Why does she only do mudras during homa? There could be two reasons for this specific link to the occasion of the homa. A homa is known among practitioners to be an occasion when deities are invited, and present themselves. It would be reasonable

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18 The commentary by 11th CE Amritananda in Padoux’s book *Tantric Mantras* (2011), describes this as expressive of a moment in the rising of the kundalini “from a yonibindu placed in the mūlādhāra to a mahābindu, on the level of the brahmarandhra.”
to assume that Anu’s mudras are not, or not only, for the people at the homa, but that they are for the deities present. Such a speculation makes sense of why this phenomenon only occurs during homa. In this explanation, Anu’s performance becomes her paean to Shakti. Like a poem, it is intimate, but it also presents such intimacy to the public eye for appreciation, empathy and to underline a shared life. It would also be a little embarrassing for her with her cohorts, like a confidential communication found later to have been actually in full public view. The second reason could be Sivananda’s presence during homa. Sivananda could be a role-model for Anu, and when she is center-stage in samadhi during homa, Anu stays with her, although on the ancillary stage. Were Sivananda herself in a state of bhāva (henceforth, bhava) in connection to Goddess Kali, it would be a well-matched response for Anu to express the bhava of the Kali-devotee, Ramakrishna.

Anu’s response illustrates the inexplicable power of any of a range of factors: guru, deity, homa, mantras, the sacred location and even the festive occasion. The artistry of the response is to Anu’s credit, and gives her a distinct status. As a person who can respond to the occasion by expressing herself so elegantly, Anu enjoys the favor of, as well as is open to, the divine. Such an understanding would accommodate and appreciate why Anu is eager to own the identity of the state in which she does mudras automatically.

5.4 Repetition of mantra

Everyone who was at Nachiketa ashram during Navaratri was engaged in sadhana. Typically, this would involve the continuous repetition of mantra and participation in the daily puja rituals. When there were no group activities, practitioners
would disperse to different parts of the ashram to do their sadhana, sometimes for hours—under a tree, inside the temple, or in their own rooms. While their bodily posture (if they sat in public view) would be that of a meditator, that was not the term at Nachiketa to describe what they were doing. Sivananda did not use the term “meditate”—she said, “If anyone says they are doing meditation, I don’t believe it … meditation is spontaneous, (but) japa we can do.”

How does repetition, which one may associate with robotic activity, help with reaching the emotional state of bhava? How could that connect to the devotional feeling between a practitioner and the deity for that mantra? Sivananda said, “If you choose japa of a god you like, it will happen. The moment you say Krishna, all the liila [play] of Krishna is right in front of you. Japa is like an ocean.” By virtue of repeating the deity’s name within the japa, the resulting emotion would be devotional. The idea that the name of an object represents that object is rudimentary language philosophy; but, in Sanskrit, the noun “nāman (name)” is related to the verbal root of “man” which means “to think,” “remember,” “believe.” S.K.Ramachandar Rao in Lalita Kosha – a compendium of Goddess hymns with a commentary that I found many practitioners referring to – has a clear explanation of how “name” connects with the object:

Nāman” in Sanskrit is derived from the root “nā” meaning that which serves the purpose of repeated employment (abhāyāse); mnayatte abhāyasyate yat tat nāmah. It is commonly used as a designation (abhidhāna), a denotation (ākhya), an adoration (sambhāvanā), and invitation (āhva), a description (lakṣaṇa), or a symbol (saṃjñā). There is a secondary meaning which signifies mind’s inclination towards an object (namayati, namyate anena va); the mind bends towards what the name points to. As a devotional device, the name reveals the deity, the aspects of the deity and the relevance of the deity to the devotee.

Names are not only representative, they are descriptive—they function as adjectives even though they are nouns. The name of the deity is associated with the
primary characteristics of that deity, and events in the life of that deity add to names to
the deity. When Kali vanquishes the demons Chunda and Munda, she acquires the
name “Chamundi,” and to address and invoke her by this name means invoking that
particular warring Goddess. It is also why, when practitioners become seers, their names
are changed—it is not only to signify a change of status, it is because they have changed
irreversibly. Thus, Kulapati’s name was changed to Siddheswarananda Bharati,
Bhavani’s to Sivananda Puri, and Prahalada Sastry’s to AmritanandaNatha Saraswati.
Further, names are existential links to objects. Thus, when names are given to new-born
babies as per Indian astrology, they selected for the sake of the syllables they contain
which help balance the negative effects of the particular combination of constellations
associated with the time of birth. Sometimes, misfortunes are remedied by changing the
name. The ease of repeating a name-mantra such as “Rama” is also well-known, and it
stands for the egalitarianism of devotion today contrasted to the elitism of scholastic
scriptural knowledge. Even though names of deities may be in Sanskrit, repeating a
name does not quite require any expertise in Sanskrit. On the one hand, there is a
suggestion that such simplicity belongs to a decadent era; at the same time, such
minimal requirements are appreciated for the equal opportunities they provide seekers.
In the words of Guntur’s Vidyasagar Sarma, a scholar and a follower of
Siddhesvarananda:

You don’t have to struggle hard, in Kali Yuga, just remembering the name (is adequate). \textit{Hare-rama hare-ram -rama-rama-hare-hare}, that is a maha-mantra. \textit{Durgadurgadurgadurga}, that is a maha-mantra.

\footnote{Kali-yuga is the current era (“yuga”), and considered decadent.}
5.5 *Transported by sound*

Sivananda regards mantras ontological like in ancient Indian philosophy—mantras are sounds available in the universe, we simply access them. She was also insistent about the primacy of sound over form: “The source of everything is sound. Without sound no form takes place.” In one of our conversations, I complained that I was only seeing Indian gods in my sadhana, but no Greek gods, and wondered why that was so, considering I was equally literate in Greek as in Indian mythology? Sivananda seemed very amused; she laughed, and then responded, attributing the culturally apt visions to the mantras.

The god also is created by the sound. I have SEEN like that, through my eyes, when I am chanting certain mantra, how it is taking first a gross body, gross level, it’s forming some circles and triangles and all, and then it is turning into a particular form of… let’s say I am chanting panchakshari. […] So it is just, the sound is just transforming AS a Shiva. And when I am chanting a Devi, Kali mantra, or any mantra, it is just y’know, the form goes so beautiful...

I - first when I discovered this I was very fascinated. I said how come it happens like that. So I wanted to test myself. So I sat, you know, nights I would sit. Now also I enjoy nights you know because no one will be there. And I see how it happens...

Sivananda’s experience of the mantra-sound is similar to that of other practitioners who reported deities as sound forms; but different in that she spoke about “catching” the particular *frequency* of the pre-existing mantra-sound.

SIVANANDA PURI: “See, my voice is so gentle. But when I chant mantra, without my notice I understand there’s something is happening to me. What happens I do not know. I catch certain frequency. I just wanted to tell, that mantra, when we chant, it has certain frequency. And if we can catch to that
certain frequency, just you are in that mantra. That frequency is so wonderful if you can catch. That’s it, if you can tap that …”

Having heard Sivananda chant during homa, I recognized what she meant by “certain frequency.” However, I had also thought at the time, that it was a part of her performative excellence, a learned and enacted utterance rather than something that happened, like “catching” a frequency. The next part of the conversation was a helpful clarification.

MANI: Do you think that is related to performance?

SIVANANDA PURI: No, it’s not related to performance. Many people think that it is related to performance … Just start that frequency and everything changes. The tone changes, that outer consciousness which is there, that completely .. you are a little aware of.. maybe you are aware of 5%. If you keep chanting even that reduces, and what happens is that mantra gets stopped. Suddenly. You are, it is.. you are going to that frequency, you are in that frequency. When you are settled there then everything drops. Even the loud voice, whatever you are chanting, suddenly it stops. And you are in it. You catch up to that frequency so quickly, just, you are established in it. So this happens through loud japa.

I asked if this discovery of the frequency of a mantra only occurred during loud repetition. Sivananda replied that it also occurred during silent japa.

SIVANANDA PURI: Aaan no, it occurs when you say it silently also. When you say it loudly, the nervous system gets so vibrant, so activated, and then when you say mentally, along with nervous system, there is a smooth, it is smooth activation, and then you switch on to different planes.

Sivananda explained at length about losing body consciousness and then being transported on to other planes. I could understand the first part, for that also occurs with engaged and focused activity, but not the latter— what she mean by “different planes”? Where was one transported to? Sivananda described an episode when she had traveled somewhere with others at Nachiketa and visited a temple. They had not eaten for hours and were hungry; when she sat down in sadhana, she forgot her body— hours passed by and she had had no hunger. She said, “once you go to the “anandamaya kosha (bliss-
filled sheath)” it is another world out there. There is yet another world beyond that too, void.” In Indian thinking, the body is regarded a conglomerate of sheaths or containers, of which the physical body is only one. The physical body is called “Annamaya-kosha (food-filled sheath)” because it is nourished and sustained by food. The next sheath is the “Pranamaya kosha (breath-filled sheath),” this is the sheath where the vital life force circulates. “Prana” means breath and something that animates the breath, of which the physical part is air; chakra activity is located at seven spots along this sheath, and that is why prāṇa-yama is an important part of yoga. The next sheath is the “Manomaya kosha (mind-filled sheath)” and this is also the sheath in which we dream, and where the impressions of our experience are sifted and sorted—perhaps this is equivalent to the English term “sub-conscious.” The next sheath is that of the “Vijnanamaya kosha (wisdom-filled sheath)” where intelligence, discrimination, learning and language reside. This ordering of sheaths is not hierarchical; Vijnanamaya is not “above” Manomaya—all the sheaths penetrate each other. The final sheath is the Anandamaya kosha, the sheath of bliss.

Such a conception makes it possible to think about how people share parts of their ‘bodies’—a sheath becomes a shared platform upon which all sorts of information could possibly be shared, exchanged and communicated. This also dispenses with the problem of physical boundaries, for what is outside the physical sheath may be inside a mental sheath. It also solves the problem of existential reality of deities—and if mantras and deities are realities within us, they would also be accessible to everyone. So I asked Sivananda, “In what kosha is mantra?” “Vijnanamaya kosha, “she said, completely unsurprised by my question, and then, “it takes you to the Anandamaya kosha.” An early
source that discusses how a hierarchy of beings are in a state of “ananda (bliss)” is the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.98). Gods are described as enjoying a state of bliss numerous times that of the material bliss enjoyed by a human being. As she spoke about how mantras are in the vijnanamaya kosha, a bridge to the anandamaya kosha, I also understood how she meant what she had said in her very first interview, that mantra was in her. Nachiketananda, however, had a different technique for being transported, and it was all about silence.

### 5.6 Silencing the mind

There were some basic observations I noted from mantra-sadhana. When I did japa aloud, I found myself comfortably entertaining other thoughts; the memorized mantra could flow without error from my vocal chords, and did not require my full attention. This was not just a result of the simplicity of syllable-based mantras, I found that I could parrot any mantra once I was very familiar with it. Mantra done aloud blanked out external sounds, but not my internal noise or thoughts. When I did mantra silently, I could silence other thoughts. If I could hear inaudible mantras when my thoughts ceased, it meant that thoughts were like sound, disturbing and interfering with sounds at wavelengths not normally audible. Don’t we refer to this idea when we say, “I hear you” (to mean “I understand what you really mean”) or as when we say “Please stop talking, I can’t hear myself think.”

This led me to a revised understanding of the well-known definition of a mantra—*mananāt trāyate iti mantra* – “that which comes from the *manas* (mind) and protects, that is a mantra.” What if it also meant “that which protects you from the mind”? I began to regard a mantra as a “*yogasana* (steady yoga-posture)” of the mind.
Perhaps it is such a quiet environment that a focused sankalpa can be “held,” with or without a mantra. Over the months that followed I came across a few irregular definitions. In Heidi Wyder’s *Kriya Yoga*, she quotes Lahiri Mahasya: “That which saves us from the mind (restless breath), or *manasa*, is called mantra.” Ramakrishna Paramahamsa had a Bengali-based definition of mantra which he told new initiates—“*mon tor*” – “now the mind is yours.” Discussing “Mantra in Yogic Meditation,” Gerhard Oberhammer quotes from the ca. 9th CE Ratnatika which explains how the muttering of mantras results in the withdrawal of the senses (“*pratyāhara*”). Once the mind has withdrawn from engagement with worldly objects and topics (external or internal), the mind is silenced (and going deeper into this state results in samadhi). Thus, the practice of mantra leads to the silencing of extraneous thought. Among the practitioners I spoke to was Geetha, a chartered accountant from Chennai, who did a sadhana of no-thought.

### 5.7 The “NO”-mantra

Up until the time that Geetha saw what she saw at Nachiketa, she had come close to an experience only once in her sadhana. She had gone to Uttarkashi, a pilgrimage place in North India, with a group of practitioners. At a Shiva temple, when sitting under a Bilva tree (known to be sacred to Shiva) she did slow-japa according to Nachiketananda’s instructions. Nachiketananda had asked the practitioners to first mentally “scream” their mantras to help quiet the mind before doing slow-japa of their

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20 Bharati, *Tantric Traditions*, 105. The Bengali word “*tor*” is the second person pronoun for “yours.”
21 Gerhard Oberhammer, “The Use of Mantra in Yogic Meditation” The Testimony of the Pāśupata,” in *Understanding Mantras*, 204-224.
respective mantras. Geetha felt a range of sensations during this japa. The entire left side of her body from head to toe tingled, and she felt her heartbeat everywhere on the left side, her face tingled and “the whole ear was vibrating … as if something was going to come.” Scared, she opened her eyes. She said it could have been the fear of losing the life she knew. Geetha confessed that japa had always been like “a mechanical exercise”—“you have to do it, it’s part of your puja, and because your Guru’s asked you to do it, so you do it.” Such actions conducted mentally before embarking on a japa as offering a flower to the guru, or lighting a lamp, were all done in a routine manner. “You go to work after the puja, right, so already you are switched to the next ...(appointment).” We chatted about the difficulties we faced in our sadhanas. I said that sometimes, when I did or said something that appeared loving, I also chided myself for I knew that it had risen from my sense of ‘good behavior’ and had not surged from a genuine feeling of love. Geetha could not agree more—she said “yes! sometimes it is just pretending”—but the sadhana she did at Nachiketa in May 2014 was anything but posturing.

In May 2014, Geetha was struggling with some problems, and turned to Nachiketananda for help. He asked her to do a two-day sadhana of silence (“maunam”). This was not just about staying silent externally, it was inner silence too. For two days, Geetha was to stay inside a room and not think. If she had a thought, she had to say “no” to it, her mantra, simply, was “no.” She would keep her eyes open, but downcast. There would be no communication with the outside world and no reading and writing materials at hand. There were one or two exceptions – a short prayer to Ramakrishna that she could read twice a day, and a clipping of an article written by Nachiketananda titled “the witness in you.” She was to go to the temple on the evening of the second day
but to go after everyone and sit at the back without making any eye-contact. How can
one not “think”? Nachiketananda’s article presents the mind as the obstacle to
understanding and is reproduced in a book titled Sadhana (2015):

    The moment we try to understand with our mind, mind comes in and SELF
disappears. Then we start experiencing the mind and soon get carried away by
the mind’s play without witnessing the mind.

Nachiketananda then details a “focusing” and “defocusing” technique, at the end of
which one can defocus from the body as well as the mind. In the same article,
Nachiketananda differentiates between “vacuum” and “silence”: He calls vacuum “a
state of inertia” contrasting with silence which a “state of activity.” How does one know
if the mind is silent or just vacuous?

    In silence, one can sense or judge a situation, whereas in vacuum one is
completely helpless and unaware of results. Silence soothes the body and
mind, goes deeper within to communicate with the soul, whereas vacuum
jolts the body & mind and dances on the surface, making more noise. Silence
sends very soothing and inspiring waves in the spine, whereas vacuum sends
shivering waves through the spine. Therefore, it is important for one to know the
difference. Silence makes us feel charged, vacuum drains our energies. Vacuum
sucks, silence fills.

Thus, the silence from where a mantra or an understanding rises and from where an
intention can create results is not an empty mind, it is a mind in suspended stillness.
Discussing the generative power of imagination, bhavana, David Shulman also makes
such a distinction. The “common, pragmatic sense of paying attention in a task-oriented,
non-introspective and selective manner” does not yield generative results. Instead:

22 Nachiketananda Puri, “Spiritual Quest,” Nachiketanjali, 2:2014, 4; and Sadhana (Hyderabad, Nachiketa
Tapovan Trust, 2015), 29.
a relatively unfocused, even floating, receptive attentiveness, neither inward- nor
outward-directed [...]. Such states are conducive to sudden moments of
unpredictable insight or “realization.”

Geetha was able to engage wholly in inner silence: “Absolutely no thought. Once or
twice it would come I would say no.” Food was delivered to her door; she found that
she was not hungry throughout this period. She had some visions, of a script (“lipi”) but
could not read it. She had some other visions such as a lake, but they were restful and
not extraordinary. It was towards the end of the sadhana, on the second evening at the
temple that she saw the Goddess. Sivananda was engaged in some puja in front of the
Kali temple, and Geetha saw a little girl walk into the inner sanctum.

I saw a little girl in red – pavada [long-skirt] and blouse – walking in – I could
see. Into the temple. And then I knew that - later on I saw the kalasham [sacred
pot] was the same red color. She was wearing the same dress that they had put
on the kalasham. I got scared a little.

A kalasham is a particular arrangement of a brass pot with a coconut, which stands in
for the Goddess, and is decorated and worshipped as the Goddess. From where she sat,
right at the back, Geetha had not seen the kalasham, and did not make the connection
until she saw the kalasham later. I asked her for more detail.

MANI: Can you describe? Did you see her face. Did she have a jada (a typical
long braid).

GEETHA: Yes. She had long hair. She was well-dressed, as for a wedding. Face
glowing. And you will immediately, I could see that she was not a, not a human
child at least, I mean the things that, you will know, right, that she is a kid – I
didn’t feel that - that you want to cuddle and all, she was not like that, it was a
different thing I felt.

I had heard about Geetha’s experience from Sivananda too. She made a connection that
was not in Geetha’s narrative— “I was calling her [Goddess], doing the ahvanam–

23 Shulman, More than Real, 141.
mantras [invitation-mantras], and Geetha’s ma saw her come.” When I asked Geetha about the mantras, she said she did not remember any in particular. Mantras only feature in the next part of Geetha’s narrative. After everyone left, Nachiketananda beckoned Geetha to the Ramakrishna temple and did some mantras over her head and behind her head. He asked her to sit there with eyes shut as long as she wanted, and to open her eyes only when she felt ready. Geetha described what happened next:

GEETHA: After some time I opened my eyes and looked at Sri Ramakrishna, and, he was, like, alive, face, face was live. It was not marble. It was a person’s face. And, his lips, he had opened his eyes, and I could see him blink, and his lips uh were moving. Again, after a couple of seconds. I couldn’t stop crying. I lost it after that. Really, really wonderful.

Geetha said she had felt “immense joy.” It was not the kind of joy one gets from achievement or other things. “This was totally different, a different kind of feeling,” and she has never had a similar a feeling ever after that either. How did Geetha interpret her visions?

MANI: What do you think was the purpose of letting you have this vision? Whoever, whatever caused it … was it some kind of sign or something?

GEETHA: See my (business) partner is a Christian, she calls me “doubting Thomas.” My trusting instinct is low. Social with everybody but still don’t let anybody come close. If anybody tells something I always take it with a pinch of salt. So His (God’s) reasons would have been, uh, the way of telling me that it is possible for me to achieve it. That I can also realize God during this lifetime. That was something, like, I wasn’t sure, I think I was postponing it to my next janma [birth]. Which .. I think.. this was one way of saying yes I can also see, and it is not necessary that I should work and do sadhana – I still believe that I have to work, that I have to do sadhana for anything– but still, that I can also get, some, get this kind of boon without actually working for it!

MANI: Does the vision lead to moksha (liberation)? What does it do in itself?

GEETHA: Nono, no. No. It doesn’t lead to any moksha, definitely not. But then, it.. at least, reinforces faith, no? Somewhere. Because, we say we have faith but I think, it’s quite, it is more like a fear than faith. More like fear .. because you think he will strike you when it’s necessary so I have to be good and that kind of a thing. From fear to faith is big leap, actually. I think.
MANI: Faith in what? Faith in existence of Devi and Ramakrishna?

GEETHA: Faith in existence of God. I believe in ... God being formless, but, us, we need to make some...thing out of him, so we give him an image. So, that we can, we can realize him. This is not an experience, right, we are not experiencing God, we are seeing Him. So seeing him is different, and maybe experiencing is different. It was an external thing, whatever I saw, was external, it was not something internal.

Geetha distinguishes between an external and an internal experience. Seeing deities in their physical form is “external,” and she speculates that there must be an entirely different “internal” experience that occurs. Why was she making such a distinction?

MANI: What is it based on, your expectation that experiencing God is another kind of thing?

GEETHA: There should be a change, no? – in the person once you experience God?

Geetha has an exalted idea of the transformation that ought to occur when one “experiences God” and she expects this to be something “internal.” But Geetha is also aware of her own transformation and that she has moved from fear to faith. Her initial motivation for the intense sadhana of inner-silence had not been soteriological. At the outset, she had specific worldly problems (which she did not share with me, and I did not feel it pertinent to ask). I asked if this sadhana had also addressed the problems she had been facing. She said her problems persisted, but now she had an entirely different attitude towards them; she had arrived at “acceptance” of her situation and she had never again been overwhelmed by any situation.

If numerous practitioners had invoked and seen deities with mantras, and some had said that they saw how mantras produced the sound-forms of deities, Geetha had visions without the help of any mantra. Whereas some practitioners acknowledged that intention or a directed thought was equally powerful than mantra, Geetha had visions in
a state of thoughtlessness. Geetha’s ‘mantra’ had been “no”-mantra. Either this made the phenomena of her sadhana entirely random and accidental, or confounded the effort of all other practitioners. So I probed the idea of “sankalpa (intention).” Sankalpa is an active and dynamic intention that may be different from the meaning of the words, and a sentence may thus have a sankalpa as well as a meaning. In the case of mantras, even when there is no meaning, there is usually an intention. Geetha had no mantra and “no” for a mantra, but she may have had a sankalpa. Did she want to see the Goddess? “Absolutely not,” said Geetha. Moreover, she added, she did not think herself worth it and had not done anything to deserve it. The vision of Ramakrishna was because of Nachiketananda—“I think he knew. That kind of a vibration he set up or something like that.” If Geetha had no sankalpa, did her Guru or someone else have a sankalpa for her? The role of the seer and the significance of the place comes to the fore in Geetha’s experience. She specifically visited the Nachiketa ashram and undertook a sadhana given to her by Nachiketananda. I asked Geetha if she thought Nachiketananda and Sivananda had changed after their experiences. This was an apt question for Geetha because she has been acquainted with Nachiketananda and Sivananda for a long time, long before they became ascetics and gurus.

GEETHA: Definitely. They may appear to us as if they are not, they are like y’know, with us, but they are in a totally different dimension and world, the world they live is totally different .. to the world we are in.

24 Authorial intention was regarded irrelevant in early Indian thinking, since the observance of aesthetic rules would create the “rasa (the aesthetic effect or mood).
5.8 The guru-disciple bond

Navaratri tends to deliver a bounty of phenomena for mantra-practitioners at Nachiketa. Twenty-two year old student and researcher Maheshwari, aka “Mahi,” described a series of visions during Navaratri 2015. The first was a vision where she returned to an empty yajna-shala (yajna-room) after doing japa in the temple and saw several people there including an ascetic sitting in Sivananda’s seat doing homa. She felt his presence after she circumambulated the Fire-deity Agni, bowed down, and got up.

MAHI: Stepping into the yajnashala I felt there are people sitting and doing homa.

MANI: You felt?.. You saw?

MAHI: I felt. As soon as stepping in. Somebody is there. Doing – some - ritual. Felt that way. After one circumabulation, after bowing and getting up, you know Mataji’s table [seat] where she does yajna, on that table a sadhu [ascetic] is sitting and doing yajna. I bent, and as soon as I got up, that I felt. I did not see his form. But I am very much sure that he has… matted hair. he is very.. a big personality. And near him too, there are people. This I found. This is one incident.

The second incident was during japa at the Kali temple. She saw a man sitting inside the inner sanctum, doing homa. She described his precise posture: “Here’s the statue of (Kali) “Ma, here’s the homa-kundam [fire-pit], he sits at this angle.” She knew there was no physical fire-altar at the Kali temple, so she wondered if this had been her imagination and consulted Sivananda, who confirmed her vision as reality.

MAHI: (Mataji said) “He is doing that. Whatever visions you are getting that is happening actually. It happens, in the inner sanctum. He does homa every day.”

MANI: Who was it?

MAHI: He is also one of the sadhakas.

A third incident was her vision of a crowded inner sanctum, except these were not standees.
MAHI: Then, what happened, as soon as I closed my eyes, you know Amma’s statue, right, there, from the ceiling, people were hanging. Not people. Celestial bodies, Mataji told me later. But I used to feel that presence on the corners. They’ll be doing sadhana. This corner. That corner. In fact, in Kaliamma’s inner sanctum there were lots of ascetics, I felt. Later I asked Amma (Mataji), lots of great people are coming to do sadhana, she said yes, in Navaratri lots of celestial bodies are coming to do sadhana.

Could Mahi’s vision of people hanging from the ceiling be a “memory leak” from having seen images of the iconography of Indian temples, where numerous gods and demi-gods crowd every inch of crown molding on pillars and temple exteriors, holding up the architectural edifice? Mahi too suspected her imagination, but she took Sivananda’s word as final. She described how close she felt to Sivananda, and how she would “answer” her whenever she had any need. Searching for the right words to use, Mahi then said perhaps Mataji would become present in her “energy form.”

Mahi was a graduate student at VYASA in Bangalore, and her thesis was based on intervention-research into mantras.²⁵ Perhaps because she was also a researcher, I was more persistent than usual in asking for clarification.

MANI: What do you mean “energy form” and you can feel her “energy presence.”

MAHI: What that is... mm.. In my entire eyes Mataji comes. In my mind, in my eyes. I am looking like this (i.e., normally), I see Mataji. Like that. I used to feel her like that.

MANI: But that’s imagination, right? While looking normally, suddenly, to come...

MAHI: Nonono. That *feel* is *entirely* different.

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²⁵ At the time we talked, Mahi was completing her MSc degree—this would be called a graduate degree in the USA; in India, it is called a post-graduate degree.
I urged Mahi to explain this “feel,” this difference between imagination and reality.

Mahi’s response was that it was to do with retention of memory.

MAHI: There’s a LOT of difference. Because, in imagination, we just imagine and we forget. For a fraction of moment it will be there. But when I feel, that comes from within.

MANI: Imagination does not come from within?

MAHI: Imagination comes from thoughts …

MANI: “Within” doesn’t mean thoughts?

MAHI: “Within” does not mean thoughts.

According to Mahi, imagination not only came from thoughts, it was not retained. On the other hand, she spoke about feeling as if it were in the category of perception. I asked if thoughts too did not come from within us.

MAHI: Thoughts do come from within us, but I would not have understood it is Mataji. But I used to feel her, “she is with me.” Now how to explain that, I am not getting. But that is definitely not imagination. Because whatever doubts I had in me, I used to get the answer from that. I know I don’t have that capacity. I know — for ordinary Mahi – that shakti [power] is not in me. Something is energizing me.

Mahi’s certainty that Sivananda is with her is based on “understanding”— a word she uses like cognition or recognition, and this has a certainty and lasting impression contrasted to “thoughts” that are fantasy-based and insubstantial, forgotten.

Mahi has also received mantras during japa. At Navaratri 2015, during japa— “suddenly a voice. I got one mantra.” Mahi does not recall if it was a male or a female voice, nor any other detail. This was a syllable-mantra, and after consulting Sivananda, she did thirty “malas (rosaries)” of this syllable-mantra. This occurred a second time:

MAHI: The other day also a mantra came. A bijakshara. I did thirty malas that day. Mataji told me to continue that. But the next day I continued (with her regular mantra that Mataji had given her). Because what Mataji gave, that will remain like that only. I don’t know what God is but I see God in Mataji.
The role of the guru is crucial for a practitioner; the guru mediates between the practitioner and the unknown deity or a larger divine goal that is also an unknown. Mahi was given mantra-diskha (mantra-initiation) by Sivananda.

5.8.1 Diksha

Diksha establishes a relationship between the practitioner and guru—and the mantra is that relationship or the “sutra (thread)” which means a connection. Diksha is conducted in private, although secrecy over the identification of the mantra imparted seems a cipher. In the “upanayana (sacred-thread ritual),” the well-known Gayatri mantra is typically whispered in the ears of brahmin boys who receive their sacred thread that marks acceptance into a school and more generally, into the religious life of the community—but which mantra it is that is being whispered is no secret. Diksha is a definitive part of the rubric of mantra-sadhana—in Tantric Tradition, Agehananda Bharati writes: “a syllable or a collection of syllables constituting a mantra is no mantra at all, because a mantra is something imparted personally by a guru to a disciple.” If the constituents of mantras are letters and words, mantra-diksha is like the “samskara (ritual)” called “aksharabhaysa” which marks the beginning of literacy for a young child of around three or four years old. In this rite-of-passage, a guru draws the first letter of the alphabet, or a symbol (a common symbol is the graphic form of the Aum-mantra), and the child-student traces over it. When I shared this (my) analogy with Sivananda, she agreed, but said, “similar, but different, like purva-mimamsa and uttara-mimamsa.” These are systems of philosophy that are cited as a contrary pair when connoting

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external rituals vs. inner observance. Whereas purva-mimamsa is the hermeneutics of vedic rituals, uttara-mimamsa expounds the oneness of “atman (soul)” and “Brahman (God).”

My mantra-diksha from Sivananda was conducted at the Nachiketa yajnashala after Shivaratri 2015. There was nobody else in the space except for her and I. It was morning, and the fire in the ‘homa-kunda (sacrificial fire-pit)’ from the previous night had subsided. The ashes were still hot. Sivananda picked up a long fire-iron, pushed it into the pit to extract some ash (“vibhuti”) with its tip, and then smeared it across my forehead with three fingers. Then I bowed for “pada-namaskar” i.e., touched her feet, and I felt her hand writing or scrawling something in the air just over the crown of my head. The effects of this initiation were most felt by me later during my sadhana when I found that I could recall the texture of Sivananda’s voice in my memory. Even after months of having first heard Sivananda say the mantra when she gave me diksha, I found that if I did the mantra in the same tone as she had first uttered it, my japa became focused. Perhaps the whispering is not about secrecy, but about privacy and creating a quiet space; the voice of the mantra-giver becomes imprinted in the memory of the mantra-receiver, a memory that works as a model until one cultivates the tone of one’s own inner voice. Mahi told me that in her diksha, Sivananda had whispered the mantra in her right ear.

Sivananda said she initiated some practitioners in the five-syllabled Panchakshari mantra because she “had the authentication” for that. I conjectured that
this was the same as gaining “siddhi (mastery)” over a mantra as a culmination of doing sadhana of that mantra. In Siddheswarananda’s parlance, it might be expressed as gaining control over that mantra’s deity. Later that week, Sivananda spoke about someone who did not want the Panchakshari, she wanted the Shirdi Sai Baba mantra. Sivananda obliged, but six months later, the woman returned, telling her that she was getting visions of Shiva. I joked, “so it doesn’t matter what mantra you give, it’s really the Panchakshari in any guise?” Can a guru only teach/activate mantras that they have siddhi over? I remembered how Karunamaya had told me that if anyone wanted the Radha-mantra, Amritananda would send them to Siddheswarananda. This is similar to professors at a university who specialize in different subjects. Just as different deities were “in-charge” of different qualities or tasks, different gurus are adept at teaching different mantras.

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Are mantras discrete sounds, or any sound anywhere? Are they naturally occurring sounds received by seers, or can they be composed by humans like movie songs? Nachiketananda and Sivananda had different points of view, but it was one of definition. Even though Nachiketananda seemed not to care for mantras, and his technique of “no”-mantra seems a counterfoil to Sivananda, he had used mantra at the

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27 Gaining siddhi over a mantra means having the ability to harness its power.

Ramakrishna temple both with Geetha and with me. Nachiketananda’s methodology of “no”-mantra was a viable alternative to Sivananda’s methodology of doing mantra. Either way, both gurus focused on a practice of arriving at a stage of stillness that would in turn be receptive—to deity, vision, or any revelation.

In *Kathopanishad*, Yama the God of Death asks young Nachiketa to choose a boon. Nachiketa asks, “asti iti eke, nāsti iti eke” – i.e., “Some say it is, some say it isn’t.” Commentaries over the centuries have interpreted this question to refer to the ātman or the self, roughly translatable as “soul” – thus, the question would mean, “some say there is a soul, some say there is no soul.” Yama tries to dissuade Nachiketa from wanting to know if it (the self, or soul) exists, but Nachiketa insists this is the one and only knowledge he seeks. Reconsidering the two distinct approaches of Nachiketananda and Sivananda Puri, I reinterpret this question in the context of mantras—”some say it is, some say it isn’t.”

Practitioners at Nachiketa looked upon Nachiketananda and Sivananda as seers and as ideals, and saw themselves as seekers. Mahi and Geetha expressed doubts about their visions, but these doubts, like in Luhrmann’s research, are par for the course. Practitioners eventually conclude after an experience with more conviction than with which they began. Sivananda and Nachiketananda were also researchers, I suspect, in ways they did not discuss with others. That first day, I had heard breathing in the Ramakrishna temple; it was just behind my right shoulder, and quite close to me. Afterwards, Nachiketananda asked about my time at the temple and I duly reported the breathing incident. He simply noted, “many others have experienced that”—I had no idea what investigations of his own were served by my experience.
6. Understanding Mantras Again

The title of this section is an obvious reminder of the anthology edited by Harvey Alper, *Understanding Mantras*. In this section, reviewing cases of contemporary mantra-sadhana helps understand mantras again, *after* fieldwork. Whereas considerable discussion has already been ongoing in tandem with the ethnography, this section brings together a panoramic view across the fieldwork. I begin with a concept about spaces of mantra-practice, and then discuss the broad differences between the three main communities of my fieldwork. I then discuss the components that constitute the rubric of mantra-sadhana: seers, deities, and mantras, and how they relate to each other. While I focus on practitioners from the three locations of the fieldwork, I also include some material from other informants in Andhra-Telangana.

6.1 Mandalas

Traditions are constructed in retrospect, joining dots across periods of time and this helps create categories and understand provenance and influences. Thus, we also construct and understand Vedic and tantric as distinct traditions; among scholars, for instance, Alexis Sanderson and André Padoux specialize in tantra, whereas David Knipe, Frederick Smith, Frits Staal and Laurie Patton specialize in Veda. Such a division is pragmatic for scholars because of the sheer volume of sources. It is also reflective of the differences asserted in the literatures themselves for concepts, rituals and terminology. However, such a vertical ordering does not illustrate interactions between the traditions. In practice, a Vedic pundit may have a personal tantric practice, and a tantric guru can host a vedic yajna. Zooming in to moments of discovery can expose the difficulties of categorization. When we refer to ideas from centuries or millennia ago as
“traditional sources” or “ancient thinking,” we mostly point to a few influential individuals—a Bharata on aesthetics, a Bhartrihari on language philosophy, a Jaimini-Sabara on vedic hermeneutics, a Sayana with Vedic commentary, advaita of Shankara, etc. The gurus and seers of this fieldwork are influential to their followers—we do not know if they will also be significant in intellectual history, but we can observe how they initiate new practices which may shape tradition.

Stepping away from a vertical conception of tradition and situating ourselves in the present, what we find in mantra-practice are communities of people coalesced around seers, often at specific locations. Additionally, mantra-practitioners are existentially linked to the guru who initiates their practice; the guru is at, and is, the center of a circle of adherents and practices, as at the center of a “mandala (mystic circle).” Thus, the three locations and chapters of this fieldwork may also be called mandalas. In Indian and Buddhist ritualistic contexts, a “mandala” refers to specific diagrams or structures. These mandalas are not regarded as the creations of human artistry, but as images of cosmic origin and holding universal significance. A simpler term that references a cohesive, delimited space would be “world”—suggesting also that practitioners have a weltanschauung or “world-view”—but such a term would suggest a fixed, culture-based view, and neither would it convey a religious context, nor cue in the concept that the spaces of mantra-practice are highly structured and directed and are

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1 Various etymologies have been proposed for this term. Gudrun Buhnemann notes a religious etymology in Kularnava-Tantra 17.59: “it is called mandala because it is auspicious (maṅgalatva) because it is the abode of the group of Yoginis of the Dākini, and because of (its) beauty (lalitatva).” She also notes Jayaratha’s commentary on Abhinavagupta’s Tantrāloka which explains “manda” as “essence” and ‘la’ from the verbal root ‘lā’ [to take]. *Manalas and Yantras in the Hindu Traditions*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 13 and 225.
formed around a guru-seer, relying on that guru. The term “mandala” fits the context of ritualism of mantra-practice and presence of deities. A mantra in practice is associated with one and only one guru—just as planets do not belong to two different solar systems, mantra-mandalas do not overlap. Mandalas have been applied in Jungian psychoanalytic practice as therapeutic devices. Carl Jung called mandalas “archetypes” which “signify nothing less than a psychic centre of the personality not to be identified with the ego,” and regarded them as having “alchemical properties.” Such a definition also aligns with my speculation about the material and mythical spaces shared by practitioners within which an intense process of transformation occurs.

I had not expected, in today’s mobile context, to find practices anchored to physical locations. Practitioners who lived far away made a point of travelling to the place where their guru was to do their sadhana. Such a location is regarded as a point of convergence, a “sangam (meeting place)” for visible and invisible influences. A well-known example of such a location is the Triveni-sangam in Allahabad, the confluence of three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati—whereas Ganga and Yamuna are visible, the Sarasvati river is invisible, mythical. Spiritual seekers travel to a “teertha (pilgrimage place),” expecting such hidden imprints, and they situate themselves at these locations as heirs and claimants to a legacy. Mantra-practitioners of this research did their sadhana in the proximity of the image of a deity, or at a “samadhi (tomb of saints).” This

was not only a method to aid mental concentration, and for “darshan (to see and be seen)” — it was because such locations were regarded conducive to practice. I often heard remarks about how the “kshetra (field or location)” was potent, and how extraordinary phenomena tended to occur at there. It was as though the history of sadhana at this location had the capacity to attract deities, or as though deities too, had habitats, and habits. Mantras, thus, inhabited not only subjective and inter-subjective spaces, but material spaces.

In *Mandalas and Yantras in the Hindu Tradition* (2003), Gudrun Bühnemann points out an overlap and blurring of distinctions in the terms “yantra” and “mandala.” I did not come across the term “mandala” at all in my fieldwork, and suspect that over the centuries, “yantras” have simply become technical parlance in Hindu, and “mandalas” in Buddhist, rituals. Further, Buhnemann writes that unlike the mandalas of the Buddhist tradition which include representations of deities, mandalas in the Hindu tradition tend to be more abstract. Perhaps by categorizing the peopled spaces of mantra-practice as mandalas, this ethnography may also comment on such a perceived deficiency — for mantras and mandalas do not exist in disembodied space.

The term “mandala” has a long history of association with mantras, and is its earliest known use. Rig-veda “*samhita* (mantra section)” is organized in “mandalas”—

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4 Sung Min Kim discusses the relevance of Indian traditions in understanding Buddhist mandalas: “The philosophical exegesis of Trika Šaivism, in my opinion, substantiates the non-dualistic philosophy of the Yogacāra Buddhists. Especially, the conviction of the Pratyabhijñā School that Śiva permeates everything and the pratyabhijñā of one’s own identity (ātman) as Śiva leads one to salvation reminds us of the Yogācārīn’s exposition of Tathāgatagarbha (Womb of Enlightenment). Tucci has recognized the validity of Trika Šaivism of Kashmir in understanding mandalas.” *Voice of the Void: Aesthetics of the Buddhist Mandala on the Basis of the Doctrine of Vāk in Trika Šaivism* (New Delhi : DK Printworld, 2015), 13.
this is translated as “chapters,” or “books.” Such a taxonomy is linked to the idea of lineage—for five of eight mandalas, mandalas 2-7, are mantras attributed to the lineages of distinct rishis. Chapters Three, Four and Five may be construed as the Devipuram mandala, Siddheswarananda Mandala, and the Nachiketa Mandala. Finally, each mantra-practitioner is, or will be, a seer, a mandala. Discussing mandalas in the Buddhist tradition, Martin Brauen notes how the person of the practitioner is a blueprint for the cosmos: “Eventually, in the context of the image of the person in the Kalacakra Tantra, we shall discover that the human being is also seen as a mandala.” Borrowing a term that has vedic origins as well as tantric currency also underlines one of the findings of this research.

Visionary experience is supported by a life of dedicated practice, the intensity of which we can surmise from early sources and which is evident today in this fieldwork. While beginners may enter mantra-sadhana for material or soteriological gains, more seasoned practitioners seem engaged in relationships with deities, and even experiments with mantras for some unknown purpose. The sadhaka who becomes a visionary proceeds to create a mandala of adherents, advising and helping them with mantras and deities, and arriving at a private-public practice.

6 Martin Brauen, The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism (Boston; Shambhala, 1997).
6.1.1 Unique mandalas

All three mandalas of this research had resident and visiting practitioners doing mantras and homas. Shakti is the central deity in all of these mandalas, even though there are smaller temples to other deities including Ganesha, Rama, and Venkateshwara. Rituals in these mandalas were often around the Sri-chakra yantra/mandala, the diagrammatic or aniconic form of Shakti. Approaches to mantras at these sites were comparable; consolidating the information I gleaned from all the three locations provided a range of perspectives on questions of mantra-practice. There are no schools for training in Vedas at any of these locations, nor do all practitioners consider themselves as following a tantric path. There were also links between the mandalas, and one of these active links was I—as I traveled on research, I would often refer people to each other, share narratives about mantras or deities. Sometimes an idea or question from one location would be investigated at the other.

At Devipuram, mantras were a part of interacting with and developing a relationship with a deity. The mood here was more devotional, and like their guru, Devipuram sadhakas expressed surrender to the Goddess. In the Siddheswarananda mandala, mantras were primarily used to solve problems. A self-made guru with a self-made (“svayam-siddha”) deity encouraged followers to be dogged until their penance bore results—mantras here were instrumental. At Nachiketa ashram, the goals seemed soteriological—mantras were a part of the process to attain a state of mind in which the practitioner achieved a visionary experience, gaining faith, or confidence in guru and the divine. Here, even those who did not use deity-based mantras used the “Aum”-mantra, and the emphases on breathing and mind-control were led by principles of yoga.
Devipuram was an international hub and all the literature was in English. Sadhakas at Siddheswarananda’s mandala were mainly Telugu-speakers and the literature on tantric practices and mantras was in Telugu with the exception of one pamphlet on Siddheswarananda translated into English by Ramya Yogini—at least for these reasons, the community here was not very accessible to those who do not know Telugu. As a private ashram that chose to focus on its local environment with social upliftment programs, Nachiketa attracted alliances with NGOs and educational groups even outside India, and the people who arrived at Nachiketa through these alliances did not come there for religious or spiritual reasons. Talks and writings by Nachiketananda and Sivananda Puri often dramatised the greatness of Hinduism—perhaps it was also an extension of their mission of spiritual education in the tradition of Swami Vivekananda. Devipuram was also engaged in such community-service as building low-cost geodesic homes for villagers, but their predominant activities were Goddess-centered with Srividya workshops, kalavahana pujas, and daily homas. In the Siddheswarananda mandala, I included two practitioners who are not his disciples, but they are closely associated with him, and I considered Karunamaya—who may also be regarded as a center of his own mandala—as a part of the Devipuram mandala because he is Amritananda’s disciple. If I had to place these three mandalas to points in time and space, I would place Siddheswarananda’s world in a pre-colonial medieval moment, Nachiketa’s in a nation-forming late 19th CE or early 20th CE India, and Devipuram in a surreal, universal future.

I observed some patterns of interaction between gurus and practitioners across these mandalas. Some practitioners go to many gurus—they are as if at the peripheries
of mandalas, which are locations where mandalas intersect. Sometimes, practitioners will try out a range of gurus and practices until they find the one that suits them. Prema at Devipuram had done Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation and found that it did not work for her; it was when she met Amritananda that she found her path. Once practitioners find a guru and enter an intense practice, they tend to keep to their own circles, mingling more closely with others who have the same guru—they are closer to the center of mandalas. The guru becomes the source of information and interpretative lens for his or her followers, often settling questions in the way they are meant to be understood. It is not often that one finds more than one guru on the same stage and such public occasions seldom include conversation about practice; if conversation between gurus occurs in private meetings, followers are rarely privy to it. Then, research like this also helps in the flow of information among practitioners.

Such an role also makes one wonder about the lack (or apparent lack) of collaborations between practitioners. Do, or can, mantra-practitioners, especially seers, collaborate with each other, sharing findings and thus making collective progress? Why is it so important to those who seem to learn something from visionary experience that they did not get it from secondary sources? Like with scholarship, I wonder if this has something to do with currency (i.e., if knowledge is always in a state of revision).

6.1.2 Before and beyond categories

As practitioners advance, they become seers, and then teachers to help guide other practitioners. Attending a homa at Mani Prasanna’s house one day, I saw a line of people waiting to speak to her and to touch her feet for her blessings, a traditional gesture called “pada-namaskar.” Don was also a teacher, guiding groups of people in
meditation. Subbarao Kompella is a disciple of Amritananda who became a guru in his own right, and renamed as (Guru) Karunamaya, continues to attract many other seekers. Many practitioners in this ethnography including Vadlamudi, Appaji and even Ramya are respected by people around them by virtue of their visionary experiences and insights that they have shared with people around them.

When gurus institute practices based on their experience, categories become confounded or just reconfigured. Sivananda Puri had said that the mantras she had heard were in Sanskrit, but the tone was high, and quite unlike vedic mantras. Amritananda’s visions led to the creation of an unusual temple at Devipuram. Siddheswarananda’s talks about tantra occur in an orthodox brahmin community.

I raised this question with the three gurus of this research. Amritananda gave the example of his vision of Arabic mantras:

AMRITANANDA: There’s no essential difference, ‘ma. What’s seen in meditation may be vedic mantras or tantric mantras. There are also Arabic mantras. Now is that Vedic, or tantric?

The absurdity of the question about Arabic mantras helps demonstrate that these are categories that come later, while the moment of vision confounds categories. Cooperatively, though, Amritananda pointed to the vedic Gayatri mantra as the equivalent to each of the “kūṭa (triangle)”\(^7\) of the tantric Pancha-dashi mantra.


\(^7\) The mantra is in three parts, and each part is called a Kāṭa. Ka-E-i-La-Hrīṃ….Ha-Sa-Ka-Ha-La-Hrīṃ … Sa-Ka-La-Hrīṃ.
Vedas were organized. Organized tantra is Veda. That is, were there no tantras before the Vedic era? Tantras, means, the practices that people would follow. People existed before the Vedas

MANI: yesyes

AMRITANANDA: Were there no people before 4,000 years?

The only difference between veda and tantra, Amritananda said, was in the “dravyas (materials, substances), and even that was arguable. In tantra, the dravyas are the five-Ms or panchamakaras, and Amritananda’s writing explains the five substances figuratively. Indeed, the Tripuratapini Upanishad establishes the equivalence of each kuta of Panchadashi mantra with the Gayathri mantra. Several sadhakas quoted this popular hymn: “sarva shākta dvija prokta, na śaiva na vaisṇava: ādi śakti upāśmahe gayatrīm veda mātaram.” This means that all Shaktas are Brahmins. (In a tradition where there are one too many, or no, authoritative texts, quoting Sanskrit lines to convey authenticity is a common practice and does not establish very much except that contrary sources may also be found if one searches hard enough. Which authoritative source, then, survives? Time will tell).

Siddheswarananda offered reasons why veda and tantra had become separate categories. He specifically linked tantra to Atharvaveda and said that because vedic pundits tend to study Rigveda and Yajurveda, they do not know that tantras are related to vedas. He gave an example from the Atharvaveda of rishi Angiras who killed “rakshasas (demons)” for Indra using mantras.

8 The five “m”s are madhya (alcohol), māṃsa (meat), matsya (fish), mudra (codified hand gestures) and maithuna (sexual intercourse).
Killing, protecting, all these things are in the Atharvaveda. Vedic pundits adopted a sattvic method⁹, they do not like so they do not give importance, they reject it.”

Tantras took some mantras from Vedas, like the Panchakshari [Aum Namah Shivaya], Ashtakshari [Aum Namo Narayanaya]. Once these practices went to lay people, those without the adhikara [rights/duties] of/towards the Vedas, those who were not dvijas [twice-born], all kulas [lineages] it evolved from there. The difference is that [Veda] has svara [tones], this [tantra] has not.

Siddheswarananda presents the segregation of Veda and tantra as a social division. By contrast, Amritananda had said there was “no real difference” between veda and tantra except some substances in the rituals.

6.2 Seers and visionary experience

The seer of a mantra usually refers to the person who first perceived the mantra. What about all the subsequent seers of that same mantra? The Panchakshari mantra of “Namah Shivaya” is a part of Yajurveda’s Rudram mantra which has Kashyapa for its rishi. However, when a guru gives this mantra, it is understood that s/he has the authority to give this mantra. Such a role is not the same as Foucault’s “author-function” where the author is a function of discourse. Here, the seer is a perceiver or receiver and also a mediator between deities and practitioners. In Guntur, Lakshmi told me about how she pleaded with Siddheswarananda to speak personally to Goddess Lalita. I asked why she thought he would speak to the Goddess for her sake? Lakhmi narrated an anecdote from one of his talks where he had said he was like a postman delivering messages to the deities from practitioners. A seer who perceives a deity is not regarded

⁹ In Sankhya philosophy and more generally across Indian thinking, there are three “guṇas” or qualities that constitute Nature— “sattva” is true, light and non-violent, “rajas” is pleasure-loving and exuberant, and “tamas” is indolent and inertia-laden. Thus, a person, a diet, a practice and even an attitude may be more inclined towards one of these three qualities.
as the artist who created that deity; similarly, a seer who perceives a mantra is not the writer and author of that mantra.

In legend, a seer is an exalted person. As I sat in Siddeswarananda’s reception space of Siddheswarananda’s room at Courtallam, I heard him tell people on the phone, “I’ll see in my meditation (“dhyanam”) tomorrow morning to find out what is the problem, and let you know, please call me tomorrow.” Here, vision does not come across as miraculous, dependent on some deity, but as a deliberate activity within his control. What would he be expected to see? As per my conversations with his followers, they expected him to see their past lives (thus, understanding the root of the problem), or discover which troublesome deity needed appeasement, or find out which mantra would solve their problem. I heard Amritananda tell a visitor (who described his problem) that he would consider the case in his meditation and revert. Sivananda Puri said people approached her with all sorts of questions, but she did not know the answers in her waking state. These remarks from the three primary seers of this fieldwork indicate that extraordinary vision is not a permanent state, and that the perceptual capabilities of seers are not always extraordinary. This agrees with William James’ idea that religious experience is transient, but not with his other criteria that the experiencer is passive and has no control.

Among the seers I met in my fieldwork, there were those who had visions of mantras, those who had visions of deities, and those who had visions of meanings. Extracting typologies of mantra-visions from the narratives of practitioners yields “lupta (lost)” mantras via Daivarata, “supta (dormant)” mantras via Karunamaya and even “gupta (hidden)” mantras via Vadlamudi Venkateswara Rao. Additionally, there is also
the meaning that reveals a mantra via Maunish Vyas, meanings understood through visions via Karunamaya, mantras given silently and done unconsciously as in Sheila’s case, and even a “no”-mantra.

Vision is not a permanently exalted state, but seems to be an ability and depends on sadhana, i.e., on earnest practice and on techniques that can deliver results. When vision becomes a part of experience, it no longer seems extraordinary. The advanced practitioners of this fieldwork did not speak in breathless excitement when they described their visions. In Sivananda Puri’s words, seeing mantras and deities is not a “big deal,” for it happens daily in sadhana.

6.2.1 Illusion and reality

A 2015 essay by Travis Chilcott called “Directly Perceiving Krishna: Accounting for Perceptual experiences of deities within the framework of naturalism”\(^\text{10}\) considers the elaborate descriptions about the process of obtaining a deity’s vision in 17th CE Madhurya Kadambari by Visvanatha Chakravartin of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition devoted to the deity Krishna and compares them with hallucination. I turn to this essay as a pivot for discussing the possibility that deity-visions are hallucinations rather than supernatural phenomena (or natural, depending on where one draws the line).

One of the reasons Chilcott selects this particular text is that Visvanatha “is likely basing them, at least to some extent, on personal experiences that he (or possibly others)

\(^{10}\) Chilcott uses the term “hallucinations” as a phenomenon, i.e., their causes are irrelevant to the discussion. Secondly, he hopes to understand such experiences in terms of naturalistic principles, i.e., “without reference to any kind of supernatural principles or agency.” “Directly Perceiving Kṛṣṇa: Accounting for Perceptual Experiences of Deities within the Framework of Naturalism,” *Religion* 45 (4): 2015, 532-552, FN 4, 533.
had, rather than solely basing them on inherited teachings and interpretations thereof.”

Not only does Visvanaththa discuss how poetic descriptions fall short of Krishna’s splendidous form, he deliberately excludes authoritative texts because his is a direct, sensory experience and “referencing such evidence obstructs the path of direct experience” (536-537). Preliminary stages of the visionary process include faith (śraddha), the company of the saintly (sādhu-saṅgā) and the clearing of obstacles that lead to steady devotional practices and developing a taste and liking for them (rucī). The final three stages are attachment (āsakti), feeling (bhāva, translated by Chilcott as “loving emotion”) and love (prema).

As āsakti matures, it is transformed into bhāva, which is also referred to as rati, or ‘love’ for Kṛṣṇa. Viśvanātha describes the devotee at this level of development as intensely longing to relish the various attributes of Kṛṣṇa’s divine form to such an extent that he feels he will be able to experience (anu +^bhū) and perceive(^lābh) them at any moment.

Visvanaththa describes how when Krishna manifests, it is “relative to the particular loving mood (bhāva) with which the devotee identifies” (540), and after the visions disappear, the devotee is “distressed and questions whether what he has just experienced was a dream, an illusion, the result of some mental confusion, a mental concoction created by his strong desire to see Kṛṣṇa […].”

Chilcott draws from studies in cognitive psychology to show how hallucinations share structural and phenomenological detail with Visvanaththa’s descriptions. Perceptual experiences of a deity shares several features with a hallucination—there is no corresponding external stimuli publicly accessible, it is perceived as real, it is not under the subject’s direct and voluntary control, and occurs in an awake state. A hallucinator’s meta-cognitive skills become disrupted after an experience and he wonders if it is inner or outer (just like in deity-visions). The distinction between the definitions of the two
kinds of phenomena are crucial for the outcome of such a comparison. Hallucinations refer to seeing something that is not present, and vision refers to seeing something that is present—by comparing the pattern of deity-visions with hallucinations, Chilcott introduces scope for skepticism about the existence of deities. Just as a person who hallucinates might insist on the reality of her visions, so might a mantra-practitioner who has visions of deities.

In the case of Daivarata who uttered mantras, a skeptical observer may prefer to think that Daivarata authored them, and in the case of Amritananda who saw deities, the skeptical observer may decide that Amritananda imagined them—and there would be no counter-argument. How do we know that the visions reported by practitioners are indeed visions, and not hallucinations? We do not, and some practitioners also say they doubt it themselves. Doubt has a respectable place in the history of faith, whether Chilcott’s 17th CE Visvanatha Chakravartin or T.M.Luhrman’s American evangelicals today in When God Talks Back (2012). After describing her visions of the Goddess, Siddheswarananda-follower Sandhya Rani asked me if I thought she had imagined it. Was this a way to express self-effacement, or to strike a rapport with a scholar? I responded by asking, “How would I know either way? And how would you know?” She said, “I don’t know, sometimes I have a *doubt.*” Sometimes, the very profusion of phenomena is cause for skepticism. G.Y.N.Babu, a follower of Siddheswarananda, remarked wryly that he felt uncomfortable saying if or not he had a vision of the Goddess, it would make the Goddess seem commonplace. We laughed; in Shakta circles, visions and visitations were plentiful—if one had seen the edge of Goddess’s sari, another had heard her anklets. Babu’s point was that the abundance of visions does not
serve the Goddess well, she comes across as readily available and that reduces her status as well as the striving for her vision. However - and this may be what differentiates the experiencing practitioner from the skeptical observer - Babu’s concern is for the status of the Goddess rather than the epistemological acumen of practitioners, and Sandhya Rani’s skepticism is about her own experience, not about the existence of the Goddess.

If some practitioners were uncertain about some visions, many practitioners were certain about their visions and when questioned, discussed ways to differentiate between imagining (i.e., hallucinating, or seeing what is not there) and seeing (what is there). Determining whether a vision is an illusion or reality is important to practitioners because it helps them draw inferences from visions. The stakes are high—every step of the sadhana serves as a ratification that leads to the next. Mantra-practitioners tell us what Visvanatha and Chilcott do not—how to distinguish between vision and imagination.

How do practitioners arrive at a conclusion that deities and mantras exist independently, separate from their imagination? Firstly, in the case of precognitive visions where actual events occur (i.e., where the vision is not only visual), internal image precedes external event—Lakshmi’s vision of a Shiva-lingam surrounded by water was not understood by her at first; later that day, when she visited a temple where the Shiva-lingam had once been surrounded by water, she interpreted the dream-vision as a call. Precognitive dream-visions of several practitioners including Appaji reinforce for them that vision is not “just” imagination. Secondly, unusual vision is likely to be a vision rather than imagination, or culturally-processed imagination. When I discussed categories of mantras with Amritananda, he told me about his vision of letters in Arabic,
and called them mantras. Karunamaya also emphasized unpredictable visions, distinguishing them from memory leaks which were more predictable (cf. 3.6). Thirdly, persistence of the vision is another indication—Mahi (cf. 5.8) said that what is imagined is often forgotten, but visions persist in the memory. Potturi’s dream vision of mantra-initiation persisted for years until he acted upon it by doing the mantra. Fourthly, collective vision is an obvious verification—Babu was among a group of people who saw the sudden appearance of Kali (and interrogating all the living members of this group could be a project for a researcher with objectives different from mine).

Practitioners admit anticipation and imagination as harbingers of experience. In hallucinations, and deity-visions, Chilcott writes, “expectations” create lower thresholds for perceptual experiences. The term “expectation” leads us to the idea of birth and conception; its connotations are resonant with “sankalpa (intention)” which Shulman translates as “generative intention” in More than Real. Mantra-sadhana consciously works with sankalpa, an intentionality which is a kind of expectation, and thus, with a low threshold. How imagining the form of the deity helps intensify feeling (bhāva) is similar to the technique shared by mantra-sadhakas of this research—Mani Prasanna stressed the importance of imagining with bhāva and always feeling connected to the deity (cf. 3.4); Siddheswarananda who spoke about deities as though they were another species

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11 Robert Buswell writes about a case of a Korean monk, Chajang, who travelled to the Middle Kingdom and had a dream in which a great saint bestowed upon him a four-line verse in Sanskrit pronunciation, and so he could not understand it. “Korean Buddhist Journeys to Lands Wordly and Otherworldly,” Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 68, No. 4 (2009): 1055-1075, 1068.
emphasized the role of imagination—“you frame a body by your imagination. They [i.e., deities] will come into that frame” (cf. 4.8).

Chilcott emphasizes the domain of naturalism to move it away from the domain of the supernatural. Mantra-practitioners would not find that problematic, for the psycho-pathological is also a part of their experience. Practitioners expect mantras to transform the mind and body, creating the ability for extraordinary perception, and many practitioners in this research noted that deities were both internal and external. Mani Prasanna interpreted her vision as an externalization of the Goddess within herself. In his journal, Amritananda writes:

After that I realized only one thing that She is nowhere else but inside our own selves. That is what we see outside. Whatever thought comes to us is what She has instructed. It is all inside us, isn’t it. When we think and worship her as the Mother that is the consciousness among every one, that form of consciousness in everyone and so, I may get my answer through you sometimes, at other times through someone else! But the point is when I need an answer, I will surely get one.

The very notion of “inside” and “outside” assumes a physical boundary for the self, and becomes invalid the moment this boundary is redrawn. In *Self-Possessed*, Frederick Smith explains the idea of the self in Indian conceptions—“the Indian view of the self” [is] “a permeable layerings and boundaries”, both of which constantly shift and mutate.”\(^{12}\) The concept of “koshas” (cf. 1.4, 4.5, 5.5) also explains how these layers mutate. If mantras and deities are in the vijnanamaya kosha, a shared platform, they are (as Siddheswarananda had said) both outside and inside. Also, if the vijnanamaya kosha is

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\(^{12}\) Frederick M. Smith, *Self-Possessed*, 10.
a part of our self, and we share it with every one else, it resolves how individuals may be separate in one part of their selves, and connected with other people via another part of their self. This is not unlike Carl Jung’s idea of the collective unconscious, where archetypes become accessible across collectives. Jung notes such connections as hereditary, whereas the Indian concept of the vijnanamaya kosha is universal.

Chilcott writes about how culture acts as a “conceptual processing mechanism” and environments with associations will contribute to experiences with those particulars. How can mantras and deities be ontological, but also within the cultural idiom? Sivananda Puri answered this particular question, noting that deities are formed by mantras and that would account for why Indian deities and not Greek deities seemed to respond to Sanskrit mantras. This explanation is like noting that Peepal trees are rounded and firs, tall—both are natural forms, and it is the distinct seeds, also natural forms, that give rise to distinct results. The second explanation provided by practitioners is that the production of the deity-form is a collaborative process, a mediation. Amritananda wrote about a deity telling him that she will appear in the form he chose—here while the form of the Goddess is presented as his imagination, her presence is a reality. In response to a written list of questions, Amritananda noted that the initial progress depends on the practitioner’s endeavor and imagination; eventually, it is deities who direct the practice. A facebook entry a few months before his death reads like a revelation as well as a confession:

I am also understanding the futility of asking for the power of making others see what I see. By the time I get into the others through my will, the visions have changed infinitely. And it never repeats. So what is the point?

They will always be my visions, whoever I happen to be.
At least is there a mantra, yantra, tantra or any process which can give such experiences? No. It is Her choice. By Her I mean the part of me which becomes what I see through my intention.\(^\text{13}\)

A collaboration between imagination and reality is how an experience can be both subjective and objective.

Just as substance-use and -abuse is instrumental, and interventionist, causing side-effects (of hallucinations), so are mantras. Users/abusers may note that many hallucinogens are derived from plants and are a part of nature, and practitioners will note that mantras are available in the natural world. No wonder then, that mantras are among the various materials - “dravya (substances)” - used in yajnas/homas and, like clarified butter, offered to the fire-deity. That material causes would create material results is hardly surprising; however, it is when vision is only visual that there is doubt and anxiety about the possibility of the effects being disconnected from reality— i.e., hallucination or imagination alone. In mantra-practice, visual visions of deities are neither isolated phenomena or spectacles, nor only in a cause-effect format (mantra in, deity out), but they indicate milestones for the practitioner and a budding relationship with the deity. Mantra-practitioners begin with and eventually seek something other than sensational visions such as success, good health, enduring relationships with deities, self-transformation, or liberation. Mantra-sadhana is a process like at an oil-rig where a range of extracts become first available even as one digs deeper. As noted in the introduction, experienced practitioners discourage too much attention on phenomena themselves, urging practitioners to carry on with the sadhana for greater, deeper goals.

\(^{13}\) AmritanandaNatha Saraswati’s facebook page, post dated April 13, 2015, accessed April 13, 2015.
6.2.2 Is vision visual?

In The Embodied Eye, David Morgan discusses the visual and material nature of (visual) visions. Asking if mental and visionary phenomena belong to visual culture, he cites W.J.T. Mitchell who distinguishes between “picture” which is material, and “image” which is an “immaterial motif that floats in thought that like a Platonic essence.” Morgan posits that seeing is distributed across mental and material domains, and using a range of examples, he illustrates how external images find their way in to “fix” the apparition.\(^\text{14}\)

Visions of deities described by mantra practitioners are evidently visual, especially when the seers describe such detail as form and color. Ramya said Kala Bhairava looked just like in the hymn called Kala Bhairava-ashtakam—either she was influenced by the hymn, or both the “author”/seer of the hymn and Ramya had seen Kala Bhairava. Such descriptions of visuals do not mean that they are also physical, or material. When practitioners use the word “body” they do not necessarily mean the physical body. Sivananda Puri had responded to my question about the appearance of siddhas by saying they were transparent. Siddheswarananda said that the subtle bodies of deities are attracted to the fire in lamps and fire sacrifices because they are filled with light themselves (“jyotirmaya šarīra”). In general, we can assume that vision connotes a form that is perceptible but not that it has to be material. What mantra-practitioners tell us is a vision that includes the material and the immaterial.

\(^{14}\)David Morgan, Embodied Eye, 186.
Vadlamudi talked about how Siddheswarananda can see deities with his eyes open, and Sivananda Puri emphasized that she saw a deity forming with her eyes. Such comments suggest that to have an optical vision is even more extraordinary than the vision seen by the mind’s eye. Except for these instances, mantra-practitioners reported mental visions, and they acted upon these visions just as one might with an optical vision—e.g., Potturi did millions of mantra-japas based on an initiation in a dream. If anything, perhaps vision calls for a more attentive response because it is not optical—thus standing out inexplicably from among impressions in daily life, lingering in the memory as though unreasonably and carrying a significance that mundane physical events may not exert.

Etymologically, vision defines a seer (Nirukta 2.11, “ṛṣir.darśanat”), but vision is not defined as optical or visual vision only. In Chapter Five, Sivananda Puri noted how some see, while others hear. Vasudevananda in Chapter Four reported a long-term relationship with Hanuman through hearing. We do not know how Daivarata perceived mantras, but the internal evidence of the mantras point to the participation of all senses (cf. 2.1). Seeing either connotes or results in knowing—to see past lives may also imply an understanding of the causes for the effects of this life (as per the theory of karma), and to see several yogis upside down (Mahi, cf. 5.8) in the inner sanctum is to know about their presence at that location. The concept that a rishi can perceive “shruti (that

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15 In yoga, hearing is associated with the anahata chakra at the heart region and seeing with the ajna chakra between the brows. According to yoga theory and practice, if a person’s anahata is active they tend to hear, and if the ajna is active they tend to see.
which is heard),” which is a synonym for the revelatory corpus of the Veda (a word which means “to know”) suggests a conflation between seeing, hearing and knowing.

6.2.3 Visions of meaning

Can visionary perceptions include understanding the meaning or interpretation? In a mantra, syllables that are not in words have connotative meanings, whereas words have denotative meanings. Thus, Daivarata’s vedic mantras with words, lines and stanzas do have a meaning, as do Karunamaya’s mantras with words and a syntax. However, from the point of the view of the practitioner, semantic meaning is not important in itself; rather, it helps the practitioner stay focused on the intention (sankalpa) articulated in that mantra. Additionally, while sadhakas may show interest in the meaning, they also consider the “real meaning” of mantras hidden. An anecdote from Puttaparthi illustrates this idea.

Maunish Vyas learned to chant Vedic mantras at Puttaparthi and now teaches widely at schools; he also has authored some books with a translation and commentary on vedic mantras. One day, when Maunish was looking in the dictionary for the meaning of a word in a mantra, he accidentally encountered the first word of another mantra, and instantly had a vision of its meaning.

MAUNISH: I was trying to translate “Katyāyanāya Vidhmahe” [a mantra that begins with those words]. So, ka+ ati+ayani; kāti+ayani; kātā+ayani (Maunish is referring to the various ways in which the first word may have been compounded). And I kept on ruminating and then I kept on opening dictionaries.

[...] I was looking at the dictionary at this kā+ati, kāti, ayani. And there was an entry: “Kāṇḍa.” And next to it there was a mantra, “kāṇḍāt kāṇḍāt prarohantī paruṣah paruṣah pari.”

And then I see in the middle of air, I see a .. a brain .. with the.. spinal cord hanging down from it. No bone structure, nothing. Just the brain and then a… bolt of electricity shooting up from below going to the brain. Which is clearly
kundalini. So then, I get the inner message: kāndāt kāndāt prarohantī paruṣah
paruṣah paruṣah.

Entries in the Sanskrit dictionary often include a textual reference in which that word is found. Maunish had thus chanced upon a single line from the Durva-suktam (which is in the vedic source of Taittiriya Aranyaka) and had an immediate visionary experience of what he took to be the meaning of that mantra. Translations of this mantra tend to explain “durva” as grass—but Maunish’s vision had given him a different meaning.

Maunish spoke about this meaning, which he called inner meaning:

MAUNISH: Of course it [durva] is a grass. But that is the “sthāla,” y’know, gross meaning. The inner meaning is Kundalini. And then I translated the whole hymn as per the Kundalini meaning.

Maunish’s understanding of the vedic mantra is not according to rituals (yajñīka), etymology (nairukta), or history (aitihāsika).16 His interpretation cues in yoga or tantra, with their focus on the Kundalini shakti. In yoga and tantra, the “prana (life-force)” of a person is mapped along the spinal cord along seven chakras or vortices. As the Kundalini shakti moves upwards, each chakra opens the yogi to new powers, the finale happens when the Kundalini reaches the crown-chakra called “sahasrara” and that is usually regarded as the moment of liberation. We can consider Maunish’s interpretation as a “parivrajaka” or mystical interpretation, similar to “anagogical” in Biblical hermeneutics.17

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16 Ram Gopal, History and Principles of Vedic Interpretation (New Delhi: Concept, 1983).
17 Despite the popularity of exegetical commentaries for vedic mantras, the idea that they have mystical meanings was prevalent among Vedic ritualists near Pune where I did my preliminary fieldwork. For instance, Vivek Shastri Godbole told me that his father would say “padte jao” (keep on reading/chanting), “and the meaning will reveal itself to you one day.”
The idea that the meaning is hidden is also in Yaska’s *Nirukta* (7.2) where he derives the etymology of “chandas” (i.e., veda) from its nature of being hidden—“chandāṃsi chādanāt.” Commentators have understood this to refer to the esoteric import of the words in Vedic hymns. In *Ṛgveda Darśana*, S.K. Ramachandra Rao cites this verse from Yaska and explains: “The real meaning of the mantras are in fact hidden behind words. Mere involvement with words, however brilliant and meticulous, fails to provide the insight necessary for understanding the meaning.”\(^{18}\) The more oft-quoted assertion by Yaska is the *Nirukta* 1.16) where he refutes Kautsa’s accusation that mantras are meaningless.

A single line triggered a vision for Maunish. Karunamaya was brushing his teeth when the meaning of the “Shuklambharadharam” mantra suddenly arrived in his mind. One may argue that this is an interpretation, or an *insight* rather than a vision. Understanding a mantra by way of ordinary language does not call for extraordinary vision; it is when, and because, a meaning is hidden that vision is called for. Therefore, Karunamaya’s description of the process, and his attributing it to a deity, follows the pattern of visionary narratives. Maunish’s meaning, which he calls an “inner” meaning, is also not literal.

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6.3 Aesthetics of mantras

Mantra-sadhakas in Andhra-Telangana endorse connections between a divine source and syllables/letters, between a divine source and grammar, and between letters and mantras, but do not link divine source and human language, nor mantras and human language. This displaces language-based frameworks in modern scholarship as speech act theory, semiotics and even structuralism and prosody. Mantras with words and signifiers will have a meaning—Daivarata’s vedic mantras with words, lines and stanzas have a meaning, as do Karunamaya’s mantras with syllables. According to practitioners, the meaning helps the practitioner stay focused on the sankalpa or the generative intention of the mantra, and it is not essential to results.

When practitioners speak about mantras in relation to their own bodies the areas of the body mentioned are not sensory organs such as eyes or skin, but those of thought and feeling—heart and mind. Another area discussed often is that of “prana (vital breath),” and the chakras. Gopi, a practitioner at Devipuram, talked about feeling mantras at specific chakras. Don’s practice integrated the Chandi mantra to his breathing, and Karunamaya used the metaphor that the L.S. mantra is his prana. The idea that mantra is, or lives in, the breathing of the practitioner reminds one of the poet Charles Olson and “Projective Verse” (1950) where it is breath that determines the length of the line rather than meter. Thus, every mantra is a uniquely subjective expression. Olson wrote that if we listen carefully to the breath, we engage speech where it is “least careless – and least logical.” The same could be said of mantras which are precise, and do not follow discursive logic. Principles of inscape and instress (as in Gerald Manley Hopkins ideas), and projective verse come closest to the appraisal of
natural rhythms; moreover, every repeated breath is always fresh, like a mantra. During japa, one automatically adjusts to one’s own breath; conversely, one brings the breath in line with the rhythm of the mantra. When uttered mentally, there are no restrictions imposed by breathing; but – and as the reader will be able to experience this even with a brief trial – the rhythms of breathing and the rhythms of silent utterance tend to play off each other. Uttering a mantra, then, is really an imitation of a natural form— as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy expands in his essay titled “Imitation, Expression, Participation,” imitation also serves as expression and participation. To this extent, then, the practitioner is a participating-author in the mantra.

Developing Edmund Husserl’s ideas, Roman Ingarden proposes a middle path between idealism and realism with stratified modes of being— Absolute, Ideal, Real and Intentional. Looking at mantras through this lens, the *Aum* mantra is “absolute,” because it is a-priori, and all other mantras are also absolute, because they are from the absolute *Aum*-mantra. Mantras are *not ideal* because they are temporal, but this also gives them a *real* mode of being and because they take on spatial dimensions in the body of the practitioner and in iconic forms of deities. When practitioners work with mantras, they become *intentional* acts of consciousness, although in a collaborative manner between a guru, practitioner and deity. As natural aesthetic forms, mantras would need to be appraised with the *reverse* of Ingarden’s ontology of aesthetics— an ontology of being.

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6.4 Some speculations about deities

"Mantravai devata" – “indeed, mantra is deity” is a near-proverbial saying, and early vedic hermeneutics of Purva Mimamsa sets up a tight equivalence with this definition: “śabdamātram devatā” — i.e., a deity is only, and as much as, or no more and no less than, mantra. In “Pancharatra attitude to Mantra,” Sanjukta Gupta explains the sequence of the relationship between image and sound: “It is the sonic form of the god which is primary, since the designating epistemologically and ontically precedes the designated.” Some practitioners in this fieldwork also insisted on such an equivalence and relationship between mantra and deity. Sivananda Puri talked about seeing a deity in the process of being formed while she did a mantra, specifying that it was an optical vision, through her eyes. In a talk with schoolchildren at Navaratri 2014, she explained the relationship between mantras and deities by equating mantras to seeds, and deities, to trees. Appaji spoke about different forms of the deity produced by different sound combinations.

Are deities more than sound-forms? In this fieldwork, even those who said mantras are the sound-forms of deities specified if their vision was that of a mantra or a deity. The idea that deities are only sound-forms and produced on the spot is not tenable because deities are also seen without mantras. Ramya Yogini received mantras from Kala Bhairava and from a figure that stepped out of the image of Kali; Vasudevananda heard Hanuman, and many other practitioners or seers saw deities. Seeds produce trees.

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20 In the same paragraph, Gupta calls the yantra as a “symbol” – practitioners in my fieldwork would have disagreed with this, as they consider yantra, deity.
but trees produce more seeds too. If mantras produce deities, and deities give mantras, perhaps mantras produce deities who subsequently dispense mantras. Yet another connection was made between mantra-sound and light per se, by Don in the Devipuram mandala when he described his experience of mantras emitting colors. Problematic as quick and convenient quotes from science may be, it is relevant to note a recent study which has shown how high-frequency acoustic waves can emit light, even though this can only happen within a very narrow frequency range from 100 GHz to 10THz.21

Why would deities make appearances and give mantras to practitioners like in dumb-charades, or as calling cards? Are they eager to be spoken to via mantras, are mantras their “code” or “language,” are they compelled or obliged to do so because they exist because of, or benefit from, mantras? There would be no way to know (nor would I get a deity to sign an informed consent form)22 … practitioners said mantras are the fastest way to reach and please a deity. Seers who received mantras from deities did not mind describing their visitors, but they were secretive about the mantras they had been given as though they had a pact of secrecy. By contrast, those who received mantras in response to problems usually had one main deity they had a relationship with and who was given credit for the vision. Karunamaya does not already have a mantra when he is asked for one, and waits for Goddess Lalita to reveal this to him. In Karunamaya’s and Vasudevananda’s narratives we are asked to assume that it is Goddess Lalita and

22 Such a case is in the legend of the deity Rama signing and fulfilling a promissory note to the Golconda king Tanishah, to secure the release of his devotee Ramdas from prison.
Hanuman who are responsible for their respective visions, because those are the deities with whom they have a relationship.

In *Daily Life of the Greek Gods*, Giulia Sissa and Marcel Detienne observe that the Olympian gods are functional, and cite Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s Encyclopedia:

> The Epicureans spoke of the gods, and recognized a large number of them; yet in truth they were atheists because they attributed to those gods no role in the origin and preservation of the world, but relegated them to a soft life of leisure and indolence.²³

Such a definition of atheism contrasts with the views of mantra-practitioners in this research who regard deities as playing decisive roles in human affairs, and with the power to intervene on their behalf. However, no practitioner discussed deities beyond the context of sadhana—even the narratives of the three gurus do not go as far. For instance, while I heard Siddheswarananda Bharati speak about his past lives and the yogis he was acquainted with, I never heard him describe what deities Shiva and Parvati may be doing in their legendary abode of the Himalayas. When he mentions events related to the gods, he is simply repeating Indic lore; i.e., he is not claiming that he has special information. One way to think about this is that mantra-practitioners only receive visions of deities in relation to their needs; they do not have insight into the lives of deities beyond that relationship. (And if other kinds of seers have visionary

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experiences that tell them about the lives of the gods, that would be a different ethnographic project).

Why do mantra-practitioners trust deities? How do they know the deities are not giving them nonsensical or false mantras? An over-enthusiastic language learner is an easy target for practical jokes with mischievous friends teaching her abusive slang instead of friendly greetings. Might there be a joke in showing Amritananda an Arabic mantra, and a tease in giving Sivananda Puri a relentless series of mantras for japa? Devotion and earnest practice then seems the logical way to oblige – or embarrass – deities into reciprocating with generosity and kindness. Another possibility could simply be that deities have no need to be malevolent. Sivananda Puri said that mantras were in the Vijnanamaya kosha and help the practitioner travel to the Anandamaya kosha where deities live. The Taittiriya Upanishad talks of the “ananda (bliss)” enjoyed by deities, and how it is multiple times the bliss enjoyed by human beings.

One of the initial challenges in solving ill-health and adversity was to identify the deity who can help. Once identified, as Siddheswarananda said, it is possible to please the deity with suitable mantras and homas. Karunamaya’s vision in identifying Goddess Nityaklinna, Lakshmi’s journey away from Hanuman, and towards Ganesha, exemplify such a methodology. Sometimes, a practitioner gets affiliated to a deity from the beginning, as did Sheila. When practitioners talk to each other, or talk about another

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24 Another story about the nature of the gods is in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.1. A cryptic message from Prajapati (a creator) is communicated through thunder, and the message is, simply, “da.” This utterance is interpreted differently by gods, titans and humans, based on their nature. Human beings get the message of “datta (be charitable), the titans interpret it as “dāyadhvam” (be compassionate) and the gods understand it as “dāmyata (control yourself). A popular explanation for the gods’ interpretation is that they live lives of supreme bliss and pleasure.
practitioner, they tend to include information about the associated deity. One such report that I heard from some practitioners in Hyderabad was about a politician and movie-actress who worshipped Goddess Pratyangiras—the information was offered as an explanation of this politician’s long and tenacious career.

Distinctions between deities seem crucial to practitioners, even when they are forms of the same deity. The Kali mantra calls on Kali, and the Durga mantra calls on Durga—therefore a practitioner was surprised when the wrong deity responded (cf. 5.8.1). Even when practitioners do japa of a syllable, the syllable is the deity and imagined as such. Contrasting with the cute (though powerful) Bala, were goddesses Varahi and Pratyangiras—Varahi is depicted with war armaments and a sow’s head, and Pratyangiras with a lion’s head, and Appaji told us that she has no shape and that she is really a flame. Contradicting this notion of distinctions was the idea—especially in Amritananda’s narratives that deities are amorphous, identity-shifters appearing in the form that the practitioner wishes. This is a 1981 entry in his memoir, in the words of Goddess Sarasvati: “We are really ageless beings. We can appear to have any age. I can be 9, 15, 18, 33, whatever age you wish to see me with any time.”

The relationship between mantras and deities in this fieldwork may be summarized by these options: 1) Mantra produces deity or/and 2) Mantra invokes deity

25 More general mantras such as the Pavamana mantra “asato mā sadgamaya” (“lead me from unreal to real/true”) do not seem to be associated with a deity.
26 There are iconic representations of the syllables called mātrkās. When practitioners of this fieldwork spoke about seeing aniconic forms of yantra and syllables, they did not mention also seeing the iconic forms.
or/and 3) Mantra is deity 4) Deity gives mantra. If the mantra produces a deity, it can also continue to invoke that same deity. Thus, the first option includes the second, and the third option is really a combination as well as an explanation of the first two options. But, though a deity may be created/invoked by many mantras, a mantra refers to one deity. Also, deities respond even without mantras, therefore they are not dependent on mantras. Mantras are generally not uttered for utterance’ sake; even Nachiketananda Puri who took a broad view of mantra said it is that which transports. Practitioners use mantras for some goal beyond just the utterance, and for some, this goal is a deity—appearance, presence, proof of presence, response, or proof of response and relationship.

6.5 Factors for success

Breaking down the components of mantra-sadhana, we find three main factors. The guru and deity are enablers—the guru gives the practitioner a starting point, and the deity fulfills the quest. Visions, manifestations, material results and recognition of a transformed self serve as evidence of mantra’s efficacy and of the presence of a deity. Most practitioners are not immediately transformed by visions of deities and mantras received from deities, nor is just receiving a mantra for practice the same as “mantra-siddhi (gaining the power of that mantra).” The practitioner maintains a receptive mental environment of imagination, intention and feeling. Mantra-sound seems to function at “levels” of sounds that (inexplicably) also become experiential levels, along which the intentions transform into results.

6.5.1 Guru and deity

Practitioners are particular about identifying themselves as disciples of a guru. The guru acts as a mediator, recommender, and as the person with, what Sivananda Puri
called, the “authentication” for a mantra. The three gurus who are the central figures of this fieldwork guided their disciples based on their own sadhana. Siddheswarananda Bharati cited from scholarly resources in his writings, but not in interviews (and this could also be because he advocates Vamachara practices). Sivananda Puri simply noted that she has not read any shastras, and Amritananda said he does not read shastras, he “makes” them. Practitioners regarded their gurus as primary sources especially in the context of lack of their own experience.

A predominant view is that mantras communicate quickly with deities who give visions to the practitioner. Often, even though it is practitioners who are seeing, they speak about it as though they have been treated to a “showing” by the deity. I use the term here in the sense 14 CE Julian of Norwich did when she called her sixteen visions of lengthy revelatory texts as “showings.” Amritananda writes about how the Goddess lets him see through his intention: “No. It is Her choice. By Her I mean the part of me which becomes what I see through my intention. After stating that it is the Goddess who decides, Amritananda complicates it by stating that she is within himself. (We see a similar two-sided coin type of mechanism in descriptions about how uttering syllables activates syllables that are already in the body). For many practitioners, deity-visits were evidence of other-wordly company and a sign of their own progress in mantra-sadhana. A deity who has given a mantra might be expected to be friendly and even obliging for future requests made with or without the mantra. Whether deities are inside or outside the practitioner’s body or being, whether deities are imagined or real, whether deities are figurative or a species who are simply invisible to optical range and unverifiable, deities
are integral to mantra-practice. Mantra-practitioners in this fieldwork regard deities as real beings with personalities.

6.5.2 Imagination, intention, feeling

Mantra-practitioners actively use imagination, intentionality and feeling when practicing mantras. Devipuram practitioners visualize syllables in their body, and after some time, they are able to see syllables in their body. Does this mean that if I visualize protons, I will soon be able to see protons? The missing – and the crucial – component, is mantra. As Mani Prasanna narrated, Goddess Bala had told her that “if you need to go inside your body, every part of your body should be affected by the mantra.” Here, the practitioner is both subject and object—uttering the mantra with the body helps recognize the mantra that is already in the body and which therefore becomes tangible. There is a significant difference between “sankalpa” and “intention,” and cause and intention, which must be clarified here. In early Indian aesthetics, intention was regarded irrelevant in language, since the observance of aesthetic rules would create the ‘rasa (the aesthetic effect or mood)— that was intention with reference to the meaning of words. Sankalpa, on the other hand, is an active and dynamic intention that may be different from the meaning of the words, and a sentence may thus have a sankalpa as well as a meaning. Thus, Shulman’s translation “generative intention” is closer to the Indian term “sankalpa.” The difference between cause and intention is illustrated in a tale in Ariel Glucklich’s Climbing Chamundi Hill. A snake bites a boy and when accused, passes the blame on to Death. It claims that it had no “intention” and was a mere “bit
player,” a “secondary cause” and not the “instigator” and gives an example: “I mean, would you blame the branches of dry trees for spreading a forest fire?”

Death then appears and confesses that he had indeed “sent” the snake on this task. When we apply this format to mantras, we may call the mantra the cause—like the snake and its poison, it causes the results, but it has been instigated by the mantra-practitioner’s intention. This is an explanation that also accommodates sadhana sans mantras. If mantra works according to sankalpa, why should meaning matter at all? Swami Madhavananda whom I met in Thogutta, had a clarification that I found useful:

As you will be clear about the meaning and the upcoming changes, your sankalpa can be even more clear. And also can be prepared/come out of the obstacles that can disturb your sankalpa.

Next, “bhava” refers to an emotional intensity as contradistinct from intellectual acumen. Karunamaya emphasized the point about feeling—calling the LS mantra his “prana (life-force),” Karunamaya demonstrated to me how to chant this mantra—not mechanically, but with feeling. Mani Prasanna’s point about seeing syllables in the body is worth repeating here:

It can be imagined. For example, “aṁ,” when you imagine “aṁ,” you need to imagine the “a” and the sunna [m sound] beside it. You can imagine it being written and one day, even when you don’t imagine, it will appear to you. The important thing is, we need to be connected to the deity all the time. If we have to stay connected, we need to find a way. We need to first feel the deity. If you don’t feel it, it can’t happen. That feeling is the imagination.

“If you don’t feel it, it can’t happen.” This might be a clue for why legends are necessary—for they could help generate intense feelings. As Sivananda Puri had said, “If

you choose japa of a god you like, it will happen. The moment you say Krishna, all the
\textit{lila} [play] of Krishna is right in front of you.”

Even though imagination may be involved, thought is not a part of the inputs which go towards making a mantra work. In \textit{The Awakened Ones: A Phenomenology of Visionary Experience}, Gananath Obeyesekare proposes that the most crucial input towards a visionary experience is the abandonment of what he calls “the thinking-I.” In Obeyesekare’s case studies, vision occurs when the mind is emptied of discursive knowledge and the rational conscious ego that thinks is absent. Mantra practitioners would concur with this idea, but with one caveat— mantra-sadhana is not just thoughtlessness waiting to catch any random phenomena; while phenomena will occur, they may not be the intended purpose of the sadhana. Mantra-sadhana involves a \textit{directed} thoughtlessness, directed by seer, deity, mantra and sankalpa.

Is there a role for intuition? Even though most of the practitioners often spoke in English and used words such as “imagination” and “feeling,” nobody used the term “intuition” which is also common parlance in India. The equivalents to “intuition” in Sanskrit and Telugu dictionaries are “\textit{sahajagña}” which means “natural knowledge,” “\textit{antarjña}” which means inner knowledge and even “\textit{pramaṇani\-rapeksa}” which means undependent on authoritative sources. The nearest equivalent to “sixth sense” could simply be the “mind” which is classified as the sixth sensory organ in Indian philosophy. Perhaps a combination of imagination and feeling (bhava) is a kind of intuition.
6.5.3 Levels of sound, levels of experience

Unlike Vedic mantras that are done aloud in rituals and involve a concern for accurate “svaras (tones),” mantra-japa can be “vācaka (aloud),” “upāṃśu (muttering)” or “mānasika (mental),” and among which mental, inaudible japa is considered most potent. Appaji had called vedic mantras “sonic” and tantric mantras, “supersonic and subsonic.” Many practitioners talked about doing japa without the interference of other thoughts, and using japa to stop the flow of thoughts. This was regarded a necessary prerequisite to hold steadily on to any deeply-felt intention, or achieving mental silence, or stillness. Practitioners said sadhana could also be mantra-rahita (without mantras) as long as there could be inner silence.

Sound is vibration and known to have an effect on material which vibrates at a specific rate; hence, soliders break stride on a bridge lest they match the frequency of the bridge. Practitioners seem to speak about even inaudible mantra in terms similar to sound-vibrations. When Sivananda Puri spoke about finding the “pitch” and “frequency,” she was talking about inaudible japa, or rather, the frequency in the imagination or conception before its imitation in inaudible japa. The idea that thought, or idea, is a vibration may be traced back to Bhartrihari. Fredinand de Saussure’s lecture diagram that helps illustrate this well,29 and which I reproduce here:

29 Saussure studied Bhartrihari.
Here, the letter A designates “the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas” and the letter B, “the equally vague plane of sounds” and the waves “resemble the union of thought with phonic substance.”

I do not use this diagram to apply linguistic theory to mantras; in fact, this part of Saussure’s lectures has received minimal attention, and the waves in this diagram represent what occurs before diachronic language (shown by the vertical markings). I simply use his diagram as a helpful aide to understand how thought, idea or intention may have, or be in the form of, vibrations and waves, just like sound.

Saussure’s lecture notes describe the diagram featured above:

Visualize the air in contact with a sheet of water; if the atmospheric pressure changes, the surface of the water will be broken up into a series of divisions, waves; the waves resemble the union or coupling of thought with phonic substance.

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31 de Saussure, *Course*, 111.
32 Ibid., 156.
A book by 20th CE scholar and practitioner Swami Pragyatmanada Saraswati called *Japasūtram* helps understand the same idea using the terms “stress” and “impulse.” In a chapter titled “ Svābhāvika śabda” (natural sound), he describes the shabda (originary Word) as an “impulse”:

> When the Ārtha [Veda] talks of śabdabrahma, what is actually meant is not that particular sound made by God has brought into being a particular type of thing. The word śabdabrahma indicates the urge of the original cause (ādi karaṇa) to express itself in different forms. The urge is a kind of stress which tends to express itself in many forms (bahuḥyām). ... original stress and sound are inseparably associated and sound is the most conspicuous result of stress vibrations.

Elsewhere in Japasutra, Pragyatmananda uses the term “causal stress.” “Urge,” “impulse” and “causal stress” are valuable bridges to understanding something about how mantras cause results. Such secondary sources help us understand better Sivananda Puri, Appaji and other primary sources of this research. Appaji had observed that he can transfer intention at a distance of three feet and this was his preferred distance from the person on whose behalf he conducts a homa (cf. 4.4). If not explained by vibration, perhaps we could understand this in terms of magnetism (especially now that gravitational waves have been verified). Vibration, magnetism or such other scientific phenomena are speculations or analogies to explain and understand what practitioners are telling us they do.

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34 Ibid., 104.
The idea that mantras take the sadhaka from one level to another was common among practitioners. Madhavananda who has done extensive sadhana on Aum-mantra told me about twelve divisions which sadhakas meditate on within the Pashyanti stage. It will be useful here to recapitulate ancient Indian ideas about the four parts of Vāk (Speech). Language philosopher Bhartrihari explained that “Vaikhārt” is the audible level with differentiated sounds upon which human speech takes place; “Madhyama” occurs at the level of thought; “Paśyanti” is the level where there is no distinction between word and meaning and there is no temporal sequence; and “Parā” is the unmanifest level of language. Sivananda had called audible sound “gross”—“gross” and “subtle” are common terms in Indian spiritualism to refer to gradations across a range that includes the physical and non-physical. Coming back to my conversation with Madhavananda, I expressed surprise when he mentioned twelve divisions in the Aum-mantra, for I had never come across such a detail (in textualised sources, of course). Madhavananda said it had come from the oral tradition, “just like shruti (Veda).” In this conversation, I shared with him my own experience of hearing the Aum-sound during my sadhana. His response was blasé:

MADHAVANANDA: Whether we hear or not, the Anahata shabda [Aum-mantra] comes out of us. The vast form of that Anahata shabda is Pranava. And also the core form of the Anahata shabda. Both are Pranava. This is how it is. ‘Sadhanat sadhyate savam.’ That is through sadhana, the universal form, the Chaitanya Svarupa [embodiment of Consciousness] can be seen / experienced. Sadhana is all... like taking one step at a time. These are all stages.

36 RV1.164.45: catvāri vāk parimiti padāni / tāni vidur brāhmaṇāḥ ye maniṣōuḥ guhā śrīni niḥśaṁ nēṅgayanti / turīyaṁ vācō manusyaṁ svarantī. Trans. Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton in Rigveda, 359: “Speech is measured in four feet[quarters], Brahmins of inspired thinking know these. They do not set in motion the three that are imprinted in secret; the sons of Many speak the fourth (foot/quarter) of speech.”
When you meditate on Aum -- it is in fact a symbol, the A-kara, U-kara and Ma-kara -- when written, it is in the form of a varna. When heard, it is in the form of shabda [sound-form] when understood it is in artha-krama [meaning-stage], when experienced it is in the jnana-krama [wisdom-stage] and when it occurs, you do not know what it is. It is in ananda [bliss]. Inexpressible.

Pragyatmananda helps bridge levels of sound and levels of experience:

samartha japa [successful japa] proceeds from vaikhari to madhyamā and from madhyamā to paśyanti and therefore transcends the physical and becomes associated with the vital, mental, supramental and blissful planes of our existence.

What Madhavananda and Pragyatmananda explain in jargon, Sivananda had described in common parlance as “switching on to different planes” and “getting transported.”

When practitioners attribute deities for the success of their mantra-sadhana, we still detect the role of directed sound or thought. Siddheswarananda Bharati had said that mantras were given to us by deities to call them. The manner in which practitioners speak about calling deities with mantras reminds us of ultrasonic whistles used by people to call dogs and birds. (Like birds, if deities also had habitats, it would make sense to go to specific locations to find them). One day, Sivananda Puri said, “they [i.e., people of yore] were definitely using mantras to measure distances to the stars.” Eyes shut and taking a leap in (literally) the dark, one wonders if mantra practitioners are engaged in some kind of echolocation.

6.6 In conclusion

This research supplements scholarship on mantras over the last few decades, and realizes Andre Padoux’s dreams from decades-ago where he hoped for ethnographic work on mantras. But the findings of this fieldwork also disagree with or displace some scholarly perspectives; after talking to the practitioners in this research, one wonders about the role of aesthetics in the study of mantras.

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Whereas scholarship on mantra is neatly divided into vedic and tantric traditions, we find here, practitioners who do not claim to belong to either—practice occurs before and beyond categories. Mantras received from deities, seen and heard mantras, hidden mantras, lost mantras, dormant mantras, mantras given silently, mantras done unconsciously, and even “no”-mantra—in practice, mantra seems much more textured and detailed than ever known before. Practitioners report receiving mantras from transcendent sources, describe visions of deities and how mantras transformed their lives. More significantly, advanced practitioners also share their processes, doubts, interpretations and insights into the nature of mantras and deities. Objectivity and subjectivity, skepticism and belief, are not only methodological questions for the scholar; in the case of mantras, they constitute practitioners’ concerns. Practitioners care to discriminate between what is imagined and what actually occurred, but they also consider imagination crucial to success and discuss how imagination coupled with feeling or intentionality generates results. As practitioners advance, they become authoritative sources, finding themselves mediating new mantras and practices, and thus, re-shaping tradition.

This research illustrates how experience creates authoritative sources. Visionary experience makes a practitioner a primary source; experienced practitioners who have had visionary experience become teachers and guide others, revising old, and instituting new, forms of practices. Scholars study early sources that have been transcribed but often neglect contemporary sources. These sources may already be in circulation among practitioners, and are already, or may eventually be, transcribed. While early sources may not be accessible or comprehensible to the general public, numerous publications
by gurus are in circulation serving as guides for religious practice—these too are worthy of scholarly study. Realizing that individual authoritative sources are continually in the making also directs our attention to the individual behind hallowed sources.

Like metaphysical ideas in early Indian sources, mantra-practitioners consider mantras ontological. Mantra-practice is driven by a range of goals from the material to the soteriological. Mantras are also considered devices that help practitioners contact, communicate with and build relationships with deities. Deities are a reality for many practitioners, and forms of deities seem mediated, explained as a collaboration between imagination and reality. Theoretically, mantras are unverifiable and unfalsifiable; in practice it is phenomena including visionary experiences that ratify progress and success. Phenomena are understood as side-effects of progress in mantra-practice, and among visionary experiences, visions of deities are the most desired and cherished today in Andhra-Telangana.

Mantras must not be confused with audible sound—mantras are also uttered and thought silently, to the extent that they may be subsumed in the intention of the practitioner. Questions of meaning are not top-of-mind. Practitioners have different views on how mantras work—common among these are that mantras charged with earnest effort, imagination and intention are effective.

6.7 Primary sources

The source materials of this research were the mantra-practitioners of Andhra-Telangana. Our conversations about mantras and the practice of mantras and their narratives about visionary experiences became the material for my study. Since the
conventions of bibliographic referencing are skewed towards textual sources, I conclude with the names and locations of these living texts:

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<th>Glossary Term</th>
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<td>Ashram (āśram)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhava (bhāva)</td>
<td>Feeling, emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahman (Brahman)</td>
<td>Formless, nameless non-object in Indian thought roughly equivalent to “God&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin (brāhmin)</td>
<td>A varna entitled to perform vedic rituals and mantras, a ritual priest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chakra (cakra)</td>
<td>Energy-center in the human body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darshan (darśan)</td>
<td>Mutual seeing between devotee and deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devi (devi)</td>
<td>Goddess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devata (devatā)</td>
<td>A God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diksha (dīkṣā)</td>
<td>Initiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guru (guru)</td>
<td>Spiritual teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homa (homa)</td>
<td>A small-scale yajna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishvara (īśvara)</td>
<td>A personifiable God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japa (japa)</td>
<td>Repetition of mantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japa-mala (japa-mālā)</td>
<td>Rosary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kavya (kāvyā)</td>
<td>Poetic composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandala (maṇḍala)</td>
<td>Mystical drawing, group, chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mantra (mantra)</td>
<td>Invariant combinations of sounds which may include words and be entire hymns with meanings used for a range of results from therapeutic to the soteriological.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudra (mudra)</td>
<td>Codified hand-gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puja (pujā)</td>
<td>Ritual honoring of deities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadhaka (sādhaka)</td>
<td>Spiritual practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadhana (sādhana)</td>
<td>Spiritual practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samadhi (samādhi)</td>
<td>Deep meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sankalpa (sankalpa)</td>
<td>Intention, generative imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shabda (śabda)</td>
<td>An authoritative source or revelation such as a Veda or Tantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siddhi (siddhi)</td>
<td>Extraordinary powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tantra (tantra)</td>
<td>A body of ancient and early sources considered revelations, ritual and philosophical content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vac (Vāc)</td>
<td>Speech, Goddess of Speech, or authoritative revelation of Veda or Tantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varna (varṇa)</td>
<td>Social grouping based on birth and tendencies, caste.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veda (Veda)</td>
<td>A body of ancient sources in Sanskrit considered revelations with ritual and philosophical content. A more restricted definition would only include four Vedas of Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yajna (yajña)</td>
<td>A ritual where offerings of substances and mantras are made to the deity of Fire, Agni.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yajnashala (yajñāśāla)</td>
<td>A place where yajna is done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yantra (yantra)</td>
<td>Device, instrument, drawing, mystical diagram</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BIOGRAPHY

Alivelu Nagamani was born in 1965 in Mumbai, India and worked for advertising and television businesses as a creative professional in India and Hong Kong for twenty years. She received a B.A. in English from Stella Maris College, Madras (1985) and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from University of Nevada, Las Vegas (2010). Writing under the name of “Mani Rao,” she is the author of eight books of poetry including *Echolocation* (Hong Kong : Chameleon Press, 2003; Singapore : Math Paper Press, 2014), *Ghostmasters* (Hong Kong : Chameleon Press, 2010) and *New & Selected Poems* (India :Poetrywala, 2014), and two books in translation from Sanskrit including *Bhagavad Gita—A translation of the Poem* (Iowa, USA: Autumn Hill Books, 2010; India : Penguin, 2011; India : Fingerprint, 2015), and *Kalidasa for the 21st Century* (India: Aleph Books, 2014). The full list of books and journal publications are listed on manirao.com.

She was a visiting fellow at the Iowa International Writing Program in 2005 and 2009, and the 2006 University of Iowa International Programs writer-in-residence. Her Kalidasa translation was a finalist for the ALTA (American Literary Translators Association) Lucien Stryk Prize in 2015. She began doctoral studies at Emory University in 2010 and transferred to Duke University in 2011. Her dissertation fieldwork was made possible by the Gurney Harris Kearns Fellowship Fund.