

## Sitting in a Cave: An analysis of ritual seclusion at minarche among Brahmans and Chhetris in Nepal

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Guphā basne (literally, "sitting in a cave") is a rite of passage among Brahmans and Chhetris of Nepal that marks the transition of a girl at menarche from a presexual to a sexual being. My study of these rites in the small Brahman-Chhetri settlement of Narikotl revealed a feature of the guphā basne rituals that appears curious on first sight: In these rites there is a clear ritual focus on the girl's consanguineal male relatives. First, it is from these males that the girl must maintain the utmost distance and seclusion. Thus if her menarche occurs while she is at her māitā (parent's house) the guphā basne rituals are more elaborate, and the duration and degree of her seclusion are greater, than if she is married and settled in her ghar (husband's house). In addition, it is a senior consanguineal male (father or elder brother) who must present the girl with the essential ritual gift of saubhāgya sāmān following her seclusion. This gift consists, in part, of red bangles and beads that in other contexts of Brahman-Chhetri culture serve as symbols of a woman's married status and therefore of her legitimate fertility. Although an unmarried girl can wear these items, a widow cannot (her period of legitimate fertility being over); in fact she cannot wear the colour red at all.

As with most societies, menarche among Brahmans and Chhetris is very closely associated with the beginning of a girl's fertility. But among the strongly patrilineal Brahman-Chhetris, it is the husband's group, the ghar, that is most concerned with and, in turn, threatened by, the sexuality and fertility of its incoming brides. Why, then, is it a girl's consanguineal male relatives who are so strongly involved in the guphā basne rituals, and why, if a girl is already married, do her affinal male relatives play such a minor, almost neutral, role? This involvement of consanguineal males in guphā basne is also curious given that in many other cultural contexts the sexual and fertility aspects of one's daughters and sisters is antithetical to their otherwise perpetually sacred and pure status vis a vis their consanguineal male relatives.

Here I offer an analysis of the Brahman-Chhetri guphā basne that seeks to explain this somewhat puzzling aspect of the rituals. I will suggest that the role of the consanguineal male relatives can be understood by examining the complex and contrasting sets of social and religious roles that a woman assumes in her māitā, or natal home, and in her ghar, or husband's house. In the former, she carries a high sacred status; in the latter she is decidedly of low ritual and social status. The incoming wife, though welcome both for the labour, she will provide and the offspring she will bear for her husband's patriline, is also seen as threatening, and is surrounded by an aura of danger. Yet a woman also plays a role of linking her māitā with her ghar and, as such, she is the focal point for those important affinal relationships that her marriage establishes between two patrilineages. It is by examining this interstitial, linking position of women that the ambiguities of female sexuality and fertility, as expressed in the guphā basne rituals, can be most clearly understood.

### The Rituals

Among orthodox hill Brahmins--and to a lesser extent among the Chhetris--every effort is made to get daughters married before their menarche. This is, in fact, implied by the term kanyādān which is used for the orthodox, meritorious form of marriage. While kanyā means generally "maiden" or "virgin", it is also used specifically to denote pre-pubescent girl. Kanyā keti, or pre-pubescent unmarried girls, are considered especially pure, or chokho, and many rituals require the worship of a given number of kanyā as incarnations of the goddess Durga.<sup>2</sup>

Since students of Brahmin-Chhetri society are already familiar with the general suspicion of affinal women and the heavy stress placed on maintaining their purity (see Bennett, 1976), there is nothing surprising in the fact that the "guaranteed purity"--and the greater emotional malleability--of pre-pubescent girls should make them preferred as brides. Yet, in the span of one generation, the village of Narikot has undergone a basic change in this regard. More and more families are preferring the prestige of an educated bride. (even though she may get little chance to use her education in her husband's home) over the "guaranteed purity" of a pre-pubescent one. In turn, more and more girls are being sent to school (some to eight and even tenth class) rather than being married off.

A survey<sup>3</sup> in Narikot revealed that of the twenty-five women aged 35 and over, the average age of marriage was 13. Among the twenty-two married women in the under-35 age group, the average marriage age was 17. Since the average age of menarche for this sample was 15.4, the shift is clearly away from the ideal of the pre-pubescent bride.

Even before this recent change, however, many girls--especially among the Chhetris--reached menarche before marriage. For these unmarried girls the guphā basne ceremony has always been, and continues to be, much more strict than it is for girls who have their first period after they are safely married and living in their ghar or husband's household. The most important feature of the ceremony is the seclusion of the girl in a dark room where absolutely no light is allowed to enter. This is the guphā or "cave" which gives the ritual its name. If the girl is already married, the guphā may be in the attic or cattle shed of her own ghar (husband's house). But if she is still unmarried and living in her māitā, she must be immediately taken to another house--preferably that of an old, high-caste widow in some other village--but it must definitely be far enough away from the girl's māitā so that she cannot possibly catch sight of the roof of her own home.

The main reason for whisking the unmarried girl away from her māitā is the very strict prohibition on "seeing the face" of either her father or her brothers during her first menstruation. "Ba ko mukh ra daju-bhai ko mukh hernu hundaina." She should not even hear their

voices; nor should they hear hers. If possible, the sight of all men is avoided. As soon as the girl discovers her condition and announces it to her mother or elder sister, she is covered with a big shawl so that neither males nor Surya,<sup>4</sup> the sun deity, may see her. Then she is bundled off by the back way to some appropriate place of seclusion. She must stay concealed there for either twelve or twenty-two days.<sup>5</sup> If she is already married and in her ghar, the period of seclusion may be even shorter than twelve days. And in one case, I observed in Narikot the guphā basne of a married girl lasted only four days (the length of normal menstrual seclusion) and was done in her husband's family's own animal shed. There was some criticism of this laxity, but the general feeling was that, since she was married, the ritual was not so important.

For the first four days, the girl may not take any salt with her food and she may have only one rice meal a day. She may not stir out of the darkened room while the sun is up and so a brass koparā is provided in the room for her bodily eliminations. After the fourth day, she may go outside early in the morning before sun rise and bathe. After that she may resume eating normal food. Except for their friends' visits, most women I interviewed remembered their guphā basne ceremony as a lonely and somewhat frightening experience, especially if they were unmarried and had been sent away to a stranger's house.

For all the women, I interviewed in depth, the guphā basne ceremony was among their most vivid and significant early memories. They all associated the sexual maturation of their bodies and the awakening of romantic and narcissistic interests indirectly with the onset of menstruation. For those who were not already married, it signaled the rapid approach of that ominous event.

With menstruation begins the taruni period of a woman's life when she is expected to be healthy, sexually attractive and desirous of admiration, despite her shyness. The word taruni means sexually mature young girl--something close to "nubile", perhaps, in English. But to get a better understanding of the Nepali concept and how it relates to menarche, I will quote one informant's memories of her guphā basne

When one becomes na-chhune [menstruous] then the taruni period begins. During this time [i.e. during menstruation] you are not supposed to touch the children<sup>6</sup> and then you become a taruni. A lot of blood accumulates and so this blood comes out. The breasts grow. First, they are small--about this big. After the first menstruation, they begin to grow bigger. And you begin to feel that if you could wear pretty clothes and do make-up then you would become pretty too. When you are small you have no desires for that sort of thing. If you get something to eat, then that is enough for you when you are small. But when you grow up, then you want good food and good things to wear. You feel that you would like to be better than all the others--to put on a lot of make-up, cream,

powder and kajal (eye make-up) -- to become a taruni. You think about what others will say--whether they will say you are a taruni or not and whether they will say you are pretty or not. These are the new feelings that you have when you are a taruni.

I was fourteen for my guphā basne. Mother was at the spring washing clothes. ... I had taken rice to the dhiki to pound it to make parched rice for my friend's wedding. After pounding four mānā, I took it from the dhiki and went. On the way, I felt like urinating. So I put the rice aside and squatted down-- but as I was urinating, I felt something cold. When I looked to see what had happened, I saw something red. And something black like the excrement of insects. I thought that there had been some insect excrement under that tree. Then when I had gone a little way, I began to think: Maybe this is what they call na chhune [menstruation], ... I didn't know anything about all that. A few days earlier there had been pains. ... Now there were red marks on my dhoti. I didn't know whether I had become na chhune or not. I left the rice right there. I didn't touch the rice. I called out to mother and told her I didn't know but may be I had become na chhune. And then I began to weep. Now I had to stay in the guphā. I would not be able to look upon anyone. I would have to stay all alone. And mother also began to weep.

"Now my daughter has grown up. She will become bigger day by day, and she will have to be married off to another person's house."

Mother also wept at the thought that she would be all alone and she would have to do everything in the house by herself ...

When you become na chhune, then you feel embarrassed with your father. They begin to think about where to hide you and in whose house you should stay.

Mother said that I would have to be taken to the house of a Jaisi on the ridge above our house. When one becomes na chhune, then if a boksi [witch] sees one then evil will befall one. One becomes ill. If the boksi sees the blood or the person taking a bath, then she casts the evil eye upon that person. We would become barren. The boksi ruins the womb and that is why one has to be kept at a place where there are no boksi. The first time [one menstruates] one can come to harm.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, a female child will do unseemly things because she doesn't know what it is all about. Grandmother scolded and said that a mere child might go around and show her bleeding. And so I went away. ... I was not supposed to look upon the sun. Nor are you supposed to look at the road straight ahead. So I went with my head bowed and the dhai āmā [wet nurse/servant] put a shawl over my head. My cousin who had already been married was home in her māitā for a visit at the time and she came along and teased me.

"Oh, Ambika has become na chhune? It is time to gether married. She has become a taruni." She teased me all along. She took me to that Jaisi woman who had a deaf-mute daughter. And that lāti [female deaf-mute], who simply used to say "Wah wah", teased me [in sign language]. She made a penis like a man's.

"Your father will play the bājā--piti, piti, piti, piti [onomatopoeic sound of drums accompanied by drumming gestures with the forefingers--a common deaf-mute expression for sexual intercourse after the wedding]! He will play the bājā and send you away and your husband will do it to you!" She kept on at it. That lāti! I felt so angry. I scolded her and told her to drop dead. But what to say to a lāti like that? So I wept and stayed there. ...

At that time, you are not supposed to eat salt for four days--that is the custom this side. But they gave it to me. They cooked rice and curry and put salt into it. Then I made my bed and slept. ... I used to sleep through the whole day. Even a small hole which would let the sunlight in would have to be covered up. On the fourth day, I bathed once. I would get up early in the morning at about 3-4 o'clock. That old woman used to take me to the place where I was to bathe. ... When the sun set, then I would come out and go to the bathroom in the fields. During the day, I would do it in a koparā and throw it away.

And then on the twelfth day, I took a bath during the day and prayed to Surya Narayan. After the twelfth day you are permitted to look upon the sun. ... On the fifteenth day, I washed my hair and took a bath and returned home. My brother tossed out my new dhōti and blouse to me and I put them on. And then father performed the pujā for Surya Narayan<sup>8</sup> and put tikā on me and gave me money and then he looked at my face [mukherne]. You are not supposed to look on your father's face until he has put tikā so I bowed down my head and father put on the tikā without looking at my face. You

can look at your mother. But you must not look at your father or your brothers. You are not even supposed to look at the roof top of your father's house! It is so bad. If they see our face then ill-fortune [a-lachhin] will follow them. And that is why it is only when Surya Puja has been performed and only after they have given us dhago [red hair braid], sidur [vermillion], chura [bangles], red clothes<sup>9</sup> and everything that they can look upon our face.

There are several variations in the rituals of purification after guphā basne. They can take place on the twelfth, the fifteenth (as in the narrative above) or the twenty-second day after menstruation. Besides doing a pujā to Surya Narayan, the girl must also make several



A Brahmin girl completing her worship of Surya (the sun deity) to mark the end of her seclusion.

godān ("gift of cow") offerings to the family priest in order to purify herself. These are done with a shawl held up between the Brahman and the girl so he does not catch sight of her face as she gives him the leaf plate of coins and they exchange tika.

But one ritual act is essential to a girl's purification: she must receive from her father and brothers a red dhoti and blouse, saubhāgya samān (red, bangles, mirror, comb, etc., that serve as signs of a married woman whose husband is still alive) and daksinā (ritual gift of money) before she can be seen by them or enter her own house again. Even if she is married, these items of clothing and decoration must be sent to her in her husband's house by consanguineal males.<sup>10</sup>

Analysis

In Brahman-Chhetri culture there is a clear parallel between the janai (sacred thread worn by males) and the saubhāgya sāmān -- the red beads and bangles that serve as signs of a married woman whose husband is alive. Both are symbols of controlled sexuality, ascetic restraint and the personal purity which the householder--both male and female, respectively--tries to maintain. The janai is first given to a male at his bartaman ceremony which initiates him into full caste and lineage status as an adult and prepares him for marriage. Girls, however, receive their red clothes and saubhāgya sāmān of initiation twice: once from a consanguineal male (her father or elder brother) at the guphā basne and once from an affinal male (her husband) at marriage. This situation--especially the receipt of saubhāgya sāmān, which is so strongly connected with marriage, from consanguineal males--at first seems not only puzzling, but even shocking in a culture where so much care is taken through gotra exogamy and various other rules to avoid the possibility of incestuous unions between any close kinsmen. In fact, if the saubhāgya gift is examined in the context of the guphā basne rite, it quite clearly signifies the exact opposite of incest: a complete transference of the daughter's nascent sexuality away from her natal group and to another patriline.

Like everything connected with female sexuality, female initiation in Brahman-Chhetri society has certain problematic aspects. For one thing, the signs of physical maturity in a female are abrupt and unmistakable. As soon as a girl has menstruated she is considered a taruni. Yet this sexual maturity which she achieves at menarche does not coincide with social and religious adulthood which she achieves only at marriage. If marriage is performed according to the Brahmanical ideal before the onset of puberty, there is no problem with the appearance of sexuality. The girl has already been transferred by her consanguineal kinsmen to her husband's patriline where she has assumed full caste and ritual status. She has already received an earlier saubhāgya sāmān from her husband and her emerging sexuality has been properly channelled and controlled. It is in this context understandable that the guphā basne ceremony of a married girl in her ghar is much less rigorous than for an unmarried girl in her māitā.

But if, as is often the case, menarche occurs before marriage, both the purity of the girl and the reputation of her māitā become extremely vulnerable. Her nascent unattached sexuality is an anomaly which endangers herself and her male consanguineal relatives. She has changed from a kanyā keti into a taruni, but she has not yet been transferred to her affinal group that will channel her sexuality toward its own legitimate continuity.

Here we have reached the crux of the strong contrast between affinal and consanguineal women in Brahman-Chhetri kinship and social organization. The sexual and procreative roles which are felt to endanger the purity of the patrilineal group are exclusively associated with affinal women. Hence the bride, so strongly identified with her

procreative role, must be protected by the strictest social means in her ghar. The daughter, on the other hand, is categorically shielded from any association with sexual roles. To her māitā a woman is always perceived as the pure, virgin kanyā. There is no need for the harsh restrictions of the husband's house because, from the point of view of her māitā, a daughter has no sexuality to be controlled. This is, in fact, the conceptual basis of the sacredness of daughters and sisters and of the high ritual status of consanguineal women: daughters and sisters can be "sacred" to their consanguineal kin only because they are not structural members of their natal patriline. Once she is married, a woman's purity does not concern her māitā; it has already been established by her acceptance into an affinal group of the appropriate ritual status.

There is, however, great concern about the purity of consanguineal females who have reached pubescence, but have not yet been transferred to another patriline. For, as the name kanyādān suggests, a girl must be pure in order to be given away as a religious gift, and until her marriage, her actions reflect directly upon the prestige of her māitā. Any "loose" behaviour on her part (and his might include such things as talking with boys on the village path, laughing too much or showing lack of proper shyness in front of men) makes her father's job of finding a suitable groom that much more difficult. For the whole village is the custodian of her reputation and the prospective groom's family will doubtless sound out her neighbours before finalizing the engagement.

In the unlikely event that she should disgrace her family by becoming pregnant, her family may be forced to expel her to save their own caste standing. There is great urgency to disclose the caste status of such an unmarried girl's lover, since this man will determine the future caste status of the girl and her child. If the gentle questioning of the girl's own family does not succeed, she is subjected to the harsh interrogation of a gathering of male lineage members. Even if the lover was a Chhetri or a Brahman, the girl's chances of marriage almost disappear unless her family can bring pressure on her lover to marry her.

But if the girl will not identify her lover, then her family must assume the worst--that the lover was lower caste or even untouchable. On the eleventh day after the birth during a ceremony called nuhāran, if no father can be produced to give his gotra and thar names to the child, both the child and the mother become untouchable.<sup>11</sup> From then on the girl may not enter her father's house and must fend for herself.<sup>12</sup>

By separating the girl from her consanguineal kin before the emergence of her sexuality, the Brahmanic ideal of pre-pubescent marriage not only avoids the possibility of such heartbreaking scandal, but also provides the ideological basis for the sacredness of consanguineal women and the special relaxed and affectionate treatment of daughters and sisters. The menarche of an unmarried girl presents her family with a grave threat to the categorical purity on which her



sacred status is based. Guphā basne is a ritual attempt to protect that purity by establishing a symbolic barrier between the girl's sexuality and her consanguineal male kinsmen. The girl's seclusion is, of course, meant to protect her from all men (and conversely to protect all men from her menstrual pollution), but there is a strong emphasis on avoidance of the father and brothers in particular. The fact that an unmarried girl is specifically forbidden to stay in her māitā or even "see the roof of her father's house" during this period, while married girls may undergo seclusion inside their husbands' house, further indicates that it is the girl's special relationship with her father and brother which is especially endangered by her menarche.

The father's puzzling gift of saubhāgya sāmān, instead of symbolizing (as it might at first appear to do) the māitā's sexual claim on the girl, is, on the contrary, an acknowledgement that her sexuality and fertility are transferable and, indeed, must be transferred. It is her fertility potential that serves as the basis for the marriage and the ensuing linkage between the group that gives her and the group that receives her. If she is already married, the fathers' saubhāgya sāmān gift is a ritual recognition of his responsibility to ultimately provide not a just a kanyā keti (virgin girl) but a sexual/fertile being. If the girl is unmarried, the father's saubhāgya sāmān is an acknowledgement that she has reached marriageable age and must soon be sent away. The response to menarche quoted in the earlier passage is typical: "Now your father must marry you off!" After the physical separation of her seclusion, the girl's father must present her with the signs of her impending marriage before he can "look upon her face."

The two individual items of saubhāgya sāmān which the groom must give the bride in the marriage rituals are red marriage beads and a vermillion mark in the parting of her hair. The latter carries strong connotations of the groom's impending sexual possession of the bride. Significantly, these two items are not included in the saubhāgya gifts which the father gives at the conclusion of his daughter's guphā basne ceremony.<sup>13</sup> The other items which he does give (i.e. the red clothes, bangles, hairbraid, mirror, comb, etc.) may be worn and used by both married and unmarried women (though not by widows), but only married women may wear the red marriage beads and vermillion mark in the hair.

This interpretation of guphā basne as symbolic of the necessity of separating male lineage members from the sexuality of consanguineal women is reinforced by two other such prescribed ritual separations between them. Thus, a woman may not "look upon the face" of her father and brothers for ten days after she has given birth and for a full year after the death of her husband. Both are situations, like menarche, which emphasize--though in different ways--the sexual aspect of consanguineal women. All three events are potentially dangerous "out-breaks"<sup>14</sup> of female sexuality which can only be controlled within the patrilineal structures of kinship.

Until the nuhāran ceremony on the eleventh day after birth, when the child's father claims it as a member of his lineage, neither the child nor its mother may be seen by the mother's consanguineal male relatives. Other men may see both mother and child, but her brothers and father may not. This period of seclusion, called sutkeri or kona ma basne (lit "sitting in a corner"), is likened by villagers to the guphā basne period and would, once again, seem to shield the woman's sexuality from men of her māitā until her affines re-assert their patrilineal control and responsibilities at the nuhāran ceremony.

At childbirth a woman's sexuality is responsible for the giving of life; when her husband dies, her sexuality is associated in a vague way with the destruction of life. It seems odd, perhaps, to associate widowhood with female sexuality when among the high castes, the death of a husband signals the end of her legitimate sexual life. However, in many other realms of Brahman-Chhetri culture, we find the idea that a woman's sexual looseness, or even her sexual demands on her own husband, weakens him and may be responsible for his death. This is not to say, of course, that individual widows are actually thought to be guilty of such crimes in the minds of their fellow villagers. The sense of sin connected with widowhood is far too diffused and inarticulate in most cases to provoke any direct accusations.

Nevertheless, a widow's sexuality--like that of an unmarried pubescent girl--is a social anomaly. Since she is no longer under the control of her husband, she presents a potential problem to both her affinal and consanguineal kin. Most important, her affinal group can never make fully legitimate use of her fertility again. There is also the problem of who is responsible for supporting her. Since she was transferred at marriage to her husband's thar and gotra, her affines have an obligation to support her and her children for the rest of her life. In some families, however, this responsibility for a deceased kinsman's wife may be resented--especially if she and her children are young or, even worse, if she is childless. Thus, the period immediately following her husband's death is a time when her and her children's rights to a share of part of the patrilineal land must be established.

Before the barakhi ceremony, which marks the end of a widow's year of mourning, the māitā must send a set of clothes to their widowed daughter. For a year, she will have worn only the plain white clothes of widowhood in which her father and brothers may never see her. But after the barakhi srāddha for her husband, she can put on clothes with designs and colours (any colour but red) and go to visit her māitā. One widow informant remembered that even though her father became seriously ill and eventually died during the year of enforced separation, she was not allowed to go to visit him:

We are not supposed to go our māitā wearing white clothes. My father wept and wept when my husband died. And within six months he also died. I was not able to go to him. We couldn't meet until a year had passed. He

sat there at the pipal tree with his grandchildren and he wept his heart out and went away. He couldn't meet me or see me so he sat there and wept and went away. In those days, we didn't have paper money. But he sent coins worth twenty, twenty-five rupees to his two grandchildren. And for me, he sent a lump of misri [crystalized sugar] this big, and a coconut. And then, when six months had passed, my father also died. He told my brothers that they should give this and that to his daughter. He had made a bangle of gold and a necklace with coral and gold nuggets and told them to give it to me. But when father died, who would give that to me? No one gave it. They brought a set of clothes with designs on them because this has to be given when the māitā is putting on the tika [after the year of mourning]. They brought shoes and clothes and shawls and I put them on and went to my māitā.

The proscription against seeing her father and brothers during the year of mourning means that a woman cannot follow what is probably her natural inclination to escape to the comfort and support of her māitā. It places the responsibility for her and her children squarely on the shoulders of her affinal kin where, in terms of the patrilineal kinship structure, it belongs.

Behind the ban on seeing consanguineal men during the year of mourning is the idea that the māitā should never become the permanent home of an adult woman. Of course, women given away in kanyādān always retain the right to return to their māitā permanently if the situation in their ghar is absolutely unbearable. But, while short visits to the māitā are a cherished delight to both the woman and her consanguineal kin, prolonged or permanent stays can place severe strains on her special honoured position there and even on her normally warm and affectionate relationship with her brothers.

Just as a woman's status in her māitā is the reverse of her lowly status in her husband's home, so her behavioural standards are to a large extent the reverse of what they are in her ghar. A chhorī (daughter) visiting her māitā is given the lightest, most enjoyable of the household work--cooking, doing pujā, weaving straw mats or looking after children. Here, she may complain freely to sympathetic ears about the treatment she receives from her mother-in-law or her co-wife. She will be allowed to sleep when she feels tired during the day and she will be expected to avail herself of her mother's hair-oil, eye liner and even city-bought cream and powder to do her toilet. Special rich foods will be prepared for her if the family can afford it, and, if possible, they will try to send her back with a new blouse or dhoti for herself as well as a load of gifts for her in-laws. The general laxity of the māitā extends even to a woman's relations with men. No one will criticise a married daughter if she talks and laughs a little with men she meets on the paths of her natal village.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, this indulgent situation in the māita is not meant to be a permanent one for women, and if it becomes so, serious structural problems and deep mutual resentment can result. The most open resentment comes from a woman's bhāju (brother's wife). As junior affinal woman in the household, the bhāju does the hardest work and has the lowest status. Since she will be similarly pampered on visits to her own māita, the bhāju is usually willing to defer to her nanda (husband's sister), but only on a temporary basis. In the case of one woman who returned permanently to her māita after her husband brought in a co-wife, the two bhāju of the house complained bitterly to me of the hard field work they were forced to do in the hot sun, which dries them out and darkens their skin, while their nanda sits in the cool house doing the easy chores and maintaining her fair complexion. From this point it is easy to see how resentment spreads to the woman's own brothers. Not only do they have to listen the complaints of their own hard working wives, but they are forced to support a relatively unproductive household member (their sister) and her children. As long as the woman's parents are alive and the extended family is intact, her place and at least her food and clothes are assured. But when the joint estate is broken up after the father's death, the question of which brother takes on the support of the sister can be a problem--especially if the sister's relations with her brother's wives have been acrimonious and the family lands are already insufficient.

Women are, as I mentioned at the outset, well aware of their ultimately tenuous position in their māita. Many women informants expressed the feeling that only while their mother was alive did they have a firm right to remain in their māita. In fact, the nature of a woman's principal link to her natal home is expressed in the word "māita" itself which is derived from the mā or āmā (mother). As one informant confided to me about the insecurity of her marital situation: "My husband didn't love me in my ghar and even in my māita, I didn't have a mother." This woman also remembered her father expressing the same idea when he was trying to find her a suitable husband: "Her mother is dead. What to do if she is mistreated after her marriage? I won't be able to take her back and look after her." This attitude would seem to reinforce my interpretation of the ritual separations imposed at menarche, childbirth and widowhood between a woman and her consanguineal kinsmen. In all three cases, the mother and sisters may visit the sequestered woman freely. Her sexuality is no threat to them or to the maintenance of her sacredness to them. But for men, the sacredness and ideal purity of consanguineal women can only, it seems, be maintained at a distance.

#### Footnotes

1. 'Narikot' is pseudonym for the village in the Kathmandu Valley where I did field work for the period between 1972 to 1976.
2. Kumāri worship among the Newars is a more fully articulated expression of the same belief (Allen, 1975). The goddess ceases

to inhabit a young girl when menstruation (or some flaw like a bleeding cut, loss of teeth or a serious disease) renders her too impure to continue as a vehicle for the goddess.

3. I conducted a survey on marriage and fertility for all the Brahman-Chhetri women past menarche who were presently members of the local patrilineal kin groups of one hamlet in Narikot. Specifically, this group of fifty-nine women includes both married-in women and unmarried daughters who are still members of their father's thar and gotra. Married-out daughters who have become members of their husband's thar and gotra in other villages are not included.
4. Surya is a male deity worshipped by Brahman and Chhetri women on many occasions as a symbol of purity.
5. Nowadays the twelve-day period of seclusion even for unmarried girls is much more common. But many of my older informants recalled a twenty-two-day seclusion.
6. This informant was very fastidious about ritual purity. She was among those who believed menstruating women should not touch anyone except a nursing child. Many other women avoided only adult men during their periods.
7. This is a reference to the common belief that the witches can cause harm--especially fertility problems--if they are allowed to see the menstrual blood of a victim. It is part of this same belief which requires the bride to cover the sidur (vermillion powder) on the parting of her hair after the groom has first put it there. Female sexuality, then, is not only dangerous to men. Women themselves are vulnerable if their sexuality is not carefully shielded.
8. According to other informants and my own observations the girl herself performs the Surya Puja.
9. The red blouse and dhoti given here are actually preceded several years by the guniu cholo which is also red, given to daughters sometime after their seventh year for Brahmans and eleventh year for Chhetris on the eighth day of Dasai. In traditional hill families this would signal the girl's approach to marriageable age.
10. This ritual seclusion and purification is repeated for a period of seven days following the girl's second and third menses.
11. Often such children are abandoned before the nuhāran. If the child's umbilical cord is uncut when it is abandoned, it will assume the caste of whoever finds it and claims it by cutting the cord.

12. In all the cases of unmarried motherhood which I encountered, the lovers were known and were of acceptable (i.e. marriageable) caste status. In one instance, the disgraced girl was taken in as a kānchhi (youngest) wife--causing the husband's indignant elder wife to leave him and go to live in her māita. In another case, the girl's family managed to marry her off to an Indian in the distant Tarai where the fairness of hill women cancels out many other defects. In the third case, the boy--though of proper caste background--refused to marry the girl. She is still unmarried and expects to remain so, but her family had the resources to train her for a profession. She now supports herself (her child died soon after birth) as a school teacher.

None of these cases occurred in Narikot itself. Rather, they happened to more urbanized relatives of Narikot villagers and, in the eyes of the villagers, they reflect the dangers of the greater freedom (in terms of later marriage, education, even office jobs) allowed to "modern" middle class girls. Nevertheless, a fourth case, which did occur in the village (more than a decade ago), seems to have been accepted with surprisingly little permanent damage to the girl's place in the community. The unmarried sister of a village woman came to help her during her sutkeri period after child-birth and was impregnated by the woman's husband. They were informally married (with the diyo kalas puja ceremony) and now the two sisters have separate households in Narikot. The offspring of the second sister are of thimbu ("hybrid") rather than jharrā ("pure") status because of the irregularity of her marriage--but otherwise the two women are treated as equal co-wives by villagers.

13. Vermillion powder (sidur) is included in the case of an unmarried girl in the fathers gift but informants stated emphatically that it was to be used only to make the red tika mark on the forehead and not to decorate the parting of the hair.
14. One vivid symbolic expression of this temporary loss of control over female sexuality in all three instances is the unoiled, un-combed hair which menstruous women, new mothers and new widows must all maintain.
15. In the Jumla region of far western Nepal the relaxation of behavioural standards in the māita is carried to an extreme. A married woman in her māita may go the all-night singing parties with eligible men (i.e. potential partners for a second or third marriage) from neighbouring villages. Such behaviour in her ghar would be a disgrace warranting at least a severe beating and perhaps permanent expulsion from her husband's house.

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