

EARLY-LIFE RITUALS AND MOTHER IDENTITIES: WAYS IN WHICH HINDU WOMEN
ARE VIEWED IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL RITUAL PRACTICES

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“Childhood ceremonies have been much neglected. They deserve more attention.”ⁱ

-A.M Holcart

INTRODUCTION

On April 27, 2009, the Saryu Parin Brahmin Parishad (SPBP) Society, through the help of member donations as well as the participation of 53 young men, carried out a mass *yagyopaveet*, or *upanayana* ceremony, to initiate young men into the Brahmin caste. This ceremony is what the society’s president Chandza Bhushan Dhar Dwivedi, as well as numerous other scholars of Vedic texts calls the second birth of the Brahmin—boy. The ceremony, according to Mr. Dwivedi, marks the Brahmin’s first step toward becoming a divine being, before this ceremony “he is no different from an animal,” and it is only through this initial process of “refinement” that he starts his journey to become a properly practicing Hindu, as well a true human being.

According to the Veda, human beings are not only born with animal natures, like Mr. Dwivedi states, but as a result of this are also born socially low as well, every man is said to be born a “*sudras*” (Smith, 68). It is only by undergoing the correct rituals at the right stages of life that an individual can become a proper human being, transitioning out of his/her animal state into a divine or semi-divine being.¹ Natural birth—the birth that a person undergoes from his/her mother by this logic, and in many instances in practice—from this belief, therefore—and because of numerous other beliefs that hold certain bodily functions/states as impure as well—, is viewed as imperfect and polluting.

¹ It is important to point out that thus rebirth process is often only open to males, as they are typically initiated as pupils, undergoing the ceremonial rebirth or the *upanayana*.

The birthing process that is undergone from the time that a woman conceives a child to the time at which she delivers a child is viewed as a state from which a person has to transition out of. And the polluting nature of the mother-birth is held to be so powerful that not only do the mother and child have to undergo numerous purification rites and ceremonies in order to be (re)integrated back into society, but their family, friends, and other individuals who come in contact with them have to follow certain precautions in order to not be polluted as well.

My project, focusing on this notion of impurity, as well as the ceremonies that are performed in order to initiate/(re)integrate the mother, child, and their family into society after the “polluting” process of birth, explores the conception of the mother role/identity within Hindu society. Working from the idea that by Vedic textual tradition birth by a woman is viewed not only as insufficient for producing a proper human being, but polluting as well, I explored the value system that is set in place when rituals are performed in the early stages of a child’s life. More specifically, I explored Hindu women’s perceptions of these rituals, as well as the types of mother-identities/roles that they felt they possessed within their society.

While traditional, and older, women viewed these rituals as necessary and in some cases crucial to the well being and development of their family, “modern,” educated and younger women often saw these rituals as binding or oppressive. Despite this difference in viewpoints, however, all of the women that I spoke to performed some early-life ceremony for their child in one form or another, which in itself reflects the continuity of Hindu traditions despite changing social beliefs and customs. Consequently, these views, as well as the degree to which traditional ceremonies/early-life rituals are strictly, or not so strictly, performed greatly reflected the different conceptions of the mother-identity and role within Hindu society. The practice and views that the women in my study revealed clearly illustrated the different ways in which

mothers are viewed both by themselves and by others within their community: forming three distinct, but often overlapping categories that ranged from a purely physical function-driven being, a socially significant figure, to an internally independent and invaluable presence within herself, her family, and her society as a whole.

Research Methodology/Fieldwork/Participants

Over the span of approximately one month, I conducted 18 interviews: 12 formal interviews with mothers living in or around the Assi region of Varanasi—the only precondition being that a woman had given birth to one or more children and were Hindu by birth—², one informal interview with a male Brahmin restaurant owner, two formal interviews with members of the *Saryu Parin Brahmin Parishad* Society (one being the president of the organization and a scholar on Hindu religion and practices), one semi-formal background/foundational interview with a childless widow, and one informational interview with a professor at BHU. In addition to my interviews I also observed several ceremonies in person, a *upanyana* (pupil/Brahmin initiation ceremony), a 21st day *puja* for the health of a father one month after a child is born, and a *Ganga puja* (to pray to God and for purification), and several more ceremonies, the *Mundan* (head-shaving ceremony), and the *chatti* (purification/cleansing ceremony) through personal/family photos provided by some of my interviewees and informants.

In my formal interviews, I prepared a fixed set of 12 questions to ask my interviewees, but depending on the situation or the direction of our conversation, I would ask other questions as well accordingly, particularly questions about the role/importance of the mother in Indian society, and their opinions on certain practices. All of my interviewees were briefed on the

² This was done so that no assumptions were made beforehand about whether or not Hindu women/families were still performing these rituals. There was no prescreening process to see whether the women had performed ceremonies or not, and this turned out to be important considering that none was necessary.

intention of my study, and agreed to be photographed as well as to have their interviews tape-recorded. Each recorded interview was then outlined in Microsoft Word where it was coded and memoed for major points, patterns, quotes, etc.

I used still and/or video photography to capture the scene/events for each ceremony that I observed. Some of these situations had numerous limitations depending on the people in charge of the ceremony, however so note-taking, and particularly my own memory, was used as an alternative recording device. For example, at the 21st day ritual, I was only allowed, by the demands of one persistent helper, to take photos once the *puja* was coming to a close. In this case therefore, I took some notes to compensate for the lost images. Most of my interviewees, who ranged from educated school principals and professors to maids and housewives, were contacted through a relatively small social network of individuals, and ranged caste-wise from Brahmins (about 55%) to Rajputs (about 25%), to some lower and other castes as well (about 15%). The women's ages ranged from 29-52 years with the average age being 38 years old, and each had from 1-5 children with an average of 2.75, or approximately 3, children between them.

OBSERVATIONS/FINDINGS

Early-life Rituals and Their Function

As SPBP president Chandza Bhushan Dhar Dwivedi stated in his interview with me, “[a] child who is born just an animal, is made through...rituals a Brahmin [or simply just a human] capable of all the divinity that exists. [A man] becomes a divine being” only by undergoing rituals that are specifically designed to prepare him for the different stages of his life as a student of the Veda, or as is the case with women, as a wife and—if she is fortunate, her highest possible status in life—a mother. And because life, for Hindus, “starts from the moment of conception and not

simply from the moment of birth” (Leslie, 97) it naturally follows that numerous rites would be performed from this time as well.

In the literature on the subject of Hindu *samskaras*, there are numerous rituals listed as key to marking the “transformative processes linking different states” of a Hindu’s life (Flood, 201), however, what one finds in practice is that many of the rituals that are prescribed in texts are not always performed in daily life, and often times are transformed throughout time through the blending of “folk” and textual practices. Not only are ceremonies practiced differently as a result of this blending, but some are often joined together, some are blatantly ignored or reduced to everyday/non-ritualistic practices (such as the hair-parting ceremony that one is supposed to undergo after giving birth or conceiving a child), and many are even renamed, making it difficult to link textual explanations to practiced and observed ones.

The *jatakarma* for example, is one set of rituals that marks a very important stage of early-life, it is traditionally referred to as the “birth rite” and is performed sometimes during and after the birthing process. In my study, however, there was almost no mention of any such rites performed during the birthing process except for from one woman, Usha Singh, who came from and gave birth in a very traditional village in Bihar. Other women, even those who also gave birth in villages/homes did not undergo these rites after giving birth either, and no one, not even Usha-ji, referred to the rites as *jatakarma*. Instead, women are more likely to refer to the different rites performed after giving birth by specific names depending on the action that is taking place, and this is influenced by the familial and regional tradition more so by textual tradition.

In traditional Hindu villages, like where Usha-ji and several other of my interviewees come from, births often take place within the mother’s paternal home, allowing her the comfort

of having her parents and siblings around (more so for the first birth than for later ones), as well as the familiarity of her own family traditions. But as was the case for the majority of the women that I spoke with, even some who emigrated from villages to live with their husbands in Varanasi after marriage, a Hindu woman is often expected to adopt and follow the traditions of her husband's family instead. Under the supervision of her mother-in-law, a woman is expected to adopt her husband's family's traditional practices when she leaves her home, making it almost virtually impossible for a family to maintain their family traditions unless they are enforces/engrained before their daughter undergoes these rites, the woman is allowed to go home and give birth to her children, there is a compromise with the mother-in-law (very rare), or families simply produce male children in order to ensure that their traditions get carried on by the son's future wife. In many cases, as I will discuss in future sections of this paper, many of these strategies/opportunities to pass on tradition from family to daughter do not exist, and it is left to the daughter-in-laws of society to do so, making male children more highly desirable than females.

Among the rituals/ceremonies that my interviewees' husband's families expected them to observe were the *choti bharai*/12th day ritual (day of cleaning-up), *godh-bharai* (fertility ritual), *kata* (ceremonial story telling), 21st day ritual (for the luck of the father), the *mundan* ceremony (child head shaving ceremony), the *annaprashana* (child food-weaning ceremony), *Ganga puja* (giving thanks to God(s)/purification), and the *chatti*/6th day (purification ritual). Some of the ceremonies were given more importance than others, and only a few women performed all of the ceremonies in their family. For the women, and their families, the most important ceremonies that were performed after they gave birth were the purification rites, more specifically the *chatti* ceremony, and in some cases the *Ganga puja*.

Every woman that I spoke to performed a *chatti* ritual after she gave birth regardless of whether this was done on the traditional 6th day, the 5th day, or at an even later time after her delivery. Purification is one of the most important aspects for families after a child is born, and it plays a very big part in illustrating numerous societal as well as individual views of women, and particularly mothers. As Gavin Flood states in his book, An Introduction to Hinduism, “while narrative traditions provide people with meaning and understanding of who they are and how they come to be as they are, it is ritual action which anchors people in a sense of deeper identity and belonging” (Flood, 198), and purification rites after birth are one of the keys ways in which women are given their sense of identity and belonging within their husband’s homes.

Women’s Roles in Early-life Rituals

In the upcoming sections I will further discuss how and what types of identities are formed or reinforced for mothers during and after the performance of these early-life rituals, but first I would like to discuss the specific roles that women play during the practice of these ceremonies. While some male figures are particularly important during some early-life rituals, like the grandfather who gives the child its first solid food during the *annaprashana*, or the father who the 21st day *puja* is designed to protect against evil,³ women play the biggest roles in most early-life rituals and for the most part are the ones who oversee that things are done correctly.

The *buaa*, or the husband’s sister (usually the eldest sister), is the central figure in the *chatti* ceremony, she applies *kajal* to the child’s eyes to ward off evil spirits, oils and massages the child in preparation for the ceremony, makes (or buys) the new clothes that the child wears

³ It is important to note that this ceremony is very rarely preformed as it involves very specific conditions. When a child is born, the family seeks the advice of a *pandit* who tells them whether or not the planets were aligned in a particular way at the time of birth in order for the 21st day ritual to be performed. If the stars were indeed in an inauspicious position during the time that the child was born, then the father is not allowed to see the child for 21 days in order to avoid getting bad luck. The ceremony is performed in order to celebrate the father’s first viewing of the child, which he does through a bowl of oil before he does so face-to-face.

for the first time (the child wears clothing made from the cloth of elders before this ceremony is performed) after its ceremonial bath, and monitors the social interactions within the home during the ceremony, as well as during the feast that takes place afterward. And for the most part, during the *chatti* ceremony, as well as the *choti bharai*, only women are allowed in the room while the mother and child undergo their traditional rites. In some instances, a barber's wife comes to massage the mother, women chant words and sing songs that men are not allowed to hear, and sisters and other female members look after the mother and child to make sure that their needs are met and that they are well taken care of.

Even in the 21st day ritual, I observed that the women in the house were the most involved in monitoring the progress and details of the ceremony. Although the male *pandit* and the father were the primary focus, the women in the house were the ones making sure that all of the ceremonial items were in place, preparing the child, mother, and father for the *puja* by decorating their feet and hands and looking after their clothing, preparing and serving food to the guests, and just generally making sure that no excess work was performed by the new parents or that anything was out of place. Women not only function as the main overseers of early-life rituals, but because the birthing process primarily involves women, they are also the central authority figures as well. As I mentioned before, I was not even allowed to photograph the 21st day *puja* until I was given permission by one female overseer to do so, and, as I will discuss later, often times, it is female or mother goddesses and images that are worshipped during this period after birth as well. In early-life rituals, more than in any other types of traditional Hindu ceremonies, women, and even more particularly mothers, are the central focus and authoritative figures.

Celebration, Tradition, and Socialization

It is traditionally held, as it is believed that life begins from the time of conception, in the Hindu community that “a child learns a lot of culture, a lot of habit in the stomach...of [his/her] mother” (Archana Agarwan, interview), and whether it is true, like so many women are quick to profess, that this belief is back up by scientific research or not, in practice, most early-life rituals are performed under this premise. Socialization for a Hindu child begins at conception/in the womb rather than after he/she is born, and thus becomes a pivotal time for families to display their values, traditions, and history to their general communities, as it is expected that these values and histories to be passed on to the child. As Gavin Flood states, “[r]itual provides continuity of tradition through generations, arguably conveys implicit Hindu values, and sets the parameters for the Hindu sense of identity” (223). Early-life rituals not only instill old traditions, but are used to shape new identities for the mother and child as well, so despite the fact that some of my interviewees felt that “[i]n our nature we are not accepting [the performance of these rituals] so easily” because they are both time consuming, frivolous, as well as expensive, “we have to do it because of tradition” (Archana Agarwan, interview), and because it is important that these traditions be maintained.

In traditional villages, like Usha Singh described in her interview, tradition is both metaphorically and literally passed on to the child through folk practice in which forefathers are invoked and the child has traditional stories and values whispered into his/her ear to ensure that he/she knows his history as well as what is expected from him in his/her society. But for the most part, the women that I spoke with generally expressed the feeling that rituals are as much about maintaining tradition and upholding values as they are for showing-off for other families within one’s society. As Mantan Mishra so clearly put it, many families, especially those who

have a considerable or a small amount of wealth use these “ceremonies...to expose themselves...[they display that] ‘I can do such a large ceremony,’” and often go to the extreme of celebrating a child’s arrival with parties and celebrations for each month a child is born up until his/her first birthday.

Some women even go as far as to refer to the performance of some early-life rituals as “only fashion...no main purpose,” and state that the ceremonies are “just [performed so that] everyone celebrat[es]...everyone participat[es]” (Nitya Pandey), or even that the ceremonies are “just for fun” (Kiran Bharti). Many women express the view that not only are religious and early-life ceremonies now only being used for show, but some have even lost their familial importance as a result of this. Mantan-ji expressed the feeling that she was more in favor of small-scale rituals that involve only a few family members going to the *Ganga* or calling a *pandit* to their home for prayer, as they seem more sincere than large-scale celebrations that are often used only to display one’s wealth rather than his/her values.

But while many women differed in their opinions of the purpose of performing some early-life rituals that involve feasts, parties, or general celebration, all of the women supported rites that were used for purposes of purification. The *chatti*, the *Ganga puja*, and the *choti bhara* were viewed as essential ceremonies for all of the women who performed them because not only was it viewed as necessary for their recovery and well-being after birth, but it also marked their transition back into their families and their society after the polluting process of birth-giving. The isolation period that women underwent, as well as the purification rites that followed them, were not only necessary for a woman to be presentable among humans, but it was essential for her to be presentable among the Gods that she prayed to as well.

Isolation/Purification

“The natural functions of the body and bodily products are polluting to the Hindu who needs to purify himself each day in ritual morning ablution...graver forms of pollution caused by death...menstruation and birth” (Flood 219) exclude an individual from numerous normal activities as well as basic everyday social interactions, it is not until a person has been fully purified that he/she can move easily back into society and be accepted. As I mentioned previously, all of the women that I spoke to underwent the ritualistic purification ceremony, the *chatti*, or the 6th day cleansing ceremony, and/or the *Ganga puja* and *choti bhari* after giving birth. All of these rites, because they are tied to very traditional and deep rooted beliefs in untouchability and touchability within Hindu society are key parts of (re)integration of the mother, and even her general family, into society after birth.

In these ceremonies, the mother and child, both viewed as the most impure family members after birth, (for reasons that have to do with their direct involvement in the process) are bathe, prayed over, and kept separate from others until they have been cleansed. Normally, and as was the case in all of the women that I spoke with, including those who had given birth in the hospital, the woman and child are isolated for numerous days after birth in order to both take rest as well as to become purified. The *chatti* is usually the most important ceremony in the process of purification because it is normally the first and most dramatic one, and in most cases even makes it unnecessary to perform the 12th day *choti-bhari*.

The number of days that it takes to perform the *chatti* ritual after the birth of a child ranges from five to 12 or more days, and the degree to which traditional rules on not bathing beforehand vary according to a woman’s family, but this ceremony, as well as the traditional isolation after birth—which also ranges from one month and 15 days to only 11 days—is always

performed regardless of a woman's caste or family. From deep rooted Hindu child-birthing traditional practice tied into notions of purity and impurity, it is by default that women experience such condition as these:

“we have to live a different room, [sleep in] a different bed—we cant sleep with our husband—, we cant touch [any]thing for forty days...[we] are compelled to use separate utensils, different types of food...” (Archana Agarwan, interview)

and so forth, and “if anybody touch[es us]...they [have to] go and take [a] shower” (Nitya Pandey, interview).

This transition from a “corrupt or impure” (Rani Sharma, interview) state to one of acceptance back into society is often ceremonially ended with small scale family practices or prayers such as a *Ganga puja* in which the woman alone is purified with holy water by a *pandit* before being allowed to reenter temples or to even pray to her personal God. A small scale family traditional meal, which the woman is allowed to once again prepare, also often marks the woman's total reintegration back into her household, for even after other purification rites such as the *choti bharai* a woman is still only allowed to be viewed or touched by other family members, they cannot eat from her, and they often cannot to leave her room without having to cleanse themselves upon exiting. For the reason that these cleansing/isolation methods and rituals are so strictly followed, purification is not only viewed as one of the single most important aspects after giving birth, but within the Brahmin caste it is essential to the point of being the most important.

It is from this observation and line of thinking that I chose to focus on the identities that are formed when a Hindu woman gives birth, to basically explore the social manifestations of the thought that birth can not only be polluting but also insufficient, as further ceremonies like the *upanayana* are necessary to rid a human being of his/her unavoidable natural born deficiencies.

Additionally, the idea of purity and impurity becomes even more paradoxical as one explores the rituals that are necessary for transitioning a human through his/her numerous stages of life, as it is practiced that for the most part (other than through ceremonies performed when she herself gives birth), women are barred from the process of ceremonial rebirth, which has two different theoretical implications for their identities/position within society: one that leaves her impure and animalistic for all of her life, and one that exempts her from the pollution of her own birth as no ceremony is necessary to transform her into a proper Hindu. Traditionally, it is stated that “marriage is a woman’s *upanayana*, and serving her husband is equivalent to Vedic study” (Flood, 204), but I would like to argue that in practice marriage is only the prerequisite to a Hindu woman’s ceremonial rebirth, it is motherhood that truly transforms her in ways that gives her a new and higher social identity than the one that she is born with.

Mother Identities

Birth, by its nature, is not only one of the most traumatic experiences/events in one’s life, but it is also one of the most significant. For both a mother and a child, birth is marked/defined by a metamorphosis of one’s body and one’s self: a woman’s body changes to accommodate a child’s existence, development, and eventual release into the world, while a child literally comes into being, is formed and then released from its mother. Childbirth, as it can be viewed as a physical *journey*, is shared relatively equally between a woman and child; it is a mutual process in which both parties are participating dependently on one another to reach the same end.⁴ It can further be argued that just by the sheer physical details/process of birth that it is as traumatic to bring a child into the world as it is for a child to be brought into the world; both are one and the

⁴ This is true whether it is voluntarily or not; the nature of a fertilized egg is to grow and the nature of a woman’s body is to change to accommodate this growth—this is just the way it (or the way it appears to me as an outsider to the process other than through my own birth 21 years ago which I have no recollection of).

same, and both share their weight in value. But because this process occurs within the realm of social interactions, customs, rituals and categories, however, the physical trauma/journey of birth is also accompanied by societal definitions along with selective value systems, and therefore the formation of socially reflective identities.

It is significant that birth in Hindu society is viewed as polluting and insufficient, because it opens up numerous questions about the identities of women/mothers from its existence. Since a “Hindu’s sense of identity and belonging [is though to be]...given expression particularly through rites of passage” (Flood, 200), it also seems significant that women are not traditionally allowed to be ceremonially reborn out of this pollution. Not only do mothers bear the burden of birthing polluted impure children, but because they are women, they are never allowed to progress out of this state themselves. In this section, I explored these ideas by first asking the question: are women ceremonially reborn the same way men are often expected to be through the practice of ceremonies like the *upananyan*, and if so then what marks this rebirth?

It has been widely held amongst numerous scholars for hundreds of years that “[r]ites of passage are expressive of, and transform, a person’s identity...which is personally or psychologically important and which is recognized by the wider community: [these rites] are the formal imposition of an identity and its recognition by a social group” (Flood, 201).

And in Hindu society, women are expected to often receive this social “recognition” once she becomes a mother. It is important to point out, however, that by definition and in practice, the term mother has two very distinct definitions/implications. One is the literal/physical mother, a woman who has conceived and given birth to a child, and the second is the conceptual mother an intangible presence that only manifests itself into a personal identity that is not only distinct in

nature but for the most part the same for most woman all around. In Indian society, as is probably true in many other societies as well, both conceptions of the mother is important, however, through my own research I have found that it is important that the two be distinguished as they are distinct within society, come from two different and distinct sources but sometimes merge to form a liminal mother identity that straddles the line between the physical and the internal worlds in which Hindu mothers live.

Rebirth

Whether the mother identity “comes automatically from within” (Jyoti Rana, interview) or takes six years to develop “slowly slowly...[and is a] strange feeling” (Nitya Pandey, interview), there seems to be no question to the fact that it is a transformative right of passage for the woman. Not only does the woman gain a new identity after giving birth, but she is also symbolically reborn into her husband’s family as well. Giving birth, for a woman in Indian society is like a symbolic initiation into her husband’s family; it gives her a permanent spot in the household, more respect as an individual, and a stronger presence and voice to express her opinions.

In a sense, like I have mentioned before, a woman’s transition to become a mother is her *upananyan*, her second birth. After giving birth, the woman emerges anew, not only with a new personal identity, but also with a new social identity. As Asha Parasher states in her interview, when a woman becomes a mother, “like a baby...[she] get[s] a new life;” there is a “rebirth of [the] mother also.” And Asha is not the only one who expressed this view, most of the women that I interviewed felt transformed after giving birth to their children as well, not only as some joked, physically, but also felt that their responsibilities and social pressures increased tremendously, and that their place in society, and within their homes transformed at an equally

significant rate: “it becomes your own house [after you give birth to a child]...it becomes a different world...because otherwise there is [always a lingering] option that you can always go back to your parents house” (Kiran Bharti, interview).

The Physical Mother: Her Literal Role, Pressures, and Social Expectations

By the standards of Hindu society, many of the women that I spoke to express the belief that a woman is considered to be incomplete if she is not a mother: a woman is “not complete without a baby” (Prativbha Singh, interview). Women in Indian society are expected, by their pure physical nature, as well as by social expectations to become a wife and follow the traditional roles that they have been prescribed over hundreds of years. Not only should a woman serve the function of child-bearing, she is expected to serve it correctly; she is not only expected to give birth to child, but to a male child before she is considered to be fully complete (Sunita Shukla, interview). As one woman states, “without [a] baby I think it is very horrible life, everybody will talk you and scold you...in India if a girl has no child she is given a lot of abuses” (Archana Agarwan, interview) as well as social pressures.

Society expect women to birth children and “if [she] will not do this then [the husband’s family] will throw [her] out [laugh]...we have to do” this for the sake of keeping both society and family relations intact (Mantan Mishra, interview). And although there were no cases in which the *pumsavana* ceremony, typically performed in the second month of pregnancy to conceive a son, was performed for the women that I spoke with, nor was there every any mention that this type of ceremony existed in their families or even within their larger communities to begin with, the social pressure to conceive and give birth to sons is still so strong that most of

them give accounts that in practice some early-life ceremonies differ according to the gender of the child.

Though most of the woman that I spoke with expressed the feeling that “for a mother a boy or a girl [child] is one in the same thing,” most were quick to point out that “[Indian] society gives you more respect...[if you] have given birth to a boy” (Jyoti Rana). The ceremonies that are performed when a son is born in some families are far often more elaborate than those performed for a daughter, and some women even express the *personal* opinion, like I have stated before, that they are not complete women without having given birth to a male child. Mother-in-laws often pressure their son’s wives to continue conceiving until they give birth to males, and many families still hold on to the idea that female children are burdens, whether this is in the form of a dowry or because a female is not able to carry on her own families traditions in the house of her husband.ⁱⁱ

The Liminal Mother: Her Social and Personal Responsibility

I have included the category of the liminal mother because naturally there will always be a fine line drawn between the physical-functioning mother and the personal mother in terms of how a woman views herself. This liminality manifests itself in the idea that in Indian society, “Mother can do many things a wife cannot” (Asha Parasher). Although women acquire a master-role or overarching identity as a physical mother after they have given birth to children, often having their individual identities overlooked or having to be set aside in the interest of serving their child, they also obtain a sense of empowerment and independence because of this as well.

As their responsibilities increase, many women express the feeling that so does their sense of control, the liminal mother is able to use her physical function as the bearer and care-

taker of her child as a way of managing her own identity by feeling more empowered in the process of child rearing. A sense of duty is often another manifestation of this liminality:

“According to the textual tradition we say that husband is the highest God, but in practice as a mother I feel that my most important duty is to take care [of my children]” (Usha Singh, interview).

The Metaphysical Mother: Her Self-Conception and How Others Perceive Her

“I will always be mother till I die” (Usha Singh, interview).

Being a mother is not just a literal state (as in a woman who conceives and gives birth to a child), it is a state of mind, it is an identity that is acquired through psychological and emotional means as well. One of the questions that I particularly enjoyed asking during my study was how women viewed their own roles, and the role of mothers in general within their society. It was very interesting to hear them all say that they not only felt good about their role/position as mothers, but some even expressed the feeling that their status made them semi-divine. Not only was the mother considered to be an important part of her household, but she was also considered to be a crucial force within her society.

Many women expressed the belief that: “In my opinion mother is a very big...and important role. If a mother is educated and healthy then she can change society also, because in India, men’s role is very little, they only earn money; they are not sincerely devoted ...[to] caring [for a] child and household...Mother has a lot of capacity, she has done household work, child caring, and societal work, everything.” (Archana Agarwan, interview)

And

“Mother is a good teacher, mother is a good partner, and best friend, mother is the pillar of the house and all societies and family members and for child also. If a mother is good and she teaches her sons good values...[from] childhood then when they are grown up no one can misguide them easily.” (Archana Agarwan)

Or better yet, “[w]ithout a woman there is nothing.”

Many women, despite the fact that they clearly state that there are no ceremonies performed specifically to celebrate the mother’s accomplishment of birth-giving, still express the opinion that “[t]he woman is a goddess and the house is her temple” (Asha Parasher) and that they feel like their position as mothers make them feel more respected as well as more secure. Most women are proud of their position as mothers as they value this role and even worship it in some of the traditional early-life practices. And it goes without saying that it does not take rituals alone to make a woman feel appreciated within her society, within the female community, women recognize the extent to which they influence the world around them and take great pride in the role as well.

Non-Mothers and Mother-in Laws

Before I even set out to do research, I was advised that mother-in-laws would be a good place to begin, and while I was interviewing many of the women for my study I could clearly see why this suggestion was made. In many of the households that I visited, one could clearly see the mother-in-law tensions that existed. I would often ask questions that women felt they could not answer unless they asked their mother-in-law, and it was only after I made it clear that I was mainly interested in their personal views that they opened up. It was not rare to be told things like “[e]verything has been told to you [by my mother-in-law]...now I have to follow the

traditions of this house, so whatever ceremony takes place here I have to undergo that” (Jyoti Rana, interview), or to hear things like ‘I am in favor of small ceremonies...“not in favor of this huge party...; it is wastage of money, it is wastage of time...I think nothing is gained from this...I think this money can be invested in the education of the child...[but] I cant say these things in from of my in-laws” (laugh) (Mantan Mishra). Women not only looked to their mother in laws to guide them on the customs of their households, but had genuine fears of going against them or starting trouble. The mother-in-law, more than anyone else, is expected to maintain the foundations of tradition practices.

Yet another interesting set of women are motherless women in Indian society. As mentioned before, women are not considered to be complete without having given birth to children, and barrenness, or childlessness, in Hindu society, is often viewed as one of the “worst evil[s], one that has to be counteracted by all means possible” (Leslie, 90). In many of my interviews it was even stressed that women who did not have any children were barred from most of the early-life rituals (at least in the parts that were more ritualistic than celebratory). To be a motherless woman in India is even considered to be worst than being an unmarried woman, and one interviewee even stated that her mother-in-law threatened to have her son remarried if she did not bear him children.

Ritual Practice and Theory in Changing Times

In his Introduction to Hinduism, Gavin Flood most accurately summed up the current section of my research by stating that

“it is the persistence of ritual in Hinduism, the patterning of action in certain ways; and its understanding by those who perform it, which provides, and expresses, a sense of

identity for Hindu communities: an identity which goes beyond social and political changes and provides Hindus with a sense of belonging in the face of sometimes rapid social change” (Flood, 200).

Obviously, it has been hundreds of years since the Vedic scriptures were written, and consequently hundreds of years since the prescribed customs laid out within the text have been practiced, but as one interviewee stated, “[t]he fashion is changing now...people are [no longer] following their religious rule” (Gopal Shukla, interview). And as was illustrated earlier, even though many women, particularly mother-in-laws, are still managing to maintain traditional practice and customs, most people hold the view that these rituals are a waste of time, are only for fun or show, or are too expensive to continue to bother with. As one woman stated “[e]arlier I was into fasting and such...but now I don’t see any point” (Jyoti Rana, interview), as she does not really see the point in some rituals themselves, some she says are important, but others are not.

Which is exactly where organizations like the Saryu Parin Brahmin Parishad Society come in; they make it their goal to perform the *mundan*, *upananyana*, and other ceremonies , arrange marriages for young couples, and to just generally “keep these [religious] rules with us” (Gopal Shukla, interview). It might very well be that “[t]he *Samskaras* are rites of passage which serve to legitimate social order and to uphold social institutions” (Flood, 201) within Hindu society, but what does this mean if individuals no longer perform these rites or see much value in them? What does it mean if like Usha Singh states in her interview, “[w]e [older women] decide according to tradition...[but] modern ladies decide according to [the] internet”?

The SPBP Society, founded in 1983 by an officer at the Sanskrit University, has about 1500 members who work to serve numerous communities in Varanasi. As Mr. Shukla states, “our roots are very deep here, so [it is] easy to find people,” and the organization has built up

such great trust and respect within the community that they have almost no problem getting donations to carry out numerous projects such as their annual pupil initiation ceremony, they only have problems making sure that people are actually following traditional practices once they have done their part to set them on the right path. And because individuals often express the feeling that “[p]ersonally at times you feel bound” (Jyoti Rana), by the practices of society it is difficult to say whether or not the Society is affecting much change or not.

What is clear, however, is that even in the face of a rapidly changing society many people are still “satisfied with traditional things,” and feel that “now a days we are not following these things in a proper way” (Archana Agarwan). If nothing else, SPBP serves these individuals, and stands as a very strong symbol of the continuity of Hindu values and believe in the importance of traditions. The fact that an organization exists to maintain traditional practices and customs is in and of itself astounding, and once you hear the goals articulated by the organization president, it is no wonder why so many women still perform traditional rites despite their sometimes negative response to them. Many people, despite what they say, still feel like, Mr. Shukla does that it is the responsibility of the people to takes care of Indian society, like they would an elder: “our society is becoming old and we have to give respect to [it].”

CONCLUSION

Current Importance and Future Research

In addition to taking care of society, however, I believe that its is important to take care of the women who allow it to exist to begin with as well, which is why one cannot ignore or pay only little attention to the work that they do, as well as the ways in which they are viewed. Women uphold the values of a society. Even if they are only housewives, they maintain order

and instill morals into the children that they raise in order to eventually produce proper members of society. My research has not only given me a greater appreciation for the role of mothers within Indian and other societies, but has illustrated how often overlooked their importance and work is. If I had more time to continue working on this topic, I would extend my interviews not only to a wider community and number of women, but I would explore the views that men hold of the role of mothers as well.

A more quantitative research would help to statistically lay out how many and what types of early-life ceremonies are being performed within the Hindu community, but I feel that it is important to hear women speak for themselves. It is difficult when doing this type of research not to isolate the faces, stories, and opinions of the women who undergo these rituals in their everyday lives from the frequencies at which they are performed. I hope that someone else will take up this topic, explore the role of Societies like SPBP further, look into the ways in which isolation affects identity, study whether women have their own initiation rites similar to the *upanayana*, and just generally pay attention to the voices that are often hidden behind walls and doors in traditional homes.

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⁵ Dr. Pandey, Mr, Dwivedi, and Mr. Shukla all would all be willing to help other SIT students in the future as well. If anyone is interested in studying rituals, Ganga cleaning, or anything of that nature, Dr. Pandey has said that he know many academics that one could speak to. It was only unfortunate for me that I met him in the last week that I had in Varanasi.

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Interviews

- Archana Agarwan (Housewife). April 23, 2009.
- Asha Parasher (Maid). April 25, 2009.
- Chandza Bhushan (President of *Saryu Parin Brahmin Parashad*). April 30, 2009.
- Gopal Shukla (Member of *Saryu Parin Brahmin Parashad*). April 28, 2009.
- Jyoti Rana (Professor of Art History). April 13, 2009.
- Kiran Bharti (Maid). April 23, 2009.
- Mantan Mishra (School Principal). April 25, 2009.
- Nitya Pandey (Housewife). April 10, 2009.
- Prativbha Singh (Housewife). April 18, 2009.
- Rana P.B. Singh (Professor). April 8, 2009.
- Rani Sharma and Mun Shanti Sharma (April 12, 2009).
- Sunita Shukla (Housewife). April 24, 2009.
- Sushila Agrahari (Housewife). April 13, 2009.
- Usha Singh (Housewife). April 13, 2009.

APPENDIX

(A)

Interview Questions (Mothers)

(Ask about recording interviews/taking pictures)

- 1) How many children do you have?
- 2) Could you please list and describe the ceremonies that were performed when your child(ren) was/were born?
What was this like for you?
- 3) Could you describe in further detail what your own *garbhadhana*, *jata-karma*, *niskramana*, and *anna-prasana* ceremonies were like?
Could you describe your role in this ceremony/what the ceremony was like for you?
- 4) Do the ceremonies differ according to the gender of the child? That is, are the ceremonies different or the same when a male child is born than when a female child is born?
- 5) Did you undergo the traditional isolation after giving birth?
Could you describe what it was like?
How long were you not allowed to leave the house, where were you allowed to go, etc?
What interactions were allowed and what interactions were forbidden during this period?
How did you feel during this time?
- 6) Are there any family members/relatives of the child's parents who play important roles in these ceremonies?
- 7) Do both men and women participate in these ceremonies? Do they participate in equal numbers, or is there a higher concentration of one sex (gender) in a particular/specific ceremony?
- 8) What traditional items are used in these ceremonies? Has this changed over time? Why are they used?
- 9) In your opinion, what is the function/purpose of these ceremonies/rituals?
- 10) Is it necessary for these ceremonies to be performed when a child is conceived/born? Why?
Why do you think that these ceremonies are performed? Why are they important? What do you think is the social significance of the ceremonies?
- 11) Did you feel that your role as a wife, or as an individual, changed after giving birth? After performing the ceremonies? How?
Were you treated differently (with more respect, etc) after undergoing these rites?
- 12) *Is there any difference in the ceremonies/procedures of the rituals when you had your second child? (If the person has more than one child)*

(B)

Interview Questions (*Member and President of Saryu Parin Brahmin Parashad*)

- 1) What is your name? What is your exact position within the society?
- 2) When was the organization founded, and by whom was it founded?
- 3) Why was the organization founded? What is its original mission statement? Has this goal changed over time?
- 4) How many members are apart of this society? What is a typical member like (for example male/female, caste, class, etc)?
- 5) What community does the society serve?
- 6) How does the organization get involved in the community/help the people within it?
- 7) What types of projects does the society run?
- 8) (Mention the ceremony you observed) Is this type of work the main focus of the organization? What other ceremonies does the organization organize?
- 9) How are the ceremonies publicized? How do you get people to sign up to participate in them?
- 10) Why (do)es the organization/you feel that it is necessary to organize these rituals? Why are the rituals being performed?
- 11) Are there other organizations similar to this one that exists in Varanasi, and how are they similar or different?
- 12) Who funds the work that this society performs?
- 13) What future plans does the organization have? Are there any upcoming projects that the members/leaders are currently working on?

ⁱ No where this quote more relevant that childhood rituals have been much neglected as an area of study like in the literature review section of my paper. Not only has very little been published on the subject (at least that I know of), but most of the articles that have been published were written over 50 years ago.

ⁱⁱ Once again, it seems only relevant to point out the fact that women often do not undergo any of the ceremonies that are performed to initiate an individual into his/her society. Not only are female children still viewed as burdens to their families, but they are by the logic of many of these ceremonies, impure and “animalistic” beings throughout their entire life. They are barred from the process of ____.