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Women, Abuse Songs and Erotic Dances: Marriage Ceremonies in Northern India

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This article examines the roles of women in marriage ceremonies in North India through an analysis of songs and performance. While many ethnographical accounts refer to marriage ceremony in India, little has been written about women's roles in it despite their importance. Because previous studies have concentrated upon men's rituals, especially the priest's prayers (*pūjā*, or ritual worship), women's rituals have been neglected (Lewis 1958; Freed and Freed 1980). The status of Indian women is related to the concepts of purity and impurity. For example, Louis Dumont (1980) suggested that the temporary pollution deriving from childbirth and death are connected with the permanent pollution of caste. In this line of thinking, it is not conceived that women can take positive roles in rituals because of this pollution.

Generally, the rituals performed by priests are called *śāstra acār*, while the rituals performed by women are called *śtrī acār* or *mehrāru kā kām*. The characteristic components of *śtrī acār* are performances of songs and dances, such as *gālī* (abuse songs) and erotic performances in the marriage ceremony. This aspect is very different from *śāstra acār*. In this essay, I will examine women's performances to explore their roles in the marriage ceremony. I will also analyze why women play these roles and how women's performance is related to the Hindu concept of women.

When we consider women's roles in the marriage ritual in relation to their songs and dances, the concept of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness and that of *śakti* are both important. For example, Marglin points out in her study of auspiciousness and kingship that as a *devadāsī* is married to a god, her fertility is auspicious and augers prosperity for the kingdom (1985a). *Devadāsīs* also perform auspicious songs and dances (1985b). While Marglin only looks at a special type of women, I believe the roles of *devadāsīs* as auspicious women can be applied to women in general.

I will also consider the conception of *śakti* as it is related to auspiciousness. In Hinduism, the principle of woman is *śakti*, that is, the life energy of the universe. Although men and women have *śakti* as an attribute of individuals, only women are thought to represent the original energy of the universe (Reynolds 1980; Wadley 1977).

This article is based on my fieldwork investigating women's rites in a North Indian village for the period of two and half years between 1983 and 2002. Village S, the site of my research, is located in the Azamgarh district of eastern Uttar Pradesh. Linguistically, it lies in a Bhojpurī-speaking region. The villagers are all Hindus and consist of three castes: *Yādav*, *Kahār* and *Camār*. *Yādavs* account for more than two thirds of the population. Traditionally the *Yādavs* have engaged in selling milk, the *Kahārs* in carrying water, and

the *Camārs* in tanning, but today the majority of all caste members are farmers. The chief crop is raw sugar, but they also grow wheat, barely, rice, pulses and vegetables. They sell their crops at market for cash income.

The *Yādavs* are one of the so-called backward castes, but today they are rapidly acquiring social and economic power. The *Kahārs* are another backward caste; at present there is only one *Kahār* household in the village, and its members have been almost completely assimilated by the *Yādavs*. The *Camārs* are recognized by the government as one of the scheduled castes. Some service castes from other villages played important roles: *Paṇḍits* as priests, *Nāīs* as barbers, *Dhobīs* as washer peoples. This article deals with marriage ceremonies among the *Yādavs* who constitute the dominant caste in this area.

Marriage Ceremony

The Setting of Marriage

A marriage partner is selected according to various rules such as caste endogamy, *gotra*, or hypergamy. A *paṇḍit* (priest) is consulted to determine the prospective couple's compatibility, and the two parties negotiate the size of the dowry. Once the decision has been made, a betrothal ceremony, called *lagan* or *tilak*, is held at the bridegroom's house.

In Village S, the marriage ceremony is composed of three stages: *śādī*, *gaunā*, and *doge* (also known as *donge*). *Śādī* is performed when the bride is fourteen or fifteen years old and the bridegroom is sixteen or seventeen years old. It consists of a series of rites lasting nine days, and among the rites the most important for the couple's status as husband and wife is called *byāh*. The bride does not go to the bridegroom's home at this stage. *Gaunā* is performed two or three years after the *śādī* ceremony. The bride spends three days at the bridegroom's house and returns to her natal home. *Doge* takes place six months or one year after the *gaunā* ceremony, and the bride and groom enter into actual married life. At each stage of the marriage ceremony women sing songs specific to each individual rite.

Each ceremony is highly complicated, and space does not allow for a full explanation. Here, I will focus on *śādī* as it is the first and most important stage of the marriage ceremony.

The Process of the *Śādī* Ceremony

From the first to the sixth day of the *śādī* ceremony, identical rituals are performed at the bride's and bridegroom's houses. On the first day of the *śādī*, female relatives and neighbours perform a ritual called *urd cāval chānnā*. They sift *urd* beans and rice with winnowing baskets as they sing the songs below.

(Song 1)

Oh, my queen, is your beauty made up by a machine?
 Or, Are you created by a blacksmith?
 Oh, my king, I am not made up by a machine nor created by a blacksmith.
 My parents gave me birth.
 And God made me beautiful.



Plate 1 The *urd cāval chānnā* (female relatives and neighbours sift *urd* beans and rice by winnowing baskets with singing songs)

On the fourth day, women perform a rite called *urd kā dhoīyā dhonā*. They wash and peel black *urd* beans, and make cakes by kneading these with white *urd* as they sing. These rituals symbolize warding off evil spirits for a successful marriage. During the marriage ceremony, the bride and a bridegroom are believed to be susceptible to evil spirits that can easily take possession of them because they are so charming at this point in their lives.

The sixth day is called the *maṭmaṅgala* day, and a series of rites is performed at the homes of the bride and groom in preparation for the *byāh*. First a *paṇḍit* comes and performs *kalyān pūjā* to pray for the fulfillment of the marriage ceremony. Next, a *naun* (barberwoman) purifies part of the courtyard with cow dung and draws auspicious patterns on the grounds, transforming it to a *maṇḍap* (ritual site). Five villagers then erect a *halis* (spade) on a center of the *maṇḍap* as a marriage pole. This ritual is called *halis gādanā*. The *naun* purify the *halis* with turmeric and cow dung.

Then rites for inviting the ancestors, known as *kūṭnā* and *chūlī neotā*, are performed by married women. Five married women pound rice with pestles to prepare a meal for the ancestors, and then place the rice in four pots, circling them five times in a counterclockwise direction. At the same time, they sing songs to invoke the past three generations of patrilineal ancestors as follows..



Plate 2 The *kūṇā* (five married women pounding rice of pestle, who prepare meals for ancestors)

(Song 2)

These people who died by fire,
 These who drowned in water,
 These who died from cobra bite,
 These who died from a scorpion sting,
 Today, all of you, we invite to our marriage ceremony.

Byāh

On the seventh day the ritual of actual marriage, called *byāh*, is performed at the bride's house. The bridegroom, his male relatives and the village menfolk set out on a procession called *baratī*. Prior to their departure to take part in the *byāh*, the *naun* and married women perform rituals for the groom. Among them is the *parichhan*.

(Song 3)

Please bring a *sūp* (a winnowing basket), oh *bahūjī* (sister-in-law),
 Please bring a *musal* (a wooden pestle), oh *bahūjī*.
 Please bring a *lauler* (a stone roller for crushing spices), oh *bahūjī*,
 <some lines omitted>
 We hope they can get these kinds of things in a future life.

The groom's mother circles the five items – the *sūp* (winnowing basket), *musal* (wooden pestle), *lauler* (stone roller for crushing spices), *gilās* (glass), *kairal* (yoghurt

churn-dasher) – five times each in a counterclockwise direction over the groom’s head. These objects are considered auspicious, and this series of actions is performed in the hope that the groom will acquire them in the future. The groom then bathes and the *naun* washes him with turmeric and dresses him in wedding clothes. The *naun* then paints his fingernails and toenails red, a colour that symbolizes prosperity and longevity. This ritual is called *nākhūn raṅgāṭha*.

When the groom’s party reaches the bride’s house, *paṇḍits* of both families greet the groom at a *maṇḍap* and chant mantra. While the groom’s party is welcomed with tea and snack, female relatives of the bride and the *naun* perform *parichhan*. The *naun* then bathes the bride and washes her with turmeric and soap. The bride changes from her *salwār kamīz* to a sari as her wedding dress, and her nails are painted red by the *naun*.

The *byāh* begins in the evening and continues into the night. First the *chunrī* ritual is performed. The groom and relatives from both families take their seats on the *maṇḍap* and the groom’s family presents a basket containing a sari, bangles, ornaments, and other items to the bride’s family. Next, the bride enters the *maṇḍap* accompanied by the *naun*, and she sits opposite the bridegroom. The bride’s father takes the groom’s hand and lays it on the bride’s hand, thereby symbolically giving away his daughter. This ritual is called *kanyā dān*. Around midnight, the bridegroom puts vermilion powder on the parting in the bride’s hair. This is the ritual of *sindūr dān*, and by this ritual the marriage is in effect concluded.

A day after the *byāh*, a *khicrī khānā* rite is performed in which the groom is given a dish of *khicrī*, made with rice and *urd* beans. If the bridegroom is satisfied with the *dahej* (dowry), he will eat immediately. But if he does not eat, relatives from both sides will encourage him to eat it. At this time, women of a bride’s side sing abuse songs to the groom as follows.

(Song 4)

A bridegroom is sitting in *maṇḍap*.

Oh, bridegroom, please eat *khicrī*,

Your father-in-law is standing to present you with a cycle (bicycle).

Oh, bridegroom, please eat *khicrī*,

<some lines omitted>

Oh, my father-in-law, I want a gold chain.

If you give me a gold chain, I will eat *khicrī*.

At the groom’s house, a gathering of women only is held in the afternoon. Pairs of women impersonating the bride and groom sing and dance as they bring their hips together in imitations of sexual acts (called *naktoriya*). This symbolizes the fertility of both houses.

After some more rituals are performed, the bridegroom’s party goes back to their village. On the next day, a final ritual called *maur servana* is held at both houses. The married women report the successful completion of the *śādī* to the village deities. At that time, female relatives sing songs and dance imitating sexual acts in front of the shrine to each deity.

Abuse Songs

Gālī: Songs to Insult

To sum up the process, the *śādī* ceremony, which is composed of several stages, lasts nine days. The first stage wards off evil spirits. The next invites gods, deities and ancestors. The third purifies and blesses the bride and bridegroom. The fourth unites them and their families. During these stages, women of the bride's family sing *gālī* (abuse songs) and execute a symbolic erotic dance from the seventh to ninth day of the ceremony after the unification ritual.

Gālī song texts are classified into two types. One type insults the bridegroom and his relatives while the other has a sexual meaning. Let us look first at the former type of *gālī*. In the ritual succeeding the *byāh* on the seventh day, female relatives and neighbours of the bride sing *gālī* songs such as the one given below, as they carry out important rituals such as *pāmv pūjā*, *kanyā dān* and *sindūr dān*.

(Song 5)

Oh, brothers-in-laws, why you want to come to this *maṇḍap*,
Please stand up brothers-in-laws and go out of my *maṇḍap*.
We shame your white mustache,
Please stand up brothers-in-laws and go out of my *maṇḍap*.
We shame your nose as like a hookah (water pipe),
Please stand up *barati* (men's marriage party) people and go out of my *maṇḍap*.

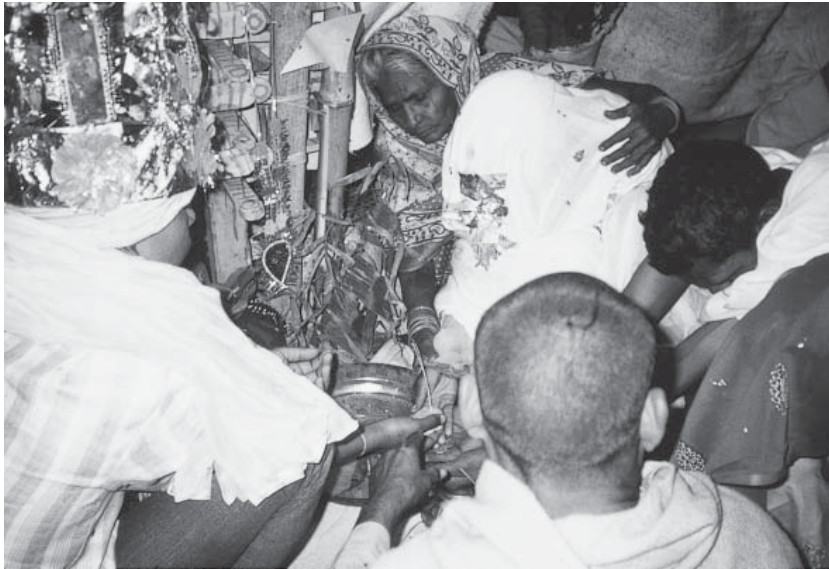


Plate 3 The *pāmv pūjā* (the bride's parents worship a bride and a bridegroom by touching their feet)

Barati come to suck their penises,
 We shame your stomach as like a drum,
 Please stand up brothers-in-laws and go out of my *maṇḍap*.

On the afternoon of the eighth day, women again sing abuse songs in the *kicrī khānā* ritual. As already stated, relatives of the bride force the bridegroom to eat special food. The bride's side shows its *dahej* (dowry) inside the ritual place. If the bridegroom is satisfied with the *dahej*, he will eat the food quickly. If he is not satisfied, he is reluctant to eat. Women sing the song below to insult his greedy attitude.

(Song 6)

The bridegroom sits in the *maṇḍap*, oh, the bridegroom.
 You don't have enough place to sit, please eat lunch.
 Your father-in-law stands to present you with a cycle (bicycle).
 He is very worrying, please eat the food, oh, bridegroom.
 I want a golden chain, oh, grandfather,
 The bridegroom is angry in the *maṇḍap*,
 I want a ring on my hand, oh, grandfather,
 If you give me one, I will eat the food.

What is the meaning of singing these abuse songs to the bridegroom and his relatives in the presence of many villagers and the bride's relatives? According to Doranne Jacobson,



Plate 4 The *khiṛī khānā* (when the groom is given dish of *khiṛī*, women of bride's side sing abuse songs to the groom)

such *gālī* singing offers a welcome relief from the formality that characterizes an often tense relationship (1982: 100-1), but it has a deeper social meaning. These *gālī* relate to social relationships. In daily life, the status of wife-givers is lower than that of wife-takers. In idealized Hindu customs, a father must marry off his daughter before her first menstruation. The hypergamy system dictates that the groom's family be given a high dowry by the bride's family (Madan 1975; Vatuk 1975). So, through the women's *gālī*, the hierarchy between the bride's and bridegroom's families is temporarily reversed (Kolenda 1990; Selwyn 1979).

Abuse Songs and Erotic Dance

The latter type of *gālī* is more important to the women's ritual role. On the seventh day, the *barati* (men's marriage party) leaves the groom's house while the women remain. The men attend the unification ceremony at the bride's house. The following day, the women remaining in the groom's village perform the *naktoriya*, which consists of singing *gālī* and dancing erotically. A village woman wears men's clothes and dances together with another woman imitating a newly married couple.¹⁾ At that time, women sing the following abuse song.

(Song 7)

We put food on a golden dish, the bridegroom doesn't eat.
 A bridegroom who cannot move his hip is a child.
 We put water in a cup, the bridegroom doesn't drink,
 A bridegroom who cannot move his waist is a child.
 We made a bed with cover and pillows.
 A bridegroom doesn't sleep.
 A bridegroom who cannot move his waist is a child.

Here, the phrase "cannot move his hip" refers to the inability to perform in bed. The bridegroom is therefore still a child, not yet a man. In their study of *gālī* songs in Rajput society, Raheja and Gold point out that these songs are examples of abusing a child husband as a "small husband" (1994: 57).

Another example is the *maur servana* ritual on the ninth day, which includes *gālī* songs and erotic dance, and is performed at both the bride's and groom's houses. Women go to shrines for worship, after which they dance and sing the song below.

(Song 8)

Chinaro (an lazy woman) goes to *Dīh Bābā* (a village deity) to worship in the best way,
 She has intercourse with *Dīh Bābā* 1,000 times.
 The bride's aunt goes to *Dīh Bābā* to worship in the best way,
 She has intercourse with *Dīh Bābā* 1,000 times.
Rukumina kā māī (name of the bride's mother) goes to *Dīh Bābā* to worship in the best way,
 She has intercourse with *Dīh Bābā* 1,000 times.



Plate 5 The *naktoriya* (a village woman wear men's clothes and dances with another woman)

Here, *chinaro* has a double meaning in Hindi. The surface meaning is 'a lazy woman' whereas the second meaning is 'a prostitute'. We should note that *gālī* and erotic dances are performed just before and just after the rituals for actually becoming husband and wife. During the six days before the *byāh* rituals, no abuse songs and erotic dances are performed. Specifically, erotic dances takes place after *byāh* rituals such as *sindūr dān* as well as before and after other important rituals that complete the marriage ceremony. After the marriage ceremony, people consider childbirth to be the next step. In the last part of the *naktoriya* ritual, women sing *sohar* songs. *Sohar* songs are generally sung when a boy is born. For these reasons, we can think of performances of abuse songs and erotic dances as imitations of sexual intercourse.

The fact that women never sing abuse songs in men's presence, nor do performances suggesting sexual activity in daily life, means that these are ritual actions and prayers for fertility. As the aims of marriages are the prosperity of the family and its lineage, women sing, dance and depict childbirth as prayers for fertility during the rituals.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have identified four characteristics of women's rituals. First, woman sing songs specific to each ritual. Without these songs, the ritual is considered incomplete: women's songs are not a frivolous addition but an essential constituent of rituals, equivalent to the *mantra* (incantation) of priests (Yagi 1999: 274).

Second, women's songs play the role of warding off evil spirits. In the study village, the bride and bridegroom are considered physically attractive during the marriage ceremony and therefore susceptible to the influence of evil spirits. Several scholars have remarked on such danger (Freed and Freed 1980: 451; Raheja 1988: 43; Sarasvati 1977: 188). The bride and a groom must carry something made of iron when they go out and, they should never go far away.²⁾ They must wear the same clothes throughout the *byāh* rituals to ward off evil spirits. Women invite ancestors to the marriage ceremony by singing songs, especially those who met an unnatural death. Because such ancestors may have an undesirable influence on the marriage ceremony, they need to eradicate the possibility of bringing misfortune by inviting them in advance.

Third, women's songs are much related to the notion of auspiciousness. Women's songs are called *maṅgal gīt* (auspicious songs). These women's songs and erotic dances of fertility and reproduction connote auspiciousness. In my study village, people believe that auspiciousness contributes to the prosperity and fertility of their family and lineage, whereas evil spirits are inauspicious and bring misfortune or disaster to them.

Lastly, auspiciousness is related to women's ritual roles and life-cycles. The singing of *gālī* (abuse songs) and symbolic erotic dances are performed primarily by married women who are called *saguṇihya* (auspicious woman). They take a leading part in the women's rites known as *śtrī acār* or *mehrāru kā kām*. Unmarried girls and fertile women, including those in menstruation and pregnancy, are considered auspicious. On ordinary days, if a person goes out and first meets a pregnant woman, this is a good omen. Inauspicious are women who are barren or widowed, and even meeting them on the street can be unlucky. Such a woman is called an *asguṇihya* (inauspicious woman). Because widows and barren women do not contribute to the prosperity of the family, they are not allowed to participate in marriage rites. Marglin has shown that the *devadāsī*, a special type of women married to a god, is considered to be eternally auspicious, but through their links with procreative power and fertility ordinary women are related to auspiciousness and powers of fertility.³⁾

All women have *śakti*, that is, the life energy of the universe.⁴⁾ This energy can work either positively or negatively. Meeting a widow or barren woman is regarded as inauspicious as her *śakti* is thought to work negatively. In contrast, auspicious women have positive *śakti*; they are capable of bringing fertility and prosperity to the family and lineage. However, if positive *śakti* is too strong, it needs to be controlled. Unmarried girl's *śakti* often brings danger to society because their sexuality is considered to be strong. A woman must be married off to reduce the potential danger. Married women's *śakti* is properly controlled by their husbands and channeled to bear children.⁵⁾ This control means that married women who are auspicious are able to assist the newly married couple in achieving prosperity and fertility. Thus women play important roles in the marriage ceremony through their songs and performances.

Notes

- 1) We can consider that women playing the roles of the bride and bridegroom dancing together imitating sexual intercourse is related to the Tantric tradition (Hanna 1998: 100-1).

- 2) Iron has the power of warding off evil spirits.
- 3) On the contrary, men are not classified as auspicious or inauspicious. Only the priest plays an important role in the marriage ceremony; ordinary men do not have important roles to play.
- 4) In my study site, villagers believe that women have more *śakti* than men. Parry states that, as women have more *śakti*, they have nine times as much heat as men in Kangra in northwest India. According to him, heat is a sort of energy that manifests itself either in desirable qualities like bravery or in undesirable lust. But men tend to think that heat in a woman is almost invariably converted into sexual desire rather than courage (1979: 213).
- 5) Kinsley pointed out that when woman's sexuality is under control by a man through marriage, it is beneficial for society (Kinsley 1986: 4, 203).

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