

This rich ethnography explores beliefs and practices surrounding aging in a rural Bengali village. Sarah Lamb focuses on how villagers' visions of aging are tied to the making and unmaking of gendered selves and social relations over a lifetime. Lamb uses a focus on age as a means not only to open up new ways of thinking about South Asian social life, but also to contribute to contemporary theories of gender, the body, and culture, which have been hampered, the book argues, by a static focus on youth.

Lamb pays special attention to older women and to the complexly ambiguous forms of power and agency that they experience in late life. She offers gendered perspectives on "purity," growing old, and attitudes about death. She also contrasts the experiences of women widowed in youth with those widowed past menopause, a topic hitherto little examined in studies of Indian widowhood.

In exploring ideals of family life and the intricate interrelationships between and within generations, Lamb enables us to understand how people in the village construct, and deconstruct, their lives. Lamb portrays feelings of love and of *mona*, a Bengali concept that can be seen as a "net" of bodily and emotional ties that intensify over the years yet also unravel in late life.

Lamb's own experiences in the village are an integral part of her book and ably convey the cultural particularities of rural Bengali life and Bengali notions of modernity. At the same time her study extends beyond India to contemporary attitudes about aging in the United States. This accessible and engaging book is about deeply human issues and will appeal not only to specialists in South Asian culture but to anyone interested in families, aging, gender, religion, and the body.

Sarah Lamb

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White Saris and Sweet Mangoes



GENDER, AND BODY IN NORTH INDIA



Sarah Lamb

Contents

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1 Personhoods

ENTERING A NET OF MAYA IN MANGALDIHI

I arrived in Mangaldihi quite by chance. I had landed in India at the end of December 1988, anxious to begin research. I had thought I would focus on a rural community or village, where it might be easier for me to get to know a wider variety of people, since villagers would tend to be less enclosed than city dwellers within the walls of their own homes and workplaces. Several restless weeks slipped by in Calcutta and then in the sophisticated university town of Santiniketan while I sought suggestions about a specific location. To most of the Bengali city and town people I met, villages (*grām*) were distant, almost foreign places that elicited nostalgia.¹ Ancestral connections might lie there or the roots of one's identity (Calcutta schoolchildren reportedly had to compose an annual essay on "My Village"). But many times I was told that I could not possibly *live* in one. I could perhaps visit a village on a bicycle, but if I were to live there—I would certainly get sick, perhaps even die, and definitely suffer. I finally met a few people who still had family or ancestral homes in villages that they visited regularly. One of these was Manik Banerji, who worked as a schoolteacher near Santiniketan and whose mother's brother lived in a large village called Mangaldihi about thirty kilometers away.

The relationship with a mother's brother (*māmā*) is a very special one for Bengalis, full of pampering and sweetness. One can ask one's mother's brother for almost anything, and he is expected to indulge the request. So when Manik Banerji wrote a letter of introduction for me to his mother's brother in Mangaldihi asking this man to help me out in any way he could, Manik Banerji assured me (with a glint in his eye) that his *māmā* would surely oblige. He gave me directions to the village and house: a crowded bus ride to the town of Parui and then a long cycle rickshaw ride past rice fields

You'll become an 'other person' (*parer lok*).” And I was deluged with milk, fish, sweets, visits, and pleas to persuade me and strengthen our bonds, so that I could not leave.

From the very beginning of my stay in Mangaldihi up until the end, I heard a continual refrain—even after just one shared cup of tea, or a brief conversation on the roadside—“Oh, it is so sad that you have come, for you will have to leave again. How will we cut this maya when you leave? Maya cannot be cut.” And one day Sankar, a well-educated young Brahman man from Mangaldihi, sat down next to me on the bus as I was on my way to shop at the market in a nearby town and said: “There is one ‘tragedy’ [he used the English word] about your coming here. That is that you will have to leave. You must be hearing a lot about this. Bengalis hate separations. They feel so much maya for everything. You know maya? Once there is a relationship (*samparka*), they want to keep it strong (*sakta*). They want everyone to be together always.” People would also chide me, “You’ve just come here to cause maya to grow and then go away.”

Human relationships for Mangaldihians involved not only bonds of maya, attachment or affection, but also *himsā*, jealousy. On one of my first expeditions to Mangaldihi I sat behind a Muslim rickshaw driver pedaling along the narrow paved road past fallow winter rice fields. As he gazed at the landscape he said to me, “Birbhum [the district Mangaldihi lies in] is the best place in the world. Everyone here knows each other and everyone loves each other.” His words made me feel exceedingly lucky to have happened on such a place: I looked around, with the winter sun warm on my face and arms, and admired the gentle hills undulating into the distance. Now his statement seems even more striking, because it was the only one of its kind that I heard. Much more frequently, I heard about and experienced the pervasive *himsā* in the region’s villages. People would tell me, “Bengalis are a very jealous people (*bāṅgālirā khub himsute jāt*).” And the people of Mangaldihi thought that they were even more jealous than other Bengalis.

I certainly experienced jealousy in Mangaldihi, which seeped into almost everything I and other people did—as people (especially women) bickered and argued about who gave more tea, rice, sugar, snacks, money, fish, land, photos, saris (on loan), attention, and so on to whom; who was favored, who was not; who was loved most, who was not. I often wondered to myself, near despair, if they could be right about the general disposition of Mangaldihians; and if so, *why* had I chosen this village? But it takes a certain amount of intimacy to be involved in such struggles, and so I finally realized that the intense jealousies I often encountered were due in part to my privileged position. Being in some ways one of their own people (*nijer lok*), I was in-

and small villages to the sizable village of Mangaldihi, where I could not miss his uncle’s three-story brick home, the largest house in the village. And sure enough, the mother’s brother, Dulal Mukherjee, generously agreed to let me live in his compound, on the second floor of his family’s old and little-used mud house, above a dark and little-used doctor’s office, where my landlord kept a store of various medicines.

And so I was introduced to Mangaldihi, where I was to become caught up in what I would later learn to call the “net of maya,” or web of attachments, affections, jealousies, and love that in Bengalis’ eyes make up social relations. It began on my first night in Mangaldihi when a young woman from the neighborhood, Hena, came to sleep with me and be my companion. Or perhaps it began earlier that day, when I visited Mangaldihi briefly, accepted a glass of sugar water (*sarbat*) in Dulal Mukherjee’s home, and agreed to live in his neighborhood. Bengalis regard maya as being formed through the everyday activities of sharing food, touching, sleeping in the same bed, having sexual relations, exchanging words, and living in the same home, in the same neighborhood, or on the same village soil. These attachments link people (family, friends, neighbors), as well as people and the places, animals, and objects that make up their worlds. And once bonds of maya are formed, Bengalis often say, they are very difficult to loosen.

I learned this first through my relationship with Hena, the person with whom I developed the most intimate ties. My landlord and neighbors decided that I should have a companion to sleep with at night and to show me around, so they sent me an unmarried young woman in her early twenties from a poor Brahman family in the neighborhood. At once a younger sister and companion, she soon became a research assistant, a confidante, and a dear friend. After a few weeks went by, however, I decided that I needed to have at least a little time and space to myself (separation being valued by Americans), and I suggested to Hena that she let me sleep alone at night, that I needed the time to study and was not afraid of the village ghosts. Hena burst out weeping, “You’re trying to ‘cut’ (*kātā*) the maya! How will I live without you? I won’t be able to bear it.” So she remained my daily and nightly companion, as we cooked together and shared food, my single pillow, and confidences.

The people in the Mukherjee household and neighborhood also protested vehemently when, after about six months, I attempted to move into a larger, more comfortable home to prepare for my husband’s arrival. My neighbors and my landlord’s family would not have me moving into what was technically a different neighborhood, although the house was literally only a stone’s throw away: “How can you just cut the maya like that and move?

evitably embroiled in the tangles (*jat*) of jealousy and wants and givings and receivings and affection and love that Bengali relationships entail.

By the end of my stay in Mangaldihi, the people of the village had indeed finally begun to view me as one of them—for they worried less about their pain and tugs of maya than about mine. People would say with compassion, again and again over the weeks before my departure, “We have maya for only one person—you—who will leave and cause us pain. But how much more pain will you suffer! For you have maya for all of us, and will have to leave all of us.” They viewed me as in the center of a “net” (*jāl*) of maya, holding multiple strands that I had gathered during my eighteen months there—bonds of affection and attachment for all of the people of the village, and also for all of my things: the household items I had collected and lived with over a year and a half, my saris, my conch shell bangles (a sign of a married woman), my taste for Bengali food (how was I going to get by without eating *ālu posta*, potatoes with poppy seed paste, a regional favorite?), the village deities, the village land. How would I be able to cut the maya for all of these people, places, and objects and leave?

I came to view the ways people reacted to and interpreted my relatively brief and inconsequential stay in Mangaldihi as an avenue toward understanding how Bengalis think about and experience the forming and loosening of social-substantial relations in their own daily lives. Indeed, I found my coming and going to be particularly relevant for understanding practices and attitudes that surround aging and dying. For if the people I knew felt that it would be so exceedingly difficult for a person like me to leave Mangaldihi after residing there for only a number of months, what happens when a person who has lived for years and years with a family, in a village, on a piece of land, with all of his or her possessions, has to take leave of them all and die? Over and over again, this was a worry I heard expressed by older people, and by younger people contemplating their own future.

OPEN PERSONS AND SUBSTANTIAL EXCHANGES

Such concerns about maya and aging—the forming and loosening of emotional relations over a lifetime—speak also to Bengali notions of what it is to be a person. A principal theme in sociocultural studies of South Asia over the past several decades has been the investigation of South Asian notions of what a “person” or “self” is.²

Several of these studies have focused on the fluid and open nature of persons in India. This insight was first voiced by McKim Marriott (1976), who with Ronald Inden (Marriott and Inden 1977) pointed to everyday Indian

practices reflecting the assumption that persons have more or less open boundaries and may therefore affect one another’s natures through transactions of food, services, words, bodily substances, and the like. Marriott and Inden, who described the Indian social and cultural world as one of particulate “flowing substances,” suggested that Indians view persons in such a world as “composite” and hence “dividual” or divisible in nature. By contrast, Europeans and Americans view persons as relatively closed, contained and solid “individuals” (see also Marriott 1990).

E. Valentine Daniel (1984) similarly emphasized that among Tamils, all things are constituted of fluid substances. In perpetual flux, these substances have an inherent capacity to separate and mix with other substances. Thus it is possible—indeed, inevitable—for persons to establish intersubstantial relationships with other people (sexual partners, household and village members) and with the places (land, village, houses) in and with which they live. Such substantial mixings point to what Daniel has called “the cultural reality of the *nonindividual* person.” They reveal the “fluidity of enclosures” in Tamil conceptual thought, whether those be the boundaries of a village, the walls of a house, or the skin of a person (1984:9, his italics).

Ronald Inden and Ralph Nicholas (1977) described similar personally transformative transactions among Bengalis, who to form kinship relations partly share and exchange their bodies by means of acts such as birth, marriage, sharing food, and living together (e.g., pp. 13, 17–18). Francis Zimmermann (1979, 1980) and Sudhir Kakar (1982:233–34), too, found notions of the fluid and substantially interpenetrative nature of persons, gods, places, and things in Ayurvedic texts and practices. Zimmermann in particular emphasized that the body in Ayurveda exists in a state of fluidity or *snehatvā*. The body is composed of a network of channels and fluids, which flow not only within the body but also among persons and their environments (Zimmermann 1979).

In Mangaldihi, I first encountered a notion of persons as relatively open and unbounded as manifest in what is called “mutual touching” (*chōy-āchhōy*). The people I knew were concerned about whom and what they touched because touching involves a mutual transfer of substantial qualities from one person or thing to the next. Initially, I saw their concern most clearly in the management of “impurity” (*āsuddhata*) in daily life.³ High-caste Hindus avoided touching low-caste Hindus; Hindus avoided touching Muslims or tribal Santals; people of all castes frequently avoided touching those who were in states of “impurity” because of recent activities (e.g., defecating, visiting a hospital, or handling a dead body); persons about to make a ritual offering to a deity avoided touching any other person at all. To be

sure, people often touched one another in the course of their daily affairs. But when they did, each considered that substantial properties from the other had permeated his or her own body, and the person who was in the "higher" or more "pure" position would often feel it necessary to bathe to rid himself or herself from the effects of the contact.

There are many forms of *chôyāchūyi*. Touching can take the form of simple bodily contact, as when a person touches another's arm with her hand or brushes into another on a crowded bus. It also occurs when two people touch an object at the same time, such as when a person hands a pen or a photo or a cup of tea to someone else, or when two people sit on the same bench or mat at the same time. The objects in such cases conduct substantial qualities between the two people. Mangaldihi villagers told me that the only material that does not act as a conductor in this way is the earth (*māti*), including, as a kind of extension of the earth, the mud or cement floors of houses and courtyards. Thus, to avoid touching and the exchanges of substance that touching entails, people often refrained from handing objects to each other directly; instead, one placed an object on the ground for the other to pick up, or dropped an object into another's outstretched hands. People themselves, like objects, act as conveyors or conductors of contact—so that two people who touch another person at the same time also touch each other. Furthermore, unlike objects, people generally retain the effects of touch: if someone touches one person and then (without bathing) another, this second person is considered to have been touched as well by the first.

It took many confused days and awkward experiences for me to learn about how touching was conceived as part of social interaction in Mangaldihi. People were constantly telling me that I had touched someone "low" (*nici*) or "impure" (*asuddha*) and therefore needed to bathe when I, with my definition of what constitutes touching, failed to see how I had touched anyone at all (and felt no need to bathe in any case). I have a particularly vivid memory of visiting Mangaldihi's Muslim neighborhood for the first time, accompanied by my companion, Hena. On our way back to the Brahman neighborhood where we lived, Hena told me that we would both have to bathe. "Why?" I asked. "Because we touched Muslims." "No we didn't," I protested, "We didn't touch anyone while we were there." "Yes we did," she insisted, "We were sitting on the same mat with them, weren't we." "That's not touching!" I exclaimed. "Yes it is; of course it is!" "Well, we don't consider that touching in my country," I retorted. A little fed up after a long, hot day, and particularly disturbed by the implied prejudice that the act of bathing entailed, I let slip my usual anthropological stance of attempting to soak in information without challenge. "Well, here," she said

as she reached out and touched my upper arm, "I touched them and now I touched you, so now you have touched them too, and you have to bathe."

I also experienced, especially during my first few months in Mangaldihi, many people who avoided touching *me*—a non-Hindu and therefore in their eyes potentially very polluting indeed. I visited the home of an elderly Brahman widow several weeks after I had moved into the village in order to give her a photo that I had taken of her grandson. She stretched out her palms to receive it, in a gesture whose meaning would have been obvious to any villager: she did not want to be touched by me. She was requesting that I drop the photo into her open palms without making contact with her. But I only later understood the gesture; at the time, I naively placed the photo directly into her hands, thereby unwittingly contaminating the woman by my touch and making it necessary for her to go again to the pond to bathe.

Some forms of interpersonal exchanges have much more lasting and extensive effects than the relatively brief forms of bodily contact or touching described above, effects that cannot be removed simply by bathing. According to rural Bengalis, when a person cooks, for instance, his or her qualities and bodily substance permeate the cooked food and are therefore absorbed by those who eat it. People who eat the same food together at the same time and in the same location (as in persons served in the same row at a feast) also share substantial qualities with each other. It becomes obvious why people in most parts of India, including Mangaldihi, are so concerned about whose food and with whom they eat: in sharing food, they also share the substance, nature, and qualities of those who prepare, serve, and partake in it.

The people I knew viewed food leavings—food that had been touched with the saliva (*lālā*) of the eater—as also highly permeated with the eater's substance. Leftovers, along with boiled rice, are considered to be *ēto*, a term that refers specifically to food items that have become very highly permeated with the substances of those who have cooked, handled, and eaten them. People were very careful and selective about whose *ēto* they would touch or ingest. Wives would eat their husbands' *ēto* (but often not vice versa), servants would eat their employers' *ēto* foods and wash their *ēto* dishes (but definitely not vice versa), and close sisters or mothers and daughters would often share and trade *ēto* food with each other.

The condition of being *ēto* also spreads easily from a hand that has touched the mouth (either directly or via an object, such as a cup or eating utensil) to other persons and objects. When I drink a cup of tea, for instance, my mouth touches the tea cup, which touches my hand; and thus my hand becomes *ēto*. If I wish to prevent the *ēto* from spreading to other objects and

PERSONS, I MUST QUICKLY WASH IT. I tried hard to regulate such practices, washing my hand after any eating or drinking, but in the eyes of my neighbors I was clearly not fastidious enough. They would tease me that my whole house and everything in it had become *ēto*, that people concerned with purity and maintaining separateness from others (such as Brahman widows) should not even set foot into my home.

But a more serious breach in my conduct, a more reckless spreading of bodily substances, came much earlier, before people were comfortable enough with me to tease and criticize me about my ways—on my second visit to Mangaldihi, before I had moved to the village. Hena had taken me to her home, where she and her younger sister were eating their noon meal alone; their parents were away. Hena offered me a little bit of their rice and egg curry, and I accepted. When she stood up to clear away the dishes, I thought I would be helpful (in the American style) and I picked up my dish and placed it on the stack that she was holding. Without saying anything at the time, she went down to the pond to wash them. But when I returned to Mangaldihi the next day, she burst into tears and told me that several neighbors had seen her handle my *ēto* dish and told her that they would not be able to touch her. I felt horrible for her. It was of course entirely my fault, for I had carelessly placed my dirty, saliva-covered dish in her hands without going to wash it myself (or at least leaving it on the ground, where she could have inconspicuously later called for a low-caste person to take it away). And her generosity and open-heartedness toward me had caused her to be slandered and ostracized by her neighbors. At the same time, I was also surprised by how uncomfortable, embarrassing, and even stinging painful it felt to learn that other people found me literally untouchable.

After I left Mangaldihi that day I went to speak with Jamphul, an older Santal tribal woman who worked in my landlady's home in the town of Santiniketan. She was at first indignant when I told her about the incident, saying "Why? Why didn't you just ask them—'Am I poor like you?'"—an interesting response, revealing how she (like many in Mangaldihi) perceived real status and power to come from possession of money, which can in some ways even transform *jāti* or caste hierarchies. Then she added compassionately, "It makes you feel bad (*khārāp*), doesn't it? It makes you feel ill at ease (*asānti*). " She herself experienced untouchability all the time as a Santal, and like many lower-caste and Santal people in the region she found upper-caste concerns with rank ordering and impurity unjust and hurtful.

Marriott (1976), Daniel (1984), and others who have looked at such interactions have termed the properties that are felt to be transferred among people "substance," translating an inclusive Sanskrit term (*dravya*) for

something that is treated as material, though it is not necessarily visible. For want of a better word, I too sometimes use this broad term. But the Bengalis I knew did not use any specific equivalent word or phrase. When they discussed the effects of touching, it was simply clear that something was transferred between persons—that persons, after touching, shared something (parts of themselves, their qualities, their bodily substance) with each other. This transfer formed part of their taken-for-granted, commonsense world, and in our conversations about how touching works, what constitutes touching, and the effects of touching, they could not believe that I did not view touching in the same way. "Touching" (or *chōyā*) simply means a mutual contact that has a lasting effect on persons involved, so that the substance of each is changed by the other. Only the most insignificant kinds of touching (i.e., brief external bodily contacts) have effects that can be ended with bathing. Others, such as eating together, handling another's *ēto*, living in the same house, sexual intercourse, and marriage, have more permanent effects. They forge real bonds of relation—*samparka*, "relation," "bodily connections"; or *māyā*, "attachment," "affection"—among persons, who come to share something fundamental.

Ranking in general, particularly the ranking of *jātis*, or castes, has long been taken (particularly by European observers, as summarized by Dumont 1980a) as the most distinctive dimension of Indian society. Thus ethnographies such as those by Adrian Mayer (1960) and Marriott (1968), as well as analyses such as Marriott and Inden's (1974, 1977), focused on asymmetrical transfers of food, water, and bodily substances (hair, saliva in food leavings, feces, menstrual blood, etc.) among castes. Louis Dumont (1980a) treated such transfers as reflecting an otherwise fixed vertical hierarchy of "pure" and "impure" castes, while Marriott (1968) and Marriott and Inden (1974) viewed transactions as continually creative of caste ranks. Marriott (1976) later analyzed intercaste transactions as also creating a second, horizontal dimension of "mixing" or alliance, and Gloria Raheja (1988) a third one of "auspiciousness" or centrality; but all earlier views of transactions had stressed only the differentiation of caste ranks.

I, too, initially found that the most striking and obvious dimension of the exchanges practiced by people in Mangaldihi pertained to *jāti* or caste hierarchy and particularly the managing of "impurity" (*asuddhatā*) through avoidance. But as the days and months went by, I came to realize that an even more important and pervasive dimension of the open and unbound nature of persons in Mangaldihi had to do with seeking, cultivating, and intensifying mixings with kin, loved ones, friends, neighbors, things, and places. Hena was the first to seek such mixings with me. After I had been in

Mangaldihi for several weeks, she began regularly to come over to my home to trade and mix some of her food with some of mine. Hena's mother would often make *ruṭi* (flat bread) for me and I would cook rice for Hena. Then we would trade vegetables with each other and eat side by side. My landlord's young daughter, Chaitali, would frequently do the same, rushing over after their family's meal was prepared with a plate of rice and cooked vegetables to trade and mix with some of mine. And after two young sisters from the neighborhood became my cooks, they would eat all their meals with me and often rush to clear away my *ēto* dish or wipe the place where I had been eating. I saw also how in their own homes, women in particular would trade rice and food, eat off others' plates, finish one another's *ēto* leftovers, and eagerly call children to them to feed them food from their own plates with their own hands.

Parents, too, would clean away their children's urine, excrement, and mucus without worrying about suffering any kind of bodily impurity. And as I will discuss in chapter 2, Bengalis defined the relations of children with their aged parents in important part by describing how children clean up parents' urine and excrement lovingly and without complaint when they have become incontinent in old age and again after death.

Family and kinship ties in Mangaldihi (as throughout Bengal) were perceived as created and sustained through various kinds of bodily and other mixings, sharings, and exchanges (see also Inden and Nicholas 1977). People of the same "family" were said to "share the same body," as *sapiṇḍas*: a word formed from *piṇḍa*, "body particle" or "ball of rice," and *sa*, "shared" or "same." *Sapiṇḍas* are people who share the same *piṇḍas*, or body particles, passed down from common ancestors, as well as people who offer together the same rice balls to the same ancestors. Families were also constituted by exchanging, sharing, and mixing via all sorts of other media, such as food (especially rice), houses, and blood (*rakta*). Mangaldihi villagers often referred to their families as those who "eat rice from the same pot" (*eki hārite khāi*). They also called the members of their families *gharer lok* or "house's people." They spoke of the "pull of blood" (*raktar tān*) that they share with parents and siblings, and of the "pull" (*tān*) they have for their mother because they drank her breast milk (*buker dudh*) and were carried in her womb (*nāri*).

Thus social relations of kinship and friendship, as well as of *jāti*, relied on daily givings and receivings. I found that people in Mangaldihi built boundaries and avoided contact less often than they sought to become parts of each other—through sharing and exchanging their bodily substances,

food, possessions, words, affections, and places of residence. This resonates with what Margaret Trawick writes of Tamil households, where mixing (*kalattal*, *mayakkam*) was viewed as a goal and pleasure in and of itself—one to be celebrated and renewed daily, and taught and learned as a value (1990b, esp. pp. 83–87). These kinds of exchanges result in what rural Bengalis often refer to as *maya*, the "net" (*jāl*) of bodily-emotional "ties" (*bandhan*), "pulls" (*tān*), or "connections" (*samparka*) that make up people and their lived-in worlds.

Such a vision of persons as open and partly constituted by what comes and goes also informed people's conceptions of gender differences over the life course. Many spoke of women as being even more "open" (*kholā*) than men, especially during their married and reproductive years. This not only made women vulnerable to impurities or unwanted substances from outside (as were also the lower castes, several explained, comparing women to Sudras); it also gave women the highly valued capacities to receive a husband's seed and produce a child; to mix with, nurture, and sustain a family (see chapter 6).

People in Mangaldihi likewise expressed the ambivalences and transitions of aging by referring to changes in the fluid and open nature of their bodies and personhoods. Aging was thought to involve simultaneous, contrary pulls in the kinds of ties that make up persons. On the one hand, these ties were felt to grow more numerous and intense as life goes on. On the other hand, aging was thought to involve the difficult work of taking apart the self or unraveling ties, in preparation for the many leave-takings of death (see chapter 4).

STUDYING PERSONS CROSS-CULTURALLY

Melford E. Spiro (1993) takes exception to the findings of several anthropologists, including notable South Asianists (Shweder, Bourne, Dumont, and Marriott),⁴ who have suggested that while many non-Westerners de-emphasize individuality, Westerners view persons largely as bounded or autonomous individuals. Spiro's article was stimulated by another article on the self by two social psychologists, expert on Japan (Markus and Kitayama 1991), who approvingly cite Clifford Geertz's celebrated characterization of this Western conception as "a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world cultures" (Geertz 1983:59, qtd. in Spiro 1993:107).

According to Geertz, Westerners see the person as a "bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic cen-

ter of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background" (1983:59). If such a conception of the person as bounded is cross-culturally "peculiar," then other ("non-Western") people must view persons to be relatively *not* bounded. This premise—which is precisely what Geertz, and after him Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, does imply—is challenged by Spiro.

I will briefly take up Spiro's key arguments here, because I believe that Bengali ethno-theories of persons can effectively resolve some of Spiro's conundrums. Focusing his argument on the supposed bounded-unbounded (Western-non-Western) dichotomy, he begins by wondering what it could mean to be relatively unbounded as a person. Markus and Kitayama (1991:245) observe that in the case of many "non-Western" selves, "others are included *within* the boundaries of the self" (qtd. in Spiro 1993:108). Spiro responds, "This proposition . . . struck me as strange, because it seemed incomprehensible—what could it mean to say that *others* are included within the boundaries of *myself*?" (pp. 108–9).

The answer to this question rests in large part on what Spiro, Markus and Kitayama, and other scholars mean by the terms "self" or "person." Spiro entertains briefly the notion that Markus and Kitayama could be referring to the self as the psychobiological organism, bounded by the skin. Such a self *could* be permeable to "others"—for example, microorganisms or germs that penetrate the body to cause disease, or spirits that possess an individual. However, such boundary crossings entail only impermanent and abnormal conditions, and Spiro therefore concludes that ethnographers who describe notions of unbounded selves could not be using the term "self" (or "person") to denote the psychobiological organism. The more likely referent, he believes, is some psychological entity: an ego, a soul, or an "I." But we still have a problem, Spiro insists, because all those who believe that others are included within the boundaries of their psychological self would have little, if any, "self-other differentiation." That is, they would lack "the sense that one's self, or one's own person, is bounded, or separate from all other persons" (1993:110). Since all people must be able to differentiate themselves from others, they must think of themselves as bounded and separate from all other persons. This, he argues, is a "distinguishing feature of the very notion of human nature" (p. 110).⁵

These arguments give rise to several interesting questions. First, consider the self as a psychobiological organism. Clearly an unbounded psychobiological self might entail a broader range of possibilities than invading germs or possessing spirits. Even in the scant material from rural West Bengal that

I have presented so far, it is evident that the Bengalis I knew viewed the sharing and exchanging of bodily and other substances—not only with other people but also with the places in which they live and the things that they own and use—as vital to the ways they think about and define themselves and social relations. Parts of other people, places, and things become part of one's own body and person, just as parts of oneself enter into the bodies and thus the persons of others. Bengalis viewed such exchanges as neither abnormal nor temporary (though some are more or less desired, more or less lasting), but rather as an elemental part of everyday life and practice.

This does not mean that the Bengalis I knew could not differentiate themselves psychologically from others—they, like all people, perceptually perform self-other differentiation. But I see no reason for Spiro's assumption that the ability to differentiate one's consciousness from others is dependent on a notion of the self as "bounded, or separate from all other persons." He conflates a sense of personal identity with that of personal boundaries: either people view themselves as perfectly bounded and separate, *or* they lose all capacity to differentiate themselves from others. One can, like the Bengalis I knew, have a clear sense of a differentiable self that *includes* bodily and emotional ties with others. Indeed, these ties make up the very stuff of who and what a (distinct and differentiable) person is.

Furthermore, Spiro's added argument that Hindu and Buddhist theories of karma prove that there can be no "unbounded" Hindu or Buddhist selves seems equally misguided. As Spiro describes it, the Hindu and Buddhist theory of karma holds that every living person is the reincarnation of myriad past selves and that any person's current and future incarnations are the karmic consequences of the actions of "his or her, and only his or her, own person" (1993:112–13, 1982). In short, he argues, "even if it were the case that other selves are included within the boundary of the Burmese [or any Buddhist or Hindu] conception of the self, . . . how then would we explain the fact that the Burmese explicitly affirm that no actor bears any responsibility for the action of others, even though the latter are allegedly included within the boundary of the actor's own self?" (1993:113).

Here Spiro provides only one of the multiple theories of karma held by Hindu Indians, if not Burmese Buddhists. Several anthropological studies of different regions in India, as well as my Bengali informants, recount how karma may be shared among members of a family or community, making it not always simply an individual affair.⁶ Susan Wadley and Bruce Derr (1990), for instance, tell of how a devastating fire in the north Indian village of Karimpur spurred a debate among villagers over the extent that karma is shared—the extent that the deeds of one person affect the lives of

owners. It became clear that "Karimpur residents viewed the fire as a community punishment, not merely an individual one" (p. 142).

The people I knew in West Bengal also offered theories of shared karma to explain a person's or group's misfortune. One respected Brahman priest and his wife were entering into old age with no children; the priest's brother also had none. The family line (*barisa*) would be extinguished, and there would be no one to care for the two brothers and their wives in old age. The common village explanation was that they were suffering the karmic fruits of the misdeeds that their dishonest father had performed in his lifetime. As one woman told me, "When a father does sin, his sons have to eat the fruits." Although Hindu South Asians also offer individual theories of karma to explain a single person's own life circumstances, they frequently view karma as something that is shared by whole families or communities.⁷

This brings me to my next point, and here I agree with Spiro: dichotomies between Western and non-Western, individual and nonindividual, bounded and nonbounded conceptions of self or person should not be overdrawn (Spiro 1993:116). Thus, though the ethnographic literature on South Asia shows a long tradition of research holding that Indians (in various ways) de-emphasize individuality,⁸ anthropologists have also examined ways in which South Asians view persons in terms that we might consider "individual."⁹

Americans, too, may not always consider themselves to be as neatly bound, closed, and individual as many scholars have presumed. A study by Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin (1994), for instance, examines the so-called contagion concept among adult Philadelphians, the majority of whom, it turns out, believe that some kinds of essences ("vibes," "cooties," germs, moral qualities, etc.) are transferred from person to person through everyday exchanges such as sharing a sweater. Some feminist theorists have suggested further that models of the self emphasizing individual autonomy do not adequately describe the self-conceptions of American women, who are more likely than American men to focus more on connectedness to others. Multiple perspectives exist in any society or culture (e.g., Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982; Lykes 1985). What are often taken as the mutually exclusive values of "individuality" and "relatedness" may in fact interpenetrate within the same culture. And obviously persons steeped in South Asian culture live in the West and vice versa, making it even more difficult to draw any meaningful boundaries between "Western" and "non-Western" conceptions.

While I believe that it is possible to explore what people believe a "person" or "self" to be, I do not intend to investigate Bengali notions of per-

sonhood as a means of contrasting them to a putative generalized "Western" conception of the person. Rather, I use the rural Bengali material to examine views about personhood in a particular society, and then bring these views or ethno-theories into the arena of Western theoretical discussion about persons, selves, and genders.¹⁰ More specifically, I explore how Bengali notions of persons as relatively open and composed of relationships (a notion I will continue to elaborate on) are tied to their perceptions about aging, dying, gender, and the forming and taking apart of social relations over the life course.