

Women and Tradition in India : Construction of Subjectivity and Control of Female Sexuality in the Ritual of First Menstruation

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Chapter 7

Women and Tradition in India: Construction of Subjectivity and Control of Female Sexuality in the Ritual of First Menstruation

Yumiko TOKITA-TANABE

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with discourse and practice concerning the control of female sexuality in India, using material regarding the ritual of first menstruation in a village in Orissa.¹⁾ It argues that the ways in which female sexuality is controlled in contemporary India may only be understood by looking at both the kinds of cultural values associated with womanhood and the socio-historical conditions in which these values are contextualised.

Issues regarding control of female sexuality are closely related to the questions of position and status of women, which has been one of the major concerns in gender studies in India. It is possible to discern two broad trends here. On the one hand, problems of gender inequality and the asymmetric power relation between men and women have constituted the main framework of research for a large number of scholars on women in India. It has been argued that socio-economic asymmetries are reproduced in spite of (or in some cases even due to) various developmental programmes, resulting in the continued oppression and subservience of women in India (DE SOUZA 1975; SHIVA 1988). On the other hand, anthropological research has focused attention on the rich cultural-symbolic world of women, their association with *śakti* and their link with the value of auspiciousness (FRUZZETTI 1982; MARGLIN 1985; SAMANTA 1992). Studies in this line emphasise the autonomy of female identity and women are portrayed as having confidence in their life's worth and not as mere subservient beings oppressed by men.

The problem with works (mainly anthropological) which attempt to "re-evaluate" the world of Hindu women is that they tend to depict womanhood and femininity only in terms of the cultural-symbolic values associated with them. As a result, "conceptions of womanhood in terms of cultural symbolism frequently lapse into essentialist analysis" (NIRANJANA 1992: 408). In other words, "an atemporal ahistorical view of feminine nature" (*ibid.*) is projected in which certain idioms such as *śakti*, auspiciousness, fertility and well being that constitute aspects of Hindu cosmological schemes come to be definitive characteristics associated with Hindu

women in general. Socio-economic approaches concerned with the development of gender inequality in Indian society, by contrast, do deal with aspects of historicity in the social reproduction of gender asymmetry. However, they tend not to investigate how such gender asymmetry in socio-economic terms is represented and sustained in given cultural symbolic contexts. Insights provided by the two kinds of approaches may be combined in order to grasp the overall complexities regarding the construction of female subjectivity. I employ the term "subject" to refer both to the "subject of action" as well as "being subject to" the structures in which the women exist.²⁾ What is required in understanding the complex nature of female subjectivity is sensitivity to both the agency of women as subject of action seeking their own worth and the socio-economic environment within which women are embedded and subject to gender hierarchy.

The ritual of first menstruation in Orissa dealt with in this chapter provides, at one level, a rich resource for symbolic analysis of the complex nature of women's subjectivity. The ritual can be said to constitute women's subjectivity which oscillates between the autonomous world of women that celebrates female generative power and the androcentric world where womanhood is defined in terms of hierarchical gender relations. One aim of this chapter is to discuss how the two aspects of womanhood are interwoven to constitute a complex and often indeterminate character of female subjectivity.

While this kind of symbolic analysis allows us to discover a relatively historically stable structure of semantics of womanhood which is constituted in the ritual, we must note also that, at another level, the meaning of womanhood in relation to the ritual changes according to the socio-political context.³⁾ The complexities and oscillation in the meaning of womanhood indeed give scope for variable discourses, allowing for women's identity to be indeterminate and perpetually contested, but at the same time there are forces which act upon discourses on gender to fix the meaning of womanhood and women's identity. Another aim of this chapter is to consider how the value of womanhood and femininity is given a particular significance in the context of the modern period.

In considering the meaning of womanhood in the wider context of history and politics, we must be sensitive to the category of gender as deployed not only in terms of men and women but also in terms of a larger semantic framework for interpretation of culture and history. Rather than confining ourselves to either looking for the basis of gender identity in terms of what value constitutes the essence of femininity as the cultural symbolical approach does, or locating the gender hierarchy in order to criticise the reproduction of inequalities between men and women in Indian society as the socio-economic approach does, we should pay attention to the nature of *gender difference*⁴⁾ in the context of history and culture. That is, we need to focus on the semantic framework of gender distinctions employed to bestow meanings and values to aspects of social life. The challenge for anthropologists dealing with contemporary Indian society, then, as I see it, is to attempt to ask questions about the contemporary significance of gendered

categories and values and how they are employed in the construction of women as *gendered subjects*.

In the contemporary modern period, we argue, that the gender category is employed to tackle the identity problem of the Indian people in terms of how they perceive their "tradition" and "modernity." It seems that particular forces in history and culture have led to the gendering of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity so as to make women the bearer of the tradition. I would like to look at how this particular meaning of womanhood is created in the context of the modern period and reflected in the discourses surrounding the first menstruation ritual in contemporary village Orissa. An attempt is made to investigate how the cross currents of cultural-political responses of the Indian people to the modern age, the semantics of gender values in India, and women's agency interact to make women take on a positive role as the preserver of tradition in contemporary society. In particular, I focus on the aspect of *control* found in the symbolism of the first menstruation ritual and its significance in discourses about women in today's world, since this aspect seems to play a pivotal role in the constitution of women as subjects of action and of their being subject to structures in which they exist. I am painfully aware that what is being dealt with here is a highly complex process, yet it is precisely such intricate nature of subjectivity and identity in history and culture that I would like to examine.

This chapter will first deal with socio-historical and political contexts in which women were held to maintain tradition by drawing references from previous works and show how these relate to conditions in which female sexuality is controlled in a contemporary village setting. It will then go on to discuss the constellation of values about ideas of womanhood, looking at women's place in kinship and the relationship between the female and *śakti* in a wider context. This will provide a setting for an exploration into the way in which practices and discourses concerned with the first menstruation of girls in a village in Orissa construct the subjectivity of women and girls as those responsible for the well being of their society and the continuation of social values.

2. WOMEN AND DISCOURSES ON TRADITION

Recent works by historians and political scientists have provided interesting insights into the attitudes and rhetoric regarding Indian women and the values they are said to represent with reference to the colonial and post-colonial periods. It has been pointed out that the representation of women in colonial reports depict them as passively following the dictates of tradition and that such representation played a role in justifying British colonial rule in India (MANI 1990). From the colonial point of view, the oppressed women of India needed to be saved and the British colonial administration was to do just that in a civilising mission (CHATTERJEE 1989). Representation of women as submitting to tradition further became "politically strategic metonymic tropes for passivity of India as a whole" (RAHEJA

and GOLD 1994:5) as the relationship between the ruler and the ruled came to be put in terms of gender. In response to such devaluation, Indian nationalists drew up a different idea of Indian women in terms of the role they might play in the struggle for Independence. Gandhi had many things to say about women and values associated with womanhood. He saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order and argued that Indian women were not blind followers of dictates of custom but self-conscious subjects actively guarding their tradition (KISHWAR 1985).

Partha Chatterjee provides a comprehensible framework for analysing the nationalist project regarding the "women's question." He argues that anticolonial nationalism divided the world of social institutions and practices into two domains, the material and the spiritual, and whereas the West was superior in the "outer" material domain, of economy and statecraft etc., the "inner" spiritual domain was the core of Indian cultural identity to be guarded and protected by the Indian people. Chatterjee goes on to say that this inner/outer distinction was mapped on to the concrete separation of living space of *ghar* and *bāhir*, which he translates as the "home" and the "world." The home/world distinction was applied to the gender division of social roles, as the world came to be considered the domain of men that had been dominated by the foreign colonial power due to its superiority in material terms, while the home, with women as its representative, was to remain unaffected by the material world and to retain its inner spiritual culture. In the nationalist struggle there was a need "to protect, preserve, and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence" (CHATTERJEE 1993: 121). The home, the space of activity for women, became the selected sphere for such nationalist endeavour to preserve the inner spirituality. Women in this context became the preserver of the "traditional" values as they were held responsible for the preservation of Indian spiritual identity.⁵⁾

It is important that Chatterjee insists that the association of women with tradition is not to be taken as a refusal of modernity. According to Chatterjee, the emphasis of traditional values at home represented by women was rather a product of a selective process in which there was not a denial of modernity, but an endeavour "to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project" (CHATTERJEE 1989: 625). Similarly, as I shall go on to argue, it would be a great mistake to gloss the present condition of village women in terms of pre-colonial, pre-modern social relations. As it was in the case of the nationalist project, there has been a selective response at the village level to the changes in the modern period in the gendering of the spatial division between "home" and "outside" (*ghara/bāhāra*; the Oriya version of the Bengali terms *ghar/bāhir* discussed by Chatterjee). Here also, the space of the "home" was made the site of tradition represented by women and hence the "traditionalisation" of women's activities should be seen as part of village people's selective search for enduring values in a distinctly contemporary setting.⁶⁾

It should be pointed out, however, that Chatterjee's formulation is founded on

an analysis of nationalism and conceptual frameworks of the urban middle class. As Chatterjee himself poignantly remarks, "nationalist discourse not only demarcated its cultural essence as distinct from that of the West, but also from the mass of the people" (CHATTERJEE 1989: 632). I would say that the discourse of nationalist modernism has been displaced in interesting ways in the contemporary village situation.

From the point of view of the urban middle class, spiritual values representing the "national" culture of India belonged to the "inner" sphere which was to constitute the basis of their "unique" identity, in contradistinction to values represented by liberal democracy, individualism and market economy that had been introduced from the West and the adaptation to which in the "outer" sphere was necessary for the nationalist elites to achieve India's independence and material prosperity on the basis of the principle of equality. From the point of view of contemporary villagers, however, what mattered was not an abstract and imaginary "nation" as such, but their face-to-face communities represented by family, village and caste. Although the villagers similarly adopted the semantic framework of outer/inner sphere in order to interpret and understand their position and identity in the modern era, its content was quite different from that of the urban middle class. While "home" in the village case is most certainly the selected site for the maintenance of enduring aspects of culture and people's identity, just as it was in the nationalist context, cultural identity in the village is not based on national identity, but rather on identities of family, caste and village community. It can be said that the values in the "inner" sphere for the villagers were related not to nationalism but to the sense of belonging to such groups. Moreover, the language of liberal democracy and individualism which constituted the basis of the nationalist movement in institutional politics of the "outer" sphere has very little meaning for the villagers and can hardly be considered relevant in their conceptualisation. What is "outer" for the villagers are matters concerning the pursuit of material gains including, for example, participation in market-based commercial activities and cut-throat party politics.⁷⁾ While such activities are considered necessary in the modern era, it is also taken as inherently self-seeking and hence detrimental to the unity and harmony of the family, lineage, caste and community which constitute the core of their identity.⁸⁾

It is in this context that the control of women's sexuality is considered vital for the integrity and honour of the family, lineage, caste and community.⁹⁾ Women who represent the "home" were also made to represent the integrity and continuity of the people's traditional identity. This control is expressed and constituted through the gendering of space in the village and the conceptualisation of women's work. It is important to note here that the gendering of space of activity is related to the villager's ways of adaptation to modernity. By gendering the space of activity, they try to preserve their traditional identity at "home" though their women at the same time enjoy the fruits of modernity "outside" through the activities of men. The meaning of control of female sexuality in contemporary

village India should be understood in the context of such a semantic framework recreated in modern history.

3. WOMEN, HOME AND THE OUTSIDE

The division of home/outside (*ghara/bāhāra*) is very much prevalent in the practice and discourse in Orissa's villages today. *Ghara* refers to house, room, home, indoors and is primarily space occupied by women. *Bāhāra* may refer to outside of the house, or village depending on the context, where public meetings take place and where men often break restrictions regarding food and sex that are posed inside the village or the house. *Ghara loka* refer to family members or those familiar enough to be regarded as insiders. My husband and I were told that we were *ghara loka* by our host family because they said we stayed and ate with them. *Bāhāra loka* refers typically to people from outside the village. For instance, Bengali middlemen who came to the village to buy the cashew nuts at harvest time are referred to as *bāhāra loka*. Cashewnuts are a major cash crop in the area and an important source of income for many families. Selling cashewnuts is primarily a men's affair and belongs to the "outer" sphere of activity.¹⁰

There is another related distinction between the "back" and the "front" referred to as *bāḍi* and *dāṇḍa* respectively in local terminology. *Bāḍi* means typically the back yard or the area behind the house and *dāṇḍa* the area in front of the house. *Bāḍi paṭa* is the foot path linking houses or leading to a nearby pond through the back way, whereas *dāṇḍa paṭa* is the main street in front of the houses. An outsider to the village, such as someone buying the harvested cashewnuts passes along the main street in the front part of the houses and he will not know the back routes. Men go to the nearby pond via the "front route" to bathe in the morning but women, particularly married women in their husband's village, always go via the "back routes." Men, children and old widows sit on the terrace of their houses facing the "front" to relax. Visitors who are not relatives and are from outside the village (and are hence considered as *bāhāra loka*) are first seated on mats on the terrace, so in this sense *dāṇḍa* is associated with the "outside." There is a phrase (*dāṇḍaku sundara*) which literally means "beautiful for the front," that is to say, to do actions which looks good on the outside, or to outside eyes.

Married women in their husbands' village seldom go out via the "front" of the house and their activities remain inside the house or in the back yard, that is to say, in the "home." They spend most of their time in the house, the courtyard or the back yard. *Ghara kāma* literally means "house work" and much of women's time is taken up by all kinds of work which includes cooking, cleaning, looking after cows, as well as the performance of rituals at certain times of the year in which women pray for the health and well-being of their husbands and children. The most important part of the house work seems to be cooking and feeding members of the family and this is extended to her feeding the husband's ancestors. Ancestors take the form of an earthen mound (*iśāna*) in the north-east corner of one



Plate 1. Married women preparing offerings for their husbands' ancestors during *śrāddha*.

room in the house. Also, small bones left after cremation are placed in an earthen pot and buried in the wall facing the back yard (*śubha*). Every full moon, new moon and *saṃkrānti* day, married women put a mixture of water, milk, rice and flowers on the *iśāna* and *śubha*. The ancestors (*baḍabaḍiā*) are said to take water (*pāṇi pāibā*) in this way and women also offer cooked food they prepare on special occasions such as *śrāddha*. Feeding the ancestors in this way is the duty of women who have married into the family and is not done by daughters of the line, married or unmarried.

Women's work, defined as "house work," thus involves maintaining and continuing the family line, the enduring aspect of life which may effectively be called "tradition" (*paramparā*, also meaning "line"). In order for women to successfully carry out their role, however, they must keep a strict control over their bodies. A married woman living in her husband's house, for instance, takes care to wash herself properly after she goes to the toilet because, she says, if she does not do so the ancestors will not accept water. She also says she does not eat eggs or chicken for the same reason, whereas men eat these items and do not wash after urinating. Whether or not ancestors "take water" is up to the women's behaviour and if ancestors do not do so the house is said to be doomed, the fault being on the part of the women. The welfare and prosperity of the family line are thus thought to lie in the hands, or rather in the bodies, of its women.

Married women who are held responsible for feeding the family and ancestors are those whose husbands are alive (*ahya*) and whose sons are not yet married. These women regard bearing children, feeding the members of the family and venerating the ancestors as their major duties. When their sons get married and

new brides come to live with them the tasks are handed over to the daughters-in-law. In this way, married women whose husbands are alive (and who are also mothers or mothers-to-be) play particularly important roles in the "home" which, as I have mentioned above, is the selected site for the manifestation of the enduring aspect of identity in the village setting since it is where the family line is continued and maintained. The spatial containment of women and control over their bodies is crucial for this purpose and this control begins at the onset of a girl's puberty, that is to say on the occasion of her first menstruation, when the distinction between the "home" and the "outside" is clearly played out and the girl is made to learn how to control her body. Before dealing with the ritual process of first menstruation, however, let us look at notions of womanhood related to first menstruation and female sexuality in the wider cultural context.

4. SEMANTICS OF FIRST MENSTRUATION AND THE MENSTRUATION OF MOTHER EARTH

A girl's first menstruation indicates her sexual maturity, marking her transition from being an asexual child to a sexually mature woman. Menstruation is taken to be a sign of female sexual power, indicating the reproductive capacity of the woman. This is because menstrual blood is considered to be a discharge of excess blood in a woman which is the source of female fertility. According to folk belief, a child is produced by mixing the man's seed (*bīrjya*) and women's vaginal secretion (*raja*) at the time of sexual intercourse. It is believed that the white bone of the child is made from the semen while the red flesh is produced from the secretion of the woman. The colour red is associated with the child's flesh and with the menstrual blood of women, while the white bone is associated with semen. Although the word *raja* in the context of sexual intercourse refers to the transparent vaginal secretion, the same word can also mean menstrual blood as in the context of *rajabatī* pointing to the occasion of first menstruation at the onset of puberty, and *rajaswalā* indicating the state of menstruation.¹¹ The word *raja* thus refers to the reproductive fluid of the woman, be it in the form of blood or vaginal secretion. Another important context in which the term *raja* designates menstrual blood is that of *raja parba*, a festival celebrating the "menstruation" of the earth.

Raja parba (*raja* festival; often referred to simply as *raja*) is one of the major festivals in Orissa which takes place each year in on the last day in the month of Jyēṣṭha and the first three days in the month of Āṣāḍha (if the *saṃkrānti* day is counted as the first day of the month), just before the rainy season.¹² The earth is often referred to as the "mother earth" (*pr̥thibī mā*) and in an Oriya village, where agricultural production is the basis of subsistence economy, analogies are drawn between the productive capacities of the earth and the human womb. The oft noted "seed and earth" symbolism (DUBE 1986; FRUZZETTI and ÖSTÖR 1984) is also found here and, accordingly, significant parallels can be observed between stages in a woman's life course and the annual cycle of the earth. Just as a woman



Plate 2. A married woman preparing for *māṇa basā* worship in her husband's house.

experiences her first menstruation, marriage and pregnancy, the mother earth goes through the same stages. In Orissa, the earth's pregnancy is celebrated on *garbhaṇā samkrānti* (pregnancy *samkrānti*) in the month of Kārttika, and celebration of the birth of its fruits take place during *māṇa basā* in the harvest season of Mārgaśīra. Mother earth is said to menstruate during the four days of *raja parba* and all goddesses in the village are said to do so too during the period of this festival. Women, young unmarried girls in particular, look forward to *raja parba*.

The festival takes place over four days, but excitement starts some days before the festival actually begins, as the walls of houses are cleaned, agricultural tools, vehicles and kitchen utensils are washed and polished. One day before the festival, grams are ground (*baṭā*) for pancakes (*chakuli piṭhā*) to be eaten during the festival. On the first day of the festival, called First *Raja* (*pahili raja*), women and girls get up before sunrise, bathe and wash their hair, put on brand new clothes and decorate themselves with make-up. After that they do not wash their hair until the fourth day, just as they do not do so during their periods. They perform *pūjā* to family gods and ancestors (*isāna*), the cremated remains of late parents (*śubha*), doors, vehicles, kitchen utensils such as the stone grinder (*silo* and *puā*) and pounder (*ḍhimki*), and agricultural tools such as the bullock cart (*śagaḍa*) and harrow (*mai*) by offering raw rice (*aruā chāula*), milk, flour, pieces of coconut, pancake and fruit, and smearing dots of sandal wood paste (*chandana*), red paste (*sindura*) and black paste (*kajala*).¹³ The second day is called *raja samkrānti* and women draw a line around the wall of the house with either chalk (*kālī*) or cow dung (*gobara*) to form a closed circle (*bandanī*) which is said to prevent any unwelcome things such as

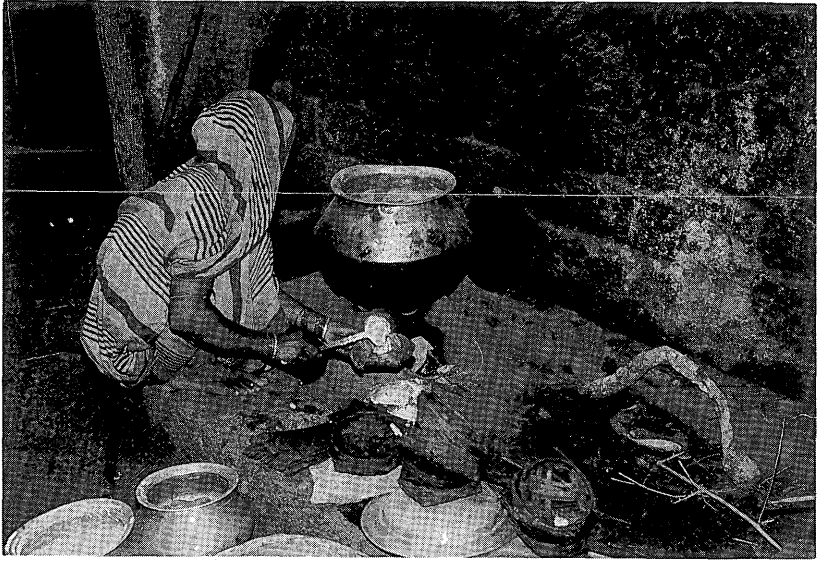


Plate 3. A married woman preparing cakes (*pitha*) on the hearth.

tigers and snakes from entering the house. Women eat only uncooked food (*jaḷakhiā*) on this day, wishing the welfare of the family. The third day is called Burning Earth (*bhuī dahana*), when the earth is said to become red with heat. This heat does not lead to fertility and any seeds sown on this day are believed to burn up. Excessive heat indicates the uncontrolled power of the earth. On the fourth day, variously called *bāsumatī snān*, *bāsumatī gādhua* (bathing of earth), or Mahā Lakṣmī *buḍa* (bathing of goddess Lakṣmī), it is said to rain for the earth to cool down and purify herself. Items on which *pūjā* was performed on the first day are given a ritual bath and a mixture of milk and rice are poured on them and red paste smeared. After this day, the earth is regarded as ready for sowing.

Raja is an occasion for everyone to rest and make merry. The festival celebrates the “mother earth” reaching her maturity and her creative fertile power that enables seeds sown in fields to grow and multiply. During the festival itself, all agricultural activities must come to a halt, as the “mother earth” is said to be taking rest during her menstrual period, just as kitchen utensils and vehicles, which are considered female, rest for four days. These four days are festive days particularly for young girls who do no household work during *raja*. They spend their time singing, playing on swings and are invited to eat in their neighbours’ houses during the day. Girls who have had their first menstruation and women who have not reached menopause are not supposed to bring water, cut vegetables or grind spices.

There are many parallels between the earth’s condition in *raja parba* and a girl’s condition during her first menstruation. There are also same behavioural restrictions for the women and girls, for instance, who are not to eat after sunset. Central to both is the celebration of female sexual power, *śakti*. *Śakti* as the

dynamic aspect of divinity is conceived and represented in the form of goddesses in Hindu mythology. As has been often pointed out, there are various forms of goddesses representing different aspects of *śakti* (ERNDL 1994; KINSLEY 1986). At the village level, there are tutelary goddesses who are held to be responsible for the welfare of the region. *Śakti* in itself is an ambivalent form of power which may bring, in its different manifestations, both destruction and prosperity. Hence people pray to and worship goddesses for their mercy and protection so that *śakti* may bring about fertility and auspiciousness to the devotees.

Śakti is conceptualised as being related to heat. The girl who has started her first menstruation is confined inside a room. She is not to be seen by men and boys and restriction is placed on her meal times and times she can go to toilet. This is interpreted by the villagers as being due to the girl's excessive heat, that is, the accumulated *śakti* of the girl. It is interesting to note that smallpox and any other poxes and infectious diseases such as chicken pox, measles etc. are also due to the "heat" of a goddess (*thākrāṇī*), typically of Śītaḷa. People pray to the goddess so that she may cool down and the disease be cured. There is an interesting parallel between the condition of the menstruating girl and that of the goddesses which are both considered to shed excessive heat that is hazardous to society and thus must be cooled down. The third day of the *raja* festival is called "Burning Earth" because of the excessive heat of the mother earth. Heat here is an idiom of female power that is destructive and requires cooling down. Only when it is cooled down does it become the source of fertility and well being.

In spite of such similarities, there are certain crucial differences between the menstrual condition of the goddess and that of human women (TANAKA 1996). Women who are actually menstruating during *raja* are not allowed to celebrate with others and must refrain from eating rice products. The menstruation of human women is considered polluting even at the festival celebrating the earth's menstruation. The earth's fertile power as manifested during *raja* is not an object of control but rather that of worship and respect, whereas women's sexual power must be closely controlled. This difference may also be seen in the way excess heat is cooled down. While goddesses are worshipped and offered cooling drinks and food at the breaking of pox, and the earth (and the various forms of the goddess) offered *pūjā* and bathed during *raja*, the girl on the first menstruation is physically confined and put under the direct command of the elder women whose orders must be obeyed for the girl to be cooled down and avoid being socially hazardous.

Whereas the *śakti* of the mother earth and other goddesses is venerated, the appearance of a girl's sexual power at puberty is characterised by physical confinement and control. Analysis of the ritual process of first menstruation indicates that female sexual power, *śakti*, is controlled and transformed from ambiguous and potentially dangerous power to a benevolent and potentially fertile one. In this process the girl is first made an object of control and then transformed into a subject who is responsible for guarding customs and rules.

5. THE RITUAL PROCESS OF FIRST MENSTRUATION

1) Hiding in a Room for Three Days

When a girl finds she has started her first periods, she runs straight back to her house and tells a woman in the house who shuts her up in a room.¹⁴⁾ This is usually the same room as that used for delivering babies. It is the room normally used for the women's work, often where a *dhimki* (a rice pounding device) is placed. Women, especially before the introduction of electric mills in villages, used to spend a long time in such a room to pound rice. Women in the neighbourhood come to know what has happened as the girl's mother sings and cries (*khāndaṇā*) in the back yard, mourning the fact that time has come for the daughter to get married and go away. The back yards (*bādi*) of houses in a neighbourhood thus function as a locus of an information network for women. The importance of the back yards as characteristically women's space as opposed to the front street (*daṇḍa*) for men and "outsiders" has been already mentioned.

The neighbouring women send gifts of food (usually snacks and sweets) through their children and the girl's friends come to visit her with gifts of food, ornaments and cosmetics. News is also sent to her mother's brother's house that she has started her first period, which is also a message for the relatives to start looking for a good match for her. Usually, a girl's match is found through the alliance networks of in-laws, the aggregate of which constitutes the endogamous unit or *jāti* in the narrow sense of the term. The girl is given gifts of food, clothes and ornaments from the mother's brother's side. She is likely to be presented with a sari, which is considered to be the appropriate dress for married women. Very small girls in Oriya villages today wear *phuroka* (from the English "frock") which refers to the western-style short dress and older unmarried girls usually wear what they call *daresa* (from the English word "dress") which is the North Indian style salwar kameez or "maxi" (short sleeved ankle length dress). Marriageable girls may also wear saris. However, it is considered inappropriate for a married woman to wear a dress and she is expected always to wear a sari, which may be interpreted as the sign that she is conforming to the social norm as a "good" woman.

The girl "hides" (*luchibā*) behind closed doors until morning of the fourth day and is not to be seen by men and boys, who are said to break out in fever or boils at the sight of her. The girl may be seen by other women and girls but is treated as in an "untouchable" (*achhuā*) state by them and if touched by her the clothes worn by women and girls must be given to a washerwoman to keep. The girl's mother is supposed to have as little to do with her as possible during her confinement and other married women of the house, such as the girl's brother's wife and father's brother's wife, keep a close eye on her and take care that she remains in the room behind closed doors, eating the right things at the right times. The girl is forbidden to eat after sunset and can only leave the room after dark to go to the toilet.

2) Secret Ritual on the Fourth Morning

In the early morning of the fourth day, seven married women whose husbands are alive (*ahya*) gather in front of the room where the girl is hiding and take her to a pond to bathe. It is only women in this category who are permitted to take full part in the bathing and if a pre-pubertal girl participates in the bathing part of the ritual, she is said to get fever. A post-pubertal unmarried girl may go with them but can only watch and not participate. At the pond the women and the girl rub their bodies with turmeric and oil and bathe. After bathing, the girl throws a small stone behind her while facing away from the pond.¹⁵⁾ She strips off all her clothes and ornaments, puts them in a basket with money, rice and turmeric. She eats a little salt, wears eye black on her eyes, forehead and head, then hides the basket in a grove nearby for the washerwoman, who has been informed beforehand to collect the basket and its contents in the morning to keep. She then puts on new clothes and goes back with the women to the room where she has been hiding. They take care not to be seen by men and boys. The girl goes back into the room and decorates her feet with red dye (*alatā*). The seven women put *alatā* on their feet, vermilion in the parting of their hair and draw a dot with it on their forehead (*sindura tapā*) and wear black eye cosmetic (*kajala*). These decorations are used in particular by married women whose husbands are alive on auspicious occasions such as marriages, festivals and fasts (*osā, brata*). The women return to their houses while it is still dark.

3) The Return as a Woman

In the morning after dawn, a small quantity of raw rice is collected from seven neighbouring houses and cooked into a sweet rice pudding (*khiri*). This is served to seven small children on seven eggplant leaves in the room where the menstruating girl had been hiding. The girl seats one of the children, a boy, on her lap and feeds him rice pudding from one of the leaves before eating some herself. It is said that eating sweet rice pudding on eggplant leaves with seven children and feeding a boy on her lap get rid of the girl's impurity and at the same time it is considered to be good for the children's health, particularly for the health of the boy who is fed on her lap.¹⁶⁾

After feeding the boy, the girl pays respect to her elders by bowing down at their feet. Bowing down to one's elders on appropriate occasions is an important etiquette, particularly for married women. Married women are expected to bow down at the feet of their elders on greeting them and also after performing fasts and household rituals. The girl's household then prepares a feast for relatives and neighbours. Care is taken that members of those households in the neighbourhood which sent the girl gifts during the period of her seclusion are called, or else the food cooked for the feast is sent to the households. Social relations expressed and constituted through such sharing of food indicate the importance of public recognition of the change in girl's status from a child to a marriageable woman.

4) Transformation in the Body-Person

Transformation in the girl's body is further expressed and constituted by the change in the social space she occupies. The girl who was allowed to move freely before puberty becomes restricted. She is not supposed to venture far outside the neighbourhood to bazaars and fields and is expected to stay at home to help with the housework. She is protected and kept an eye on by the male members of her household lest she has sexual relations with men before her marriage. In this way the girl is made ready for marriage as she is to be given away as a gift (*kanyā dāna*). Her family begins seriously to collect and set aside money, ornaments and household items for her to take to her husband's house. As the control of the women's sexuality is related to the notion of honour of the family, her body from then on is not only the concern of the girl herself but of the whole family. The honour of the family depends upon the integrity and firm control over the female body. It is a telling fact that a way of humiliating a man is to call him *śālā*, meaning "wife's brother," since this indicates that the speaker has had sexual relations with the sister of the man he is insulting, who has, by implication, failed to control the sexuality of his female family member.

The ritual process of first menstruation thus marks the threshold in the process of maturation of female sexuality and fertility. It points to a stage in the girl's life cycle when she can no longer be treated as a little girl who can freely play about but must be seen as an eligible female prepared for marriage, whose sexuality must be carefully controlled. In colloquial speech, a girl having her first menstruation is said to "have become big" (*baḍa helāṇī*).¹⁷ It is indicative that the occasion is also referred to as "staying at home" (*ghare rahibā*) and it was said of a girl who had started her first menstruation, "from now onwards she should stay at 'home' and not go 'outside' very much" (*ghare rahibā kathā, bēśt bāhāraku jibā kathā nuhē*).

6. CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITY IN THE RITUAL OF FIRST MENSTRUATION

Through physical confinement during the first three days, the girl learns that changes in her body are not only a personal concern of hers but of those around her, and moreover she discovers that she cannot do anything to control it by herself. She finds herself as a potential threat to the welfare of society for the first time and experiences that she can only bring her own body and *śakti* under control by submitting herself to elder women, who are married and are usually mothers. The secret ritual on the fourth morning, however humiliating it might be for the girl, is a means by which she can escape from being socially hazardous. She does not know about the ritual procedures beforehand, since girls before puberty are not allowed to see the ritual bathing. She is thus the only one at the pond who does not know what to do.

I was impressed to observe that a girl, whom I had always seen as answering

back the elder women in the house, concentrated on this occasion only on doing what she was told to do quickly and correctly and awaited for the next order. She even stripped off all her clothes without hesitation in front of others when she was ordered. It was probably the first and last time in her life to be totally naked in the presence of other people. There is a strict restriction against being naked even when women bathe (LESLIE 1995: 88) or make love and it is considered inauspicious to be totally naked. Small babies, who otherwise go around without much clothing, are given bracelets, chains or amulets to wear and are not totally naked in that sense, but the girl in the first menstruation ritual takes off all her jewellery too. The symbolic meaning of nakedness here may be interpreted as death and regeneration of the initiate, marking the change of status.¹⁸⁾ It should be also noted that it is an act of total submission on the part of the girl to the authority of the adult women. It must be an experience of humiliation, an experience of violence in some sense, to show her naked body to others, but she has to endure and succumb to it in order to achieve her adult status and to control her *sakti*.

The remains of her old self represented by her old clothes are left behind as she is reborn as an adult woman. It must be a relief for her to be back in society as her *sakti* is publicly demonstrated as beneficial when she feeds a boy on her lap. She learns what is expected of her through the ritual procedures. She bows down to the family elders, enacting her role as an adult woman who knows her place and the behaviour befitting her. The girl hence emerges from the ritual experience as a subject in the sense of being subject to the conditions of being an adult woman and at the same time a subject with a distinct female identity.

The construction and celebration of female identity is an important aspect of the ritual process of first menstruation. It is crucial that the whole affair is managed independently by women. Women are the only agents/subjects of action in the ritual process. Men are not allowed to participate, and moreover not meant to know anything about the content of the ritual. The non-involvement of men is significant, since a girl's first menstruation is an occasion on which women's autonomy and their capability of controlling female reproductive power by themselves are ritually expressed and constituted. It may be said to be an occasion when a "community of women" becomes visible. The women who participate cooperate and together transform the personhood of the initiate from an asexual child to an eligible young woman with sexually reproductive power.

The ritual construction of women's autonomy through the creation of a community of women (and girls) is achieved in a context of negation of the mother-daughter relationship.¹⁹⁾ A girl's first menstruation is the beginning of the severing of ties with her mother, who has as little to do with the arrangement of her daughter's confinement as possible and sits crying in her songs that her daughter will soon marry and leave her family.²⁰⁾ This is similar to the mother's behaviour during her daughter's delivery, even when she comes to her natal house to give birth. This is said to be because the pains of childbirth will increase if her mother is present. It might be tempting to interpret this as the preponderance of the

patrilineal principle which places constraints against the involvement of a woman's mother in childbirth as a married woman is considered to belong to her husband's family. This kind of interpretation, however, does not account for the fact that a woman often goes back to her natal home for delivery.

The exclusion of the girl's mother suggests rather the importance of negating filial ties between the mother and daughter and asserting the superiority of the community of women over matters of filiation. What is important in the case of first menstruation is the symbolic creation of a community of women which is not based strictly on ties of kinship. The married women who act as guides and represent examples to be followed are not consanguines for the girl since they have married into the girl's village from elsewhere. Hence the community of women into which the girl is initiated is not based on blood relationship but rather on the fact of being of the same gender. The ritual of feeding children signifies the potential motherhood of the girl. The fact that the children who are fed are from the neighbourhood and not necessarily only from the girl's family also points to the idea that the "community of women" is represented as the mother not of a particular family but of the whole community.

Bloch, in his interpretation of symbolism in rituals among the Merina of Madagascar, argues that "specific filiation" (BLOCH 1982: 217) represented by "mothers and sexually active women" (*ibid.*: 218) is denied and the deme (localised kin group), that is to say the community, is represented as the eternal source of life. He equates the denial of filiation and motherhood with the negation of sexually active women and female sexual powers, but in the case of the first menstruation ritual described here, even though filiation or a specific mother-daughter tie is denied, motherhood as a whole and female sexual powers are celebrated.

Through the analysis of the first menstruation ritual, we come to understand that the process of transformation of the *śakti* and personhood of the girl is also about the initiation of the girl into the community of women. The married women whose husbands are alive, fully representing the value of womanhood, guide the girl to embody the virtue of an adult women, which entails the control of her sexuality. Women as a group here succeed in controlling the girl's *śakti* on their own and celebrate the value of motherhood that they represent. From the point of view of motherhood, men are seen as children of women. The representation of the girl as a potential mother of a boy connotes that the "community of men" are the sons of the "community of women." Manhood is encompassed here under the motherhood of women. It should be noted that this is not about particular filial ties but about the community of men as a whole being born from the community of women. Here, then, we can see one aspect of womanhood equated with the "mother goddess" which "can be interpreted as expressing ideas of power, autonomy and primacy in the widest sense of the term." The mother goddess "conveys not so much the idea of physical motherhood but a world-view in which the creative power of femininity is central" (GANESH 1990: WS58).

However, on the other hand, it is important to note that the celebration of the

creative power of femininity is only possible, as it can be seen in the process of the first menstruation ritual, after carefully controlling female power and defining the space of womanhood. This brings us to the place of gender hierarchy in the ritual.²¹⁾

It is significant that it is only married women whose husbands are alive who are fully eligible as the guides for the initiate. They are the women who fully embody and represent the fertile aspect of female power and thus the value of auspiciousness. Seven married women whose husbands are alive are considered auspicious beings whose productive ability or *śakti* is controlled and beneficial. They are the women who put red powder at the parting of hair as the symbol of their auspicious marital status. In this way, although the ritual process of first menstruation is managed by women alone and the autonomous capacity of a community of women to control their sexuality is emphasised, the role of seven married women whose husbands are alive as the guide and ideal suggest that female power can only be controlled in the final instance through union with the male. The dangerous power of a woman menstruating for the first time can only be dealt with initially by women who have already controlled their own *śakti* through marriage.

In fact, the construction of a gender hierarchy in the ritual process may be seen right from the start as the girl is hidden out of sight of men and boys. She is introduced to the world where gender division is of utmost importance and it is significant that the spatial distinction between the male and female spheres is played out here. The girl is confined to a room usually facing the back of the house, and she and the seven women take the back path to the pond to bathe on the morning of the fourth day. I have already mentioned that the space of the "back" is the space of women as opposed to the space of the "front."

The implication of gender hierarchy is also important when we reconsider the act of the girl feeding a boy on her lap on the fourth day. Although I have mentioned above that this act can be taken as an emphasis of the potential *motherhood* of the girl who has reached puberty and that her initiation into the community of women is celebrated, this may not directly lead to valorisation of the *femininity per se*. Whereas the sons or the males can be seen to be dependent on the female fertility for their reproduction from one point of view, it can also be said from another point of view that the value of motherhood is dependent on a woman's capacity to produce sons. The mother-son relationship is emphasised here whereas the mother-daughter relationship is played down as the girl's mother is supposed to play a minor role in her daughter's first menstruation ritual. Here we see that the value of motherhood is defined in terms of "mother of sons" serving for the reproduction of the male world.

In this way, the ritual of first menstruation may be seen as a site of construction of women's subjectivity in which female creative power is celebrated by a community of women acting as autonomous subjects of action and at the same time women become subject to hierarchical relations based on gender difference.

7. SEMANTICS OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN CONTEMPORARY VILLAGE INDIA

Having considered the ritual process of first menstruation as a cultural symbolic site in which women's subjectivity is constructed, I would again stress that the meanings of womanhood and femininity represented therein are produced in a specific socio-historical environment and are not to be taken as part of an essential female identity. Women's subjectivity and their attitudes in preserving their value as women, then, should be taken into account in the context of contemporary village life.

As I have tried to argue, the ritual process of first menstruation first establishes the girl's body as an object of control. Her space of activity is defined in terms of gendered categories in order to protect not only the girl herself but those around her. I mentioned that the female/male distinction is represented spatially in terms of the division of home/outside in the village people's discursive framework. It is important that the ritual of first menstruation is colloquially called "to stay at home" (*ghare rahibā*). During the course of the ritual process, however, the girl is also constructed as a subject of action, an adult woman with a distinct female identity. The occasion marks the transformation in the girl's personhood from an asexual child to a "big girl" who is expected to know how to behave in the proper manner. An adult woman is required to know that her domain of activity is restricted to the home.

In the section dealing with women and discourses on tradition, I described how the gendered space of home/outside acquired a new significance in colonial and post-colonial history and how the home and its representative, women, came to be the place for safe-guarding tradition. Indeed in the village context in Orissa today, importance is placed on the home—the domain of activity represented by women—as where the enduring aspects of culture and identity are maintained in spite of changes outside, that is the domain of activity represented by men. It is in such a socio-historical environment that village women seem to have developed a *raison d'être* in behaving as disciplined adults who have control over themselves and subjects of action responsible for maintaining the family honour and tradition against changes in the outside world.

In this connection, it is interesting that the ritual of first menstruation was expressed by the girl and women who took part as the being a norm (*niyama*) and something that they have been doing from the past (*āgaru jāhā āme karuthilu*) in the village. The control of female sexuality is thus set in the language of norms for maintaining family honour and order in the village in ways that are said to have been the case in the past and this is in turn set in contrast to criticism regarding "the dark age" (*kali juga*) of the modern (*ādhunika*) when the morals and the norms of society are breaking down. Village people often gossip and at the same time lament how the people of younger generation are becoming corrupted nowadays (*ājikāli*). Married women in particular like to comment on the deplorable state of today's

youth and gossip about “loose” women, usually young women who sleep with men before marriage.

There is much talk about the present age losing all the good traditional morals and women frequently say that today pre-marital girls walk around in the bazaar, talk and mess around with boys in school and some even get themselves pregnant, killing the baby to hide the fact and so on. No doubt such accounts are exaggerated and sensationalised to some extent to satisfy women’s curiosity and appetite for gossip but nevertheless they are regarded with disgust and contempt. Interestingly, the women almost always either add a comment that such questionable young women have no father or elder brothers living with them or remark on the brothers’ angry reaction to the incidents. It is considered quite normal for wives to be afraid of their husbands and for sisters to be afraid of their brothers, and in fact it even seems to be thought of almost as a virtue to do so. This is an important indication of the presence of gender hierarchy in people’s lives and the widespread idea that gender hierarchy is necessary for controlling female sexuality.

Colleges and schools are regarded with suspicion by older women and are said to be places where boys and girls mix freely. Even mothers in their late twenties and early thirties who have gone through primary education themselves say that they would not allow their daughters to go to college unless it is inside the village. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to go on to further education outside and parents seem very conscious of the fact that in today’s world one must be educated to get anywhere in life. Girls too are sent to school, but their parents’ concern seems to lie in the fact that more education means less dowry and better grooms for their daughters. College level education is considered unnecessary for the girls since it is not considered fit for a bride to be more educated than the groom and besides the girl’s conformity to the traditional norm would be suspect if she had been to college where boys and girls often mingle. Education is considered to be a modern phenomenon and going to school is one of the responses by the village people to the changes in the outside world. The villagers’ attitude towards education is, however, ambivalent. Although most village people recognise the need for the children to get educated, they also relate the loss of fear (*bhaya*) and respect (*sammāna*) with education. They seem to think that the more people get educated, the more they will be modern and lose respect towards the traditional norms.

In the context of this kind of evaluation of the “modern age” by the village people, the control of women’s sexuality is an important condition for the maintenance of their “tradition.” It seems no wonder then that the aspect of control related to obedience towards hierarchy and the norm is emphasised in the modern period regarding female sexuality rather than the aspect of celebration of women’s fertile powers. The ritual of first menstruation then, from this perspective, can be seen as a site where the female body is disciplined as a subject through the control of sexuality and confining the space of activity in order to

maintain traditional order and identity.²²⁾

There is no doubt, on the other hand, that the field of activity for village women in India today is expanding. It is becoming increasingly taken for granted that girls go through primary education and many go on to higher education. Some, though still very few, have jobs. However, it is precisely because of such changes in circumstances that being an adult woman has come to mean being a self-conscious subject of action in the sphere of the "home" who carries out her "house work," respects the social hierarchy and acts in accordance with the norms regarding the control of her sexuality. A woman who leaves the house unkempt, does not cook properly or sleeps too much or is seen too often in the front area of houses, is said to have no fear (*bhaya*) towards her husband. The absence of male authority is thought to be the cause of laziness and promiscuity in women. It is in such a context that gender hierarchy is stressed and the necessity of having fear and respect towards authority, male authority in particular, is emphasised in order for women to carry out their proper duties (*thik kāma*). Here we see the contemporary significance of the need to control women and their sexuality.

It is significant that the aspect of control is intimately connected to the celebration of women's fertile powers in the ritual of first menstruation. Women express their autonomy through their ability to bring under control the dangerous power of the menarchal girl amongst themselves and the girl is taught how to control her sexuality henceforth by the "community of women" during the ritual process. It is this very aspect of control, however, that binds women to the hierarchy of gender relations. Although they are the subject in so far as they impose control over themselves, they are also seen as the object of control by men from the point of view of gender hierarchy as it is the male world they are reproducing.

In this way, in spite of the fact that the ritual process of first menstruation contains within it the celebratory aspects of female reproductive powers, which form an important part of the cosmology and culture as can be seen in the festival celebrating the menstruation of mother earth, the value of womanhood has come to be intimately associated with gender as hierarchical relation in the socio-historical setting of the modern period and the aspect of control plays a pivotal role in this respect. We see this at work in the case of the contemporary village as the girl emerges from the ritual process of first menstruation as a subject who is responsible for the maintenance of proper behaviour through self-control which simultaneously means that she is subject to the hierarchy of gender relations.

8. CONCLUSION

Symbolic analysis of the ritual of first menstruation in Orissa shows that the construction of female subjectivity in the ritual process involves representation of two aspects of femininity. On the one hand, there is an image of autonomous women who are capable of controlling their sexuality on their own. The creative

power of women as mothers is much celebrated from this point of view. On the other hand, there is an image of women whose existence is meaningful only in their relationship with men. From this perspective, women are considered most auspicious in their married state and their fertile power is considered worthwhile for the reproduction of sons.

These two aspects of femininity may be seen to correspond to the two previous trends in the studies of Indian women, one emphasising the autonomous identity and value of womanhood and the other emphasising the inequality of gender relations. These two aspects and trends, as I hinted in the Introduction, should be combined since there is some truth in both. It is important to note that the subjectivity of women symbolically constructed in the ritual of first menstruation contains both the aspect of being autonomous subject with its distinct value and identity and also that of being subject to a gender hierarchy. It is precisely this kind of overdetermined character and shifts in the ontological semantics of female subjectivity that we must pay attention to in order to understand the complexity of the position of women in Indian society.

The shifts at the symbolic level in the semantics of female subjectivity represented in the ritual process of first menstruation, however, have come to be restricted in the socio-historical context of modernity as the aspects of control of female sexuality and gender hierarchy are emphasised. We have tried to say that this is related to the formation of a hegemonic discourse that women are the repositories of "tradition" in the colonial and post-colonial periods and that this discursive framework is not something that is forced upon women by men, but part of a complex ongoing historical process whereby Indian people, both men and women, negotiate their agency and identity in response to challenges from outside. One of the people's responses to the "modern age" has been to associate the maintenance of their "tradition" with the control of female sexuality and of women's activities in general.

The aspect of control is a crucial point in the oscillation of women's subjectivity. An analysis of the symbolism of first menstruation suggests that the female body is disciplined through the ritual process into a subject capable of self-control. Moreover, in discourse about women's good and bad behaviour, the necessity of self-control in confining their activities to the home and controlling their sexuality is repeatedly stressed. From this point of view, women's autonomy as subjects stems from their ability to control and discipline themselves. However, it should be noted that failure to do so is attributed not only to the women themselves but also to the men of their household who are responsible for keeping their wives, sisters, daughters (and sometimes even mothers) under strict surveillance and control and in this sense women are subject to a gender hierarchy. In order to control their sexuality women are thought ideally to be fearful and respectful towards their husbands and brothers. In this way, women are indeed subjects in the maintenance of tradition and identity of their community, but at the same time, this very assertion makes them subject to control by men whose claim is the

protection and preservation of tradition and identity.

Many recent anthropological works have concentrated on discovering the aspects of women's autonomous values and unique points of view (MARGLIN 1985; RAHEJA and GOLD 1994). These studies are important since they deal with the representation of values and points of view of women in a culture that have hitherto been suppressed and limited to the perspective of gender hierarchy. Such endeavours are also means by which women's "liberation" in India may be considered in terms of values inherent in the cultural environment in which Indian women find themselves without forcing upon them values represented by the West. But the discovery of the uniqueness of women's values is not enough. We need to consider the way in which the gender hierarchy has come to be emphasised and how this developed into a hegemonic discourse under specific socio-historical conditions. Unless we do so we will not be able to understand why it is that the representation of women's autonomous values is prevented and how to overcome this kind of situation.

On the other hand, those who have mainly dealt with the socio-economic inequality between men and women should take note of the fact that gender hierarchy cannot be reduced to substantial inequalities in the allocation of socio-economic resources and that it is part of the semantic framework which has been constructed in the process of people's pursuit of identity and meaning. In this process of search for values, a certain aspect of gender relations, namely the hierarchical aspect that stresses the dependence of women on men, has come to gain particular significance in the modern period. Hence there is a need to keep in mind the cultural values attached to gender difference and the historical specific nature of representation of gender relations.

In order to understand the complexities of women's subjectivity, we need to combine the semantic and socio-economic approaches and take historical changes into further account in an attempt to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of gender in culture, politics and history.

NOTES

- 1) Fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted from April 1991 to November 1992 among women of Khaṇḍāyāt (Khandayat) caste in the village of Garh Manitri, Khurda district, Orissa. I would like to thank the people of Garh Manitri for their hospitality, especially Mr. Laxmidhar Sundaray and his family, and the women and girls who allowed me to observe their puberty rituals. This paper is part of a research project conducted with the aid of a Japanese Ministry of Education research grant for science (effective from April 1st 1995 to March 31st 1996) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Research Fellowship for Young Scientists (effective from April 1st 1995 to March 31st 1997), for which I am very grateful. I would like to thank those who provided me with valuable insights on earlier versions of this paper which were presented in a seminar organised by Professor S. Einoo at the Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo in November 1994, a seminar for graduate students at the

Department of Cultural Anthropology, University of Tokyo in April 1995 and an informal workshop on interdisciplinary approaches to gender at the University of Tokyo in July 1995. I am also very grateful to Professor M. Tanaka for his comments and suggestions and for all his kind help.

- 2) FOUCAULT 1978. Kumar discusses extensively the possibilities of a women as subjects in South Asian contexts (KUMAR 1994).
- 3) Kapadia argues in her work on untouchable women of Tamilnadu that "disjunction is emerging between Tamil ritual discourses and everyday practices" and that "the proclamation of female power in the puberty rites jars sharply with the reality of women's new insecurity" due to changes in marriage patterns leading to the devaluation of women (KAPADIA 1995: 123). I would say, however, that rather than there being a disjunction between ritual and its everyday context, the ritual symbolism contains within it both the aspect of celebration of women's fertile powers and that of their subjugation, and the socio-historical conditions work to fix the meaning in a certain direction.
- 4) See MOORE 1994 for the importance of looking at gender difference in the context of cultural theories on social difference.
- 5) Nationalistic discourse that women are upholders of tradition in India may also be found today in the cultural politics at the national level. For instance, the image of the "new Indian woman" in the media and official discourse shows how an urban middle-class woman can be "modern" in the sense of being educated and socially aware and at the same time "traditional" by being religious and playing the role of ideal mother and wife (SUNDER RAJAN 1993). Consumer culture among the upper and middle classes in India today is saturated with play on images of "tradition," "modernity" and "femininity" and this is well illustrated by Nag's analysis of the Bengali sari industry in which she clearly states that the "image of tradition...was constructed by the nationalist ideology as essentially connected with the image of a stable female figure, one that protects the spiritual sanctity of the home from the alien influences of the materialism of the West" (NAG 1991: 111-112).
- 6) This search for enduring values and identity may be said to be one form of resistance. It is significant that the "home" is selected as the site for protection of tradition. hooks also points out the importance of "home-place" as a site of resistance: "when a people no longer have the space to construct a homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance" (bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Boston: South End, 1990, p.42, quoted in VISWESWARAN 1996: 112).
- 7) The village people's distinction between the "inner" and "outer" with regards to the relationship between women and village politics has been dealt with in my paper on village politics and women (TOKITA-TANABE 1996) where I discuss how women contribute substantially to the transformation and maintenance of interhousehold relations which constitute the basis of political groupings at the village level.
- 8) There is of course a complex history behind this in the case of the region where I conducted my fieldwork which I cannot go into in detail here; but, to put it simply, one of the reasons why the village people were significantly alienated from the nationalist movement of the elites was that they did not possess the necessary vocabulary for participating in the institutional politics of the period. Instead they developed a different kind of logic according to which institutional politics was labelled as degenerate and unworthy of their participation.
- 9) As van der Veer points out, the "honour of the family and, by extension, the nation

- depends on the integrity, modesty and submissiveness of the female body" (VAN DER VEER 1994: 85).
- 10) Men of the house sell the cashewnuts in bulk, but since the selling price fluctuates from day to day, whatever has been recently harvested is sometimes sold when the price is high. Although young married women who hardly have access to the *dāṇḍa* take little part in cash transactions, older women sell small amounts of cashewnuts and pocket some of the money while the men are not around.
 - 11) Leslie glosses "*rajaswalā*" as "full of impurity" (LESLIE 1995: 283), but the state of menstruation in the context of the first menstruation ritual has more positive connotations than negative.
 - 12) Accounts of this festival in Orissa can be found in PRESTON 1980: 16–17, MARGLIN 1985: 234–235, MARGLIN 1994 and BEHURA, N.R. 1963. References to a similar festival in Bengal, *ambuvāci*, is made in BHATTACHARYYA 1977: 8, BAGCHI 1990: WS66–7, and SAMANTA 1992: 59–61. Kāmākhyā temple in Guwahati, Assam, attracts many pilgrims during the festival of *ambuvāci*. Professor S. Einoo, Tokyo University, has kindly pointed out to me that textual references on *ambuvāci* include those in the *Devībhāgavat Purāṇa* (Bengal, 12th century) and the *Brahmāvaivārtha Purāṇa* (Bengal, 15th–16th century). Similarly, there are festivals celebrating the menses of rivers (see TANAKA 1996)
 - 13) In Brahman households, where they have idols of gods and goddesses as family gods (*iśāṇa*), the idol of Lakṣmī would be placed on a special table away from Nārāyaṇa, the consort god. Lakṣmī would be offered only uncooked offerings during the first three days. On the fourth day the idol of Lakṣmī is given a ritual bath (*snān*) and offered red paste, after which she is placed back next to Nārāyaṇa.
 - 14) There are many variations in procedure followed for first menstruation according to family, caste and village. For instance, Brahman girls are secluded for seven days. Details of the differences, however, cannot be dealt with in this paper.
 - 15) The throwing of the stone may be interpreted as an act to ward or cast off evil effects. Kapadia reports that in the puberty ritual among untouchables in Tamilnadu, the menarchal girl bathes in a river at the end of her seclusion and returns home "without looking back" (KAPADIA 1995: 100) lest evil spirits possess her. The vulnerability of girls to malevolent spirits and the evil eye during their first menstruation is pointed out by most accounts of puberty rituals, especially in South India and Sri Lanka (GOOD 1991; MCGILVRAY 1982; SUZUKI 1985; WINSLOW 1980).
 - 16) Women say that children of any sex will do, but in the three cases I observed, boys were chosen in spite of the fact that girls were also standing nearby and could have easily been picked. In the ritual of first menstruation for a Brahman girl, seven girls are fed and boys are not involved at all in the ritual. This may be said to be an expression of the autonomy of the female world, but it may equally be interpreted as a lack of significance of this ritual in social reproduction since Brahmans also give more weight to the birth of sons.
 - 17) This seems to be a common euphemism for referring to a girl's first menstruation (WINSLOW 1980: 607; MCGILVRAY 1982: 34; MARGLIN 1985: 73).
 - 18) Beidelman distinguishes between nakedness and nudity among the Nuer. He defines nakedness as "a state of being undressed which causes shame, disrespect, and harmful results in one's social surroundings" and nudity where no garment or ornament is worn in "liminal situations in which a person passes from one social status or state to another" (BEIDELMAN 1968: 114–115). Here I employ the term "naked" to refer to absence of

ornaments and/or clothing on the body without making any further distinction because the cultural significance of being with or without certain ornaments or clothing is too complex to be dealt with in this paper.

- 19) That is not to say that the girl severs relations with her mother's line. She maintains relations with her mother's brother's house, that is to say, her mother's natal house even after marriage.
- 20) According to Kapadia's account of puberty rituals among untouchables in Tamilnadu, the girl's mother must not notice the menstrual blood first nor take part in the bathing ceremony (KAPADIA 1995: 94). Similarly, Winslow says that among Muslims in Sri Lanka, the mother is not supposed to see her daughter's menstrual blood first (WINSLOW 1980: 611).
- 21) There is also a construction of hierarchy between women based on age. The hierarchical relationship between the girl and her elders is enacted at the end of her seclusion period as she bows down before them. I have also pointed out that the unconditional obedience of the girl towards the seven women who act as her guides is crucial for the transformation of the girl's body and personhood in the ritual process. It is important, however, to note that the language of this hierarchy is expressed in terms which extend beyond the age difference. That is to say, both age and gender hierarchy are expressed in the language of fear/respect (*bhaya*) and obedience (*mānibā*) in everyday circumstances. Fear and respect come hand in hand. I have seen a woman smack her baby niece and when the baby showed fear, she commented that it was good that the girl was afraid of (and was respectful towards) her. The same woman told me proudly that her house is kept in order and she works hard because she has fear/respect towards her husband. Respect and obedience are supposed to be shown not only by juniors towards their seniors, but also by wives towards their husbands and by sisters towards their brothers. The age hierarchy constructed and represented in the ritual process of first menstruation, then, is implicitly associated with gender hierarchy and probably even functions to strengthen it.
- 22) The confinement of women in the home is also a mark of their high caste status as far as the Khaṇḍāyāts in this village are concerned. Khaṇḍāyāt women value the fact that they stay at home whereas the untouchable Hāḍi women come round to sell baskets and work in the fields.

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