

THE WIVES OF THE RISHIS:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE TIJ—RISHI PANCHAMI WOMEN'S FESTIVAL

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The Tij-Rishi Panchami complex represents a response to the dominant patrilineal ideology which so strongly influences the social structure and the world view of Brahman-Chetri culture in Nepal. As such the rituals of Tij-Rishi Panchami and the myths surrounding those rituals express patrilineal ideology and its ambivalent view of women while at the same time attempting to mediate some of the conflicts and contradictions inherent in this view.

The keystone of Hindu patrilineal ideology is the high value placed on the solidarity of male agnates. This principle is evident in the kinship structure which is based on the patrilocal joint family. Usually a man, his wives, their unmarried daughters, sons, son's wives and the latter's children all live together as single residential and economic unit. Each patrilineal unit must send its daughters out in marriage and bring in daughters-in-law from other patrilineal lines. Thus women serve as the links between lineages, but they never become fully identified—ritually or emotionally—with either their natal or affinal patrilineal lines. They remain to some extent outsiders with regard to the whole patrilineal institution.

The peripheral nature of women's involvement in the institution of the patriline is ritually expressed by their exclusion from the major ceremonies like Devali (worship of the lineage god) and the Dasai Durga Puja, both of which celebrate various aspects of agnate solidarity. It is also highly significant that women may not directly perform the *kirya basne* funeral rites or the annual *sraddha* rituals of feeding of the ancestors.¹ These ceremonies represent the spiritual continuity of the patriline beyond death, and the strong Hindu belief that only a son can assure his parents' immortality in the *pitrilok* (the world of the fathers).

The ambivalence towards women which is evident in patrilineal ideology is increased by their association with sexuality which is itself an unending source of contradiction in the Hindu tradition. Village Hinduism, such as practised by the Brahmans and Chetris of Nepal, represents a perpetual opposition between the loftier ideals of the ascetic (*tyagi dharma*) and the more practical ideals of the householder

¹ A priest informant said that women could theoretically perform these ceremonies in the absence of a qualified male relative *after they were past menopause*, though he could recall only one such instance in his experience.

(*grihasti dharma*.) Village Hindus are of course by and large householders involve in the toils of earning a living and raising a family. Nevertheless, their deep involvement with concepts of purity and pollution betrays a strong underlying respect for the values of asceticism. For the things which are considered polluting are almost all associated in some way with birth, death, copulation, eating or defecation—the organic processes of life and the temptations of the flesh which tie men to the samaric round of death and rebirth. These things which the Hindu householder sees as defiling are the very things which the Hindu ascetic attempts to escape through his austerity (*tapas*) and renunciation (*tyag*.)

Obedience to the rules for maintaining individual and caste purity then, is one of the principle means of integrating the ideals of asceticism (for which sexuality and women are dangerous distractions) into the life of the householder (for whom they are a necessity). This integration is symbolized in the rituals of Janai Purni when Brahman and Chetri men must renew the *janai* (sacred thread), which signifies their ritual purity as members of the “twice born” castes. I have chosen this ceremony out of the many life cycle and calendrical rites in village Hinduism which deal with the ascetic / householder contradiction, because the ritual idiom of Janai Purni closely parallels that of Tij–Rishi Panchami which is the focus of our inquiry. Janai Purni is an all-male festival² which involves purification through fasting, sexual abstinence and rigorous bathing followed by worship of the seven Rishis. These same elements appear in the all-female festival of Tij–Rishi Panchami and I believe that their meaning in either context is amplified by reference to the other.

The *Sapta Rishi*³, or Seven Sages worshiped on both occasions are the mythic embodiment of the ascetic / householder contradiction. At the same time in their role as *gotra* founders, they represent the continuity of the patriline as an

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2. In the village setting Janai Purni involves only men. However, it is also an occasion of pilgrimage to various alpine lakes (such as Bhairav Kund and Gosain Kund) sacred to Siva. Women also participate in these pilgrimages and bath in the sacred lakes.
 3. The original Rishis are traditionally seven. According to one village priest they are: Atre, Kaysap, Biswamitra, Bharadwaj, Gautam, Basista, and Jam adagni. However, their numbers increase in certain contexts. One such situation is the explanation of the origin of *gotra*, each of which is said to be named after its founding Rishi. The number of *gotra* far exceeds seven and includes many names not found on the traditional list given above.

institution and the claim of each individual lineage to purity of descent. The Rishis are ascetic forest dwellers; but they are also householders because they have wives. As O'Flaherty has pointed out, it is the wives of the Rishis with their distracting sexuality, their own unsated sexual demands and eventual unfaithfulness who delude the Rishis and hinder them in their spiritual pursuits. "The virtue of the wife is often the crucial point in the forest dwellers dilemma"⁴— the flaw that upsets the tenuous balance of the householder / ascetic paradox.

Although the Rishis' wives are supposed to be, like their husbands, paragons of virtue and restraint, "the ascetic tradition, based as it is upon a profound misogyny, is quick to challenge the chastity of any woman and is therefore suspicious of the wife of the forest dweller".⁵ O'Flaherty cites many myths⁶ wherein the loss of chastity—even in thought or by accident—on the part of the Sages' wives cause the Sages to loose the power they have gained through their long and arduous austerities. The Brahmans and Chetris of Nepal have their own version of the story. It appears in the *Swastani Vrata Katha*⁷ woven into the story of Shiva's madness after the death of his beloved wife Sati Devi. Most villagers are well acquainted with this short text (approx. 300 pages), which is read a chapter a night in the homes of those who are literate during the holy month of Magh. This then, is the Nepali version of what O'Flaherty calls the "Pine Forest Story", which forms part of the mythic backdrop for the worship of the Rishis on Janai Purni and Tij-Rishi Panchami:

"After Sri Mahadev had brought his mind under control he realized that Sati Devi's body was gone. He felt disconcerted and decided to go north to perform *tapasya*. But by mistake he took the route to the south and arrived at Karnatak (forest). There was a village there called Brahmapur. The Rishis of the village had gone to bathe in the holy river. The wives of the Rishis saw Shiva. One of them pointed at him and said "Look there goes Mahadev ! He is roaming about like a madman because of Sati Devi's death. Our Rishis are weak of body because they eat only once in twenty-four hours. They are incapable

⁴ O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973, p. 81.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 80

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 80–81. and p. 98–106.

⁷ *Swastani Vrata Katha*, Babu Madhavaprasad Sharma, Dudhvinayak, Varansi – 1 Samvat 2022.

of giving us sexual satisfaction, so let us follow Mahadev!”.

So the one hundred wives of the Rishis followed him. But the Rishis who had gone to take their baths at the river came to know of it and they went in search of their wives. After some distance they caught up with them. The Rishis charged Mahadev with enticing their wives away. Mahadev replied that he was not guilty of such a crime. Then the Rishis pointed out the throng of women following him and asked Mahadev who and what they were. Mahadev looked around and was surprised to find, a crowd of women behind him. He was amazed to see the Rishis' wives and he flatly denied having seduced them.

“I dont' known why they have followed me.” he said.

“It must be your penis which is responsible.” replied the Rishis. So they cursed his penis to fall from his body. Because of the Rishis' curse, Mahadev's penis fell down from his body. Out of it another penis of flames (*jyotirling*) appeared, it continued growing until it covered the entire world. At this terrible calamity the entire host of gods led by Brahma, the Rishis, Yakshas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras and Daityas went in a group to Vishnu and said, “Oh Baikuntha Nath ! Mahadev's flame *linga* has grown until it covers the entire creation. We have come to inform you !”

Vishnu acted immediately and covered it (the flame *linga*) with his body. At this the *linga* became small again at once. Seeing this, all the gods, Yakshas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras and Daityas thanked Vishnu and went back home. Sri Mahadev issued out of the flame, *linga* and addressed the Rishis and cursed them.

“When I was without fault you cursed me.” he said.

So he counter-cursed them for their crime saying, “Let your words not be truthful and thus without force, and let your wives be unfaithful to you”. After delivering this curse he went north and practiced meditation and devout austerities.⁸

Despite this mythic lapse (i.e. the Rishis lost their detachment and became jealous of their wives' sexual attraction towards Shiva), the Rishis in their role as *gotra* founders continue to represent the ideal of male ascetic purity to Hindu

⁸ *Ibid.* Chapter 12, (pages 142–145), (my translation).

villagers in Nepal.⁹ After all it was their wives, not they, who caused the trouble ! Through *gotra* affiliation each lineage traces its symbolic descent from one of the Rishis (though not necessarily one of the traditional seven). As T. N. Madan¹⁰ has pointed out *gotra* does not represent an actual kinship grouping—its only social function being the regulation of marriage. But I think he misses the *conceptual* importance of the fiction of patrilineal descent from the ancestor Rishis in validating the Hindu patrilineal ideology. The ascetic Rishis provide a kind of spiritual pedigree for lineages which by their very nature must be deeply involved with the worldly concerns and distractions of the householder's dharma. Since absolute ascetic purity is impossible for the patriline as an institution, purity of descent becomes its structural equivalent.

Sexuality is legitimate if the proper women are obtained in marriage through the rules of *gotra* exogamy and caste endogamy—and if these affinal women are then carefully guarded from outside men. The agnatal group's concern over female sexuality as a threat to lineage purity is, on a deeper level, a concern for the spiritual purity of its own members.

There is a strong emphasis on asceticism in the *brataman* ceremony which initiates the Hindu male into caste, *gotra* and lineage membership. The young boy must renounce his family and lineage for the celibate religious life of a *brahmacharya*. His head is shaved, he dons the clothes of a mendicant and makes as if is set out into the world as a *yogi*. He even begs rice from his relatives. Then having symbolically fulfilled the ascetic ideal, he can be called back by his family to assume the life of a householder and his eventual duties as a husband and father. Having established his spiritual purity, he is fit to participate in the continuity of the patriline.

The sacred thread (*janai*) which a boy receives during his *brataman* is not only the emblem of high caste rank and full lineage membership. It is also a symbol of spiritual purity and of the initiate's link with his ascetic Rishi "ancestor". Informants explain that the Rishis are actually *in* the *janai* that they wear. The lives

⁹ For fuller discussion of *gotra* and its relation to Nepali *thar*, see; von Furer-Haimendorf, Christoph, "Unity and Diversity in the Chetri Caste of Nepal", pp. 11-67. In *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, ed. Furer-Haimendorf, Asia Publishing House, 1966.

¹⁰ Madan, T. N. "Is the Brahmanic Gotra a Grouping of Kin ?" in *South-Western Journal of Anthropology*, p. 59-77., Vol 18, 1962.

of adult Brahman–Chetri males are beset with rules to keep the *janai*—and by extension its wearer—from being defiled. Thus the *janai* is placed over the ear during defecation and changed altogether after a birth or death in the patriline or after contact with a menstruous women or an untouchable. Like purity of descent, these rituals of physical purity are the householder’s equivalent for the absolute purity of ascetics like the Rishis which he cannot attain.

The importance of the Rishis as an ideal of male purity is evident in the Janai Purni rites. The men say they must bathe three hundred and sixty times on Janai Purni “because the Rishis used to bathe every day and we don’t so we make up for it on this day”. The day before the festival all initiated males observe the strict *havasya basne* regimen which includes shaving the head,¹¹ bathing, restricting the diet and avoiding sexual intercourse. Then early on the morning of Janai Purni the high caste men of the village, dressed in clean dhotis, go down to the river carrying their year’s supply of new *janai* and the things they will need to purify themselves and to do *puja* to the Rishis.

After stripping to his loin cloth, each man takes *choko mato* (pure earth) in his left hand, makes three mud balls of it and covers them with his right hand while he recites a *mantra* invoking the mud to destroy his sins. He then takes the first ball of mud and rubs it over the lower half of his body. The second ball is rubbed from the waist up and the third from the head down over other whole body. Then, dipping his whole body in the river, he bathes.

He repeats the process twice rubbing himself with cow dung and then ashes—though since ashes are sacred to Shiva, they may only be rubbed on the purer part of the body above the waist. Then he takes some strands of *dubo* grass and sprinkles himself three times with water from the river. He does the same thing with *datiun* (a wild plant) leaves and finally splashes water on himself three hundred and sixty times with a spring of holy *kus* grass before taking a final plunge in the river.

When all the men have finished bathing and put on clean dhotis, they gather in a large circle for the Rishi puja led by one of the Brahman priests in the village. A copper tray containing all their new sacred threads is placed in the center along with the standard *kalas* (water vessel into which the gods are invoked), *Ganesh* (betel nut in a plate of rice representing the elephant-headed Ganesh, son of Shiva, who must be worshiped at the beginning of any ceremony) and *diyo* (lamp). After

¹¹ Many less orthodox villagers avoid this requirement now.

the *Ganesh*, *diyo* and *kalas* have been worshiped, offerings are made, first to the sacred threads and then to the Rishis. As they offer puja, the priest tells each man to remember his own *gotra* the while the priest recites the following *mantra*: "Let our sacred thread give us *tej* (brilliance associated with ascetic heat) *bal* (strength) and *ayu* (life)".

After the joint worship each man approaches his own family priest, gives him a *janai* and *dakshina* (religious gift to a ritual superior) and puts a new *janai* on himself while reciting the *mantra* given above. Later in the day each family priest will come and tie the protective yellow *raksya bandan* thread on the right wrist for men and the left for women. Thus, through bathing and worship of the Rishis on Janai Purni, high caste men are able to restore the power and purity of the *janai* which their past year's existence as a householder—above all their contact with female sexuality—has dimmed.

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Tij-Rishi Panchami is actually comprised of two separate festivals on the 3rd and 5th day of the bright half of Bhadau (Aug-Sep).¹² But as Bista¹³ noted, Nepalis think of the two as a single event, because they are both for women exclusively and also I believe, because the expressed purposes of both are conceptually related. Informants usually explained their activities throughout the entire festival as motivated by two desires (i.e. to insure the long life of one's husband¹⁴ and to be purified from the possible sin of having touched a man during one's menstruation period)—even though strictly speaking the first goal is related specifically to Tji and the second to Rishi Panchami.

To understand either part of the Tij-Rishi Panchami complex—or the relation between the two—it is first necessary to become acquainted with some of the symbolic meanings attached to menstrual blood in Brahman-Chetri culture. Menstrual

¹² Usually the two are separated by a day in between, but since the dates for the festivals are determined independently by astrological calculation, they sometimes fall back to back—even though *tij* means the third day of the lunar fortnight and *panchami* means the fifth.

¹³ Bista, Khem Bahadur, "Tij ou la fete des femmes", p. 7-18 in *Objets et Monde*, Vol IX, No 1, Spring 1969.

¹⁴ Unmarried girls (past menarche) seek a good husband; widows seek to avoid widowhood in the next life.

blood is a strong source of pollution—particularly to adult initiated males (i.e. those who wear the sacred thread). At menarche girls are sequestered in a completely darkened room, usually in another village. They are hidden entirely from the sun (a symbol of male purity¹⁵) and from all men—especially male consanguineal relatives—for a period of 12 days. This rite called colloquially *gupha basne* (staying in a cave) ends with a series of purificatory rituals after which the girl can look at the face of her father and brothers and return home.

Thereafter a woman becomes polluted “like an untouchable or a dog”, for the first three days of every menses. She may not carry water, cook food, worship the gods and above all she may not touch adult men¹⁶.

The myth of how menstrual blood came to be polluting is in the *Rishi Panchami Vrata Katha* which is read by the priest after the rituals on Rishi Panchami. According to the Nepali myth, Indra, the king of the gods, sought help from Brahma to purify himself from the heinous sin of *Brahman-hatya* (killing a Brahman) which he had committed. Brahma helped Indra by dividing the sin into four parts and throwing them into four different places.

The first fell into the flames of the fire, the second into the river the third on the mountain and the fourth into the *Rajh* (menstrual blood). And that is why these women have to be set aside with great care. They should not touch anything at all, they should set themselves apart, and this is the command of Brahma.....! All the four *varnas* should first and foremost forsake the woman during her menstruation because on the first day she is like a *Chandalini* (an accursed, damned woman), on the second day she is as sinful as *Brahmaghatini* or one who has killed a Brahman. On the third day she is equal to a *Rajhki* or *Dhobini* (untouchable washer woman), and on the fourth day she is purified. During those three days (if there is contact) a most grievous sin is committed. And in order to destroy that sin, to destroy all sin and all kinds of defects, it is

¹⁵ Women explained their reluctance to engage in sex during the daytime (or even after sunrise in the morning) as being out of respect for Surya, the sun god who is strongly associated with purity and asceticism.

¹⁶ Very orthodox women also avoid touching other women or children (except their own nursing infants), but most women touch each other freely during menstruation.

necessary to under take the *barta* (fast, religious vow) of Rishi Panchami¹⁷.

Despite this strongly felt¹⁸ and strictly observed negative import however, menstrual blood also has some positive connotations through its connection with fertility. For according to village beliefs about the physiology of conception, menstrual blood is the material out of which much-desired children are formed in the womb. Village women explain that during pregnancy the blood which doesn't appear in mensus is collecting or solidifying to form the child¹⁹. The ambivalence towards menstrual blood is expressed in the myth given above. For, although it is connected with the grave sin of Brahman murder, the connection is arbitrary. Furthermore, it is significant that the other three things which receive a fourth part of the sin—the fire, the river and the mountain—are all considered sources of purity in the Hindu tradition. The structural message of the myth is that menstrual blood too is basically a good thing, but due to human weakness (Indra's violent crime) it must be regulated.

It is my contention here that menstrual blood is symbolic of affinal women—women in their specifically *sexual* roles as wife and mother. From the point of view of the patrilineal unit affinal women, like menstrual blood, are at once necessary and dangerous. They must be brought in to produce children if the lineage is to continue. At the same time affinal women present a threat both to their own husbands individually and to the agnatal group as a whole.

As the Tiji *bart* shows, women are felt to be somehow responsible for their husband's long life. His death is considered as their *pap* (sin).

¹⁷ *Rishi Panchami Vrata Katha*, Babu Madhavaprasad Sharma, Dudhvinayak Varansi-1, Samvat 2022. (translation by P. R. Cehtri and myself)

¹⁸ Women do feel that they are ritually impure for three days, but they do *not* feel the sense of personal sin (which the text seems to impute to them) any more than would a Nepali male who was undergoing death pollution observances for his father. On the contrary, women cite the myth to explain that they are not individually responsible for menstrual pollution *unless they disobey the restrictions*.

¹⁹ For fuller discussion of beliefs about conception and menstruation, see my "Sex and Motherhood among the Brahmans and Chetris of Central Nepal" in *Anthropology, Health and Development*, a special issue of *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, in press.

Thus women who have been widowed during a given year may participate in the purifying fast at Tij and the bathing on Panchami, as a kind of penitence for their husband's death, but they may not on either occasion participate in the worship of Shiva or the Rishis. Villagers often explain the wife's responsibility in terms of her *karma*: some sin in a previous life causes a woman to become a widow in this one. In myth the connection is often made between the wife's chastity and her husband's life span. For example in the *Swastani Vrata Katha* mentioned earlier, the demon Jalandar loses his life the moment his wife Brinda is seduced by Vishnu disguised as her husband. It is perhaps this idea which finds expression in the colloquial word *randi* which means both widow and prostitute.

Carstairs has pointed out a more direct threat in the sexual demands of the wife which are seen as drain on the husband's life forces²⁰ "Sexual love is considered the keenest pleasure known to the senses. But it is felt to be destructive to a man's physical and spiritual well being. Women are powerful, demanding, seductive—and ultimately destructive²¹". There is more than a faint echo here of the Rishis' wives !

But besides the threat and distraction which individual wives present to their own husbands, there is the very real threat which affinal women represent to the agnate unit as a whole. For the status of a daughter-in-law in the joint family is extremely low and her goals are likely to be counter in many respects to those of the group—aimed at the prosperity of herself, her husband and their children rather than that of the patrilineal unit as a whole. Furthermore, her only influence in the joint family (until she has a grown son) is through her husband. To gain power she must use her sexuality to win him away from his ingrained loyalties to his parents and brothers. Often of course, these lineal ties are already frayed by restlessness with parental control and the strong sense of competition between brothers.²²

²⁰ Had Carstairs been able to interview Rajastani women, he might have found that, like Brahman and Chetri women, *they* also view their husbands' sexual demands on *them* as debilitating. I have found that each sex expresses the view that the other is more sexually active and demanding. This probably reflects the fact that ascetic values including a negative view of sexuality is, not surprisingly, shared equally by both sexes.

²¹ Carstairs, Morris, G., *The Twice Born*, Indian University Press, Bloomington, 1967. p. 156.

²² Doherty, Victor S., "The Organizing Principles of Brahman-Chetri Kinship.", p. 25-41 in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 1., No. 2, June 1974.

However, since agnata rivalry is contrary to the dominant patrilineal ideology, affinal women—their devious and contentious nature and above all, their seductive wiles — are usually the focus of blame for the constant household quarrels and for the ultimately inevitable segmentation of the joint family. Although it tends to be exaggerated by the patrilineal bias, this characterization of women as the divisive members of the groups is not entirely inaccurate.

The Tij–Rishi Panchami complex expresses this dangerous and potentially divisive power of women and their sexuality and attempts though myth and ritual to re-integrate that power into the very patrilineal structures of family and kinship which it threatens.

The festival which consists of purificatory fasting (Tij) and ritual bathing (Rishi Panchami) begins paradoxically with extreme indulgence in rich expensive foods which the women eat at the *dar khane* feast on the eve of Tij. The women explain that the purpose of their *dar khane* gorge is to “keep a fire burning in the stomach” during the strict fast on Tij. The men of the family, if they possibly can, must provide whatever foods the women demand for *dar*. And as Bista pointed out,²³ the unreasonable nature of women’s requests and the great trouble and expenses that men must go to satisfy them is a common theme of jokes during Tij.

Young daughters-in-law also expect to be allowed to return to their *maiti* (natal home) to celebrate Tij and have a few days “vacation” from the demands of their *ghar* (husband’s home). A daughter-in-law who is kept in her *ghar* because there is work to be done is very likely to sulk quite openly and to receive the sympathy of her neighbours when she complains.

On the day of Tij itself women re-enact the famous fast of the goddess Parvati who performed austerities to obtain Shiva as a husband. This story is part of the traditional puranic corpus of Shivite mythology and the Nepali version with which village women are most familiar appears in the previously mentioned *Swastani Vrata Katha*.

In the story Parvati (or Uma), the daughter of King Himalaya learns from her girl friends that her father has arranged her marriage to Vishnu. Parvati is distraught because she has always wanted to marry Shiva. (He was her husband

²³ Bista, Khem Bahadur, op. cit. p. 10–11.

in one of her previous incarnations as Sati Devi). On her friends' advice she runs away to a hidden spot by the banks of the river where she makes a sand *linga* and worships Shiva. Pleased with her devotion, Shiva appears and grants her a boon. She asked for Shiva as her husband and her wish is granted.

In some versions of the myth Parvati undergoes extreme austerities. For 3600 years she spends the hot season in the midst of four fires with the sun as the fifth, and the cold season immersed neck deep in an icy mountain stream. She reduces her diet to water, then to dry wind blown leaves and finally to nothing at all. Parvati, who is usually portrayed in Hindu art as a beautiful sensual young woman is sometimes depicted as an emaciated a-sexual hag at the end of her austerities. This extreme *tapas* is one mythic solution to the Hindu conflict between asceticism and fertility. Parvati's body has been so purified that there is nothing left of her sexuality to threaten or contaminate her beloved ascetic Shiva !

Parvati's austerities as they are depicted in the *Swastani Vrata Katha* however, are far less violent and much more within the reach of village women themselves. Parvati's good deeds, her attention to the details of ritual, her distribution of alms and above all her religious devotion (*bhakti*) are stressed along with her asceticism.²⁴

As it is actually enacted by village women at Tij, Parvati's mythic fast undergoes yet another subtle transformation. The romantic and erotic elements of the myth (i.e. the fact that Parvati fasted to win the man she *loved* rather than the man her father choose for her), come into much greater prominence. Of course the under-

²⁴ The whole *Swastani Vrata Katha* is dedicated to extolling the powers of the goddess Swastani and the efficacy of the Swastani *vrata* or *barta-a* religious vow to the goddess with power to grant any desire. Thus Parvati's fast is used by the text as an occasion to demonstrate the power of the vow. Shiva appears to Parvati in response to her worship of the sand *linga*. But instead of directly granting her boon, Shiva directs her to follow Vishnu's advice. Vishnu then tells Parvati to perform the Swastani *vrata* and describes the procedures for it in meticulous detail. Only after performing the vow to Swastani, does the goddess grant her Shiva as a bridegroom. Village women usually perform the arduous Swastani *vrata* at least once during their lives—but as the vow can only be performed during the month of Magh (Jan–Feb) and requires a month of fasting and worship, it is not performed on Tij. Instead village women re-enact the first and more traditional part of Parvati's austerities in which she worships the sand *linga*.

lying theme of purification through asceticism remains. The women observe a strict fast for more than twenty-four hours ²⁵. Most will not even take water and say that to do so is "like drinking your husband's blood". Some even spit out their own saliva to make the purification more complete.

But the aspect of devotion changes from passive worship of the sand *linga* to virtual seduction of Shiva at his temple. The women do make and worship a sand *linga* when they go to bathe in the river as part of their purification. They also set out offerings and a votive light for Shiva during the night of Tij²⁶. However the main event of the day is when the women, giddy with their fast, dance and sing at a local Shiva temple.

After their bath in the late morning, the women spend hours combing their hair, putting on precious make-up bought in the bazaar and adorning themselves with all their jewelry and best clothes. Red is by far the preferred color and by afternoon the village paths to the temple are overflowing with chattering crowds of women dressed in their blood-red wedding saris carrying trays of offerings for Shiva. After worship the women linger around the temple talking and admiring each other until usually one of the older women begins to clap and sing and urge the younger girls to dance. Some of the young men of the village may loiter on the outskirts of the temple grounds hoping to see the dancing and one or two may be allowed nearer if they are playing the drums. But the throng at the temple is almost all female. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of coy reluctance and genuine embarrassment among the women, because dancing is considered highly suggestive and erotic in Brahman-Chetri culture. Respectable women simply don't dance. ²⁷ But at Tij most women will allow themselves to be coaxed into a few graceful steps before they collapse into giggles and run to hide among their friends. If there is a new bride who has married into the village that year, the other women will not let her rest until she has shown her skill at dancing—a skill which, if displayed on any other occasion, would brand her as shameless prostitute !

The laughing, singing and dancing at Tij then, represents a complete reversal

²⁵ From after the late night *dar khane* until the morning of the day after Tij.

²⁶ Although my informants reported that the offerings were to Siva, Bista reports (page 12) that women in his area made offerings to Krishna on the night of Tij.

²⁷ The one occasion besides Tij when women will dance is at their son's or brother's wedding.

of the Hindu ideal of womanly behavior. By village standards a virtuous woman—the kind of girl one seeks as a bride for one's sons—is shy, quiet and restrained in all her behavior. To say that a girl is *laj manne* (shy, embarrassed) is to praise her highly. On Tij the high spirits, the flirtatiousness, the sexuality which women must ordinarily suppress are released *en mass* at Shiva's temple. However this display of the erotic side of female nature is only permissible because on Tij, it is held in check by the strict purifying fast which the women are undergoing for the welfare of their husbands²⁸. On the morning after Tij women must perform a puja and make offerings to a Brahman priest dedicating the *barta* to their husband (present, future or in the next life) before they can break the fast. The dangers of female sexuality are thus firmly bracketed by the mutually re-enforcing ascetic and patrilineal ideals.

But it is not until the rituals of Rishi Panchami are complete that female sexuality which emerged in the Tij dancing is truly brought under control and integrated into the ideology of the patriline. On Rishi Panchami female sexuality is represented not by throngs of dancing women in red saris, but by the abstract concept of menstrual blood with all its contradictory connotations. As I mentioned earlier, Rishi Panchami is concerned with purifying women from the possible sin of having inadvertently touched a man during menstruation.²⁹

Women explain that Rishi Panchami is “like the fourth day of menstruation” for all women and that only after bathing are they pure enough to touch men. In the morning the women gather in groups of friends to walk down to the river where other women of the village may have already begun bathing. Each woman has prepared the items she will need to purify herself including 360 stems of the *datiun* plant, and 360 *datiun* leaves all tied into neat bundles of twenty each. After removing her sari and drawing her peticoat up over her breasts she squats in the long row of women beside the river and begins her ablutions.

²⁸ However, even this pious, patrilineally acceptable goal can be subverted, because some women told me that if a woman didn't like her husband she should dedicate her fast to finding a new one to run away with (*poi le jannu*). Even though women and even widows who marry a second time lose ritual status and a certain amount of respect in Brahman-Chetri culture, quite a few do so.

²⁹ Women past menopause do not need to bathe on Rishi Panchami although they gain extra merit if they do so.

First she must rub red mud (*rato mato*) on her vagina 360 times to wash away the mud. She keeps track of the numbers with a small pile of stones from which one is removed after every 20 washings. She continues rubbing mud and sprinkling water 360 times each on her feet, knees, hands, elbows, mouth, shoulders (or arm pits) and forehead. The whole process is then repeated with "white" mud. (*seto mato*)³⁰ or *pina* (remains of mustard seeds after they have been crushed for oil) and then cow dung (*gobar*). Next she washes her hair with either mud or *pina*. She cannot use soap for any of her bathing as it is considered *bitulo* or ritually impure. Then she puts a piece of holy *kus* grass around her waist and begins to brush her teeth 360 times by chewing on the bundles of *datiun* stems and spitting them out into the river. After that she dips the bundles of *datiun* leaves into the water and sprinkles them over her head. Then, borrowing a flat basket sieve (*calno*) from her neighbour, she pours water over her head with it several times. Since each tiny stream of water counts as one bath she can quickly insure that she had taken the required 360 baths. Then she takes a quick plunge in the river (held by her friends because the river is swift and she cannot swim). Finally she recites her *mantra* and swallows a sip of purifying *panchamrita* (five purifying substances—milk curd, ghee, cow urine and honey). Then she cuts the *kus* grass from around her waist and her bath is complete.

In some villages the women return to their own households after bathing to do the Rishi Puja there. In others' a group of twenty to thirty neighbour women, all Brahman-Chetri, may meet together at the river and do a joint puja under the direction of a single priest.

The women form a large circle in the middle of which is placed a tray of paddy contributed by each household. On top of this is the central *kalas* which the women will worship together. All the women have brought long pieces of white-tipped *sama* grass which when extended gives them contact with the central *kalas* during the worship. The Brahman also gives each woman a ring of holy *kus* grass to purify the right hand which will make the offerings.

On the edge of the circle before each household group (i.e. co-resident women who share the same *thar* and *gotra*) are baskets full of offerings and the implements for worshipping their own separate *diyo*, *Ganesh* and *kalas*.³¹ The ceremony

³⁰ In Bista's very thorough account of the bathing ritual the more orthodox *sapta mritika* (seven types of pure earth) are mentioned here.

³¹ According to some informants a married daughter in her *maiti* could worship the *diyo Ganesh*, and *kalas* with her mother, but she had to do her own *godan* and her own offerings to the Rishis and Arundhati. Other informants maintained that a married daughter also had to do a separate *kalas* puja.

begins with each group individually performing these standard pujas under the common direction of the priest who tells each woman to remember her own *gotra* as she makes the offerings. This is followed by a *godan* (gift of a cow represented by coins on a leaf plate full of rice) which each woman must offer to the priest in order to purify herself for the subsequent rituals. Then there is joint worship of the central *kalas* which the priest has decorated with red and yellow powders. Holding their long wands of *sama* grass in contact with the *kalas* the women throw flowers, rice, water etc. as the Brahman directs.

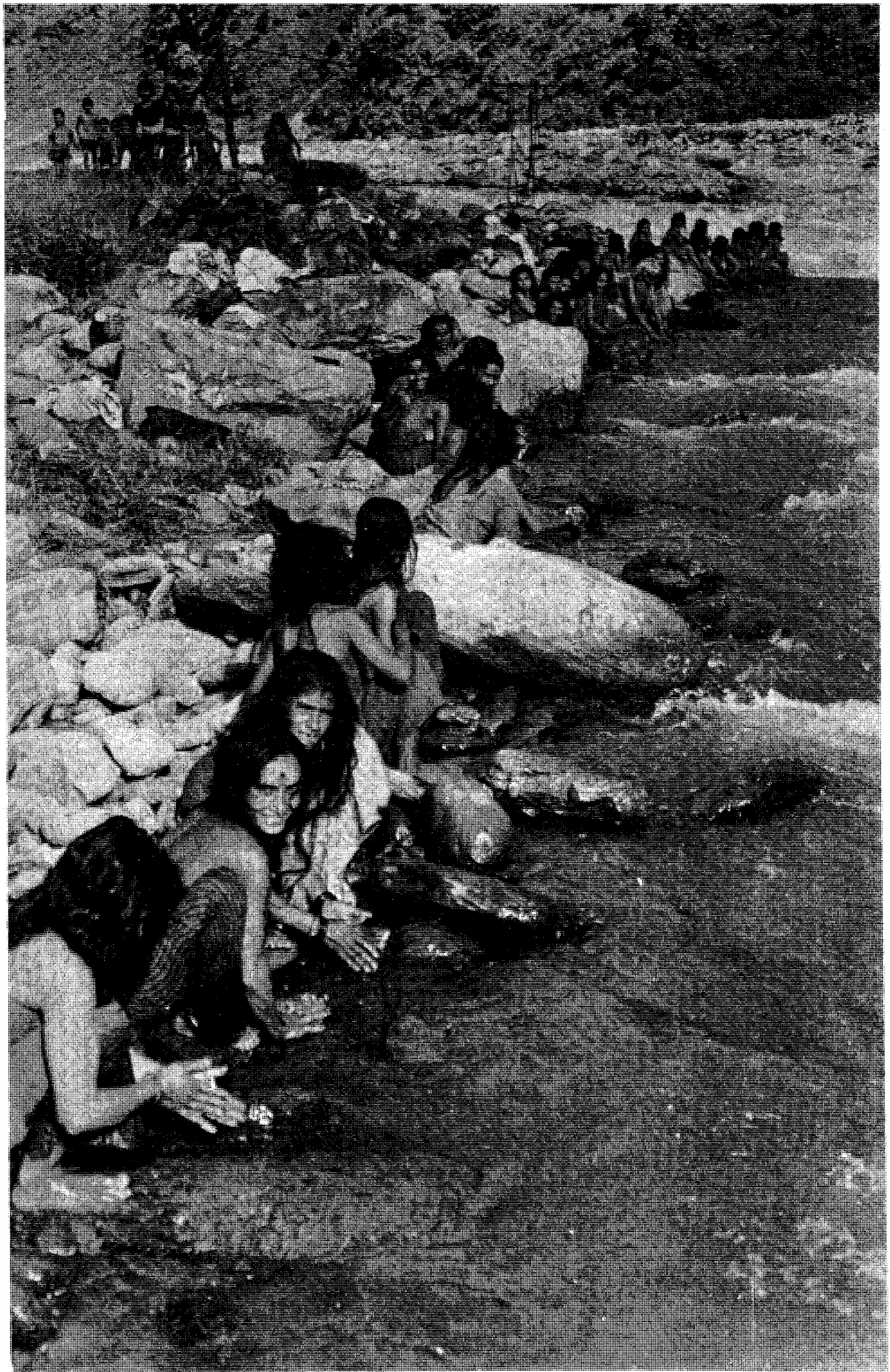
After these preliminaries comes the actual Rishi Puja. The Brahman places a tray on top of the central *kalas*. The tray contains eight *kus* grass figures stuck into eight piles of rice. The seven *kus* figures around the side represent the Rishis and the figure in the middle represents Arundhati – the one among all the wives of the Rishis who remained faithful to her husband even in the face of Shiva's charms.

Arundhati is really the focus of the entire ritual. She is the epitome of the chaste and faithful wife, the *pati brath*, and myths of her virtue abound in the Puranas. Those cited by O'Flaherty bring out two points which help to clarify the Rishi Panchami rituals. First, O' Flaherty suggests that the vulnerability of the other Rishis' wives who do lose their chastity is related to menstruation.³² According to one interpretation of the myth of the birth of Shiva's son Skanda, the Rishi's wives had been bathing in the river at the end of their monthly periods when all but Arundhati went to warm themselves by the fire of Shiva's seed and became impregnated. It is hard to see the Rishis' wives innocent act of warming themselves by the fire as culpable, but symbolically it represents their sexual looseness in contrast to Arundhati's restraint.³³ Village women on Rishi Panchami, who we recall are also ritually considered to be "in their fourth day" like the Rishis' wives, are particularly anxious to associate themselves with Arundhati. She represents control of the erotic side of female nature which surfaces so dangerously during menstruation. As one village woman explained; "Arundhati can take away the *pap* (sin) of having touched a man during menstruation because she was faithful to her husband."

The other myth concerning Arundhati which O'Flaherty discusses re-inforces

³² O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger, op. cit. p. 100.

³³ The myth is echoed in the traditional belief that the husband must sleep with his wife on the fourth day after menstruation because women begin their fertile period then and are particularly desirous of sex—though village women themselves usually deny that they are.



5. On Rishi Panchami women cleanse themselves by washing various parts of their bodies with "red" mud, water,

the connection between the wife's chastity and the husband's long life which we have encountered already as a central theme of the Tij-Rishi Panchami complex. Because Arundhati resists his attempts to seduce her, Shiva gives her the boon of immortality and virility for her husband.³⁴ This stands in marked contrast to Shiva's curse on the Rishis to be "without force" and have "unfaithful wives" after their wives had tried to seduce him in the passage quoted earlier from the *Swastani*.

Before worshiping Arundhati, the women make their offerings to the Rishis. The items offered in this elaborate puja include milk, ghee, curds, water, honey, strips of cloth, vermilion, incense and sandelwood powder, betel nuts, and leaf plates full of fried breads and others containing fruits and coins which the priest collects and places in the center. But the most important among the things presented to the Rishis are the sacred thread, banana and leaf plates containing the 'counted things'. Each woman prior to the puja must count out exactly 360 grains each of barley, unbroken rice and sesame and 360 ghee-soaked cotton wicks. When the *janai* and all the 'counted things' except the wicks, have been given to the Rishis, the women then offer their *saubagya saman* to Arundhati.

The *saubagya*³⁵ *saman* are all the accessories of the married woman whose husband is still alive. It consists of the following: a *batta* (small box), *sindur* (vermillion powder for making the red tika mark on the forehead and the line at the part of the hair), *dago* (hair braid) *kaniyo* (comb), *aina* (mirror), *vastra* (strip of cloth representing clothes), *chura* (glass bangles), *pote* (bead necklace) and *gajal* (black eye make-up). These are bought by the husband in a small pre-assembled packet before Tij. But no married woman will ever, if she can possibly help it, be without these signs of her auspicious state—especially the red hair braid, beads, bangles and vermilion mark. These adornments and the privilege of wearing red clothes are at once an enhancement of her beauty and a sign of her virtue. Good women are believed to die before their husbands and have the honor of being cremated in a red shroud (instead of yellow or white) with the *saubagya saman* laid on their chest. Once again the indirect connection is made between the husband's long life and his wife's virtue. The *saubagya saman* then, symbolized female sexuality (since they increase a woman's powers of seduction by making her more attractive) and its control (since she may only wear them while her husband is alive and presumably her chastity is intact). By dedicating these adornments which they wore on Tij to dance seductively before the temple of Shiva, to the chaste wife Arundhati, women are

³⁴ O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger, op. cit., p. 102.

³⁵ Turner's *Nepali Dictionary* glosses *saubagya* as "happiness, good fortune, prosperity—the possession of a living husband."

purifying their own sexuality. They are channeling it in the only direction acceptable to Hindu patrilineal ideology—towards their own husbands.

This interpretation is re-inforced by the final part of the ritual. After lighting her 360 ghee wicks, each woman purifies herself by moving her hands from the fire to her face three times. Then the plates of burning wicks are placed outside the circle and the women walk around the central *kalas* eight times – once for each Rishi and once for Arundhati. The women move very slowly for as they explained to me, the whole efficacy of the puja would be lost if they do not keep their knees together as they walk or if any space is left between heel and toe. The meaning of this restrained gait in the context of Arundhati's faithfulness is clear enough. When they have completed the circumambulation, the women are seated in a circle again and they make their final offering to the Rishis – either a banana or a cucumber— while the priest instructs them once again to remember their *gotra*. Each woman must bring this final offering home and give it to her husband.³⁶

The Rishi Puja itself is now complete and the women may return home for their morning meal.³⁷ Usually however, after the puja some women in the village sponsor a priest to recite the *Rishi Panchami Vrata Katha* in their own home and other neighboring women go there to hear it. The central myth of the *Rishi Panchami Vrata Katha* adds an important dimension to our understanding of the

³⁶ Although no explicit association was made to me in this context, women often joked about the phallic nature of these fruits at other times.

³⁷ This meal is cooked and served by husbands and the women eat first, reversing the normal procedure. Because they are considered ritually to be in the same state as if they had just bathed on the fourth day of menstruation, the women returning from their Rishi Panchami observations are pure enough to touch men but not pure enough to cook food or carry water. (This they may do only on the fifth day). The meal of rice, *piralo* (a white potato-like root) and *karkalo* (the dried edible stalk of the *parilo*) must be served on a banana leaf which the women must burry themselves when the meal is finished. The *karkalo* which the men must serve is interesting because it seems to be believed to arouse sexual desires when eaten. Women in the late stages of pregnancy are advised not to eat *karkalo* because “it will make their buttocks itch”—i.e. it will make them want intercourse. Informants themselves however, never mentioned this aspect of *karkalo* in connection with the Rishi Panchami meal.

Tij-Rishi Panchami complex. I have excerpted here the main part of the story from the Nepali text:

There was once a Brahman named Sumitra who had become an expert in all the Vedas and rites and rituals. He was the kind who worked in his fields and cared for his family with love and kindness towards all. He had a very devoted wife, a Brahmani named Jaisri. She was completely devoted to serving her husband and she had sons and daughters and servants. All she worried about was what was happening in the fields.

"The field workers have come," she would say to herself. "It is getting late and food has to be prepared for them and taken. If I don't go then they will cheat us. There's no manure. There are seeds and it is time to sow them. The clods have to be broken. The mustard has to be threshed and there is millet which has yet to be harvested. The wheat has to be sown. The corn has to be weeded. Everyone else has weeded their rice and we haven't". These and many other problems of daily household work used to keep her occupied.

One day she saw that she was having her menstruation period, but she did not care about what utensils she touched and out of contempt, she touched everything.

When she became old, then death claimed her and the Brahmani named Jaisri died. And her husband Sumitra Brahman also died. And when both husband and wife had died thus, the Brahmani who had deliberately touched and defiled things was born again as a bitch. And because of the sin committed by his wife, Sumitra Brahman was also born as a bull. And both of them happened to go and live in the same house which they had owned in their past life. Because of her deliberate defilement during her period of menstruation, both of them had to go and be born of such miserable wombs.

The son of Sumitra was one who served his ancestors. His name was Sumati and he was very religious. Although Sumitra's parents had been conceived in the womb of animals, both of them were fully aware of what they had been in their past life and the reason for their present condition. The Brahmani used to remember her *purwa karma* (deeds of the past life). But what could she do? She used to go from house to house and eat what they threw away. And her

husband Sumitra who had become a bull had to go and plough every day.

Then one day the *eko dhist sradh* (the worship which is performed annually on the day when one's father, mother or husband died) of Sumita's father arrived. And he, who was devoted to the service of his ancestors, was filled with a sense of duty. So Sumati said to his wife Chandrawati,

“You with the beautiful smile, today is my father's *sraddha*. I shall have to feed Brahmans, so prepare a rich feast.”

Hearing the command of her husband, Chandrawati prepared different and various kinds of rich food. But at the time a snake came and dropped its venom into the dish of *khir* (rice pudding). The bitch which had been waiting outside saw the venom being dropped and was afraid that if the Brahmans ate the *khir* than they would surely die. So the bitch went and touched the food. Then Chandrawati hit the bitch with a flaming stick and it ran yelping out. Then Chandrawati again cooked other food and the *sraddha* was performed according to the ritual and the Brahmans were fed.

The bitch sat outside. But Chandrawati, angry because it had touched the food, did not give that bitch the food that was left-over and had been thrown away. So that day the bitch went hungry. Where was it to go ? What was it to do? Where it used to be fed every day there was nothing to eat that day. It spent the whole day thus and then when night fell the bitch who was suffering terribly with hunger went to where the bull, its husband was and said thus:

“Oh Lord, Oh Husband ! Today they did not give me even a mouthful. I was unable to lick even the dirty plates and I am sorely troubled with hunger. Before my son used to give me food everyday. Today they did not even give me the left-overs.....”

And after that the bitch's husband said to her.

“Oh auspicious one ! You have suffered because you touched that *khir*. What am I to do? I am helpless. I can do nothing. I myself go around with a load upon my back – this you have seen. Look, I also went to my son's fields today and ploughed the whole day. While I was ploughing he tied by mouth. Say – what is it that he would give me to eat ? I am also suffering from hunger. It is useless for that son to perform my *sraddha* because today I have to suffer so !”

Hearing his mother and father talk among themselves about their sorrow, Sumati came to know that night that these (animals) were his mother and father. So Sumati took food that was rich and delicious and fed it to them.

And then when Sumati saw this condition of his mother and father he went into the forests. Because he wanted to know the reason for this condition and this sorrow of his parents, he went into the forests. There he saw the seven Rishis, the enlightened ones who always live in the forest. And there Sumitra prostrated himself at the feet of the seven Rishis and, for the good of his parents, he asked them with great deference,

“On Brahma Rishis ! Please deign to answer my question. Oh masters of meditation ! By the fruit of what karma did my mother and father take birth in this state ? Now what should I do so that they will be liberated from that sin?”

When the Rishis heard Sumati's question, they replied,

“Oh Brahman! Out of stupidity your mother was careless during her menstruation period. And because of this act she became a bitch. And because of her defilement your father has also become a bull. And now in order to liberate them from this womb, your wife has to undertake the Rishi Panchami *vrata*. She has to worship the Rishis in the proper manner according to the rites and rituals. Oh Brahman ! You should undertake this *vrata* for seven years. (Here follows the Rishis instructions for penitential fasting and the rituals of Rishi Panchami)... And because of the efficacy of the *vrata* when it is performed all the sins committed when one touches and defiles during the period of menstruation will be cleansed and destroyed. Your mother and father will also be redeemed. There is no doubt about this.”

....Because of the virtues of this *vrata* the mother of Sumati was liberated from the womb of that bitch. Sitting in the best *viman* (flying machine) and wearing ornaments which defied description, she went to heaven. And his father was also liberated from the animal womb at his death. Because of the effects of this *vratha* (his parents) entered heaven.³⁸

³⁸ *Rishi Panchami Vrata Katha*, op. cit., p. 16-60. (translation by P.R. Chetri and myself)

The myth immediately relates the ascetic / householder opposition to that between male and female. Initially the opposition is balanced. The husband who is an expert in ritual also cares for his family and the wife who is concerned about the prosperity of the fields is devoted to her husband. It is when Jaisri's worldly concerns overcome this devotion and she touches her husband's food during her menstruation that the balance is destroyed. It is restored at the end of the myth by the ascetic Rishis who prescribe the strict fasting and the bathing rituals of Rishi Panchami to rid the couple of the effects of Jaisri's sin. The Rishi's instructions to Sumita about what food he may eat during the penence for his parents also carry a distinct anti-householder import. "You should eat only that which grows wild, like green leaves, *sama* grass and the like. Eat only that which you do not have to sow and reap." This is a sharp contrast to Jaisri's initial over-involvement in sowing and reaping which caused all the trouble.

Two other recurring themes of the Tij-Rishi Panchami complex find expression in the myth: the idea that a woman's virtue affects her husband's long life and that women present a threat to patrilineal solidarity. In the myth Jaisri's lack of fastidiousness about menstrual taboos (i.e. her sexual looseness) does not cause her husband's death. They both die in old age. But it does cause him—as well as her—to be born in miserable and very impure re-incarnations. She is reborn as a bitch—a very impure animal who eats the *jutho* or polluted left-overs of others. (We also recall that women during their periods are likened to female dogs.) He is reborn as a bull who must plow the land as the pure Brahman caste is forbidden to do. Instead of enjoying a peaceful and contented existence as *pitri* (ancestor spirits) in heaven, they become animals on the earth. Because of their lowly rebirth the *sraddha* ceremony for them (which represents the spiritual continuity of the patriline) is rendered ineffective. The son's attempts to honor and feed his dead parents are unsuccessful and both the animal-parents go hungry that night. The Rishis appear, not in their role as the irrasible cuckolded husbands of the *Swastani* myth, but as protagonists for patrilineal continuity through ritual purity. By following their instructions, Sumati with his wife's help is able to release his parents and send them to heaven where his *sraddha* ceremonies for them will be effective. Thus the Rishis re-establish patrilineal continuity which has been broken by female sexuality. In this role they provide the link between the men's festival at Janai Purni where the sacred thread is purified and the woman's festival at Tij-Rishi Panchami where the *saubagya saman* (women's equivalent of the sacred thread) is purified.

In the myth Jaisri demonstrates her repentance by reversing her former sin. Instead of polluting others in secret for her own benefit, she publicly pollutes the

khir so that the Brahmans will not be killed by the snake's venom, even though she knows she will go hungry as a result. The fire brand with which she is struck represents the beginning of her purification from her initial sin.

It is Jaisri's daughter-in-law, Chandrawati, who threw the brand, who ultimately plays the main role in destroying her mother-in-law's sin through the Rishi Panchami rituals. Chandrawati in her fastidiousness about pollution stands in contrast to her mother-in-law. She went to the trouble and expense of re-cooking the *khir* after it had been defiled by the dog. If Chandrawati had been careless like Jaisri was during her menstruation period, the Brahmans would have been killed by the poison *khir*. Thus Chandrawati's ritual purity is structurally equivalent to Arundhati's sexual purity. She is opposed to the ritual laxness of Jaisri just as Arundhati is opposed to the sexual looseness of the other Rishi's wives. Both are virtuous women. Like the village women who have just undergone the Tij-Rishi Panchami rituals, they have accepted the restrictions placed on them by the dominant ascetic and patrilineal ideology of Hindusim.

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