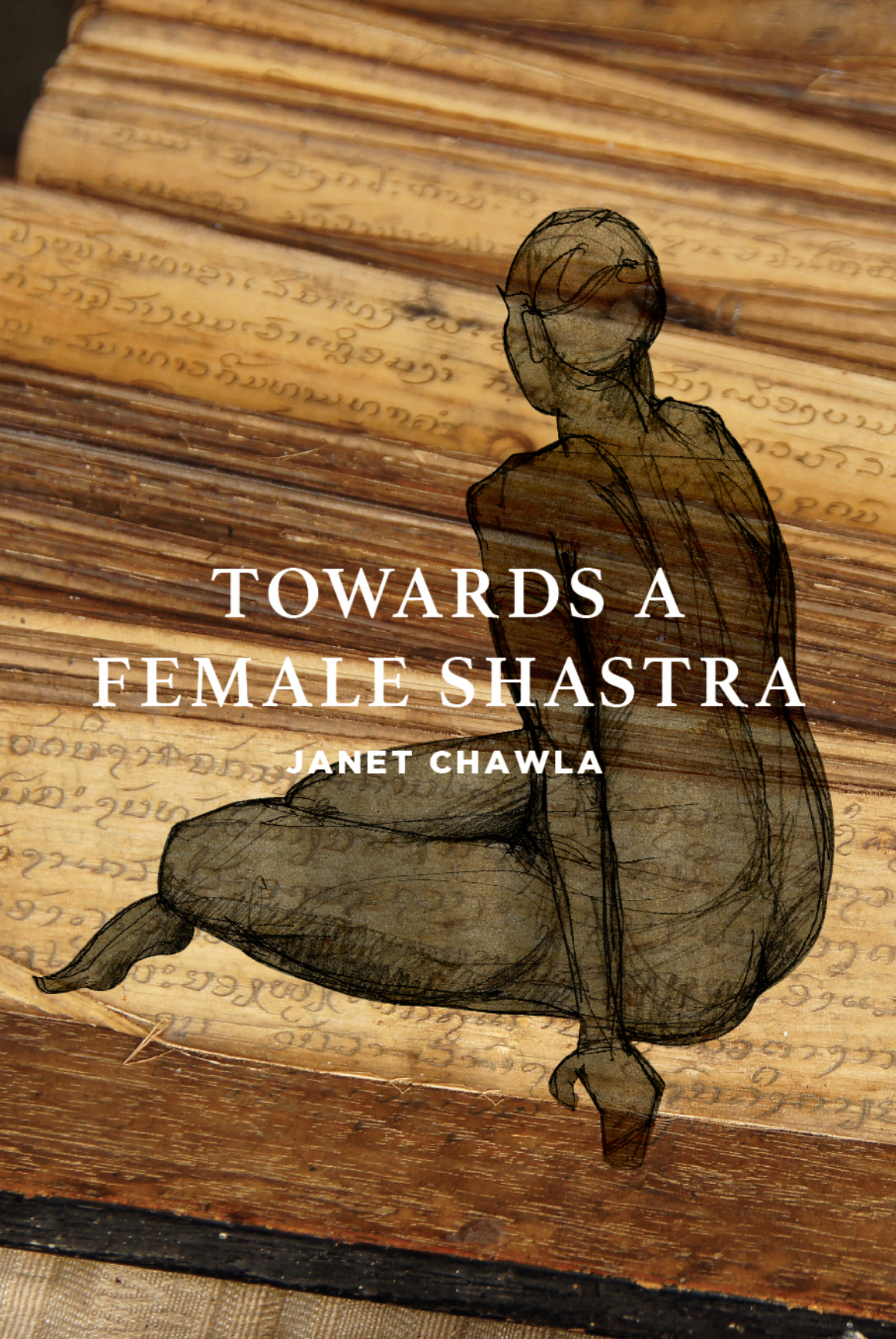

TOWARDS A
FEMALE SHASTRA
JANET CHAWLA

About the Author

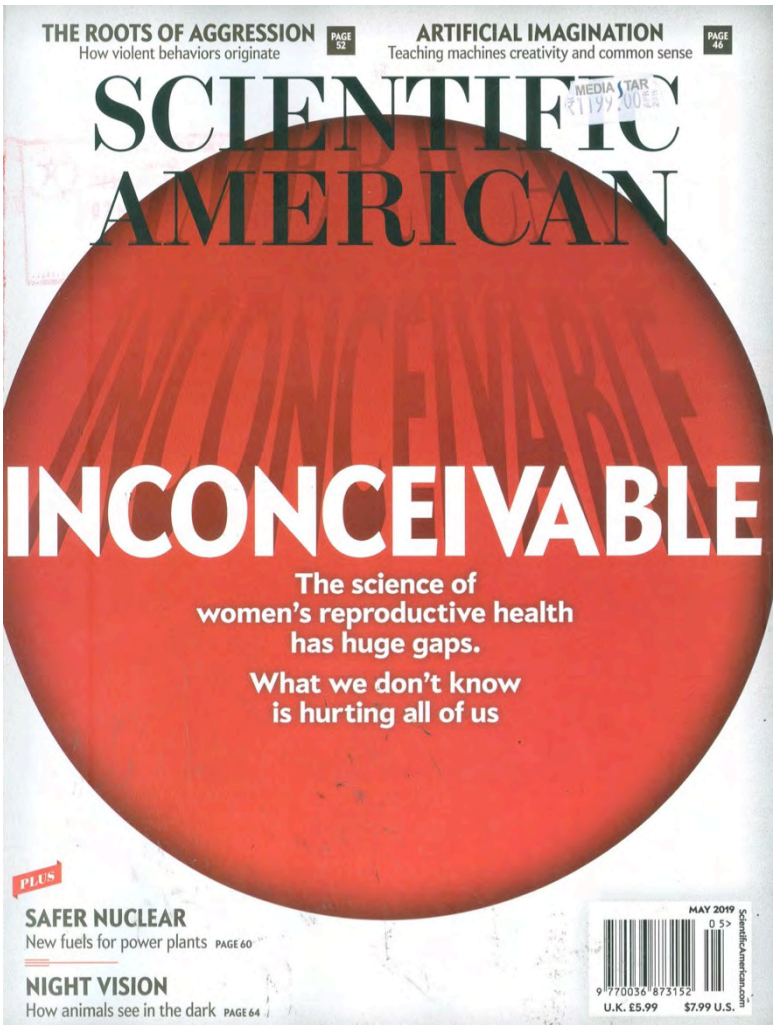
I am an insider/outsider... born in the United States but have lived, married, mothered and now grand-mothered in India. I have produced a film (Born at Home), contributed to countless books, co-founded Delhi Birth Network, executed a play and travelled to numerous parts of the Asian Subcontinent. I had already taught exercise classes for pregnant women in San Francisco and Oakland where I became sensitive to the fact that entering a room where a woman was laboring was like entering her body. In India, however, I became even more interested in birth and female bodies as well as scriptures and rituals.

A quest to discover what was right (not what was wrong as many international groups were doing) led me to recognize that I didn't want to import an 'inappropriate technology' rather an indigenous one. I set off on an investigative journey across the subcontinent with an almost obsessive curiosity on traditional birthing methods used by women of all classes and castes before the Brits arrived.

The English speaking and reading public both in India and abroad don't know much about traditional and women

centered rites. Wherever women's bodies are mentioned in a dominant male religious context, female bodily rites and practices are mostly excluded. This book is an amalgamation of what I have learned working with other Indian women who were also interested in learning from dais - not teaching them.

Towards a Female Shastra



The baby, just born in the small hut and still connected to the placenta via the umbilical cord, lies lifeless, not moving, not breathing. The traditional midwife (dai) picks up the newborn, rubs it—with no result. She then calmly calls for burning embers and a tava, places the placenta onto the hot tava and slowly it starts to pulsate and crackle. Heat, the heat of life, surges through the umbilical cord into the baby. She starts to move, make small sounds—and breathe. This scenario, unknown to most doctors, NGOs and public health professionals, has been repeated for centuries, perhaps millennia, throughout the Indian subcontinent. It may not always work to revive a newborn in trouble, but often it does.

lntroduction

There are a lot of misconceptions about India, its past and its heritage. Here I set about to demolish some of these shibboleths. Chief among them are notions of the body, generally and the female body specifically. Science defines our bodies these days, medical science. Neither is it scientific, nor is it medical. Rather technological and pharmaceutical would be a more accurate description.

In this book I am reclaiming a lore, a history, a way of perceiving that has been either lost or denigrated and that I consider valuable. I am a compiler, putting together fragments of books, fieldwork and interview, seminars, research, images, analyses. I am mucking about among in the dusty notes and boxes stuffed with precious bits of what I have learned in my 40 years in India. As the orthodox Shastra writers were compilers of knowledge and perspective, so am I—but from a woman's point of view.

Why a woman's Shastra? Shastra is a Sanskrit term used for written texts giving knowledge on a particular subject. Some interpreters and commentators focus on the 'rules' aspect—that these discourses are sacred and thus inviolable. Some focus on Shastra as a compendium displaying sophisticated Indian knowledge traditions. Various Shastras detail specialized areas

such as physics, chemistry, biology, dance and drama, architecture, economics or law.

For example Vastu Shastra is the science of construction or architecture which was originally meant for the building of temples. Vastu Shastra knowledge, along with its Chinese variant Feng Shui, has been in vogue in India in recent years for design of homes, apartments, factories and office buildings. These systems of thought situate buildings according to directional alignments of north, south and sunlight and water sources etc. thus drawing on the energies of the cosmos. Vastu includes concepts of the panch mahabhuta or five elements (earth, air, fire, water and ether). Some would call Vastu and Feng Shui, its Chinese equivalent, 'geomancy' or earth magic. Some with a more western 'scientific' orientation think of techniques which align energies of the earth and cosmos as 'superstition.' This idea of 'superstition' was often used by colonial powers and orientalist interpreters of Indian traditions to assert the superiority of western rationality and knowledge categories. Shastric composers were diverse authorities in their respective areas and were great organizers, arranging the elements of their subject and categorizing them extensively.

The problem is that women and those falling at the lower end of the caste spectrum were not involved in generating norms and

customs prescribed by the dharma shastra and often got defined, limited and exploited by common perceptions of these writings.

We can see some of these contradictions in 'the status of women' and gendered normative behaviour prescribed in the 'The Laws of Manu.' Feminists, in recent years, have often used the text below to indicate the misogyny of Shastric traditions.

"By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent." (The Laws of Manu V, 147, 148)

Questions then arise "Why is there a need for a woman's shastra now?" and "Haven't modern people realized that medical obstetrics, pharmaceuticals and technology are superior to the superstitions and primitive methods of the past?" And if this knowledge was so valuable why wasn't it recorded?

And the answers are quite simple. Among the ancients it was women who held special knowledge about the female body and birth and women didn't usually write shastras. Women, generally, and dais (or bais or suins—they go by many names in the different

regions of India) rarely wrote. And even if they did, they wouldn't have written about female knowledge because that was considered 'women's affairs' and certainly not for men or very young women. Yes, menstruation and birth were considered polluted and only women's business. But becoming public knowledge would have placed at risk the menstruating woman and the vulnerable mother-child dyad. Exposure risked nazar or evil eye, curse and jealousy, and release of demonic forces detrimental to all.

So unfortunately the uniquely Indian imaging of women's bodies and the creative power of baby-making is now becoming extinct. It is mostly inaccessible to middle and upper class women. Yes, old aunties and grandmothers may remember the dietary, herbal and other womanly ways of handling menstruation, pregnancy and birthing, but they are being silenced by the 'scientific' body knowledge of today. Medical doctors (gynaecologists, obstetricians, paediatricians) are the holders, carriers and dispensers of female body knowledge. Internet posting is dicey and certainly not where you can find the personal counsel of aunties, grandmothers and elderly dais keeping blogs and twittering. This 'secret' and special womanly heritage is endangered and remains the domain of poor women in the bastis of cities and the hutments of rural India. Because that is where women live who either don't have access to medical facilities

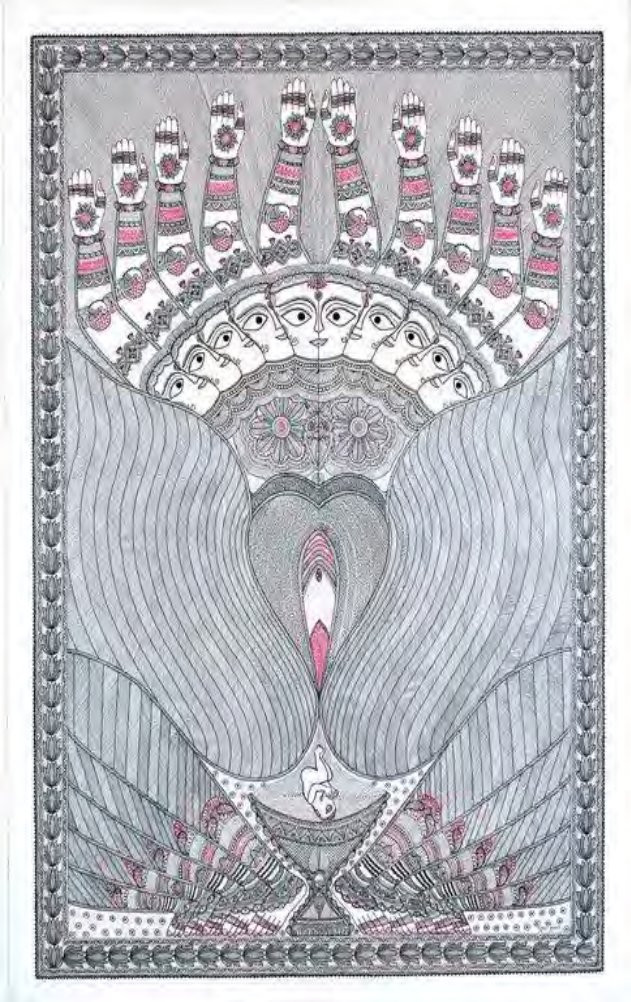
(when they really need them) or aren't convinced that they are the best places to give birth.

I have in a sense adopted Dais, the traditional midwives on the Indian subcontinent, as my gurus. Their birth traditions include amazing ritual and hands-on medical practices and I have researched them for 35 years learning from them, not 'teaching' them. I have pirouetted between models of childbirth from a woman-centered perspective over many years: the obstetrical model; 'natural childbirth' as it has evolved in reaction to over medicalization of birth; and indigenous south Asian traditions which are also in flux. I draw on these experiences and readings in this book. I also possess a sensibility informed by having lived in India for 40 years—socializing and travelling; living in a joint family and raising children and now grandchildren; teaching natural childbirth and researching; reading newspapers and watching television and films, moving through NGO and academic circles. All this has shaped my perspective.

And I return to the value of indigenous birth practices and body knowledge. Should this surprise us? Yoga, meditation and Ayurveda are being practiced globally. Birth knowledge and custom is part and parcel of the same sophisticated civilizational heritage.

Chapter 1

Yoni—Site of Power, Site of Mutilation



A Madhubani image of Yoni (from the Delhi Crafts Museum)

Germaine Greer once related an incident about a family planning advocate who was 'educating' village women in India, about their bodies. The educator went through her whole routine—explaining female reproduction by using a plastic pelvis with ovaries, uterus and a marble-egg that shuttled down a plastic fallopian tube. After the health worker's talk one assertive woman villager came up to her and said, "You may look like that inside your body, but we don't look like that inside our bodies." The embedded assumption of such educators or activists, and also the global health establishment, is that women don't know anything about their bodies.

Biomedicine now provides the body map of choice globally. Your liver is here; your thyroid is there, uterus, ovaries, prostate glands etc. And the doctors, accredited of course, are the high priests of this medicine. They are the 'professionals' who know how to handle troublesome parts, should they act up or break down. The problem with this biomedical model (in India the word used is allopathic) is that the body is viewed as a site for pathology. Understanding one's body as a potential problem, constantly suspicious, aware of lurking symptoms and practicing, as the public health professionals' term it, 'health-seeking behavior' is not a particularly cheerful way of inhabiting a body. This attitude is true generally, for everyone, but it is even more detrimental to women. So much more goes on in the female body, like

menstruating cyclically, like the moon. Gynecologists are happy to treat women for PMS. But does biomedicine or 'science' know anything about how women and the moon share these similar cycles? No, that involved too much normalcy, too much cosmos.

Do obstetricians or pediatricians inform new mothers that the womb will contract as in orgasm while nursing their babies? No, too focused on pleasure and symbiosis or what is good for the baby is also good for the mother. Reproductive specialists are territorial. The postpartum womb is the domain of the obstetrician while the breasts are that of the pediatrician. And when menstruation ceases liberating women with male partners to have worry-free sex, do doctors focus on that? No—that is menopause, another occasion for pathology. One study in the United States showed that women married to OB-GYNs were twice as likely as other women to have a post menopause hysterectomy! Yes, a lot goes on in a woman's body, a lot more than in a man's. So when you pathologize the body, the woman definitely gets more attention and thus more pathology.

I have come to appreciate Indian traditional body concepts and maps for the view of the body as potential, not for disease, but for enlightenment, cosmic alignment as well as for personal pleasure and procreativity. Unfortunately the great gender divide still prevails: female body mapping tends to emphasize not the woman

person, but Eros and reproduction; enlightenment is more commonly viewed as a masculine potential. But ultimately, of course, women are totally capable of both.

Currently the vagina, the entry to the womb, is most often represented in dry, schematic biomedical terms, or in gross, often exploitative pornography. We find completely different representational perspectives in Indian traditions. The root of yoni is the Sanskrit word yuj meaning 'to unite.' The yoni is the crucible where things are combined (male and female, mother and fetus) where creation and re-creation takes place. Where unseen human life (not perceptible to the senses other than the mother's internal sensations—at least before sonograms) takes material form.

We have a desire for precision in words, in naming, especially in body parts, with our orientation towards material reality. We want to know precisely what is the definition of yoni in anatomical terms. But an answer to that question is difficult. Yoni is not a direct equivalent of vagina, nor to womb. A direct correlation between western-derived 'anatomy' and indigenous body knowledge is problematic, if not impossible.

In concept, philosophy and visual traditions, both popular and textual, the female, be she woman or Devi, is the giver of forms—she gives birth to the material world (aka maya) she knows where

form arises from and is inextricably associated with matter. She is responsible for manifestation. This association both condemns and valorizes her. The womanly magic of manifestation is a double-edged sword. Nevertheless, conceiving, carrying and birthing a new life is a central concern populating the religious, cultural, medical forms across the subcontinent from time immemorial. Woman has been revered, deified, codified, symbolically rendered, controlled and celebrated for this power which she and only she possesses (not that women themselves have not participated in these processes—but they have not steered them). Freud had it all wrong, it's not penis envy which women suffer from. It's womb envy and that power, the ability to manifest, that men covet.

My photo of a yoni with a supplicant receiving blessing from the female taken at the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai

Power: Mysticism and Manifestation

I appreciate, but also have some concerns about the mystification of the yoni. This part of the female body, very early on in the Hindu texts, became associated with a metaphysical concept of the source of all the manifest world.

"That which is invisible, unseizable, without lineage,
Without colour, without eye or ear, without hands or feet,
Eternal, pervading, omnipresent, very subtle,
That is the unfailing, that the wise see as the source (yoni) of all beings." The Mandukya Upanishad (c 700 BC)

Of course it makes perfect sense that the Creator is female, not male. She is perceived as the source of all existence. It is the female who gives birth to both male and female. This Upanishad renders yoni as abstract, mystical and deeply philosophical.

In the visual traditions, a Harappan seal from the Indus Valley Civilization depicts the generative yoni of a woman--a real woman, not a metaphysical concept. Although the proto-writing has not been deciphered, it is clear that this is an inverted female figure (in a upside down meditation-like posture) with an emanation emerging from her vagina. What emerges is not an infant, nor a plant, but rather an energy which to me signifies the life force or jeevan—responsible for both the fertility of the female body and the earth body. This image visually displays the power of birth and fertility. The yoni is not ritualized, mystified or philosophized, but shown as a part of a female body.

A Harappan seal

I first saw this image in Pupul Jayakar's book The Earthen Drum. I noticed that on the other side of the same seal was a man with a woman with splayed out hair resembling a woman possessed, but it also looked like a sheaf of grain being carried on her head. She is being approached by a man carrying mithuna (female and male) objects of cup and knife. In the Earthen Drum Pupul Jayakar had written that this was human sacrifice. I disagreed with her interpretation.

I think this image represents a woman 'possessed'. Often women flail about with their hair disheveled while possessed. Here the hair also seems like a sheaf of grain...and we've seen women carrying bundles of grain on their heads before mechanization. In my reading, the man is coming to her to receive her teachings, her experience, while possessed--of the secrets and magic of generativity or manifestation. In her body she 'knows' the source of babies and vegetation—manifestation—the yoni on the other

side of the seal relates to that. At a later meeting with Jayakar she said she agreed with me.

Until recently the most well-known image was the Shivaling resting in the yoni. Just as a common greeting used to be 'Jai Sia-Ram' (Jai Sita-Ram) and nowadays it has become Ram-Ram, dropping out the feminine Sita—so one finds more and more the Solitary Ling, minus the yoni. Poor Shiva. Poor Devi. Poor us!

Art historian Stella Kramrish noted that in this pervasive imagery the Ling itself is not a penetrative ling. It is not entering the yoni, as in human sexual intercourse. Rather it is emerging from the yoni—and I would suggest, just as both the male newborn (and the female) emerge from the female body. Again and again we can read in these commonplace cultural artifacts a strong woman-centered orientation: Woman as creator, primacy of the female body, generativity and the power of manifestation. But increasingly feminine elements are being obscured and abandoned.

Other artifacts central to women's lives that have had ritual or sacred meanings have been excavated from the most unlikely of places. Few know that Sita ki rasoi and Sita ka koop (Sita's kitchen and her well) existed in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh at Babri Masjid, which was destroyed in 1992 by Hindutva mobs anxious to reclaim

Ram's supposed birthplace. The well and also a rolling board and rolling pin had been under worship in this sacred place for eons.

Ramchandra Gandhi, philosopher and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, perceived images of generativity in Sita's Kitchen artifacts. I spent quite a few years in his weekly workshops where he spoke and we questioned, everything from texts like the Mahabharata and Upanishads to his own philosophies. What I appreciated and respected him for was the breadth of his knowledge of both the 'folk' and the 'high' (or textual) traditions. Ramuji was equally spiritual and political—he was both devoted to the poor of India and their wellbeing; as well as comfortable with Indian philosophical traditions.

Gandhi claimed that the compound title of the shrine at Ayodhya: "Janmasthan Sita ki rasoi" reflects this dual aspect of those who are generative: earth mother and woman as mother. This is similar to the emanation from the womb depicted in the Harappan seal. Life is represented—both vegetative and human and the female's integral connection as source. We can see in the Sita ki rasoi image that just as the kitchen cooks and transforms food so the womb 'cooks' and grows the fetus. As I heard one dai use a kitchen metaphor of when she referred to labor pains "the pot is boiling".

Another woman-centered story about Sita was told to me by a sweeper-woman in Bodhgaya Bihar years ago. Sita was in exile

with Ram and Lakshman when news reached them about Dasrath's death. Ram and Lakshman ran off to the market to buy supplies for the death rites, pindis etc. While they were gone Sita sat by the side of the river waiting. Dasrath's spirit appeared and said to Sita 'hurry, hurry. It is painful this waiting. I need these rituals to be done quickly.' Sita explained the situation and Dasrath retreated—only to return again a short time later, begging that the rituals be done as he was suffering a great deal. Again and again this was repeated until finally Sita herself performed the rite saying the prayers and making the needed pinda out of balls of mud.

When Ram and Lakshman returned and started to perform the rite, Sita said 'you don't need to do this, I have already done it. Ram found this hard to believe and Sita said 'Ask the cows, ask the river, ask the Brahmin, they all saw me do the ceremony.' Ram asked the cows, the river and the Brahmin—and they all denied that Sita had done the rituals. The moral to the story is that they all lied and Sita cursed them and that is why, to this day the cows eat garbage; the river runs underground and the Brahmins are poor in that area.

There are many versions of the Ramayana both in Sanskrit and regional languages. Ruth Vanita writes of the *Abhut Ramayana*, composed in Sanskrit around the 14th Century (a Vaishnava

Shaktic Text). Her article, entitled 'The Sita Who Smiles' questions biases in the understandings of Sita as unrelentingly suffering at the hands of 'patriarchy'. Besides presenting a more uplifting view of Sita, Vanita also questions a simplistic view that 'homogenizes both the textual and the oral traditions, wrongly identifying the former entirely with Brahman males and the later with women...as sisters in suffering.'

Pupul Jayakar, in her documentation of the folk traditions, The Earth Mother, describes how, in some rural societies and Tantric rites, the diagram or yantra was identified with the female generative organ as the goddess Bhaga or Kamakhya, the eye of love and creation, the doorway to the womb. According to her the drawing of mandalas or yantras in the high traditions, and floor and wall paintings by women in folk traditions, all display this magical structure. First, a space is created and then the magical rite with its form and intention is enacted in that space. This allowed for the bringing into being of the desired intention. Just as the baby is born from the womb!

Sita had her well at Ram Janambhoomi/ Babri Masjid and throughout North India people traditionally worshipped at the water source postpartum, Kua Puja. This was not just as a place of 'purification' or end of the time of pollution—but rather to honor the source and sustenance of life. In some slums in Delhi,

euphemistically called 'resettlement colonies', this post birth rite was done at the hand pump—wells were not the water source in urban slums so in true jugaad (make do with what you have) the ritual was adapted to an urban slum setting. The amniotic water, which held the growing fetus, is analogized with well water (or hand pump water) in this postpartum kua puja rite. When I was puzzling over the significance of 'kua puja' a very Marxist and unspiritual Rajasthani friend said, "Janet, in the deserts of Rajasthan the well is the sustenance of all life!" Oh yes, it's like a yoni! I thought. The fetus is held in womb waters. And indeed the birth of a baby sustains the family line.

My photo of a well worship rite in Rajasthan

In these customs, rituals and ways of understanding reality, the sacred is not separate from the mundane. God or Ram is not located in any one place, but is rather everywhere, in everything and everybody. Or, as a Bhil tribal respondent recently claimed, when asked about which god he worshipped he said, "Our god lives in the tree, the mountain, in people, the tiger, the river." This active presence of the entire phenomenal world is a living reality of indigenous peoples and has been reduced to the trite category 'nature religion.'

Modernity has erased much of traditional ways of thinking and perceiving—which might be called analogical thinking. Historian N.N. Bhattacharyya writes that tanks or pools of a particular shape were often conceived of as the Yoni of the Mother Goddess (yonikunda). In the Mahabharata Bhim was reprimanded for bathing in such a pool. An awareness of and reverence for still water, which is not circulating as in a river or stream, has health implications as well as 'spiritual' meaning—but that is just the point—life was not fragmented into our modern, separate categories of religion/medicine/ecology.

Likewise in the Ramayana Sita, was originally an earth goddess—sprung from a furrow (read vulva or yoni) and disappearing again into the womb of mother earth. Ram, the hero, is derived from 'ram' meaning both ploughing and sexual intercourse. In the

hymns of the Vedas, 'sita' is simply the furrow that bears crops. In the Arthasastra of Kautilya the goddess Sita is conceived as residing in seeds and plants. Social psychologist Ashis Nandi even reported that for centuries parents in Mithila (where Sita was from) refused to allow their daughters to marry someone from Ayodhya, however eligible the prospective bridegroom, because of the ill treatment that Sita was subjected to by Rama and the residents of Ayodhya.

Many women academicians and feminists have been troubled by this earth-woman conflation. Who wants to be thought of as a clod of dirt or only in terms of fertility and reproduction? Sociologist Lila Dube expressed the problem in her article 'The Seed in the Field.' She showed how the homology, as she called it, conflating women and 'field' doubly exploited women. In popular belief and quasi-legal arrangement men who possess the 'seed' (plough the field, meaning the wife) have privileged rights both to inherit the land from fathers and to gain custody of the children in case of a marital dispute.

Here a subtle but crucially important distinction between the meanings of 'field' and 'earth' is important for woman-centered reclamations of tradition. I nuance Dube's analysis and point out the difference between the term 'earth' (which is not bound or possessed and has the quality of generativity) and the term 'field'

(which is fenced, ploughed, 'husbanded' and under man's control). I acknowledge the power and persistence of representation systems that legitimize male control—of women/wives and of the fertile earth. But I also feel it is important to extend understandings, epistemologies of 'earth' that are not 'husbanded' or bound by patriarchal meanings.

Avoidance of the Yoni

I first discovered that spiritual and heroic males have sometimes avoided being born via the yoni when I was studying at Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies. I wanted to use data I had collected, along with NGOs, on women's experiences of pregnancy, birth, postpartum and menopause— as a basis for examining their beliefs and rituals. The oddities of studying Indian childbirth rituals with celibate Catholic male priests!

I was perplexed by the fact that the interviews with women who lived in the slums and held traditional ideas and observed 'pollution taboos,' spoke more positively of their experiences of childbirth than did the middle and upper-class respondents, who framed their experiences in biomedical terms. They also spoke of many women-centered rites, such as the post-partum well worship. I became increasingly inquisitive about these pervasive menstrual and childbirth taboos and their origins—leading me

literally from slums to sacred texts! This exploration led me to the Rig Veda where the first mention is made of menstruation as 'taboo'.

To shorten a 3,000-year-old story—in the Rig Veda, and numerous other, later texts with different adaptations, Indra slays Vritra, who himself is a kind of a Brahmin and thus Indra is guilty of Brahmanicide. Brahmins as a caste hadn't been invented at the time of the Rig Veda so I interpreted Vritra as a shaman, or a practitioner of magic, who had mastered maya or the art of illusion, as is mentioned in the text. As the story goes, Indra wants exculpation for killing Vritra and his sin is divided into different parts; one goes into the mountains, one goes into the river, and one goes into women—in the form of their menstrual blood!

While researching this topic I learned that many 'great' males have had miraculous births avoiding the bleeding and birthing yoni. These renderings are intended to showcase their greatness and set them apart from the common folk born in the usual way—though the vagina or birth canal. In the Rig Veda (4.18) Indra's unnatural birth from his mother's side is narrated.

"Indra's mother: This is the ancient proven path by which all the gods were born.... By this very path he should be born when he has grown great. He should not make his mother perish in that way.

Indra: 'I cannot come out by that path; these are bad places to go through. I will come out cross-wise, through the side..."

It seems as though very early on the yoni or the vagina was narrated as a 'bad' way for powerful males to born. I wonder if this is a reason that there are so many cesarean operations today—because everybody wants their baby to be great?!

Similarly in Lumbini, where Siddhartha was born, image and text today represent Gautama, the Buddha as having been born from his mother's side. It is also recorded that his mother, Mahamaya or Maya Devi as she is referred to in Nepal, died shortly postpartum. It is presented as historical fact, unlike in Indra's case, that Siddhartha was a human being born in Lumbini and his mother died after having given birth to him. Not so certain are his origins from Mahamaya's side. Image making and worship of the Buddha was a contentious issue even for early Buddhism. Buddha's immediate post-birth teachings. Notice the gods assembled, including Indra!

Nevertheless all the visual depictions of Buddha's birth that I retrieved from Lumbini have the birth from the side and in some even Indra is depicted as present at the birth! Granted these may

be later 'Hinduized' add-ons to the birth narrative, but our inherited views remain the same of these spiritual teachers and their supra-natural origins and of the undesirable yoni.

The birth of Buddha literally from Mahamaya's side in the farthest below panel

What relevance does this discussion have to contemporary life? And what does Yoni have to do with traditional childbirth knowledge?

Medical Mutilations

People speak about patriarchy, misogyny and violence against women. Everyone collectively admits that murder, harassment, stalking, rape and wife beating are wrong. But seldom do we question the violence that contemporary, scientific and modern medicine does to women when they are most vulnerable and in need of support, comfort and protection—as they are becoming mothers. I suggest that that routine episiotomy is a ritual and violent mutilation of the yoni.

Episiotomy, for the uninitiated, is the surgical enlargement of the vaginal opening thought to be necessary for the baby to emerge from the mother's body. This means cutting through numerous layers of muscles and flesh—and is also, as many women will tell you, the most painful part of the whole birth experience. Episiotomy was first practiced in the West and then exported worldwide part and parcel along with modern medicine.

A medieval image of the female body cut open to show the fetus

The hoary history of obstetrics includes how people (read men because women faced many difficulties entering the medical profession) decided to cut this precious part of a body that Mother Nature designed to hold, grow and push out babies. A routine surgery in 99 % of births is unnecessary (and in 1% thank god we have it).

Interestingly dais and poor women speaking Hindi refer to episiotomy as chota (little) operashun and cesareans as burra (big) operashun. And this is one reason that these women are reluctant to go to hospitals—because they don't want to come out with either operashun!

Sheila Kitzinger, a British experienced childbirth anthropologist, educator and advocate for women-centered childbirth wrote that

in the past an experienced midwife took pride in her skill in conducting the second stage of labour so that an episiotomy should not be necessary in most cases and that whenever possible the perineum should remain intact. She claimed that when episiotomy is seen as an inevitable consequence of childbirth this expertise was lost or abandoned as irrelevant to modern obstetrics.

In no other physiological function is it accepted that routine surgical intervention is an improvement on the natural process. Kitzinger is referring to nurse-midwives who have had medical education. Anyone who is sensitive to female pain, knows that episiotomy is one of the least considered and most painful of all operations performed on the human female. Far too many women remember the pain of episiotomy which they say was far worse than the pain of giving birth.

I can never forget cringing while watching a poor urban working woman giving birth; dirty sari and petticoat pulled up around her chest, lying flat on her back on the delivery table in a hospital in Pune. She was pushing the baby out and wanted desperately to squat on the table. But time and time again the nurse pushed her down flat and scolded her, telling her to push, push. Then the doctor came in and gave her a huge episiotomy. Oh my god, I thought. A well-off woman can go home, lie down in a clean place and apply antiseptic to her stitches, that's one thing. But this poor

working woman was victimized first by not being allowed to squat and then by her perineum being slashed and stitched.

It is ironic that routine episiotomy as practiced globally and the 'female genital mutilation' happening in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia and are both cruel and unnecessary mutilations of the yoni. The global health establishment, western and biomedical dominated, disseminate information on the horrors of female genital mutilation (clitoridectomy, subincision, etc). They seem to remain oblivious to the fact that routine episiotomy painful, most often needless and causing endless suffering to all women, but especially the poor. I wonder if this intervention has not now morphed into the massive global cesarean epidemic.

I had an episiotomy with my first birth and sat on something resembling an inner tube for weeks afterward. My second birth, in San Francisco General Hospital's Alternative Birth Center, was with midwives. There the interns studying at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center politely asked the midwives and the mothers if they could watch the midwifery-attended birth. These doctors-in-the-making wanted to learn how to use their hands to deliver a baby without episiotomy. In their obstetrical curriculum, they had only learned how to cut, not how to use their hands skillfully to guide the baby out of the birth

canal. This is a big difference between obstetricians and midwives. Many women suffer unnecessary pain while becoming mothers. This is a powerful and practical reason for considering the yoni, this part of female anatomy from other than biomedical perspectives.

The Arab and African (and in a few parts of India) cultural custom of FGM also involves the cutting of the yoni, but for very different reasons. In both cultural settings this womanly part of the female body, this site of pleasure and babies, gets mutilated. Episiotomy is medical violence against woman as mother; traditional Female Genital Mutilation is violence against women as sexual beings and female pleasure. If the yoni has been so mutilated, for such different reasons, it must be a site of female power. So how cultures, civilizations have represented, controlled and celebrated the yoni is important.

An obviously worshipped 'cleft' of a tree

Power

Indian culture, customs, images and attitudes have much to contribute to re-imaging the yoni. I live in Sundernagar, an old, but upmarket colony of New Delhi. We have many beautiful trees in our neighborhood—and some of them

are being worshipped. Mostly pipal trees, but others as well, are garlanded with flowers, small icons of gods and goddesses nestle amongst the base, remnants of dias are scattered about.

Years ago while mucking about in the prescriptive texts stipulating the good behavior expected of the twice born Hindu, and regulating unacceptable (read tribal or low caste originating) practices – I came across this tidbit – "One should not worship in the clefts of trees, or use their red exudations." Hmmm. Wonder why not? Anyone who has wandered rural byways or tree-lined city streets knows that this textual prohibition didn't carry much weight with many people. Trees, clefts and all, are very much places for a brief prayer. Aha! They're like a yoni!

Contrary valuations of the yoni abound in Indian metaphysical and mystical traditions. Hugh Urban, contemporary Tantric scholar focuses on the mystical aspect of a 16th Century text, Yonitantra. He asserts that the Yonitantra praises the yoni as the source of all creation, the divine organ that gives birth to all the gods and elements of the cosmos and that Hari, Hara and all gods who are the agents of the creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe, are all born from the yoni.

Monier-Williams, famous for his Sanskrit dictionary, displays an opposite understanding in 1877 saying that the Tantras are

generally mere manuals of mysticism, magic, and superstition of the worst and most silly kind.

J A Schoterman, who translated the Yonitantra text in the 1970s, contributed that the epithet 'bhagavat' is applied to Vishnu and Krishna because they uttered the words 'yoni-yoni'. 'Bhagavat' is actually a pun because it draws on the dual meaning of bhaga. Bhaga means fortune and prosperity, on the one hand, and yoni or vagina, on the other. This is another example of what I am calling the female body's magical power of manifestation and how that 'source' gets reified in religious discourse.

Shoterman, however, states that the Yonitantra lists nine kinds of women whose yoni is suitable for performing yoni puja. The list includes: an actress; a prostitute; a washerwoman; the daughter of a barber; a Brahmin woman; the daughter of a Shudra; the daughter of a cowherd; the daughter of a garland maker—they are referred to the nava kanyah, thus they should be unmarried, but also not a virgin.

Then the author states that the specifications are mostly dropped 'Or she may belong to any caste as long as she is experienced and wanton.' The only criteria that men really followed, were that she should not be a mother.

Years ago I personally met and interviewed a young woman who was 'worshipped' in the way described above (I would now call it sexual abuse) by a very famous internationally known 'guru.' Her mother was a devotee of this guru and thus it was easy for him to have access to her daughter. Hearing her story I wanted to claw his face and shout about it, but was sworn to secrecy. He is no longer living but his 'spiritual' organization is thriving in India and the United States.

Miranda Shaw did a marvelous job of deconstructing this business of being 'experienced and wanton'— words Shoterman quotes without any irony or hesitation. In her work *Passionate Enlightenment, Women in Tantric Buddhism* she debunks the masculine biases of those who have written on the texts and practice of Tantric Buddhism. She also notes that ancient practices from India's forests, mountains and rural areas, among tribal peoples, villagers and the lower classes, were embraced and redirected to Buddhist ends. This idea will be elaborated on when we come to story of the Buddha converting Hariti from her evil ways of 'child stealing' in a later chapter.

Western scholars wrote that practical considerations necessitated the use of low-caste women…outcaste girls were more promiscuous, uninhibited by Manu's laws. And that girls of low

caste and courtesans in the tantric "orgies" were more fit for the rite as they were more depraved and debauched

Early western scholars distorted women's, and particularly low caste women's place in Tantric rites, much as Katherine Mayo distorted dais skills as birth experts. Bound by their own biases of caste, class, gender and culture, they weren't able to recognize women as teachers and gurus of the male luminaries of Tantric Buddhism. But as I have come to discover and the body-knowledge of the Indian subcontinent, whether of healing, birthing or enlightening, historically often emerged from the ground and those who live close to the earth—that is those who were not high caste and high class. Given that women were indeed among the early teachers of the secret oral instructions of the sexual yogas, what does this tell us of views of the yoni? Shaw quotes from one explicitly erotic text.

"She will then draw him to her and kiss him, direct his mouth to between her thighs, and embrace him playfully. She guides him in how to make the offering of pleasure to her."

But we must be careful not to be seduced by the purely sexual allusions of the yoni and yonic knowledge or tantric practice. Remembering that women hold the power of manifestation, embedded in the sexual act of intercourse, for women is the

possibility of conception. The male's awareness of this risk and the power of conception is less physical and more diffuse!!

Therese Blanchet, wrote about childbirth in Bangladesh and offered a unique, literal and practical use of the yoni. She describes that if the birth is not progressing some dais admit to taking off all their clothes. One explained to her how, completely naked, she would step repeatedly over the mother's belly exposing her own birth canal to entice the baby to be born. In Dhaka district, a dai explained to her that when dealing with a difficult breech delivery she would first remove her clothes, then place a kula (soop or winnowing basket) below the mother, saying ayo, ayo (come, come) while making inviting gestures. The dai explained this technique would eliminate all resistance and the child would be born.

Clay image of Krishna placed in a winnowing basket immediately after his birth – notice the placenta is still attached.

The kula or winnowing basket, Blanchete explained, is used exclusively by women to separate the grain from the husk and symbolizes food, prosperity and womanhood. We will notice that it is used in birth rituals again and again in late

chapters. The use of the winnowing basket, emphasizes the similar fertility of earth and woman. In many parts of Uttar Pradesh the newborn was first ritually placed in the winnowing basket.

Horror

A caveat: As I sit to write in December 2012 the city of Delhi is in grief and turmoil. The young woman who was gang-raped and tortured in a bus her return to the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus with her friend after watching movie has died in a hospital in Singapore. I grieve as I write this for the chapter on 'yoni' not only because of her suffering and death, but because not only the assailants' penises, but also a metal rod was inserted into her vagina—puncturing her intestines and other organs as well. So much for valorizing Indian perceptions of the yoni!

Belief, I have always thought that what one believed was the bedrock of human action. Leading birth preparation classes I used to say that what one had between one's ears (i.e. beliefs) had more to do with the progress of one's labour than did the width of one's pelvis. Now I'm questioning what these young men, assailants, rapists, murderers believed about the yoni—that part of the body I

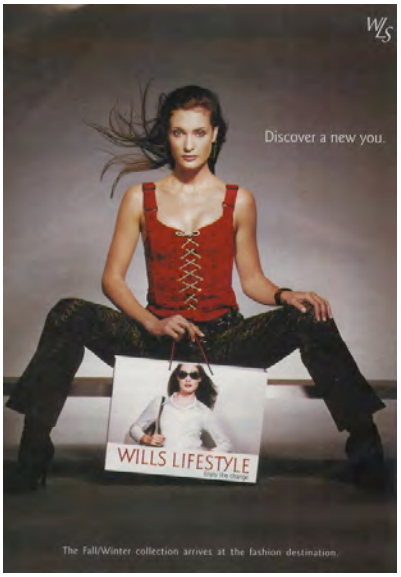
am writing about, meditating upon, collecting cultural information about.

Let me pause for a moment and recall a photo of the Hariti shrine on the sidewalk in Kathmandu where young boys are gazing upon the image of the Devi with a baby emerging from her yoni—could the perpetrators of this horrific act have ever been exposed to such an image? I recall the fact that the names of so many Indian women including the appellation 'Devi' like Ratna Devi, Kaushalya Devi—were they ever exposed, however subliminally, to this conflation of goddess and woman?

Nepali street shrine of boys regarding birth

I think of the images of the contrasts between Lajja Gauri and Aditi Uthanpad yoni images (legs splayed, yoni exposed) with commercial advertisements, one fancily dressed and attractive woman with legs apart and a shopping bag tagged with the store's name placed in front of her yoni. And in the 40 years I have lived in Delhi I have witnessed a shift images, beliefs, names

and attitudes and I wonder---if these assailants truly believed that the yoni was the source of all life, if they really understood the woman/Devi trope; if they weren't so angry at being a part of the underclass excluded from malls and money—would they have committed such a heinous crime?



Rape and caste—having said this, when considering sexual assault on women in the Indian context, we have to recognize that low and outcaste women have always, historically and traditionally, been the targets of rape by upper caste men. I remember hearing from a woman activist working in Saharanpur District of Uttar Pradesh about the low caste villagers' meaning of the word Harijan—the term used by Mahatma Gandhi for Dalit, low or outcaste peoples. She claimed that actually, for the Dalits, the term was used for the offspring of such forceful couplings—hari, meaning god, and the woman having been impregnated by the upper caste (hari or god man)—her child would be known as Harijan. Gandhiji meant this term to mean 'God's children' dignifying an oppressed group of people. However he was ignorant of the realities and language of those we

now call Dalit—a term chosen by them meaning broken or crushed. Such confusions, differences of understanding depending on one's perspective, abound.

Chapter 2

Menstrual Matter and Mystery

Statue at Kamakhya displaying women's blood as sacred

Bleeding and Meaning

Over 30 years ago a British friend and I journeyed to Mount Abu to interview a holy woman, Vimala Thakur and her devotees. Vimala Thakur is an English-speaking, intellectually oriented female guru who was sometimes referred to as 'the female Krishnamurti'—a comparison to the well-known J. Krishnamurti who was groomed as a boy by Annie Besant and the theosophists and taken to the West as a boy-guru.

We had corresponded with the guru's personal secretary, K, to make an appointment. The next morning as we filed in for the 6 am meditation we noticed K, looking sleepy and slightly disheveled sitting outside the room. The same sight greeted us on the following morning. On the third day my friend interviewed K asking about gurus and devotees—and what needs the gurus were fulfilling. As the interview was finishing my friend impulsively asked why she had been sitting outside the meditation room the previous mornings. K asked her to turn off the tape recorder and said "It was that time of the month for me." My friend persisted "Yes, but why did you stay outside when you could have been meditating?" K answered, "We believe that menstruating women

emit certain vibrations which can be distracting to those meditating." We probed a bit further but got no more explanation, so we packed up, thanked her, and left.

At the open-air tea stall down the road we discussed this practice of excluding or secluding the menstruating woman. My friend was furious. She thought this was a barbaric practice and should be stopped immediately—and it was even worse that a progressive, educated, woman guru was allowing the customary menstrual taboo of exclusion from the sacred. I saw her point of view, but my curiosity was piqued. What was this phenomenon of vibrations? What were the origins of these beliefs and practices? If the menstruating woman was the source of some power thought to disturb meditation couldn't that same power be defined in another way and experienced positively by women?

Then an incident at one of the ornate Jain temples that dot Mount Abu anchored these questions in my mind. We travelled by tourist bus with an Indian family, a couple and their young children. When we approached the first temple a sign in Hindi and English announced, "Women on their monthly courses are prohibited from entering." I watched the mother of the family turn away to sit on the lawn outside while the father and children entered without her. I felt sorry for the woman and anger at a system that defined religion and woman's biological femaleness as mutually exclusive.

I also pondered this power of woman that was supposedly so threatening to meditators, devotees and temples. I began reading, asking questions and thinking seriously about menstrual beliefs and customs.

Sociologist Veena Das writing of the Indian context explains some of the important cultural assumptions underlying perceptions of female cyclical bleeding. She claims that the female body makes the notion of regularity of nature available to mankind. For the Hindus, it is the regular periodicity of menstruation that is the guarantee of the regularity of nature; the word 'rtu' stands for both seasons and the menstrual cycle. To the indigenous mind this shows that the rhythms of the body and the rhythms of the cosmos are in harmony".

The English word 'rite' or 'ritual' originates from the Sanskrit 'rtu.' Strictly speaking this word means repeatable action. It is ironic that western 'science' demands this repeatability as validation for efficacy. A scientific experiment must be able to be repeated for the results to be considered valid. For ancient Indians it was the seasons and women's menstruation that were repeatable and valid.

Historically these issues of bodily purity and pollution were also concerns of early Christianity. Saint Augustine, theologian and philosopher turned to Pope Gregory in the 5th Century with

queries about childbirth, menstruation and sexuality. At that time women, even nuns, were prohibited from entering church or taking communion when menstruating or post-birth (men too if they had just had sexual intercourse). Also interesting is the fact that Augustine abandoned his long-standing lover and their child at the behest of his conscience and his church!

Women's uterine blood, menstruation, in the Indian textual traditions is 'rajas' or 'puspa.' The first word comes from the term denoting passion/agitation and is more textual (as in the English phrase 'blood lust'). The second is more colloquial and is the word for flower.

Idioms for menstruation in different Indian languages give clues to various meanings and associations.

Mahina se—monthly (Hindi)

Mahavari—monthly (Hindi)

Masik Dharam—monthly god-given (Hindi)

Bahar ca—literally meaning 'outside' suggesting that she is separate or 'outside' of normal household life (Hindi)

Nahan wali hogi—she will have to take a bath (at the end of her period) (Hindi)

Chhua chat—untouchable (Hindi)

Duram—sitting out (Tamil)

Phool jhadona—the flower is falling (Madhya Pradesh)

Kavwa chhuna—the crow has polluted her (Hindi)

Bhairi—Outside (Konkani)

Pooja korcha zai na—cannot do pooja (Konkani)

Chums—colloquial college student English

Or as a Delhi basti woman said "It was like the rainy season, it rained from a wound within." Or as my mother used to say "my red-headed aunt has come."

Menstrual Matters

Although menstrual taboos can be seen as a perverse acknowledgement of woman's biological processes and power—it is an acknowledgement nonetheless. The worst form of depreciation can be ignoring female cyclical bleeding altogether. Paula Wiedeger emphasizes that the modern world, which observes no outward ritual signs of the menstrual taboo, is even more harmful for women. At her first menstruation the young modern girl is abandoned by her culture. She is made to feel that her body and its rhythms are a biological impediment to 'freedom' and 'fun.'

According to Wiedeger, the subliminal message she receives from her culture is that a properly functioning body is male and

noncyclic. On the job 'work' is defined as a male activity; if she wants to be equal at work she must function like a male, that is non-cyclically, ignoring the work (menstruation, pregnancy, birth, postpartum bleeding and nursing a baby) that is going on in her body. Legal and cultural disputes about women being pregnant or nursing at work, or nursing in public, derive from that the fact that workspace, public space is marked as masculine.

The menstrual cycle, however, embodies the cyclical processes of all life forms—the creation, existence and death of the ovum that occurs repeatedly and naturally within woman's body. She can bodily witness, if she is experientially attuned, this fact of nature. It is a physiological fact that each menstrual cycle occurring in a woman's body recapitulates the biological phenomena of birth, life and death of an egg cell. A uniquely female physiological marvel rendered in orthodox Hindu theology as Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the sustainer; and Shiva, the destroyer.

Menstruation is seen by some as failure to conceive a child, but the biological process itself offers an experience of the total life cycle. Gender norms, however, have prescribed the roles of wife and mother as essential for the woman. These norms have foregrounded the potential to conceive that is implicit in menses rather than female experience, mystical or otherwise. On the subcontinent, the female body marked time, echoed the earth's

seasons and cosmic cycles and even provided a window to enlightenment!

Lal Ded or Lalla was a 14th Century Kashmiri mystic born into a Brahmin family and married off at the tender age of 12 to a family who mistreated her. Her given name, Laleshwari demonstrates her Hindu origins; Lal Arifa her Muslim name, the profound influence of Sufism. She had been claimed for centuries by both Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir as a woman of spiritual power and folk wisdom. Her songs or Vakhs are mystical verses which were still, until the time of the 'troubles', sung in the Kashmir valley. Thirty five years ago I remember a taxi-driver, while we were driving from Srinagar to Pahalgham, pointing out that women working transplanting rice seedlings in the fields were singing her songs.

Internet research seems to have rather sanitized her, making her 'mystical' rather that iconoclastic, in fact she challenged many hierarchies and defied many conventions. According to legend she shat in temples and graveyards and wandered ecstatically naked—much to the chagrin of surrounding villagers, whom she (mistakenly?) perceived as 'sheep'. Her songs transgressed social norms, always returning to focus on the Self/self.

"I wore myself out, looking for myself.

No one could have worked harder to break the code.

I lost myself and found a wine cellar. Nectar, I tell you.

There were jars and jars of the good stuff, and no one to drink it.

I trapped my breath in the bellows of my throat:

a lamp blazed up inside, showed me who I really was.

I crossed the darkness holding fast to that lamp,

scattering its light-seeds around me as I went."

Ranajit Hoskote stated that Lalla treats the body as the site of all her experiments in self-refinement: she asserts the unity of the corporeal and the cosmic, as achieved through immersive meditation and the Yogic cultivation of the breath. The subtle channels and nodal points of the Yogic body form a basic reality for her, its terrain as real as the topography of lake, river and mountains. Why should a woman mystic not use her experience of menstruation as another 'site' for 'self-refinement'?

One legend which caught my eye many years ago subtlety refers to menstruation goes like this. Once Lalla came to visit her guru Shrikantha and was told by his wife that he was observing the moon fast chandravana, a 40 day austere observance, and was unavailable because he was meditating. Lallaji told his wife that

actually he was not meditating, but thinking of his horse being kicked by another horse in the summer pastures of Gulmarg. That's exactly what he was thinking and overhearing her comment Shrikantha emerged from his room to meet her.

Lalla then told Shrikantha 'Let me show you how this moon fast is really supposed to be done.' She then stood on a mud pot, held another one above her head and with the waning of the moon, her body waned, until on the fifteenth night of the dark fortnight (amavasya) nothing was left of her except a little quantity of trembling quicksilver. Then with the waxing moon her body waxed and on the full-moon night she was herself again. Her body was thus mimicking the menstrual as well as the lunar cycle. Then the Guru acknowledged that the disciple had one-upped his austerities with her display of female cyclicity.

In this story the menstrual and lunar cycles resonate with the cosmic connection between Lal Ded's female body and heavenly moon body. It's not only the controlling one's breath or transgressive invoking the wine cellar which provide occasion for 'spiritual practice'—it's also an awareness that the cosmos/moon moves harmoniously through the female body. This is a far cry from cringing in a dark room, sleeping on the floor, barred from the kitchen and places of worship, and being considered dirty, which some of the Hindu texts prescribe for a menstruating

woman. Reading this incident of Lallaji's life ecstatically shifts menstruation from the domain of the 'polluted' to an opportunity to experience cosmic power, cyclicity and the sacred. Some claim that the male mystics Chaitanya and Ramakrishna both observed ritual menstrual seclusion as a part off their sadhana.

When collecting Delhi slum women's narratives about menstruation and childbirth, the following part of an interview jumped out at me.

"I was sleeping at night, but had to go pee constantly, and so I kept wiping myself. When I checked, I was frightened to see the blood. I told my friend. She said, "Don't tell your Amma." She taught me how to use the cloth and instructed me, 'Listen, on Friday you make 3 balls of mud and split them in half with your hand. If you do this you will menstruate for only 3 days.' I did that and now every month I menstruate for 3 days."

The withholding of knowledge of her first menstruation from the girl's mother ("Don't tell your Amma") was often found in our interviews. I first interpreted this as shame or shyness, young women ashamed of the marks of their biological femaleness. But when I read further, and deeper into the interviews, I realized that an older girl or woman was usually mentioned as counseling the

newly menstruating girl. As in the above instruction where the counsel includes a fascinating ritual to limit days of her period. "Listen, on Friday you make 3 balls of mud and split them in half with your hand. If you do this you will menstruate for only 3 days." I began to interpret 'don't tell your Amma' differently; by not telling one's mother – the circle of female confidants widens. I remember my mother talking with me and it was a hush-hush affair. Here other close female relatives, older and wiser, were available to counsel and pass on women's physical, and in this case ritual, knowledge—collective women's knowledge.

The onset of menstruation, however, was also accompanied by limitations, often severe, of the behavior of the pubescent girl child. It seems to me that we know much more about these strict codes of conduct than we do of any ritual magic associated with periods. Sociologist Leila Dube wrote that to establish her feminine identity, a young girl should avoid masculine demeanor and behavior. She has to be carefully guarded against even a remote semblance to a woman of loose character, a woman of the street, a prostitute, someone who uses her charms to attract men.

Moontime

Amavasya is the dark of the moon. Time, in the Indian subcontinent, used to pulsate between the dark of the no-moon,

Amavasya and the full moon, or Purnima. It is significant that the emphasis is on the no-moon or Amavasya—and not the new moon as in the west. India has always been more comfortable with emptiness or nothingness. The shunyata of Buddhism and the mathematicians who invented the concept of zero (0) display this. The importance of these pulsations, these lunar rhythms, when it comes to the female body, and female cycles should not be ignored. And ignored they have been.

In most human cultures menstruation has been associated with the moon. Robert Briffault's *The Mothers*, published over sixty years ago, is an exhaustive compilation of folk-beliefs in this connection. Although critiqued for its sources and methodology, and by feminists as being 'essentialist,' this vast survey of beliefs still deserves attention because such beliefs are, or were until very recently, an important aspect of cosmology in many parts of the world. Briffault mentioned Germans in country districts who referred to menstruation simply as 'the moon', and of French peasants who term it 'le moment de la lune'. For page after page, Briffault cites examples – in the Congo, menstruation is spoken of as *ngonde*, that is the 'moon'; in Torres Straits, the same word means both 'moon' and 'menstrual blood.'

According to NN Bhattacharayya the moon is not only regarded as the cause of conception and generation, but also as the regulator

of the periodic function of women, the controller of menstruation and the guardian of the embryo and the placenta.

I had this belief emphasized to me in our MATRIKA workshop with dais in Punjab. We had asked the question 'what kind of energies enter woman's body and when?' Thinking that might elicit various kinds of information about spirits, or the moon, etc. But the dais only responded on how, what lunar phase or what menstrual time, a boy child could be conceived. Try as we might, nothing could move them from this topic that they felt was supremely important.

Blood Magic is an anthology of anthropological studies on menstruation. One was on the Yurok Indians of Northern California. The anthropologist, Thomas Buckley was having dinner at the home of a Yurok friend. His friend's wife was not cooking, he was told, because she was on her 'moontime' and they would not eat or sleep together. The Yurok wife later talked to Buckley about how her maternal aunts and grandmother, conservative Yurok women, had instructed her in their traditional menstrual laws. She was aware of the shame associated with periods in non-Indian homes but her relatives believed otherwise.

According to Yurok women's traditions, she learned that a menstruating woman should isolate herself because she is at the height of her powers and that time should not be wasted in

mundane, social distractions nor concerns with the opposite sex. Rather she should focus on the purpose of her life and the accumulation of spiritual energy. The blood that flowed was purifying the woman—preparing her for spiritual accomplishment. The menstrual room was like the men's sweathouse—where she should go into herself and make herself stronger. "You should feel all of your body exactly as it is, and pay attention," she was told. She sounds like Lal Ded!

According to the young woman in the old-time village life all of a household's fertile women who were not pregnant menstruated at the same time, a time dictated by the moon; that these women practiced the bathing ritual together at this time; and that men associated with the household used this time to "train hard" in the sweathouse. And she said that if a woman got out of synchronization with the moon and with other women of the household, she could "get back in by sitting in the moonlight and talking to the moon, asking it to balance her."

The anthropologist, who had studied Yurok culture, thought that this man and wife were involved in re-valuing 'Indian ways' and so were putting a positive gloss on menstrual laws. From his anthropological training and existing literature, he had learned that menstruation and everything associated with it was simply negative, dirty and polluting. However in this article he excavates

what he calls the 'double male biases' – that is, of male anthropologists recording male voices in speaking of menstrual matters.

Listening to the Yurok wife's narrative prompted Buckley to re-examine primary data from the library at the University of California at Berkeley. Kroeber, the doyen of the traditional study of California's indigenous peoples, himself had taken extensive field notes including transcriptions of an interview with an elderly Yurok woman and drawings of collective menstrual huts—which he had never used in his various publications! Probably because he didn't understand them and they didn't conform to existing anthropological theories.

Buckley examines an exciting phenomenon—menstrual synchrony. Anecdotally women have experienced this tendency towards synchronization of their periods—women's college dorms, nunneries, even families. Women who come into frequent contact with each other—their menstrual cycles tend to align themselves. And perhaps more 'primitive' women menstruated synchronously, as the young Yurok woman reported! Buckley explored this phenomenon further and found evidence pointing towards such synchrony. He suggests that men carefully watched the skies from within sweathouses that were designed to function, at least in part, as lunar/solar observatories. The moon had to be

watched to determine the correct dates to hold the great inter-regional ritual and ceremonial events that were once held in accordance with cycles in more than a dozen northwestern Californian centers. Yurok tribal women were not allowed to attend inter-areal festivals if they were menstruating, and yet *all* women *always* attended. He also notes that many California tribes had birth and menstrual shelters that had been constructed for collective use—more evidence for menstrual synchrony.

Menstrual Synchrony: The Cosmic Dance of Bodies

In 1971 a young graduate student, Martha McClintock first documented the phenomena of "human intra-group menstrual synchrony." McClintock observed that the menstrual cycles of frequently interacting women tend to become synchronized over time and also seemed related to the extent and frequency of contacts between individual women. She had shown, in an article published in *Nature*, that women living together do evolve a strong cooperative menstrual rhythm. McClintock claimed that both direct and anecdotal observations indicate that the menstrual cycle is affected by social groupings. Comparable findings were soon confirmed by other studies. Nevertheless menstrual synchrony is still 'scientifically' a contentious topic. The Ling Puran presents the usual menstrual prohibitions along with one from which we can infer some kind of menstrual synchrony.

"A woman in her monthly course shall avoid touching another woman in her monthly course and talking with her also."

The taboo against menstruating women touching or talking to other menstruating women suggests the existence of menstrual synchrony as mentioned in the previous chapter. Were there alternative collective menstrual practices—otherwise why prohibit the touching and talking? By the logic of ritual pollution all menstruating women are in a state of impurity so there would be no defilement or polluting touch.

The theory of 'lunaception,' a term coined by Louise Lacey, saw the light of day in 1975 with the publication of *Lunaception: A Feminine Odyssey into Fertility and Contraception.* Lacey drew on anthropological evidence pointing towards menstrual synchrony and widespread connections between the moon and menstruation both in language and observances, such as the Yurok woman claiming that the moon could 'balance' women. In the lunaception model women would ovulate at the full moon and menstruate at the dark, no-moon. Of course primal peoples lived without exposure to the continual artificial light available to modern women.

Some suggest that the menstrual cycle was, with hunting and gathering peoples, and can still be, with contemporary women, exposed to phototropic stimulation, phase-locked to the moon. So we are considering two independent, but related phenomena: first, the tendency of frequency interacting women's cycles to align themselves; and second, the tendency of woman's body to ovulate when exposed to full moon light, Purnima, or its artificial equivalent, and to menstruate 14 days later during the dark of the moon, Amavasya.

Anita Diamant wrote a popular novel published in 1997 called *The Red Tent*. Situated in Old Testament times it depicts a Hebrew custom of women retiring to The Red Tent for a woman-centered and sacred handling menses and childbirth. Here too the collective and dark of the moon time are portrayed. The protagonist receives a teaching

"The great mother whom we call Innana gave a gift to woman that is not known among men and this is the secret of blood. The flow at the dark of the moon, the healing blood of the moon's birth—to men, this is flux and distemper, bother and pain...in the red tent the truth is known as the gift of Innana. It courses through us, cleansing the body of last month's death, preparing the body to receive the new month's life, women

give thanks—for repose and restoration, for the knowledge that life comes from between our legs, and that life costs blood."

Both Diamont and Lacey point to the rhythm of women ovulating at the full moon and menstruating at the dark of the moon.

In *Blood Magic*, the editors Buckley and Gottlieb note the privilege of male bloodletting and the taboo on female bleeding.

Finally, in the majority of the world's societies, men have a virtual monopoly on routine or ritual forms of bloodletting: hunting, butchering, warfare, and rituals involving sacrifice, mutilation, and scarification. Thus the fact that menstruation is the only act in which women normatively and routinely let blood, may, depending on the culture, constitute a symbolic anomaly.

In all of these senses then, there is a compelling tendency to perceive menstrual blood as "out of place" ... hence menstrual blood is perceived as a dire pollutant whose effects must be contained through stringent taboos.

Both nature and women are producers of life. War is violent and visible. The balance and harmony of growth are experienced but not seen. In male-constructed representation systems men's right

to shed blood is considered normative and acceptable, even heroic as in war, whereas women's menstrual blood is depicted as dangerous, threatening and needs to be symbolically and ritually controlled. All the studies in Blood Magic restrict their analyses to one specific society's construction of menstruation. Nevertheless the editors' perceive commonalities across vastly different gendered ideas of bloodletting. Women's blood is 'out of place' and a 'symbolic anomaly' whereas men's permission to shed blood is integral to male activity.

Taken from a rath, or temple chariot, this carving shows the vagina or source of blood

In the Indian/Hindu context this permission to shed blood is inherent in a religious philosophy that valorizes fighting because the 'spirit' does not die. In the Mahabharata, we read...

"The physical bodies of the eternal, immutable, and incomprehensible Spirit are perishable. Therefore fight, O Arjuna. (2.18) The Spirit is neither born nor does it die at any time. It does not come into being, or cease to exist. It is unborn, eternal, permanent, and primeval. The Spirit is not destroyed when the body is destroyed." (2.20)

Pertinent to the Indian subcontinent is the story from a Yurok neighboring tribe relates the origin of the Pleiades to several sisters who shared a house and who all menstruated at the same time. The constellation of the Pleiades is identical to the Krittikas who find ample place in Indian myth and astronomy. They have long been known to be a physically related group of stars rather than arranged by any chance alignment.

The Pleiades have been known since antiquity to cultures around the world, including the Māori, Aboriginal Australians, Persians, Chinese, Japanese, Maya, Aztec, and the Sioux and Cherokee. In Tamil culture this constellation is associated with Lord Murugan who was raised by six sisters and thus came to be known as Kārtikeyan, in Sanskrit he is known as Skanda.

The Krittikas/Pleiades were also supposedly responsible for the creation of certain demon entities (grahas) constituted by the menstrual fluid or "Rajasa essence" of the goddesses Ganga, Uma

and Krittika. These 'demons' afflicted infants according to the Ayurvedic text.

"The nine presiding deities of the nine diseases of infant life are all possessed of ethereal frames, divine effulgence and specific sex-distinction of their own. They were created by the gods Agni, Mahadeva and the goddesses Krittika and Uma...

Of these Grahas the females are considered as originally made of the Rajasa essence of the Goddesses Ganga, Uma and Krittika." (Sushruta Samhita, Vol III, 1963, P 161)

Is there a masculine bias here??? Whatever biases, there was considerable activity in the heavens influencing the female body.

Nur Yalman wrote one of the first detailed anthropological studies of menstruation and the pollution taboo practiced among the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). Yalman observed that at the time of menarche, a different horoscope was charted for the newly menstruating girl. He claims that two measures were taken as soon as it is known that a girl has menstruated. The exact time of the first beginning of the periods was noted, and the girl was secluded in a chamber. The father or some other reliable person, goes to a specialist astrologer who draws up a horoscope of the girl. The new horoscope, drawn upon the beginning of menstruation

supersedes the birth-horoscope of women. “It is, as it were, a new life that they are beginning. Men have only one horoscope.” (Yalman)

An understanding of woman’s bodily cycles as a part of a pattern of cosmic rhythms is implicit in the practice of drawing a new horoscope superseding her natal one. The motif of rebirth, mentioned here, is the primary focus of male puberty rites. The custom of charting a second horoscope at the onset of menstruation conceptualizes the young woman, not as earthy—a fertile field to be sown with patrilineal seed—but as cosmically connected. The physiological processes in her body resonate with heavenly significance—an expansive understanding of female cycles.

Menstrual Pads and ‘Development’

An anthropologist once asked me for help with finding positive aspects of Indian menstruation traditions. Her friend was working with women in Tamil Nadu on an income generation project making menstrual pads—and she had found women’s attitudes and traditions about menstruation were totally negative. She wanted to learn if there was anything positive in Indian menstrual customs.

Likewise a Canadian friend, a skilled homebirth midwife, had been working in Indonesia helping birth babies in a rural clinic serving the poor. She had also helped their effort to make menstrual pads for women who reportedly had the custom of sitting on straw mats in their huts during their periods. She mentioned this on Facebook and everyone let out a collective cyber gasp applauding her efforts.

Now my purpose here is not to champion the traditional handling of menstrual blood in Tamil Nadu, Indonesia nor anywhere else. Rather it is to foreground the indigenous contexts and belief systems which underlie such practices.

The project of 'development' is changing, and homogenizing cultures throughout the world. Women are custodians of culture—and I suppose now days they are wearing bras and menstrual pads—if they have money and resources. Babies are wearing disposable diapers. Pampers, pads and tampons may be liberating women but they are also stuffing landfills. Menstrual blood and baby poop no longer return to and nourish the earth.

One of the problems some NGOs in India have encountered when converting women to re-usable cotton pads is their washing and drying. Traditionally women are considered especially vulnerable during the times of menstruation, childbirth and postpartum. The body (and the psyche—in this paradigm they are one) is open,

blood is flowing and special protection is needed. The fear is 'spirit attack' or the evil eye. One NGO found that women hesitated to hang their washed menstrual cloths out in the sun because of this inherited sensibility—so they put the cloths in the space between the mattress and the charpoy to dry—much to the chagrin of those who were trying to teach them about menstrual hygiene. These progressive activists, or those who trained them, were not aware of the cultural trope of vulnerability, of blood (or cloth used to hold blood) being very attractive to bad spirits or the evil eye of other people.

Another problem is the lack of cotton cloth for menstrual or postpartum use. I recognized this as a problem in one area of Jharkhand where many people are *very* poor. Throughout India and among all classes, women used to use old and torn cotton saris for menstrual or postpartum use—to soak up the blood. Now, with the shift to wearing mass manufactured polyester saris, women have no access to fabric for these uses. This is a good example of a holistic and ecological custom being overridden by the centralized production and marketing of a non-biodegradable single-use fabric.

The Devi's Red Dress

A different take on menstruation comes from the *Brhaddharma Purana.* This story about the origins of Ganesh is an example of what I call 'mythic anatomy and physiology.' The Devi, Parvati, desires a child and finally Shiva succumbs to her desires. O'Flaherty translates

"When Sankara saw how sad the Goddess was, he said to her, 'How can you be so sad just because you lack a son, beautiful goddess? If you want to kiss the face of a son all over, I will make a son for you, kiss him if you yearn to do so'. As he said this Shiva pulled at the gown of the daughter of the mountain and made a son with that fabric, and then Shiva said 'Daughter of the mountain, take your son and kiss him as much as you wish.' Parvati said, 'How can this piece of cloth be the source of a son for me? This is my red dress. Stop teasing me, great lord Shiva; I do not have the mentality of a common beast. How shall I rejoice in a son obtained by means of a piece of cloth?' But when she had said this, the Goddess born of the mountain made the cloth into the shape of a son, and she held him to her breast, brooding upon the teasing words of her husband.

And when that cloth in the form of a son had touched the breast of the Goddess, it came to life and fell from her breast and it quivered and quickened. As she saw it quickening, Parvati cried out, 'Live, live', and she caressed it with the two lotuses which she held in her hands. Then the boy came to life, getting his life's breath at that very moment and he made Parvati rejoice as he cried out indistinctly, 'Mama! Mama!'

The goddess took the little boy and was filled with maternal love; she held him to her breast and gave him her breasts to suck, and milk flowed from her breasts.

After she had embraced him, she gave the beautiful little boy to her husband, the great lord, and said, 'Husband, take my son. [Shiva says] What is this miracle? Give him to me and let me see; he has indeed become a real son, but his body was made out of cloth; whence did life enter him?'..."

This narrative is a subtle reference to the connection between menstruation and babies. Ganesh's origin is attributed to Parvati's red dress—the red cloth bloodied by menstrual fluid. The story itself and the words of Shiva assign the central power of baby making, of creation, to Parvati. Her desire for a child, menstrual blood, affection and the milk from her breasts combine to create the infant, Ganesh, not male "seed."

Sjoo and Mor point out that women's menstrual blood always was and is the essence of the creative power of the Great Mother. Blood is the mystical life force spiraling throughout the cosmos, nourishing the universe, sustaining its manifestations and dissolutions. Parvati can be viewed as the "Great Mother" or Supreme Creatrix in the process of being spousified, eroticized and maternalized in this Purana.

The supremacy of Devi, the feminine principle, as beyond all dualisms including that of male and female is made explicit in

Shaktic and Tantric philosophy, rites and texts. In the Devi Gita section of the Devibhagavata, the Devi speaks, defining herself.

"Oh king of the mountains, it was I who existed before the days of creation, and there was nothing beyond me... My original form is beyond inference, beyond end, beyond illustration and even beyond the concepts of life and death. I am identical with my energy called maya. This maya is neither sat (existent) neither asat (non-existent), nor a combination of both; it is beyond all these that exist until the final end. This maya which is my inherent perpetual energy is like the heat of the fire, rays of the sun and light of the moon.... this maya of mine is variously called tapas, tamas, jada, jnana, pradhana, prakrit, sakti, aja."

Etymological connections exist between our English words matter, material, matrix and mother. Often Brahmanic and Upanishadic mysticism, and their contemporary interpreters, turn away from the 'maya' of matter, naming it as illusion or delusion—aiming upwards for transcendence, nirvana or escape. The project of reclaiming the value of female heritages is the re-valuation of the material world. Or as my friend Vidya says "beloved maya."

Beloved Maya Menstruates

In many parts of agricultural India the fields lay fallow during monsoon, they were not worked or ploughed. Mother Earth (Dharti Ma) was analogized with the menstruating woman. Both earth and woman needed to rest, recoup, renew, in order to continue the work of fertility

N.N. Bhattacharyya lists some examples of beliefs and practices concerning menstruating earth-goddesses. In the Punjab, Mother Earth sleeps for a week in each month. In the Deccan, after the Navratra, her temple is closed from the tenth day to the day of the full moon while she rests and refreshes herself. In Malabar, She rests during the hot weather until she gets the first shower of rain. In many parts of India great importance is attached to the menstruation of Parvati.

But the menstruation of the Goddess has been most highlighted and ritualized in the Shaktic areas of Northeast India. At the temple complex of Kamakhya, five kilometers from Gauhati, the capital of Assam, the yearly celebration of the menstruation of the goddess is held during the monsoon when the Brahmaputra River is in spate. During that time the Ambubachi Mela is held when the Goddess, the earth and the devotees are all understood to be menstruating and observing menstrual 'pollution'. The blood of

menstruation is, or was, connected to the blood of animal sacrifice ritually practiced at Kamakhya.

A map given to me years ago of Kamakhya outlining places of interest

Kamakhya, also called Kamarupa meaning “the form or shape of love or desire,” is the most important Shakti Peeth where the goddess is worshiped in both her maternal and erotic roles. There is no idol of the deity in the Garbha griha of the temple. She is worshiped in the form of a yoni-like stone over which a natural spring flows.

Kamakhya, the place, is known as the origin and homeland of Tantra; the Yogini Kaula school of Matsyendranatha. This siddha or sage lived in about the year 900 and was most important for in the development of early Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. He is said to have received esoteric knowledge in Kamarupa while living among the many powerful female yoginis who resided there. Keith Urban writes that the term yogini often used here has multiple meanings, ranging from human female practitioners of yoga to powerful and frightening female deities who are worshipped with blood, meat, and wine in secret Tantric ritual.

Urban also emphasizes that the Assamese tradition of Yogini Tantra is the result of a complex negotiation between the many indigenous traditions of the northeast and the Sanskritic, Brahmanic traditions from North India.

Shakti practitioners worship the divine female principle, the immanent power of the absolute, in forms such as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Tripurasundari, Bhairavi, and local variations. According to one estimate, 51 Shakti Peeths are strewn across the geographical length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent. Mythology, text and pilgrimage customs weave together many of these sacred sites in the narrative of the grieving Shiva who flew through the skies in anguish at the death of his beloved Sati,

dropping her body parts on to the earth. Kamakhya is the place, the Peeth where her yoni fell.

I first learned of this Puranic story involves Sati's transgressions of both patriarchal and sacrificial convention at our mountain house in Landour, Mussoorie overlooking Seer Kanda Devi, where her head supposedly fell. Sati or Parvati had returned to her natal home on the occasion of a yagna (ritual sacrifice) performed by her father Dakshin, even though she and Shiva had not been invited. When her father, who never accepted Shiva, publicly humiliated her beloved Shiva at the ritual, Sati immolated herself in the sacrificial fire, not only killing herself but also, in terms of laws of purity and pollution, desecrating it. The Devi, in the form we know as Sati, defied her father in her choice of husband and spoiled the Vedic sacrifice, literally, by polluting the yagna with her body.

Devotees believe that the during the monsoon rains the creative and nurturing power of the 'menses' of Mother Earth becomes accessible at Kamakhya. And, in keeping with customary women's menstrual seclusion, the Kamakhya mandir is closed to worshippers. Devotees, male and female, observe similar restrictions - not cooking, not performing puja or reading holy books; all the prohibitions a menstruating woman would follow.

When the temple is reopened, Prasad, a part of the 'food' that has been offered to the goddess, was distributed in two forms. Angadhak (literally the fluid part of the body) is water from the spring. And angabastra (literally the cloth covering the body—a piece of the red cloth that covered the stone yoni during her menstruation). Both earth body and female body processes are represented as profoundly sacred during this ritual that is mimetic of female biological process. Of course, currently all this reference to female bleeding is being cleaned up.

Some scholars think that the Brahman authors of Puranic texts executed the narrative of Sati's body parts falling in disparate geographical places in order to incorporate local legend, sacred sites and rites into a dominant Hindu mythology and geography. Scholarly debates aside, when I went to Kamakhya many years ago, the 300,000 or so pilgrims who journeyed there to observe the Ambubachi mela were an eclectic mix of householders and saints, converging to honor the goddess during her bleeding. Sanyasins, black clad Agoras, the Khade-babas, the Baul or singing minstrels of West Bengal, intellectual and folk Tantriks, Sadhus and Sadvis with long matted hair were all ensconced within the temple compound. Blouse-less, impoverished widows and others, particularly women, journeyed from Bengal, Orissa and Bihar on special bogeys attached to many trains headed for Gauhati.

The festival of Raja Parba, celebrated in costal Orissa, is another celebration of menstruation and monsoon. Here it is the sea, rather than the river that is assumed to be menstruating along with earth and woman. Marglin in her book Rhythms of Life: Enacting the World with the Goddesses of Orissa writes of the celebration as it occurred there. She notes that the festival, Raja Parba (raja meaning menses, and parba meaning festival), is celebrated in villages in the coastal district of Orissa by all castes (including so-called untouchable castes), with the exception of Brahmins. It takes place once a year in mid-June, when the monsoon rains make their first appearance, the earth and the Goddess and the sea are said to be menstruating for three days. According to Marglin, this festival is most important and largest of the year for the villagers of this region.

Marglin emphasizes that in spite of the ritual limitations of the behavior of menstruating women for her informants in costal Orissa, the bleeding is spoken of as an *action* of theirs, not something imposed on them from outside. "The earth and women bleed as an act, it is not something that happens to them." This active voice is similar to the active language in our birthing data like 'giving' the pains of childbirth—no mention of suffering the pains and being passive.

During this festival girls and women take over public spaces in the villages, swinging on gaily decorated swings, while men of the village camp out collectively, sleeping and eating together elsewhere for the four days of the festival. Raja Parba is observed across religious lines. Marglin quotes a Muslim farmer who claimed that we give rest to the land, the bullocks and to men. It is the way people do, it is a custom.... The people stop work. He spoke that "If we cultivate at that time people will surely feel bad...there is nothing in our book about the earth menstruating...but this earth is Mother; only because of that do we give rest to her."

Ingesting Menstrual Blood

Both scholars Frederique Marglin and Wendy Doniger refer to Tantric texts in which menstrual blood is consumed ritually. Kristin Hanssen presented a paper at an American Anthropological Association Meeting – "Why Menstrual Blood Should Be Ingested; on notions of health and bodily fluids in Bengal." She reported on reports from her informants, low caste Baul singers who shared their practice and beliefs about ingesting menstrual blood.

I first heard of the 'ingesting' of bodily substances from one dai in Rajasthan who told us during a Matrika workshop that she made

the newborn lick the placenta—saying that this protected the neonate from respiratory diseases. Of course cow urine was known to have medicinal properties. Former Prime Minister of India Moraji Desai, who lived well into his 90's, was considered rather eccentric for consuming his own urine.

Now we know that stem cells are also found in menstrual blood. Universities and the biomedical industry are investing billions of dollars to research and patent stem cell medicine. It appears that menstrual blood stem cells are more effective than umbilical cord stem cells. Menstrual blood stem cells (also called "endometrial stem cells" or "endometrial regenerative cells") come from the lining of the uterus, and are one of the most dynamic tissues in the body. Every four weeks the endometrial lining grows a new network of connective tissue and blood vessels that can support the growth of a child --a biologically incredible feat. No other tissue in the adult body has this kind of growth potential. If pregnancy does not occur, these cells are shed via menstrual blood and the process starts over, month after month for 40 years or so. It seems that the pre-modern activities of ingesting menstrual fluid and making the newborn lick the placenta converge with the postmodern science of stem cell therapy!

Chapter 3

Pollution: Both Caste and Gender are Untouchable

Both outcaste people and women at the time of menstruation and postpartum share the category of 'untouchable' or polluted. In 1992 I interviewed an older, wealthy Delhi woman originally from Amritsar. She shared the experience of her mother being 'touched by the sweeper,' that is menstruating.

"I am one of eight children. In those days people had big families and women had lots of work. Only on the days she was menstruating could the woman rest. When she had her periods they'd say she was 'touched by the sweeper'—that's how they'd explain it to us as young children. The woman would be secluded, sitting separately on a cot, doing nothing—neither kitchen work, nor children's work. How I hated not being able to be touched by my mother, not to sit in her lap or be held by her! I was very naughty. I'd touch her cot and say "Now I am also chhu jana (untouchable- impure)."

On the third day she'd have a bath. My mother made a big production out of it. She wouldn't touch anything, but would

call me or one of my sisters to prepare the bath. I'd burn incense in the bathroom and arrange the wooden platforms and the partition, separating her from me. Then I'd take out her clothes and change her sheets. Things that couldn't be washed like the razai and mattress were put in the sun. Tubs of hot and cold water were put in the bathroom and a glass of milk. I'd pour the water into her mug across the partition. I had to be sure not to touch her or even allow my mug to touch her mug. She'd wash, rinse with milk and then I'd pour a balti of water over her. Her mug had to be washed with ash and put in the sun to dry. Then I'd heave a sigh of relief that now I could again touch Bibiji and get things done by her. I didn't like all this at all. I thought. "When I grow up I will never do this (she speaks intensely). I'll never believe in this chhu chhat."

Both women and Dalits have opposed the custom and practice of 'pollution'. Here I highlight the skill, practice and knowledge of the body held by low and outcaste women who attend birth as well as heal. I am not denying the oppressive aspects of the social categories reflected in the term Dalit, meaning 'broken' or oppressed, nor the humiliation and exclusion of women from the

spiritual at the height of their bodily power. Rather I am attempting to place another interpretation and valuation of this bodily social space and those who negotiate it, both outcaste and women.

In modern discourse the concepts of 'untouchability', and 'pollution' have been *only* associated with structures and spaces of hierarchy and oppression. Louis Dumont, in his classic Orientalist work, Homo Hierachicus, identified only the hierarchical aspects and structure of caste. His hierarchical model of caste (Brahmins were the 'pure', thus highest and Dalit or untouchable were 'impure' thus the lowest—outcaste) has dominated historical, sociological and anthropological studies of India for a century.

Anthropologist Frederique Apffel-Marglin disagrees with Dumont's theorizing and points out that the categories of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness have, under the hierarchical paradigm, been wrongly put together with those of purity and impurity. She differentiates these categories and points out that the terms *auspiciousness* and *inauspiciousness* speak of different values and a different sort of power. Purity and pollution as Dumont interpreted them are inherently hierarchical. But auspiciousness and inauspiciousness refer to a non-hierarchical power.

My experience of twenty-five years of fieldwork supports Apffel-Marglin's assertion. Childbirth IS considered an auspicious event—even though a 'polluted' one, not really a paradox. When it is a matter of regenerating life (childbirth) those at the lower end are foregrounded and needed by all, including the Brahmins who are at those moments out of the picture and helpless. During recent research in Jharkhand, the *dais'* stated that they are sometimes called to the wedding of a child whom they have helped birth—and gifted a sari. They have been instrumental in the auspiciousness of the child's birth and must be honored during the wedding so the auspicious gift of fertility will be passed on to the next generation. They are not 'pure' but the work that they do is 'auspicious'—whatever caste they are serving!

A Japanese researcher Yasumasa Sekine (2002:16) also rejects the 'Homo Hierarchicus' theory. Sekine, drawing upon fieldwork in a South Indian village, asserts that in the "pure-impure" ideology polluted phenomena are only seen as objects of "repression and rejection." He argues that the very marginal nature of pollution makes it a creative space that is a space with hidden potential for decentralization. Then it is possible to radically change one's own sense of order through encounters with others.

Sekine views pollution indicating a chaotic situation that destroys the conventional order. Sites of pollution require a renewal of the

social order. This 'chaotic situation' is the site for the power and practice of Dalit peoples—those who can negotiate the chaos of body and spirit presences.

A notice for a conference on South Asian traditional medicine held by the Center for Developing Societies, acknowledged the often-outcaste status of some popular health care practitioners. The announcement states that "*Dais* or midwives provide treatment mainly for women, particularly pregnant women and children. Their subordination is heightened by their gender. They are the 'wise women' who may at times be accused of exerting malign power or witchcraft... Groups that are otherwise despised or outcaste, such as low caste surgeons, midwives, itinerant medicine sellers or tribal practitioners, often enjoys a healing reputation."

Those who live, or have lived at the lower end of power hierarchies have not written 'history.' People whose lives have been in great part determined by those who wield political, social, economic influence. At the same time these often 'powerless' people have acted and possessed their own agency and possess and pass on their own skills, knowledge and stories...like the dais.

In any case we cannot restrict understandings of pollution customs and taboos to readings from the sacred texts that limit, sequester, and define as 'dirty' female bleeding. These texts,

however, do elaborate on contaminating states and do so explicitly and graphically.

Priestly Texts: Biblical and Brahmanical

Brahmanical and Biblical priestly texts speak similarly on women's menstrual and birth pollution. The Book of Leviticus, in the Old Testament of the Bible, is a foundational text of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. The Old Testament Bible is one textual and historical authority accepted by Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all distinguished by a belief in one God. The Leviticus chapter of the Old Testament details the instructions relating to the impurity of women during menstruation and postpartum.

"If a woman has a discharge, and the discharge from her body is blood, she shall be set apart seven days; and whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. Everything that she lies on during her impurity shall be unclean; also everything that she sits on shall be unclean."

Although in Leviticus there are many occasions for becoming unclean, the longest lasting state of impurity is caused by childbirth. Interestingly, birth of a male child renders a woman impure for seven days whereas birth of a female is fourteen days. The mother must avoid the realm of the holy for 33 days for a male

newborn and 66 for a female. Zoroaster had menstruating women punished for approaching either fire or water. St. Jerome wrote "Nothing is so unclean as a woman in her periods, what she touches she causes to become unclean." From the 8th to the 11th Centuries many church laws denied any menstruating woman access to church buildings.

The Hindu texts resemble Biblical notions of the impurity of female blood. N.N. Bhattacharyya synthesizes the taboo from the Vedic Grhyasutras, Puranas and Smritis. In these texts, women's state of impurity is measured by caste categories.

"When a woman is in this state of impurity, scriptures must not be recited before her; she should not be seen or touched by one who has retired from family life or by a Brahman engaged in dinner. On the first day of her courses she must be treated as a Candali, on the second day as a bramaghatini and on the third day as a rajaki. The first and third terms are denotative of women who belong to the lowest castes while the second is of one who has killed a Brahman."

We will talk more about the menstruating woman as a Brahmin murderer later in this chapter. I first learned of this narrative connection in an anthropological work *Dangerous Wives and Sacred*

Sisters by a friend Lynn Bennett. She also personally shared that while she was doing fieldwork in Nepal and living with a village family, when she started her period, she would be sent down to stay with the cows. Her husband would then toss down her sleeping bag to ensure a more comfortable stay!

From the Dharmashastra we learn about more such restrictions.

"For month by month the menstrual excretion takes away her sins. A woman in her courses is impure during three days and nights.... she shall not apply collyrium to her eyes, nor anoint her body, nor bathe in water: she shall sleep on the ground; she shall not sleep in the daytime, nor touch the fire nor make a rope, nor clean her teeth, nor eat meat, nor look at the planets, nor smile, nor busy herself with household affairs, nor run."

The Vashistha Samhita gives the mythic rationale of Indra killing Vritra for all these definitions and prohibitions.

"For it has been declared in the Veda, 'When Indra had slain Vritra the three-headed son of Tvashtri, he was seized by Sin, and he considered himself to be tainted with exceedingly great guilt. All beings said to him 'O thou slayer of a learned Brahman! He ran to the women for protection and said to them, 'Take upon yourselves the third part of this my guilt caused by the murder of a learned Brahman.' "

Some bargaining then takes place between Indra and the women:

"'What shall we have for doing thy wish?' He replied, 'Choose a boon.' They said, 'Let us obtain offspring if our husbands approach us during the proper season, at pleasure let us dwell with our husbands until our children are born...Then they took upon themselves the third part of his guilt. That guilt appears every month as the menstrual flow."

Origins of the menstrual taboo in the Rig Veda

The texts state that women took upon themselves a part of Indra's guilt for slaying Vritra which appears every month as the menstrual flow. And in exchange they receive the 'boon' of getting to live with their husbands and bear children. Some would point out that this is definitely a text written by men, patriarchs in fact.

Now why should women menstruating be linked to the murder of a Brahman, and a strange one like Vritra at that? What or who was being killed? And why?

In the Rig Veda Indra's slaying of Vritra (or the Vritras) is referred to over 100 times. Most Vedic scholars agree that this killing is the central dramatic event in India's oldest existing text. Everyone gets to read and interpret the Rig Veda, the earliest 'Hindu' text, in his or her own way. For over two millennia the Rig Veda has been commented on and reworked in subsequent texts. I am curious by nature and set about to investigate this question of the origins of the menstrual taboo myself at Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies with a Jesuit Vedic Sanskritist as my guide.

Vritra is depicted as the withholder of the waters, the demon of droughts, a snake or dragon-like figure who dwells in the rivers or celestial waters, or in a cavern in the earth. The literal meaning of Vritra is concealing-covering-hiding-protecting. He lives in the caves with the cows. Indra kills Vritra with his thunderbolt, thus releasing the waters, the cows, and wealth, prosperity, and progeny.

The women and cow conflation that saturates Hindu imagery and concept started with the Rig Veda. Critical literature recognizes the marginality of women in the Rig Veda. J. Gonda acknowledged that women are a rare subject and that they are

mainly mentioned in metaphors and, as a collectivity, in similes. One of those similes was cows, which along with women were the booty of battle during those cattle and women raiding times.

Wendy Doniger categorically stated that The Rig Veda is a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men; one of these concerns is women, who appear throughout the hymns as objects, though seldom as subjects. In the Rig Vedic text Indra, himself speaks on women: "Indra himself hath said, the mind of woman brooks not discipline, Her intellect hath little weight" (RV VIII 33.17). Ironically this aphorism is put in the mouth of a heroic warrior known neither for his intellect nor his self-discipline.

The Rig Vedic Vritra, although a 'brahman', is a demon, dasa, and magician or priest. He exercises the power of 'maya,' magic or illusion. Is it a coincidence that in later texts Devi is supreme Maya? Shaktic texts valorize Maya. However, both Gautama the Buddha's mother Mahamaya and Indra's mother die soon after giving birth, as mentioned in the Yoni chapter. Is Maya somehow related to the magic and sacredness of birth giving?

Rhythms

Menstrual taboos have involved both sequestering women as well as shaping cultural notions of time and rhythm. We have seen how woman's monthly bleeding was a cyclical and powerful

marker of nature's rhythms. Interpretations of these sacred cycles at times entailed women being kept separate from other rhythms. In some areas of India craftswomen were not allowed to use certain tools that involved rhythmic motion: the lathe, the loom, and the wheel. Women, in contrast to men, experience a rhythmic cycling of the body, the menses.

Bharatnatyam dancers in Tamil Nadu may or may not observe the traditional taboo against dancing while menstruating, according to Anne-Marie Gaston in her article "Dance and the Hindu Woman." However, if they do perform during this time they will usually refrain from doing puja to the Nataraja. Also there is the prohibition against touching the talam (metal cymbals) or tattukalli (block of wood struck with a wooden stick). The rhythms of these instruments may have been kept separate from the rhythms of the female body.

Notions of time and rhythm, the seasonality of the earth body and the bleeding patterns of the female body were a part of traditional psyche and social behavior. There are many ways to interpret these occupational limitations. One is the oppressive aspect: gender bias, pure and simple. Another is protection; female rhythms must not be disturbed by other rhythms and rhythmic activities. The woman weaver, dancer, musician might be entitled to rest during the first few days of her menses.

Women's Voices: The Cultural Code of Pollution

The custom of 'pollution' or 'chhu chhat' functions both to do patriarchal violence to women and to create inviolable spaces for femaleness and the female body to play out and 'speak.' Reams of writing is devoted to the oppressive characteristics of pollution but our modernist orientation prevents us from discerning wisdom, skill and gentler gender norms embedded in this idea of the 'polluted'.

Both Muslim and Hindu basti women described their experiences of the ritual impurity ascribed to women.

"In our religion without taking bath no body is purified. My Dadi used to give bath to both mother and child after six days, give them clean new clothes to wear, and call Kaji sahib to do the path. The sacred water is brought from the nearby masjid and sprinkled on them. Then that woman starts doing the household work. After feeding all the relatives the child's name was kept, Riyazuddin." (Sahana from Jehangirpuri)

"Women don't cook food in the kitchen because it's taboo, but they do the rest of housework. Both the menstruating woman and the one who has recently given birth are considered

untouchable. They can do household work, but can't enter the kitchen. The jachcha is considered polluted for a month and a quarter. I don't know why, but the elders consider it so."
(Kanta from Seemapuri)

Ritual impurity customs obviously have serious implications for the caste status of the dai. Not only are the signs of women's procreative power defined as defiling, but also the midwife herself remains in that state of 'pollution' whereas for the menstruating woman or new mother the state is temporary.

However much we valorize dais and 'tradition,' we must never forget the oppressive nature of caste. Ananya Vajpeyi, in writing 'The Sudra in History: From Scripture to Segregation,' tells us of the grief and pain of people receiving this kind of contempt-filled pronouncements through millennia. Vajpeyi claims that the link between the sudra and soka—grief, sorrow or suffering...is an abiding one in the Indian imagination of what it means to be of a low status, of humiliated communities. She also points out that through the ages 'truth' is an abiding value, and yet Satyakama, in his quest for Vedic learning must erase himself if he wants to learn.

*

Sociologist Veena Das acknowledged the cultural code of pollution while examining women's way of 'speaking' the unspeakable after the 1984 slaughter of innocent Sikhs at the time of Indira Gandhi's assassination. She compared Sikh widows' behavior having witnessed the horrific murders of their male kin to the response of Draupadi to her violation in the Mahabharata.

Das does not claim that the women devised a strategy or that this was a common female tactic carried into a political dimension. Instead she sees them as living out 'fragments of a myth' a part of an ancient cultural code or I would suggest, women 'speaking' the unspeakable. She described the women in Sultanpuri who sat in the posture of stillness, letting their bodies grow dirty and disheveled, refusing to comb their hair, thus defiantly as well as sorrowfully embodying pollution and dirt.... the women simply refused to present a clean facade.

She made a further linkage. To one schooled the cultural grammar of mourning, the women were presenting their bodies as evidence of their grievous loss...Das remembered the powerful figure of Draupadi in the Mahabharata, who had been disrobed in the court of Duryodhana when she was menstruating because her husband staked her in a gamble with the king. The text states that for 14 years she wore the same cloth stained by her blood and left her hair wild and uncombed. Das asserts that the Sikh widows had

unconsciously re-crafted the symbols of mourning. A question arises "How does the unspeakable 'speak'? I would suggest that the concept and practice of 'pollution' mask and at the same time 'speak' the power of female blood.

Female Blood Speaks: Narak

I had the good fortune of doing a workshop in Bihar, in an area where mica was mined, when I went for a short walk to clear my head. I was mulling over the meaning of 'narak' and saw that the earth was sparkling with a smattering of mica shining through amongst the dirt. I thought 'aha, narak.'

Another inkling of the meaning of 'narak' comes from a podcast that I listened to about how trees communicated with each other extensively through their roots underneath the earth. Again, what we thought was dull, lifeless dirt was indeed 'narak.' More evidence that the real meaning was not 'hell' but the underworld.

"Girls are considered holy before puberty. The marriage of a young girl, who has not yet menstruated, is performed with her sitting on her father's lap. After puberty the woman is considered unclean, and is unholy, because she bleeds, and this is narak." (Basmatia, Bihar)

I first learned this language, this 'speaking' when trying to decipher the meanings behind the dais' use of the word 'narak' in talking about menstruation and their birth work. These quotes came to us in 1998 while we were doing Matrika workshops.

"On Chhati day the Narak time ends. The dai checks if the umbilical cord of the baby has fallen off. Then she bathes the baby and beats a thaali. Then the woman is bathed and she wears new clothes. The dai cleans the room where the birth took place and the woman was kept separately for six days." (Saubatia, Bihar)

"We make the woman stand and the dai presses her belly with her head to help expel blood, the narak. This is black blood—in this way the nine months stored blood comes out. If it is not done then the belly looks swollen as if there is a baby inside and the bleeding continues for a month." (Keevni, Rajasthan)

Although often translated as hell or demonic place, narak can be understood as the site and energy of the unseen inner world—of the generative earth and female body. Narak connotes dirt, but also signifies the fertility or fruitful potential of the underground, the unseen. What we call "pollution taboos" are related to narak. Women don't go to mandir, mosque, church or gurdwara, nor do

they read holy books, recite mantras, do puja or other personal or public worship because they are unclean.

Dais, however, speak very differently than the pundit and religious texts about narak. To her the placenta, the ultimate polluting substance to caste Hindus or the 'twice born,' is spoken of reverently as another mother of the baby. Both caste and gender are implicated in concepts of narak. Those who handle polluted bodily substances are considered unclean. And strictly speaking even Brahmin women lose their caste status when menstruating. It is no coincidence that dais and those who cut the cord are mainly from low or outcaste communities.

During our MATRIKA research work the team adopted the dais' language of the opening body, the open body and the closing body for the birth time rather than labor, birth, postpartum. The dais' language focuses on the mother's body, not Latin or Sanskrit terms. Narak can be viewed as representing the open body. This is the time when the womb, the body and the psyche that are normally closed, are now open, and the female fluids of menstruation and lochia are flowing.

I suggest that 'narak' functions as an indigenous medical idea, providing a conceptual framework for a variety of non-invasive therapeutic interventions. Narak, signifying the inner world of the body that is invisible to the human eye, allows for gentle

techniques without violating the integrity of the body. Dais' holistic health modalities utilize touch (massage, pressure, manipulation) and natural resources (mud, baths and fomentation, herbs) and application of 'hot' and 'cold' (in food and drink, fomentation etc.) and isolation and protection (from social, domestic, maternal and sexual obligations). Certainly the concept of narak deserves our attention as not just signifying the dirty, unclean, polluted and superstitious, but encoding gentle and woman-friendly indigenous medical practices.

Ayurveda

Ayurvedic and naturopathic practitioners often employ low caste people to apply the hands-on therapies they prescribe. I was once called to a premier Ayurvedic hospital in Coimbatore to help them identify uniquely Tamil traditions surrounding childbirth. Although they handled the care of women pre-and post-birth, in the allopathic hospitals where women were giving birth there were far too many cesarean sections. I spent a few days on their lovely compound, where I would definitely go if I became terribly ill, and noticed that early in the morning a bevy of beige sari-clad therapists would walk to their various patients—to give the prescribed hands-on oil dripping or massage therapies. I knew that these women, or at least the older women of their families, would know much more about Tamil birth traditions than I ever

would. But when I mentioned this to the Ayurvedic doctor, I drew a blank look. Claiming these women 'knew' information that the Vaidyas didn't would reverse the power structure, not to mention caste hierarchy of the whole institution—inverting the pyramid of those who 'know.'

Today Ayurvedic and naturopathic curricula in teaching institutions rely heavily on the obstetric model of birth; perhaps other branches of alternative or indigenous medicine are less influenced by biomedicine. A woman vaidya told me that there had been no Ayurvedic initiative to train dais in the first 50 years of India's independence. Although Ayurvedic concepts can be used to analyze and validate dais' practice, gender and caste bias remains.

In ancient India hands-on medical practice rendered the physician polluted because the physician often used touch to diagnose. Magic or shape shifting was perhaps also practiced. According to scholar Sukumari Bhattachari, in the Mahabharata Indra objects to the Aswins (the divine physicians) partaking of the sacred Soma. Indra's objection was very clear: "you two roam about the earth, curing people and assuming different shapes, how can you claim a share of the sacrificial Soma?" The pollution of the sick, the active touch or surgery degraded them from the rank of true gods. Another Mahabharata passage says that offerings to a

Brahmin who practices medicine become pus and blood. Manu Smriti and the Vashistha Dharmashastra also exclude doctors from sacred ceremonies. Not only female bodily processes were polluted—doctoring was dirty as well.

This bias extended into the colonial period when women medical students had to battle against opposition from family and friends, against the low caste and polluting associations of the medical profession. The difficulty of attracting women as medical students was frequently mentioned in the reports of the Dufferin committees. The first medical graduates from Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras were an eclectic mixture of castes and communities, including Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Jews and Parsis. Only gradually did medicine become a respectable profession for women.

Rethinking Hell: The Underworld and Narak

Pollution and the demonic, or what is being expelled from the socially acceptable, swirl together—especially in written material, the priestly texts. These writings have exerted an inordinate influence in all realms of contemporary human thought, values and authority. As we destroy the environment and each other, it is relevant to look back. How did we get here? What have we left behind?

One conceptual tool for understanding indigenous epistemology is Triloka. Triloka has been variously translated as "three worlds," "three planes of existence," or "three realms." The three worlds not only refer to heaven, the mundane and underworld—they also resonate with the human body; the head, the trunk, and the genitals and legs. Because of bleeding and baby-making women carry the burden of being associated with the netherworld or narak.

Jains, Hindus and even Buddhists draw on a common store of these metaphysics—both anthropomorphic and abstract forms—the Loka Purusha. To attain the abode of Siddhis, enlightened ones who disengage from the karmic cycles of birth and rebirth, one leaves behind the hellish lokas and focuses on the upper lokas (or chakras). That metaphysics, of course, leaves out sex and procreation and valorize renunciation.

The Buddhist texts and teachings use a similar schema of the human body telling in great detail the sufferings of those who don't live according to dharma. "Yama's henchmen impale them through the heels and the anus with tridents of red-hot iron, until the prongs push out through the shoulders and the crown of the head." These are sufferings of samsara, the wheel or round of existence. One should not put one's trust in the apparent joys of samsara and the aim is being free from the 'great ocean of

suffering.' Unfortunately for us, women as birth givers are the conduits for such suffering.

'Hell' has not always been imaged as a site of pain and misery; in the same way narak has different meanings depending on who is mouthing the word. The English word 'hell' is derived from a goddess! Hel was the Norse queen of the underworld, perhaps a mother goddess in her netherworld form. She ruled over a fiery womb of regeneration. Her domain, unlike the Christian hell, which supposedly received its name from her, is simply an otherworld, a place between death and rebirth, of renewal, rather than a place of punishment and misery.

And dais do speak of narak, or this lower realm, in a variety of ways that differ radically from the teachings of the priests, pundits, lamas. Having a body, indeed having a baby, does leave one open to the experience of pain. Shakina Dai illustrates this embodied experience as she invokes both the Islamic Sayyids and the birth goddess Bemata.

"Look, sister, at the time of birth it's only the woman's Shakti. She who gives birth, at that time, her one foot is in heaven and the other, in hell (narak). The woman's Shakti is indeed a lot when she gives birth to a child. Before doing a birth, I get the woman to open all the trunks, doors and so on. I pray to the One above to open the knot quickly. I take off her sari, open her hair and take off any bangles or jewelry. I put the atta on a thaali and ask the woman to divide it into two equal parts. Also I get Rs.1.25 in the name of Sayyid kept separately. But mostly I remember Bemata. Repeated I pray to Bemata "O mother! Please open the knot quickly." (Shakina Dai, Muslim dai from Delhi)

Woman dividing one mound of atta into two

Pollution and Blood

As we have seen women's experiences of menstruation and postpartum are tabooed from the perspective of orthodoxies of the sacred. In the Old Testament animal sacrifice is put forward as provider of 'sacred blood'. Then in the New Testament Jesus' human body again becomes source of sacred blood. Whereas women are the ones who feed infants from their bodies, in

Christianity it is Jesus who feeds the congregation with his body in Holy Communion.

Whereas women shed the sacred blood of menstruation and birth, it is a sacrificial animal, and then Jesus, who are the source of holy blood. And in the Hindu texts the blood shed by the warrior does not carry the stigma of the 'polluted.' The warrior's blood is valorised, woman's is polluted. One Adivasi woman told me that women can't offer or participate in sacrifices. When I asked why not she replied "because woman herself is sacrifice, bleeding and giving a child is sacrifice."

Some would say that women's blood is categorized as impure because it can never be controlled—so the powers that be grant three days apart from the edifice of civilization, culture, religion. Blood was the excluded element, couldn't be tamed, domesticated; and also it partook of the demonic....out of control.

In the Mahabharata one episode relates how the sage Mankanaka was wounded with a blade of kusa grass and vegetable juice came out from the wound. Mankanaka danced with joy as his austerities had proved successful—there was no blood in him and blood symbolized natural man with his carnality. Shiva, at the insistence of the gods who disliked the sage's boastful behavior, touched one finger with another and ashes came out.

Although I used to associate this turn away from woman's bleeding with Brahmanism and the high civilizational, I no longer do so. In my many interactions with women over many years and in many places, I have never been exposed to such primal people as the Bondo and they definitely observe some separation of women who participate in birth, including of course the mother, from normal everyday life. The Bondos, at the time I visited, had no commerce, were unusually isolated and self-sufficient. They made their own clothes; occasionally bought a few pots and brass and bead ornaments from outside their villages. They did not use shoes or carry lanterns and had no means of transport. One woman told me

"When a woman enters into a house after the fluid comes out the women used to say 'Our spirit is different and your spirit is different.' She cannot give food to her guests, cannot climb up on the roof where they keep grain, cannot go into the field where they begin planting and harvesting until the ritual gupasing (the postpartum ritual observance) is done."

I have never heard such a succinct, elegant and accurate explanations for pollution taboos or confinement of women postpartum. "Our spirit is different" because one is moved/changed by participating in a birth.

Chapter 4

Coupling and Conception

I do not call this chapter marriage, or anything to do with marriage because having sex and the possibility of conceiving a new life, are facts of life and body, whereas marriage is a social institution. Women and men coupled and conceived, all over the world and in all times, without benefit of anything resembling our concepts of matrimony.

Many years ago my husband and I attended a party on a rooftop hosted by an accountant who kept the books for some NGOs. I distinctly remember one guest who headed up well-funded NGO in Bihar—he was speaking of some of the questionnaires they were using to learn about peoples' sexual lives. This was a time of great international pressures on Indians to limit their population growth. The gentleman was citing questions like 'how many times a week do you have sexual intercourse?' and 'do you use any birth control?' My husband, I remember, was aghast. He turned to the man and asked him 'and you sir, how many times a week do you yourself have sexual intercourse?' Implying that one shouldn't ask questions of others, no matter how poor or rural they were, if you are not ready to answer such interrogation yourself. Although I

was embarrassed by my husband's forthrightness, I totally agreed with him.

I relate this incident to provide a context for this chapter on coupling and conception. There are no women's voices quoted on their couplings and conceptions precisely because I, and the women and NGOs I worked with were interested in pregnancy and birth and postpartum and not sexual experience.

Many funders and NGOs, influenced by Western obsession with a population 'explosion' or an AIDs pandemic, were dominated by issues of population control, birth control or safe sex. There is a kind of 'flavor of the month or year'—birth control; AIDs; abortion; homosexual rights; male involvement and now it is 'institutional delivery for all'—Janani Suraksha Yojana. I have never done such research on sex and thus this chapter is not focused on women and men describing their sexual behavior.

On eroticism

Indian eroticism is overhyped globally. I attended an illustrated talk 'Women, Mythology and Eroticism' presented by a woman whose claim to fame was being the author of Kama Sutra for Women. I paraphrase her writing in that she claims acceptance of the erotic in Indian mythology is remarkable for its antiquity, boldness and complete absence of guilt. The origins of this erotic

tradition go back to the dawn of time, since Vedic cosmologies regarded desire as an essential component that would open doorways to eternity.

We all selectively use mythology and philosophy bits and pieces from ancient texts. This writer leaves out a lot in her valorization of Indian eroticism. She doesn't mention Indra's rape of Ushas in the Rig Veda, nor the popular recounting of the beheading of Renuka, by her son at the request of his father, for her pot having broken—indicating her desire for the handsome ghandarva whom she had glimpsed.

Scholar Devangana Desai emphasizes the caste and class status of the writers stating that the importance of the art of sex among the cultured and the rich led to the writing of many such Kamashastras.... "All this literature on the erotic was written for the wealthy...this interest of the upper classes was intensified by the social opportunity that they had to afford the company of many women.... the Kamasashtras were of great help with instructions on how to make artificial penis, aphrodisiacs, tonic medicines and methods for delayed ejaculations." It seems these Kama Shastras or Sutras were written by men and for wealthy men. That leaves most ancient Indians out.

After the writer's talk I wondered what about the possibility of getting pregnant while one is being 'erotic'? What about

pregnancy as the possible result of sexual intercourse? Hasn't this been a concern of women throughout the centuries? The seventeenth century poet and composer Ksetrayya penned a padam, *A Married Woman to Her Lover* acknowledging this concern as well as the fact that she had a lover beside her husband.

"Go find a root or something.

I have no girlfriends here I can trust.

When I swore at you, you didn't listen.

You said all my curses were blessings.

You grabbed me you bastard,

And had me by force.

I've now missed my period,

And my husband is not in town.

Go find a root or something

I have set myself up for blame.

What's the use of blaming you?

I've even lost my taste for food.

What can I do now?

Go to the midwives and get me a drug

Before the women begin to talk.

Go find me a root or something

As if he fell from the ceiling,

My husband is suddenly home.

He made love to me last night.

Now I fear no scandal."

And from the Gita Govindam Eighth Ashtapad we find an obviously sexual connotation of the 'vrata', the fast that we usually associate with a good wife sacrificing for her husband or sons. Rather it is sex that she has in her mind…evoking pleasure rather than penance or asceticism. "As if keeping a vrata for the joy of that embrace she made a bed of flowers whose sharp arrows were highly seductive…full of desire…"

Raheja and Gold in their chapter 'Sexuality, Fertility and Erotic Imagination' write of bawdy songs called Kesya sung in Rajasthan

that please Shitila who is more commonly associated with childhood diseases than sex.

"Kesya, your penis is a pipal tree's trunk,

Lover, your penis is a pipal tree's trunk.

And a prostitute's vagina is four acres wide..."

The Seductive Female

Female beauty is a part of the warp and woof of life in Indian cultures and traditions. I know this from the inside—my own abhorrence of having to dress up in silks and jewels for weddings and other such occasions. This just wasn't me! My mother, however, would have reveled in it. She was aghast at my spending my freshman year of college in cutoff jeans and tee shirts or in cold weather long jeans and sweatshirt. We considered ourselves thinkers, politically active and hardly concerned with the niceties of female beauty and fancy dress. We were, perhaps, trying to be, like the guys.

The seductress, beauteous and irresistible, gets a lot of play in the Indian imagination. The erotic cavorting of Radha and Krishna emphasizes the role of Radha as the embodiment of *sringara rasa*, but gets overlaid with spiritual meanings. But many of the other

female figures are dreaded: poison girl, churel, yakshi, dakini. I wonder whether this dread is part and parcel of harnessing male desire in the service of the patriline.

The process of sucking out the fluids of the body is attributed not only to seductive human females, but also to many mythic females whose favorite food is ritual menstrual blood and 'the seed of bodily conception.' According to Doniger O'Flaherty these harpies eat both the stuff of birth and the stuff of death; when someone dies, 'the Dakinis attach themselves to the body and suck up the person's breath, drink his blood and steal away his life'

But these interpretations miss the holistic significance of the Dakini. Part of reading through religious texts and mythic images, like the Dakini involves the recognition that seeming polar oppositions of bad and good, or even birth and death do not really exist. Just as the seemingly 'mad' female saints like Akka Mahadevi and Lal Ded ran around naked in total opposition to norms of female behavior, so also the birth goddesses such as Bemata and Shashti Ma, are responsible not only for getting the baby born, but also if something goes wrong and the baby or mother die, then they, not the midwife, are culpable. This is an image of the complete female, not bad or good, not mother or whore, but simply whole.

In the extreme of the seductive females were the Vish Kanya or Poison Girls who were young women used as assassins against powerful enemies during the Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE). Their blood was purportedly poisonous to other humans and this was mentioned in the ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, the Arthashastra. Vish Kanya were used by kings to destroy enemies. The girls were made poisonous by exposing them to a dose of low-intensity poison from a very young age, a practice referred to as mithridatism. Although many of them would die, those that did not developed immunity and their bodily fluids became "poisoned" and poisonous; sexual contact would be lethal to the enemies who captured and had sex with them.

On Marriage

Before I ever came to India, and was merely besotted with my very sensual and sexual husband, I read an article in the New Yorker by Ved Mehta (1976) the section subtitled Nonviolence: Brahmacharya and Goat's Milk. Mehta quoted Gandhiji's autobiography extensively and for the first time I was exposed to notions of Indian asceticism and renunciation, the withholding of semen as a heroic act of spiritual masculinity.

According to Gandhi's autobiography an incident occurred in 1885 when he was sixteen and had been married for three years.

Kasturbai, his wife was then in an advanced stage of pregnancy. Gandhi wrote that

"The dreadful night came…It was 10:30 or 11 pm I was giving the massage (to his father). My uncle offered to relieve me. I was glad and went straight to the bedroom. My wife, poor thing, was fast asleep….I woke her up. In five or six minutes, however, the servant knocked at the door. I started with alarm. "Get up," he said…

"What is the matter?" …"Father is no more"…

I felt deeply ashamed and miserable. I ran to my father's room. I saw that, if animal passion had not blinded me, I should have been spared the torture of separation from my father during his last moments and he would have died in my arms…The shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father's death …It took me long to get free from the shackles of lust…"

It wasn't only fear of pregnancy that hampered women's enjoyment of sex. Some men also viewed family obligations as above 'carnal' desires.

Rig Veda and Female Blood of Defloration

In my Sunday morning newspaper, Times of India Matrimonial Section, I read the usual and totally ahistorical drivel about the sacredness of marriage and invoking the Rig Veda as authority.

"The Rig Veda maintains that the family is the hub of spirituality and the woman is at the heart of this structure..."

Many folks think that corruptions entered 'Hinduism' through the millennia and that ancient India was a glorious and egalitarian place. Women scholars have debunked this idea about the golden Vedic age and how it was so pro-woman. Attempting to reclaim the Vedas and perceive India as more enlightened in ancient times resulted from British propaganda that critiqued Indian traditions, their barbarism, ritualism and particularly child marriage and sati. Of course this was not motivated by any kindhearted feeling for women—rather it served as a propagandist justification for colonial superiority and hegemony.

However, we can retrieve some pretty grim stuff from the Rig Veda. In the Rig Veda there is one veiled but highly charged reference to female sexual blood – not menstrual blood, but the blood of defloration. The divine prototype for patriarchal marriages is found in a passage referred to as 'Suryaa's

Bridal'. Here Suryaa, the daughter of Surya, the sun, is wed to Soma. Of interest is the personification of female blood—its danger, power and threat (RV 10:85) read: May happiness be fated for you here through your progeny.

Watch over this house as mistress. Mingle your body with that of your husband...

The purple and red appears, a magic spirit; [Griffith translates 'fiend'] the stain is imprinted...

Throw away the gown, and distribute wealth to the priests. It becomes a magic spirit walking on feet, and like the wife it draws near the husband.

The body becomes ugly and sinisterly pale, if the husband with evil desire covers his sexual limb with his wife's robe...

It burns, it bites, and it has claws as dangerous a poison is to eat. Only the priest who knows the Surya hymn is able to receive the bridal gown." (RV 10:85:27:30, 34-35) trans O'Flaherty

These verses relate to the defloration of the bride and the staining of the bridal gown with her blood. This blood becomes a magic

spirit, potent and dangerous though not necessarily evil; the defloration is an auspicious event but too powerful to allow its emblem to remain present afterwards.

Julia Leslie's *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* traces the historical transformation of female blood from mystical-magical to polluted-magical. In later texts the valence of female sexual blood has changed from mystical-magical to polluted-magical. The role of ritual scapegoat shifts. The person dealing with and containing the power of women's sexual blood changes from the priest to the midwife. The dai or the dhobin acquires the ritual function of absorbing the power of the blood. Importantly the change is paralleled by a shift in characterization of female blood from mystical-powerful to polluting-powerful

Seed

Concerns of the patriarchy and the patriline in the Indian context differ radically from the Marxism of Engels where the focus was on family, private property and the state. In many Marxist analyses the sequestering and 'purity' of women was important because men needed to know who their offspring were so that property could be passed on to legitimate heirs.

In the Indian textual traditions and still alive in many minds, customs and concerns of today are the importance of

women/mothers incarnating, or re-incarnating the male forefathers. Of course, the pitrs and not the matrs need to be incarnated and are honored during the period of Shrada or Pitrapaksh. Clarity of lines of descent is critical to ritual ancestor supplication and worship. In the Brahmanas and Upanishads the idea of the non-duality of father and son continued from the Vedas and is identified with the *atman.*

"The self (of the father) is born as the self (of the son). The husband enters the wife, becoming an embryo. In her he becomes once again and is born in the tenth month." AitBr VII. 13

From every limb of mine you come! Right from my heart you are born forth! You are myself (atman). Kaus Up II.11

The identity of father with son is pervasive and son-preference is sometimes justified by the need for a son to light the funeral pyre during the cremation of his father.

The word 'seed' in Sanskrit/Hindi is beej and in the Ayurvedic texts, specifically Garbhavakranti Sarira, both women and men contribute bija to the conception of a child. It was thought that the male and female seed once mixed and if one is predominant a

child of that sex would be conceived. Various folk advice exists on when or how to have sex if one wants to have a son.

Ayurveda as the science of life describes the physical process analogizing the growth of a child with the germination of seeds, inserting 'the proper observance of rules'.

"A co-ordination of four factors, menstrual period (rtu), healthy womb (ksetra), nutrient liquid, i.e. chyle of digested food (ambu), healthy semen (bija) and proper observance of rules, is necessary for the conception and development of a healthy child, just as the season (rtu), good soil (ksetra), water containing nutrient matter and vigorous seeds (bija) together with proper care, help the germination of strong and undiseased sprouts." Sushruta Samhita II 33

The term *bija* or seed is not only physical but reaches even to the transcendental—as in the *bij* mantra such as *ham* and *sah. Bija* is the seed that sprouts and provides us with food; semen (*retas*) the fertilizing liquid.

The seed also assumes political importance. Central to many rites, texts and places the image of soma-seed-semen is present. Historian Gerda Lerner writes that in Genesis the promise God has made to Abram of both land and offspring is formalized by a

covenant that uses the language of generation. This radically shifts procreation from the female domain to that of the male. God asks Abram to count the stars and promises him "So shall thy seed be." And "unto thy seed I have given this land". The male "seed" acquires the power and blessing of procreativity lodged in Yahweh who usurps the role of the Goddess and also leads to the ritual of circumcision.

The Goddess previously presided over the fecundity of women. The prayers to Ishtar and other fertility goddesses indicate that one of their powers was generativity, they 'opened the wombs of women.' In Biblical Genesis that power is only attributed to Yahweh. "Every male among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin: and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt Me and you." Land, power and nationhood were the promise implicit in ritual circumcision and the covenant.

More "Mythologies" of Conception

Ancestor Bones

I flew to Vishakapatnam and went by jeep to Lamtaput Block in Southern Orissa, to the Asha Kiran Hospital. Started in a rented mud hut in 1991, the Asha Kiran Hospital was established primarily to offer medical care to the tribal people of Lamtaput

block and in particular the remote Bondo people. Some of the doctors and nurses offering care were concerned that their services were supplanting indigenous ways. They had begun multi-lingual education, documenting Bondo folktales, and published them in the Oriya script—producing a primer for those who wanted to learn how to read.

They had called me to help them document Bondo birth traditions. They wrote me that these women birthed alone, as there were no dais, nurses or doctors in their remote area. Well, much to my surprise in the first session, when I asked the Bondo women to do a role play of childbirth, they hardly birthed alone.

Bondo woman simulating labour in a classroom

One woman mimed being in labor, chased her husband out of the house and sat on the floor with her legs stretched out in front of her, grabbed the classroom's curtain, simulating a rope strung over a beam, and started pushing. Immediately one neighbor, then another, and another entered—till there was a whole string of women, each leaning back on the other, all supporting and cushioning the woman in labor. I felt in my own body the kind of energy moving from the neighbors flowing into the laboring woman—and this was birthing alone!?

I set out to record their thoughts and stories. Bondo people believe that Jombui is the goddess who creates all life. Jombui collects the bones of a person who died and powders them mixing that with water. When a married woman drinks the water that Jombui has prepared with the relative's bones then she conceives. Jombui will not give this mixture in any other food because there is a chance she might chew it. After drinking the bone water then the first, second, third month the baby grows a little and then slowly it will become big. Another story is that in olden days wives would clean the house, apply cow dung to the floor and then go for water. Jombui would place a baby on the floor while she was fetching water. When she came back she would take the baby and feed it. One day a newly married girl was ashamed to take the baby and from that day on *Jombui* started to give babies in the womb.

Jombui, during summer season, if she dries the bones and makes it into powder under the sun, then the people formed from this will have fair skin. If she makes the powder during the rainy season, then inside the house they will have a fire. Over the fire they will place baskets with things to dry (salt, chili, dry fish). They will turn black from the smoke. Therefore, the people who are formed from the bones/powder dried, like this will have darker skin. One Bonda woman shared that "when a person dies, if we cook anything in a mud pot it will have black on the outside. Sometimes they take this black and apply on the dead body on the

chest, on the forehead, on the cheeks. If the child has a mole or birthmark, they say it was from this marking.

Another creation story came from Bura Devi in the Jaunpur area in Uttarakhand. She said that when there was nothing in the world only water everywhere, two birds, male and female, Garuda and Garudi, emerged. Then she became pregnant. She worried about where would she lay her eggs. Where will she sit? She started to cry worrying when nine months were completed where would she go? Garuda spread his wings saying, 'don't worry you can give your eggs on my body.' Then Garudi gave her eggs on his wings, on his body. He felt dirty and disgusted. Garuda put one wing up and one down. One egg went up: one fell down. From the egg that went up akash was born. From the egg that fell down Narak and the earth were born

Scientific Fairy Tales

We think of the stories above as mythology, as primitive and primal and consider science real and factual. However, metaphors used by scientists portraying conception are equally imprinted by the societies they inhabit and equally mythological. Despite the fact that fertilization requires mutual, active participation by both eggs and sperm, societal gender roles are 'scientifically' projected

onto reproductive biology, leading to the portrayal of eggs as passive and sperm as active.

Many scientific textbooks tend to present the egg and sperm in ways that align with dominant societal gender norms. Some accounts of fertilization read like a fairy tale—specifically like a courtship or romance—with the sperm as the "knight in shining armor" and the egg as the "damsel in distress." In both medical and college textbooks, passive language was used to describe the egg (e.g. "the egg is fertilized" and "the egg is swept"). In contrast, sperm's activities were presented in active and anthropomorphic terms.

The Seed in the Field

The sociologist Leila Dube traced the Indian textual and folk traditions' use of the homology "seed and field" as metaphor for both agricultural production and human reproduction. She quotes the *Narada Smriti* "Women are created for offspring; a woman is the field and a man is the possessor of the field..." and notes that the Hindu marriage rituals include the *Kshetrasamskara*, the consecration of the field, which is aimed to purify the bride's womb for receiving the seed. Dube explains the exploitative consequences for women caused by the belief in the symbolic equivalence of women and field. Women's likeness to the field

suggests that women have to bear pain, as the earth does. The field is ploughed, furrowed, dug into; a woman too is pierced and ploughed—the analogy of sexual intercourse with plowing renders woman as socially passive and inert whereas man is active, dominating and possessing. This analogy of seed and field legitimizes both male rights over female sexuality and women's lack of legal right over her children if the couple separates— "the crop should belong to him who has sown the seed."

Dube uses the word 'earth' interchangeably with the word 'field' in her analysis, however I suggest that we should distinguish between earth and field. Earth refers to the ground, the soil and is not 'husbanded,' ploughed or fenced, as the field is. We speak of a 'virgin forest' that is certainly fertile but left untouched, not changed, controlled or "husbanded." The word 'Virgin' did not originally have the meaning of sexually 'pure' or untouched. Rather it meant un-husbanded or belonging to no man or men. Virgins both East and West bore children but were not 'spousified.' Priestesses of various cults in Graeco-Roman antiquity had to be virgins, but they also had the main characteristics of married women—the Vestal Virgins dressed as married women and had some legal rights—they were ambiguous—fit to mediate between human society and the powers that watched over it.

Domestication

A drama has taken place over millennia in the Indian subcontinent—what Lynn E. Gatwood has called 'spousification.' The primacy of the single entity that encapsulated both good and bad—that Goddess has waned as She was tamed by being paired with a male god. We saw how Shiva politely declined the paternal role of providing 'seed' to the Devi/Parvati when it was her desire, menstruation and lactation that are responsible for the birth of Ganesh.

Progressive centuries have coupled previously independent goddesses with gods: Indrani with Indra; Varunani with Varuna; Agnanyi with Agni; Sri becomes Sri Lakshmi and is paired with Vishnu and so on. Many goddesses are demoted from single entities to being considered the 'Shakti' of the male gods effectively becoming the spouses of heroes. Interestingly we find remnants of these independent goddesses sometimes portrayed together such as with the Yoginis and the Matrikas—both groups seen as powerful but potentially dangerous as well as beneficent.

A poignant example of 'spousification' that acknowledges Her primacy as well as Her domesticity is found in a Tamil verse. The Goddess Minakshi washes and stacks up the kitchen vessels, but those vessels are also all the worlds, rinsed by her at the end of the

eon. Dishwashing must be done again and again, because each day cooking pots and vessels get dirty; the poet identifies the soiling of kitchenware with Shiva's repeated destruction of the universe.

Maturaiminatciyammai Pillaittamil 15

"You prop up the eight mountains

To support the high encircling Cakravala Range

You plant Mount Meru in the middle as a pillar.

You cover the top of the sky.

Then you hang the sun and moon as lamps.

In the dashing waters

You wash the old cooking vessels—

All the worlds—

And stack them up.

Then you cook sweet ambrosia

From fresh food.

Mother, you've done this many times.

While you do this

The great madman Shiva with the umattai flower

Wanders through the courtyard of space

Destroying your work again and again."

Dishwashing, housework, women's work as with the rhythms of the universe occurs every day, again and again. Minakshi makes the universe only to have it destroyed; then she remakes it. So too, the making-unmaking-remaking that women often experience.

First was the female

First there was the female...thanks to Mary Jane Sherfey, a psychologist by training who 'discovered' that we all began as female. In 1961, Sherfey's interest in female biology was intensified when she came upon 'the inductor theory', which demonstrated that the human embryo is female until hormonally "induced" to become male. She was determined to popularize a fact that had been neglected since its discovery in the 1950s, and began familiarizing herself with a variety of disciplines, including embryology, anatomy, primatology and anthropology.

I find this fact about human conception especially interesting as some local healers, herbalists, 'quacks' as the biomedical folks might call them, used to give substances to women in early pregnancy to supposedly determine the sex of the child. I thought this was scientifically impossible…but I kept it in mind. Important here is that all humans are female until doused with male hormones in around the 9th week of pregnancy. And maybe the local healers were not so ignorant and 'unscientific' after all!

Chapter 5
Pregnancy: The Two-Hearted One (Dau Hrydaya)

Ayurvedic texts have a most delightful phrase for the pregnant woman— "the two hearted one"—physiologically correct and much more poetic than biomedical and ultrasound terminology. The mother's desires during pregnancy should be fulfilled according to Ayurvedic texts and also Jeeva research with dais in Jharkhand. According to Ayurveda the fetus expresses desires for the objects of senses like sound, vision, touch, taste and smell through the mother. If the mother's desires are not fulfilled, an imbalance might result. Charaka Samhita, a foundational text of Ayurveda, states that

"The proper maintenance and protection of the pregnant mother is as good as the maintenance and protection of the fetus itself. So the wise attends upon a pregnant mother with special care to fulfill her desired and useful needs."

An individualist feminist would squirm at this validation of women's desires only because they should be satisfied for the wellbeing of the fetus. 'Are women's desires only legitimate because she is bearing a child? Isn't a woman deserving attention and respect as much as a man?'

Contradictions abound in the status of women within all traditions. Imagery plays a large part in how concepts are portrayed, understood and played out. Although the two-hearted

one appeals to me, others have written books titled, “My Body is Mine” and “Birthing with Dignity” both written with the best intentions, but leaving behind tradition. I question how a pregnant woman or one during laboring to give birth can truly say ‘my body is mine’—no her body IS inhabited by another. How can a woman labor with dignity if she and her family are hungry, overworked, living in a degraded environment and without clean water?

*

We have a strange problem when examining women and the female body within Indic traditions. Western women scholars who are excellent Sanskritists (Martha Ann Selby, Laurie Patton, Tracy Pinchman…Wendy Doniger others) have written variously on India, Goddesses, Ayurvedic texts and the cultural ‘semiotics’ underlying the phenomena they are examining. But unfortunately we do not have the equivalent scholarly writing written by Indian women. I picked up Doniger’s recent book India—an alternative history (of women and Dalits) hoping to find her data, analyses and perspective on menstruation, childbirth, dais—only to be disappointed, nary a word on any of these topics. All this being said, we (meaning pregnant women, their families and society in general) have been catapulted into medical ‘science’ specifically obstetrics and gynecology, to provide us with imagery representing the miraculous human processes of pregnancy and

birth. We are bereft if we leave behind the riches bequeathed by Indic cultural traditions.

What Happens in the Womb? Who knows about it?

It is no accident that babies come into the world literally attached to their mothers via a string of life we dub 'umbilical cord' while fathers' status is more mysteriously understood. I have problems with religious/spiritual teachings of 'nonattachment.' I see them as masculine encampments—retreats from being wounded, womb less and 'unattached' and being bodily alienated from the constructive everyday dramas of caretaking, mothering and nurturing.

I was working at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Educational Television Department when I became pregnant with my daughter. I remember sitting quietly on a grassy mound and trying to meditate between my sessions of televising engineering lectures. I had been initiated into Transcendental Meditation and was pretty regular in keeping up with my meditation practice. However as the little seedling in my belly grew I was having difficulties. Whenever I tried to meditate my awareness, instead of staying on my mantra, would drift slowly but surely, to my belly to that being or growing or whatever was happening in my tummy. Sitting on that grassy place I finally gave up and decided I would

be a pregnant person and not a meditative one. Of course, if I'd been sensible and looked to a sensible meditation teacher for guidance, perhaps I would have been told to go ahead and focus on my growing fetus. But that is just the point—there are not a lot, or were not then, a lot of sensible pregnant women-sensitive spiritual people.

Pregnancy is a miracle of unseen transformation—a paradigm of the phenomena of manifestation or coming into being. Perhaps these aspects of the feminine are best left in the dark, invisible, they are the mysteries. The dark, or unknowable visually, is often seen as evil, demonic. This is the symbolic meaning of the dark side so ruthlessly rendered by Western Culture, for example Darth Vader in the Star Wars films. He has embraced 'the dark side' and becomes a threatening, demonic figure.

This kind of dualism is not limited to the West. And supposedly 'spiritual' people write such drivel as this theologian "...the fetus suffers "garbha-duhkha" (sufferings of residence) in the womb as it remembers all its previous lives and reincarnations, trapped in the cycle of "karma" and "rebirth".

The Garbha Upanishad elaborates on this supposedly painful experience:

"Alas! I am sunk in this ocean of sorrow and see no remedy. Whatever I've done, good or bad, for those about me—I alone must suffer the consequences, for they've gone on their way, suffering the fruits (of their own deeds)...

If ever I escape the womb I'll abandon myself to Siva who destroys evil and confers the reward of liberation."

Or from the Srimad-Bhagavatam, Third Canto Chapter 31

Bitten again and again all over the body by the hungry worms in the abdomen itself, the child suffers terrible agony because of his tenderness. He thus becomes unconscious moment after moment because of the terrible condition.

Quite different imagery from a Mahabharata narrative also illustrating the sensate capacity of the embryo. In the Mahabharata, Abhimanyu learned the technique of penetrating the military formation Chakravyuha when he was still in his mother Subhadra's womb. He could overhear his father, Arjuna, discussing the formation and its conquest with his wife. Abhimanyu in utero learned how to get into this formation, but not how to escape. Once born and grown, within it he was finally

killed. Abhimanyu learned in the womb, but did not hear the ending, because his mother had fallen asleep.

I question the literal, military reading of the narrative that because his mother fell asleep and thus Abhimanyu ultimately died as he didn't learn how to get out of the formation. I propose another more metaphysical and woman-centered interpretation. The esoteric teaching is about the cycles of birth, life and death, not a simple military maneuver. Subhadra falls asleep and Abhimanyu also sleeps in the womb—because she is the birth-giver...and according to Indian philosophical traditions we do forget our previous lives at birth. Although I radically disagree with the biting nature of the womb mentioned in the above sacred texts, I have come to appreciate the philosophy of life embedded in what is called 'karma'—that we get lost in life, lose our real Self/Atman. Bhul bhulaya is the Hindi word for maze—labyrinth, as is Chakravyuha, a circular place for getting lost... And indeed, Abhimanyu got lost and lost his life.

This is not to be dismissed as only a high, literate, textual concept. I have personally seen rough maze-like patterns, made of small stones laid flat on the ground outlining a maze-like form in both Karnataka and Orissa. Years ago, south of Bangalore I was taken to a small rustic temple in dusty rolling hills. Village folks had piled rocks, a standing series for a boy, and circular for a girl—a ritual

performed by those who desired to conceive. Nearby, suspended from trees were small cords tying a cloth or plastic sling (a mini-cradle)— holding a pebble or small stone. These, I was told, were created and placed in thanksgiving for a prayer fulfilled and a baby born. About twenty feet away from these trees was a maze similar to the one my friends and I saw in Ranipur Jharial, Orissa. A similar basic maze-like configuration was laid out on the massive rocky outcrop where the yogini temple was located.

Ranipur Jharial, photo courtesy Seema Kohli

Ranipur Jharial is a rather desolate yogini temple rarely visited. As we sat contemplating the dawn a pundit came, did pranam at the Shiva-Bhairava image in the center ignoring the round assemblage of voluptuous and varied yoginis. Panditji then moved on to his mandir. These yoginis are hard to ignore, some animal-headed and bare-breasted, all female, caged in by garish green bars to protect them from being stolen.

Then came an Adivasi-looking family—old woman, her son and daughter-in-law and a baby in arms. They circled the yoginis, bowing reverently to each of them offering flowers, and totally ignored Shiva-Bhairava. You see and worship what you want to and ignore what you don't!

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Womb stories abound. In the Kalpa Sutra, Mahavira's embryo was transplanted from the womb of a Brahmin woman to that of a woman from the Kshatrya caste. Mahavira was a very early adopter of non-violence. The Kalpa Sutra reports that he kept calm and still in his mother's womb, so as to not discomfit her, though he quivered from time to time to reassure her he was still alive.

The sensate nature of the fetus in the womb was also mentioned in the Akbar Nama. It relates that Akbar's mother, Hamida Bano,

used a needle to draw a lotus with mehndi on the sole of her foot while she was pregnant with Akbar. And he was also born with that lotus on his foot!

The limitations of the scientific gaze and male biases are apparent in an interview I did with a French professional opera singer, Dominique. She was pregnant with her daughter in 1995 and participated in an experiment at the National Center of Research in Paris to determine what the baby could hear in the womb. Before then it was believed that the baby could only hear low sounds, that is the father's voice, not high sounds—because the water, amniotic fluid, would filter out the high frequencies.

Dominique thought this was false because when she would sing high notes she would feel the baby move. They put a monitor to hear the baby's heartbeats and a machine to track her abdominal muscles while singing. This monitoring of the baby was to determine if it was listening by its heartbeats becoming a little faster. She thought that of course the baby is listening. Everything we do the baby feels. She had felt that the baby's head was trying to be nearer to the bones of the pelvis—to hear or feel her singing better!

Speaking of singing a linkage exists between music, birth and magic. Although I do not know about the use of music or song during labor in the material I have gathered, song surely informed

young women's sensibilities about childbirth, relationships and life. I learned that in the myths of ancient Rome, the Carmentes were associated with the good fortune of the mother in childbirth, and supposedly they were also the incantations of midwives who used music to assist the laboring mother. The Carmentes got their name from the word carmen, meaning a charm and incantation or song. The translation of Carmen is more familiar to us as song rather than as magic formula for aid in childbirth.

Problems in Pregnancy: Dancing in the Dark

The growing fetus until recent technological 'advances' was experienced and known mainly by the mother. It was her body that mediated the outside world. The fetus/baby was in the dark, not literally because we know that it sees light shining through the mother's belly in later months, but figuratively as others could only know the baby as a part of the mother.

Besides 'dark' these rituals are an acknowledgment of the childbearing woman's vulnerability and need for protection. The involvement of others, family and villagers in the ritual healings described below displays the concern of others, and enhances their awareness of her situation. The following two rituals done for problems in pregnancy are similar in that the pregnant women in both are ritually clad in black.

Matri Masaan

In a workshop in Jaunpur, a mountainous area of Uttar Pradesh, with dais and NGO workers, women spoke of their ways of understanding threats to maternal-fetal wellbeing during pregnancy. Miscarriage was thought to be caused by an afflicting entity Jaunpuris called Matri Masaan. Matri Masaan links health problems during pregnancy to the water source at the woman's maternal home. It was thought that Matri Masaan had possessed the pregnant woman experiencing problems when as a girl she was fetching water from its source at her maike. They know she's afflicted if she has nightmares or dreams of eating flesh or of deformed children. She may scream, want too much food or none at all, be always afraid, talk in her sleep, mutter things.

According to the *dais,* the therapeutic ritual*, Matri Masaan ki puja*, involves the pregnant woman, her husband and the male members of his family, along with a Brahmin, walking silently through the mountains to her natal home. The pregnant woman wears a black blanket covering her clothes. At the water source the Brahmin chants mantras while the pregnant woman performs a puja with seven leaves, dal, rice, turmeric, sindur and burning cow dung. She removes her adornments- kajal, lipstick, cream, bangles and bindi, leaving them at the site. Her marital kinsmen sprinkle rice on her. The group walks directly back to the sasural. After

this puja, she is not supposed to go back to visit her maike for the duration of the pregnancy.

The *Matri Masaan ki puja* reflects a core issue which existed in the lives of many Indian women: the experience of leaving the natal home at the time of marriage, when young women are expected to be absorbed by and adjust to their husband's family. The often-traumatic separation and the consequent emotional upheaval are a recurring motif in women's folk songs in north India.

This anxiety and sadness is germane to the woman 'afflicted' by Matri Masan. From the sasural perspective, when the daughter-in-law's body is doing the work of producing the next generation, it is expected that she be the most aligned with her married home. The pregnancy illness and the malevolent possession that causes it signal a trauma of allegiance. But in the context of a young woman's life, this afflicting spirit is collapsed into her own grief at having been wrenched from the affectionate ties of the maike village and mother's love. *Matri Masaan ki puja* attempts a resolution to the dilemma of women in staunchly patrilineal and patrilocal societies.

This rite affirms the woman's experience as it centers on the social, the psychological and the emotional realities of women's lives. The theology (or demonology, for here boundaries are blurred between the goddess and the demon) enacted in this rite

attempts the social/ psychological task of harmonizing and restituting a balance between the maike and the sasural. The fact that her male sasural kin ritually accompany her to her maike, and with them she performs the puja, indicate that her proper place is in the sasural, but also displays a public acknowledgment of her sadness.

Kanyamma

I met Nagamma, an Irula tribal herbalist and midwife as she was selling herbs at a stall at a Congress of Traditional Sciences gathering in 1996 in Madras. I accompanied them to the Irula Women's Welfare Office in Chingalpeet where Manjula translated for me.

I asked Nagamma what she did when there are problems in early pregnancy—especially psychological problems like crying a lot, bad dreams, too much fear or anxiety. She answered "We have a ritual for that. In the back of the house we put three stones and apply kumkum and turmeric on them. We make pongal and offer it there, and sacrifice a cock. The pregnant woman walks around that spot three times. A black sari is placed there for a moment then it is given to her to wear. Bad spirits will be driven away from her and the foetus will grow nicely. She must wear that sari every

alternate day till the end of her pregnancy, she washes it every other day, but she has to wear it until it tears or is too worn."

Nagamma further confided

"I, myself, was childless for a long time. This rite was done for me and I conceived. It is done both for wanting to become pregnant and for problems—it is done to invoke Kanyamma. I myself do many every month—in seven villages. A white male goat might be sacrificed and sacred ash is brought from the next house or the temple for use in this ceremony. Kanyamma is a goddess whom all Irula people worship. There are also temples for her and she is especially worshiped July 15th to August 15th, the Tamil month of Aadi when people feed the poor with ragi porridge. The Goddess is considered to be more accepting and beautiful during this month.

Near our village is a sacred grove of neem trees. It is not possible to count all the goddesses who inhabit that place. The neem tree itself is a deviam—a goddess for us. Sometimes, it is believed, that a demon will cause problems during pregnancy—for example the spirit of the woman who has died in childbirth, the aavi. She will go and catch a pregnant woman. This woman will feel cold and the spirit eats the foetus, devours it.

The pregnant woman may have convulsions—the spirit is breaking the foetus. We use neem leaves and say mantras and send the demon away. If the woman is very scared it is because of some spirit—then the person who has the special work of exorcizing spirits is called. They wave neem leaves over the woman and chase the spirit away. The spirit is either of a person who died in an accident, or a karteri or spirit of a widow—if she creates the problem then abortion occurs or the woman bleeds a lot."

What is interesting to me is the black sari; the woman, literally wraps herself every alternate day in the energy generated by the puja. Women in the Jaunpur mountain area of described above a similar puja, done for problems in early pregnancy, involving a black blanket, wrapped around the woman. I interpret the blackness of the blanket and sari, as related to the both the fertile darkness of generativity and the shadowy world of the human imagination. A seed will not germinate in full, strong sunlight—it needs the protection of the dark moist and receptive earth. This is the creative, 'chaotic' and generative feminine principle.

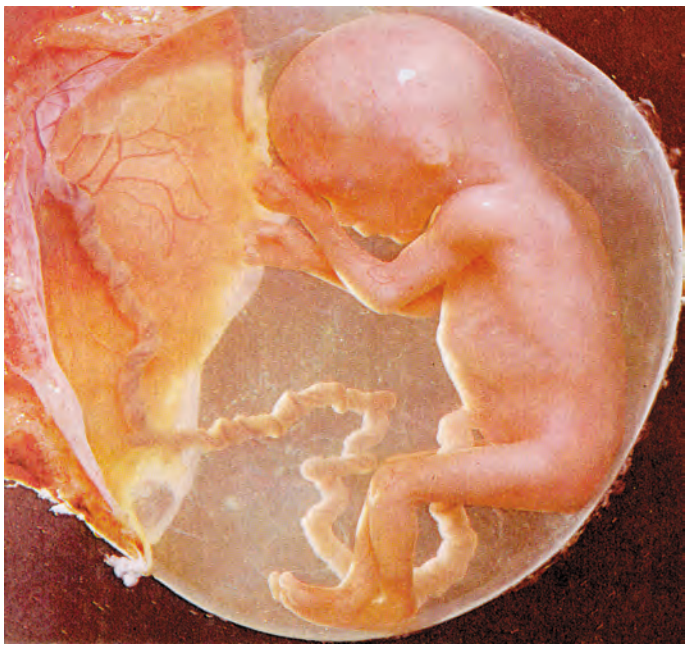
Threat and Vulnerability

Almost all customary notions of the pregnant woman involve her vulnerability and perceptions of threats to her wellbeing—malignant forces both human and spirit. During our MATRIKA workshops basti women would state that pregnant or lactating women would exude a certain smell that would attract evil spirits. Many restrictions were meant to be protective of her. She should not go out at night when spirits were wafting about. To avoid human jealousy or the evil eye being cast, she should not wear new clothes or bangles. Many rites and customs are carried out to ward off dangerous beings both human and spirit. Carrying a piece of iron, a knife or other cutting tool is said to protect. I had heard nurses, both from north and south India, report that some women keep iron articles under their pillows or cots during the birth time.

Synergy—the ability to hold another in one's body

Questions of conception, gestation and birth can found in debates about reproductive ethics, where discussions may be on legal rights and on tensions between individual entities, mother and fetus; doctors and mothers; or the state and the individual. But Elselijn Kingma, a Swedish philosopher, states that reproductive matters are not moral but rather physical. Metaphysical questions

have tremendous implications for our personal and socio-cultural understandings. According to Kingma the depiction of pregnancy as '0 becomes 1' (simply that the baby comes into being) obscures the role and physicality of the mother. Pregnancy is rather '1 becomes 2'. The fetus is a part of one organism and gradually differentiates from it. The mother's body is not a simple 'container'—a hollow to be filled by a 'baby'.



Intra uterine image of fetus and placenta

The container model pervades western and bio-medical culture—an example is Nielson's colorful image of the 'baby' in the womb, which I myself was captivated by 50-some years ago. The embryo is shown as if it were an astronaut floating in space—whereas the mother and the placenta fade into the background. Kingma maintains that the fetus is a part of one organism. She even uses the word 'splitting' for birth. (This resonates with one ritual that I have called 'separating of the atta'—a laboring woman separates one mound of atta into two mimetic of the birth activity of her own body, one becoming two). Kingma argues that this phenomenon, biologically accurate, precedes and belies legal rights of individuals of the 'morality' of abortion debates on rights and wrongs.

Although feminists have critiqued the 'container' model, they mostly use a legal approach implying that the mother's 'rights' are being infringed. This philosopher and women's incursions into science, and their influence on male scientists, have begun to allow us to know the extent of interrelationships of beings.

Placenta print courtesy Divya Deswal

The placenta, according to Kingma is the hallmark of integrated-ness. There are no firm boundaries to be drawn between when and where the fetus starts and the mother ends. The placenta and mother 'grow into each other' and at birth time they split—this splitting action is ritualized over and over again in many traditional birth rites and customs.

We all consider our bodies to be our own unique being, so the notion that we may harbor cells from other people in our bodies seems strange. Even stranger is the thought that, although we consider our actions and decisions as originating in the activity of our own individual brains, cells from other individuals are living and functioning in that complex structure. An article in Scientific American claims that cells may migrate through the placenta between the mother and the fetus, taking up residence in many organs of the body including the lung, thyroid, muscle, liver, heart, kidney and skin. And in this study, male cells were found in the brains of women and had been living there, in some cases, for several decades.

Another science- based article from BBC's intriguingly titled "Is there another human living inside of you?" claims that humans are not unitary individuals but super-organisms. "A very large number of different human and non-human individuals are all incessantly struggling inside us for control."

This science validates what we know about the substitutional pulse from Tibetan medicine. Dr. Yeshi Dondon wrote that this pulse was used to determine the condition of a loved one or family member when the patient was unable to see the doctor. For example, in mountainous areas of Tibet a severely ill patient was often unable to travel to see a physician, but by using the pulse of a

substitute person from within the family a prognosis could be made and treatment could be prescribed. For instance, if the father is ill, the pulse of a healthy son is examined. If the liver pulse of the son is complete, the father will not die, but if the liver pulse is not complete, the father will die....

Considering the Tibetan medical substitutional pulse diagnosis and scientific findings, many birth rites and customs may not seem so strange. These phenomena and principles resonate in birth practices and rites. Interrelationship, mutuality, reciprocity, concurrence and simultaneity—what Carl Jung called synchronicity are valued and utilized.

A similar belief is that two pregnant daughters-in-law in the same house is not necessarily a good thing. In some places, a pregnant woman will never be allowed to enter the room where another woman is laboring for fear that, as one basti woman explained 'the pains will be divided' between the two women. This reflects the sensitivity and receptivity of the pregnant woman. If she is exposed to the rhythmic contractions of another woman's labor she may empathize and herself go into labor. I heard a story in Mussoorie, where two foreign women both pregnant and good friends, were studying Hindi. The first woman went into labour and gave birth with her friend by her side. The next day the

second woman went into labour and gave birth—three weeks early!

Birth Songs-Sohars

It was not common for women to express themselves individually by writing novels or poetry. However, sohars, or birth songs affirm the female body and female experience of bodily processes and life experience. Collectively sung they express creativity, women's desires and dilemmas. They can be considered sex and life education through song.

The first song illustrates the suspension of independent identities mentioned above, as the mother sings to her baby in the womb. She ponders her current situation and memories of the past, in addressing the baby in her womb.

"Baby, In which month did I get married? In which month was my gauna done? In which month did I go to my husband's bed?

Baby, My body has become heavy.

Baby, I got married in Phagun. My gauna was done in Agehan. I went to my husband's bed in Savan.

Baby, My body has become heavy.

Baby, when I see arhad dal I feel nauseous. When I see roti, I feel like vomiting.

Baby, I don't even like the taste of pan. I feel like eating the mud roof tiles..."

The next sohar expresses the mother's desires, limitations and relationships—especially with the husband, Piya, in her married home.

"I want mango pickle, my Piya, mango pickle my Piya

Call Choti Nanad, get her to knead the atta,

It has become very difficult for me to get up and move about

Some mango pickle please, my Piya

I feel like eating mango pickle

Send for your mother and get her to massage my back

My back aches most terribly

Some mango pickle please, my Piya

Send for your Bhabhi

Arrange for a satiya

Living has become difficult for me

Take care of me, my Piya look after me,

Please get me some mango pickle."

The following sohar demonstrates the mother's preference for her natal family, rather that of her married home. The pregnant woman refers to her husband as her king and he calls his wife his queen.

"She – The pain in my lower back is killing me my Raja

He – Tell me my Rani, shall I call your Saas

She – Don't say that, be quiet, enough my Raja

The pain in my back is killing me

He – Tell me my Rani, shall I call your mother?

She – Hurry up, send a telegram, and arrange a car, my Raja.
The pain in my back is hurting me

He – Tell me my Rani, shall I call your Jethani?

She – Don't say that, be quiet, enough my Raja

The pain in my...

He – Tell me my Rani, shall I call your Bhabhi?

She – Hurry up, ring up, send a car, my Raja"

From Andhra Pradesh, we hear women's songs of Kausalya's labour while giving birth to Ram. They graphically depict both the pain and some of the practices still in use today. The song describes how the child is born while the pregnant woman stands upright, holding on to ropes hung from the ceiling.

"Now call the midwife, go send for her.

The midwife came in royal dignity.

She saw the woman in labor, patted her on her back.

Don't be afraid, Kausalya, don't be afraid woman!

In an hour you will give birth to a son.

The women there took away the gold ornaments,

They removed the heavy jewels form her body.

They hung ropes of gold and silk from the ceiling.

They tied them to the beams with great joy.

They made Kausalya hold the ropes.

Mother, mother, I cannot bear this pain.

A minute feels like a hundred years."

Garbha

The idea of the fecund womb or source flows through time and space in the Indian imagination. The word 'Garbha' comes from the Sanskrit word for womb and so implies gestation or pregnancy – life--or source, as considered in the Yoni chapter. From the Garbha Upanishad to Navaratri dance to the inner sanctum of temples called 'garbha griha'

Garbha is a Gujarati folk dance performed during Navaratri (literally nine nights), a celebration of the Goddess. Navaratri is celebrated throughout India marking the change of the seasons. Traditionally, the Garbha is danced in a circle around a clay diya. This flame represents life itself, the fetus in the womb in particular. I have never, in all my 70 years of life, been in such

feminine, female spaces as I was some 25 years ago in Baroda and some small villages. Now, unfortunately, all that has changed—the garbha has gotten glitzy, commercialized and less devotional: less ecstatically and physically Goddess-oriented.

The Garbha Griha is the innermost sanctum of a temple where the image of the deity resides. Literally the word means "womb chamber". Theoretically only the priests are allowed to enter there.

The Garbha Upanishad is a text that speculates on medical and physiology-related themes, dealing with the formation and development of the human embryo and human body after birth. A number of statements are made about the foetus' awareness, including the assertion that the foetus has knowledge of its past lives as well as intuitive sense of good and bad, which it forgets during the process of birth.

The Search for a Good Birth

A couple appears at my doorstep. “You are Janet Chawla?” the man asks, who turns out to be a doctor from Madhya Pradesh, trained in Russia where he met and married the tall blondish pregnant woman in front of me. This doctor works at All India Medical Sciences and definitely does not want his wife to have to give birth in the proper obstetrical fashion, in a hospital. He knows

the pitfalls involved, and they both are determined to find another way, a good way, a way they believe in.

They perch on the sofa in my drawing room, looking distinctly uncomfortable. She speaks Hindi, little English and I no Russian so the father, who is fluent in the three languages, is central to our conversation. The fetus is sideways and she is in her eighth month. They are young and earnest. “Where can we go? Do you know any midwives who will do home births?” When I suggest squatting as exercise and doing jharu-pocha in squat position I hear that they live in a one room flat, and she doesn’t do much floor swabbing because there isn’t much floor! I tell them about Chetanbai who is a very good dai and might agree to do a home birth and would certainly be good at massage and helping the baby turn. They take her phone number, we bond in spoken and unspoken ways…

At our next meeting they chat with Chetanbai and soon I see a very pregnant body lying on the couch in my living room with her chemise pulled up. Chetanbai is palpating her naked tummy showing Dr. Sahib where the head is and he says that’s where he thought it was but the obstetrician they had consulted said otherwise! They are happy and affirmed in their desire for a home birth. We discuss hospitals, birth in their one-room flat with shared bathroom. A few days later I get an sms “Do you know of

any midwives in Hoshangabad?" (his natal home) "Sorry, no, I don't.

"We have made a decision." He announces later. We are leaving for Hoshangabad for a few days and then on to Goa. A Russian midwife practices there and she calls herself a spiritual obstetrician. A friend knows her and we have spoken with her and we are going.

This midwife has asked Daksha about her mother's and sister's births and learns that both have given birth almost a month before the 'due' date. Midwife encourages Daksha to get to Goa as soon as possible as this birth may be similarly early. I am amazed, as I have perceived this phenomenon, but have not ever read or heard of it. When you go to the doctor for a checkup you fill out forms asking whether anyone among your siblings, parents or grandparents have suffered from diabetes, heart disease, allergies, cancer, etc. But never do obstetricians request information about your mother's, grandmother's or sister's obstetrical history. This is particularly crucial with 'overdue' dates—when they want to induce you, sometimes even on the date, or they 'give' you a week or ten days. And if the baby is not ready to come, the womb is not ready to contract and the induction does not 'take'—then it is a C-section. The induction stimulates tightening of uterine muscles

which cuts off blood supply to the baby leading to 'fetal distress.' The doctors are then 'saving' the baby!

Chapter 6

BIRTH-
God does the Work, but the Hands are Mine

The dai may be at the lower end of the caste spectrum but there is a dignity when she speaks of her birth work.

"I am proud of this work. The Dai is the medium through which new life comes in this world. People celebrate and rejoice and I am a part of this happiness. There are various ways to earn a living and God provides for everyone but he chose a Dai as his mediator to bring forth life. Karde te Rab hein par hath mere han (God is the doer, but the hands are mine)."

We are all born from our mother's womb maybe struggling, squishing through a moist vagina impelled into non-uterine life—or maybe we are lifted quickly from an incision in our mother's belly by the obstetrician's hands. Fact is that if you are reading this, in English, you undoubtedly know about childbirth from a biomedical or obstetrical perspective. This chapter is weighted towards voices and information both from traditional texts and from the ground. Even the 'natural childbirth' movement

originated in reaction to the over-medicalization of birth and uses much of the language of doctors and nurses. Now we move through material that has been relatively untouched by allopathic medicine and modernity. Lotardi, a Bhil tribesman from a village just below the Narmada in Maharashtra, shared this invocation. In this area men as well as women assist at birth. Lotardi pleads and bargains with the 'spirit' forces.

"Earth Mother, I plead to you!

Huarki [the cosmic midwife] who opens hair and moves pubic hair,

Bringer of children, protector of children,

If a finger is shown then let the finger break;

If eyes are cast then let those eyes burst open. [refers to the evil eye]

Let the child be born with the head straight;

As the waters flood let women flood;

As millet cooks in a pot let the birth happen, with head straight let childbirth happen!"

"Lord of Force, let the pains start!

Gentle Lord, let them progress.

And how long will you keep it in the belly?

Who knows, why are you taking so much time?

Straightaway let it happen

Jupiraja, listen with your ears,

Let nothing bad happen, let the child be born!"

Birth is a magical time, full of the unknown and the power of manifestation of a new human being out of the womb of woman. Surely Maya, sometimes translated as magic, swirls and churns throughout birth time. What we call 'science', especially 'medical science' functions to control the unknown with measurements, medicine and technology thus obscuring the magic latent in the female body and emerging fetus.

One can learn about death in detail, the natural death process, how the senses shut down, one by one, what happens with the breathing, the experiences of the dying person from the Buddhist texts. The lamas specialized in the minutia of death, whereas

childbirth educators, midwives and dais focused on birth and bringing life into being.

In Indian thought both philosophical and vernacular the composition and dissolution of the body are parallel although inverse processes. The body is being constituted out of *pancamahabhutas,* or the five great elements (earth, air, fire, water and ether) at the time of pregnancy and birth; it gets dissolved into the gross forms of these very elements at the time of the death. After death the elements of the corpse undergo an analogic process but in opposite directions. The body's components return to Nature. Every individual element merges into the general external element.

Primal Birth and Death

I went to Southern Orissa help a medical facility, Asha Kiran, document the Bonda tribal peoples' birth practices. There in Southern Orissa the doctors and nurses were offering biomedical services to primitive and isolated people and didn't want to totally displace the Bondo birth customs.

I had been told beforehand that the women in this remote area 'gave birth alone' there being no doctors, nurses nor even traditional midwives/dais—that they delivered by themselves. When I conduct a workshop, after introductions I always begin

with role-plays done by the health workers and women themselves. An elderly Bondo woman with numerous metal necklaces and shaved head covered with beads enacted a birth. She grabbed the curtain on the classroom window and began simulating pushing (a common position throughout the world—using a rope slung from a rafter or a tree for the mother to grasp and pull thus widening the pelvis, facilitating pushing and using gravity to aid her efforts).

For the actual birth the 'mother' sat on the floor with her legs stretched out in front of her and a neighboring woman came, sat behind her in the same position, and another and another—all sitting while spooning the body in front of her. As this was being enacted I could feel in my own body the energy, warmth, support and strength that would flow from the line of women into the laboring mother. And this was birthing alone? I asked myself.

Entities

During sessions with the staff and a few Bondo women we heard that at the time of birth one of certain 'entities' would come to claim the newborn. According to them women would chat about it at a birth, just making conversation. "Who has come around?" was asked. But it is only known afterwards which entity had come for that newborn. Once the child has grown up and dies, then people

will know whom the child belonged to. Mogli told us that when a woman sits for birth, Jombui (the goddess) will send the trees and rivers, the wild animals and snakes to the house to sit outside. When the baby is born, the goddess will say that the child would climb on a tree, fall and die, or be killed by tiger, or bitten by snake and die. If Jombui says that the child would die by snakebite then at birth the snake would say this child's life is in my hand. If Jombui says that child would die by falling from a tree, the tree would say that this child's life is in my hand—he will fall from a tree. For all babies born, Jombui would say at birth how the child would die in the future.

Also she said that Jombui lives up in the sky, where she has the same earth like we have here. She won't be pleased by what we give to her or what we do in ritual. Instead she will only be pleased when we die and go back to her. When we die and go up, she will be happy that her child has come back to her. When any person dies Jombui drops a thread from up above and the "jibon" (life) will go up to Jombui who is the only goddess who creates life and everything. When a child dies early, it is because Jombui has told that child to return after that short time. When a big person dies he/she will go to Jombui and be there happily.

These wild animals and other entities are, I suppose, our equivalents of dying from cancer, a heart attack, an automobile

accident, stroke. But we never speculate on this ending of life—even in normal times, not to mention at the birth of a baby! This theology humanizes the divine and powerful and normalizes both birth and death.

Shamans

Perhaps the dai, herself, has inherited some of the cosmology, shamanic tools, and ritual forms of the demon priest, Vritra (mentioned in the Pollution Chapter). If birth is a time of magic, then one needs shamans or practitioners of magic. And traditional midwives are not only skilled with their hands, but it can be said that they also know magic. Actually, all those who accompany a birthing woman through the process of her body opening and expelling a new life are transformed themselves by the experience as they enter a different dimension of reality. As one of my teachers once said 'walking into a room where a woman is laboring is like walking into her body.' She was speaking of an energetic phenomenon. Primal peoples, Adivasis, often retain the rituals of this energetic dimension.

One Bonda woman spoke about how her father, who was a shaman or disari, helped a woman who had been laboring throughout the night. Her father was called and told his daughter, "don't think of *Jombui*. If you think about her, then she will come as a threatening spirit." Then said to her, "You sit here while I go collect the herbal medicines. I will be changed when I return but don't be afraid."

Then he came back from the jungle appearing like a tiger and she was frightened and started crying. When he saw she was afraid he told her to only think of the plants, the herbal medicines. Later he returned again looking like a human being.

Perhaps this is what the anthropologists call "shape shifting". The person allows the energy of that animal into his/her body. Because that energy is so strong, other people will also see that animal. It is a human capacity we all have. If we focus on a bird in flight, we may be able access the sensations of flight. We all have the ability to transfer our consciousness (or borrow the bird's consciousness) and soar or see from a height. Shamans have greatly developed that capacity. This power is also used to heal. The Bondo woman then went on to describe what happened.

Bondo Woman with Beads and Babe

She said that he gave the laboring woman herbal medicine and told her to only think about this herbal medicine. He had other medicines that he had brought from the jungle. He ground them and applied it, stroking her hair, applying it to her back, stroking her back. We have strands of beads around our heads, so he inserted it in the back of the band,

and also behind her ears. None of the medication was taken though the mouth. It was all applied externally. Then, she gave birth. After applying the medicine, he left. When the baby was born, he was informed. Then, he did the cutting of the chicken. Whenever, a disari helps a woman during labor, after that a sacrifice is done by the disari. After the birth, the disari does a ritual to the medicine, thanking the medicine since it allowed for the fast birth.

Shamans in many places have an image of the Tree of Life, or Axis Mundi, which connects the three realms of the underworld, the mundane every-day world and the heavens. This tree of life is a common Indian philosophical and imagistic trope. (And this is congruent with the use of the term 'narak' mentioned elsewhere) Interestingly dais in Karnataka often refer to their work in similar terms which perplexed us researchers at first. Husenabi, a Muslim dai said

"No one has taught me the work of midwifery. No one in my house learnt that kind of thing. They say 'how do you eat with the hands with which you have performed deliveries?' I say 'what to do? We can't distribute it or share it. A tree grows out of a tree. God has given me to perform delivery in my soul. That is how I have learnt."

Also she says about going at night for a birth “Even if it is difficult to go at night I go because plant grows out of plant we should go.”

Biomedical practice and practitioners are working to erase the magical rites that form an integral part of Adivasi religio-cultural handling of birth in Nandurbar district. Teraki stated, “We cast the daana (seeds). Except for our Adivasi people, I don’t think any outsider can possibly know the importance if these rituals. For them it’s nothing. Doctors do not allow our people inside the birthing room. So how can they listen to what we follow?” Gugli agrees, “There are rituals which we follow in our day-to-day life too. But casting the daana and opening the woman’s hair during childbirth are the main important things we do. But I don’t think anybody will listen to us. They work hard to stop all of this so how will they listen?”

Also in Himachal, we found the use of water and grain in a ‘shamanic’ ritual facilitation of birth. Nardei, a dai, says “If the laboring woman’s pain is not increasing, then we open the woman’s hair. Our elders say that tying the hair stops the contractions. Some bring water from the chela on which mantra has been performed and make the woman drink or sprinkle it on her.” Other dais in Himachal speak of grain being blessed by the chela and that being used by burning and the smoke from that being wafted over the laboring woman.

When I first witnessed an NGO enactment of the 'casting of the grain' I wasn't the least impressed. I thought of it as some primitive hocus-pocus. Now, as I pour over reams of data from field areas, collected by researchers concerned, not with numbers and 'efficacy', but rather what people themselves value and know, I have changed radically. I am intrigued and questioning.

Coming back from the Maharashtra research area I discussed with my husband this casting of the dana ritual so important to the Paura, Bhil and Pavra people of that mostly jowar-growing area. How can it possibly be that human beings will get information from seeds, and how they arrange themselves having been thrown? What are the properties and nature of grain that allows them to transmit information that is both predictive and healing?

I certainly don't have the answers, but I can speculate. There are analogies between agricultural growth and human reproduction. The word in Urdu is *barkhat* or increase. One seed gives many. First seed, daana, provides both food for people and can be planted and grown to produce more food. In parallel the baby is not only a new member of the family, but also, when grown, itself will reproduce. Perhaps the seed/grain is a sensate entity encoding, or being able to transmit-communicate information.

Protection

Another Adivasi group, the Bondo, Mogli and I went on to talk about the 'spirit' (bad translation of the Bondo word 'deptha') of the fire and wind elements. "There cannot be deptha in the fire or in the air. If they stay in the fire, they will be burned and there is no place for them to stand in the air. If they stay in the air, there is no place for them to stay." I asked if fire was used during women's labor, and what the fire was protecting them from. "If it is cold and raining, then they will use fire. After the birth, near the door, they will keep a burning coal. If any evil spirits come, it will keep them away." She continued saying that this newborn baby is there in the house, so the ladies will come. On the path are the hill, river, trees. On the way, the deptha may come with her. By seeing the fire, it will go away. The deptha may bring the sickness to the child. The dead person's spirit will also frighten the children in the night. The burning coal is also effective in keeping these spirits away.

This notion that a burning coal, or small fire, will protect from unwanted visitors from the spirit world was a common form of defense even mentioned by Katherine Mayo in her condemnation of dais. "The first *dai* that I saw in action tossed upon this coal-pot, as I entered the room, a handful of some special vile-smelling stuff to ward off the evil eye—my evil eye."

India is a great place for a person curious about birth and death. Not only do we find lingering birth customs of Adivasi peoples, hundreds of years old. But we also can find primal substrates pointing towards their inclusions in mainstream 'Hindu' rite and belief. Even ancient texts belie ghettoized walls separating images of birth and death. A Rig Vedic Hymn exists from a time when the dead were buried and not cremated. In this chant, the earth mother and the human mother are conflated.

"Open up Earth: do not crush him.

Be easy for him to enter and burrow in.

Earth, wrap him up as a mother

Wraps a son in the edge of her skirt."

Rig Vedic Burial Hymn (X.18)

The Hands are Mine

The *Sushruta Samhita*, an Ayurvedic text, states "women who have many children, are good hearted, possessing strong character, are experienced in conducting labor, affectionate in nature, free from grief, with good endurance and able to make the expectant woman happy" should be present at birth. But not only good bedside manner is needed.

Most midwives and certainly dais used to use their hands, not surgical instruments, to massage the vaginal area, allowing body tissues to slowly stretch and unfold to release the baby. They learned the art of touch--how to use their hands during of birth. Obstetricians have often been taught in medical schools to perform an episiotomy, to cut the mother's body to deliver the child—they are not instructed in the midwifery skill of using hands help the opening of the mother's body in order to receive the newly born.

The lighting of the pyre and the retrieval and submersion of the ashes and bone remnants of the body in the sacred rivers—traditionally men's hands that do that work. Some women are challenging this custom because of the way tradition has been used to justify son preference. It is important to remember the essence of the wisdom generated by participation in the work of birth and death—and the complementary gender roles assigned by tradition. Women's activity was at one end of the life spectrum and men's at another. The body transits from one watery place to another (from the amniotic fluid to the river water). Traditionally, women handled the beginning of human life, and men, the end. I'm not sure women were discriminated against in this gendered arrangement.

When birth is all about avoiding pain, keeping a sterile field and having all technologies on hand (pharmaceuticals, intravenous drips, epidurals and surgery options) it is no longer “hands on”. When we fill out the hospital forms as the laboring woman is stooped over in pain; when the smell of antiseptics assault the nostrils while monitoring devices whirr and the Pitocin drip is readied; when the goddess is forgotten and ‘science’ is the birth technology of choice, we are deprived of an occasion for embodied learning about the life force.

When we hand over the dead body to the mortician we deprive ourselves of valuable life-death experience and wisdom. When the body lies on the floor in the family home for hours; when we put garlands on the body; when family and friends wear white and sit hour after hour listening to devotional music as women softly sob—the meanings of death and thus of life are made real to us. Something precious is given up to the professionals, the “experts” when we forsake the physicality of birth and death. We are deprived, marginalized from full participation what it means to be human. And we become anxious and frightened, powerless as if we are in the grip of the bhuts and prets and demons who ‘possess’ the uneducated and ‘superstitious.

Years ago, my father passed away while I was living in India. My brother handled the cremation, according to my father’s wishes.

But we decided to wait until my husband, my children and I could join in the ritual of submersing the ashes in the ocean off the coast of San Diego, California. Before going to California, I had attended a Childbirth Educators' conference in Toronto, Canada. During this gathering our focus was on the hands of the midwife or doctor as they 'catch' the baby.

I vividly remember scattering my father's ashes into the ocean while looking down at my hands and the fleeting remnants of my father's body, thinking, 'Look at this—how we use our hands in birth—and in death. Truly, life is not a straight line, but a great circle of birth and death.' It seemed so similar—catching babies propelled from mothers' bodies and gifting back ashes to the mother-of-us all, Mother Nature.

The moments of birth and death, not to mention sex, are moments of great power. I look up synonyms for power on my computer and find control, supremacy, influence, authority, rule, clout, dominance...no that's not what I mean with the possible exception of influence.

It irritates me that the power of birth, of a new human being entering our earthly plane, is obscured endlessly. People are obsessed with whether the fetus is a boy or a girl so they can purchase outfits and paint rooms in pink or blue. Or they are ready to congratulate a boy and condole a girl. In many nursing

homes and hospitals baksheesh given to attendants is higher if it's a boy! The privileged purchase elective cesarean and tummy tuck surgeries at the same time.

Interestingly a recently 'rediscovered' phenomenon, the 'fetal ejection reflex'. The 'fetal ejection reflex' is a term rescued from obscurity in the work of biologist Niles Newton by Dr. Michel Odent. It refers to the reflex that all animals have when they give birth to their offspring in a secluded environment.

The fetal ejection reflex is a sudden awakening, a series of irresistible and uncontrollable surges of energy that empower the mother into expelling the baby from her womb. It is a spectacular release of birth hormones including adrenalin, oxytocin, endorphins, dopamine, and prolactin. The mother most often needs to be upright or bent forwards in some way, needs to pull on a bar or handle, or rope.

In our Jeeva research, although I was working in translation of the dai interviews from Hindi, Kannada and Marathi, it became obvious that women weren't taking or enduring the birth pains, but rather 'giving' them. To me this is hugely significant. The mother is spoken of as active and central to the process, not passively submitting to what and who is outside of her body.

Bhadu from Jharkhand said,

"Baby whose buttock comes first, its neck can get stuck. Then I slowly move baby out and ask the woman to give pain and in this way birth happens."

JayaBai from Karnataka says, "If strong pain comes, she gives pain. Whole body shakes. If she gives two such pains delivery takes place."

This use of the active tense is similar to the idea Apfel Marglin describes in the menstruation chapter where in costal Orissa the women speak of the bleeding of menses as an action of theirs, not something imposed or submitted to.

Language and Birth

Birth is beyond language—it is a primal act. Nonetheless humans bear the capacity of speaking and expressing experience in language. What has come to us is mostly male language and experience, especially about the penultimate female experience, childbirth. We revert to the sacred texts to view priestly male words about birth. The Atharva Veda includes a charm or prayer for easy 'parturition.'

"May this woman be delivered, may her joints relax, that she shall bring forth!

Four directions have heaven, and also four the earth: from these the gods created the embryo. May they open her that she shall bring forth!

I split open thy vagina, thy womb, thy canals; I separate the mother and the son, the child along with the placenta. May the placenta fall down!

As flies the wind, as flies the mind, as fly the winged birds, so do thou, O embryo, ten months old, fall along with the placenta! May the placenta fall down!"

We have no clue as to what the mothers had thought of this invocation and blessing.

In another Veda, the Rig Veda, Purush, the cosmic person, is lord of all creation, animate and inanimate. Purush's birth-giving powers are metaphysical as well as the source of the divinely ordained social order—caste. This creation, however, involves dismemberment of the cosmic body spawning Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras or lowest castes.

"When they divided Man, the Person

How were the parts distributed?

His mouth was the Man of the Word.

Into the Prince, his arms were made.

While his thighs produced the People.

His feet gave birth to the Servant."

Rig Veda, X.90, 11-14

Although the mother-child paradigm of birth involves symbiosis and empathetic mutuality, the purusha-caste paradigm, which morphed into caste, involves dismemberment of the body. This maiming provides the textual foundation for the institution of a social order based on supposedly cosmic- ordained superiority and inferiority.

It struck me one day that the cosmic sound or mantra OM parallels the movement of the fetus through the 'birth canal" The vocalization of AUM passes through the back of the mouth (deep in the throat) through the mouth to the lips. It powerfully affects human consciousness. Then, I thought, why shouldn't the conscious female awareness of the passage of the fetus through the bones, organs, membranes (which anatomically replicate the

process of chanting OM) similarly affect a profound change of consciousness in the mother?

An amazing midwife Robin Lim practicing in Bali writes about the beliefs that support different practices. She says that what birthing women and their babies experience in most hospital settings…are procedures and practices that do not have any faith as a foundation. Instead that which is the 'baby's house' becomes the 'uterus'. What I can tell from having worked in many hospitals, the uterus is perceived as the enemy, a dark and mysterious place from which doctors must rescue babies. Armed with induction and the Pitocin drip, they are ready and able to move those babies out.

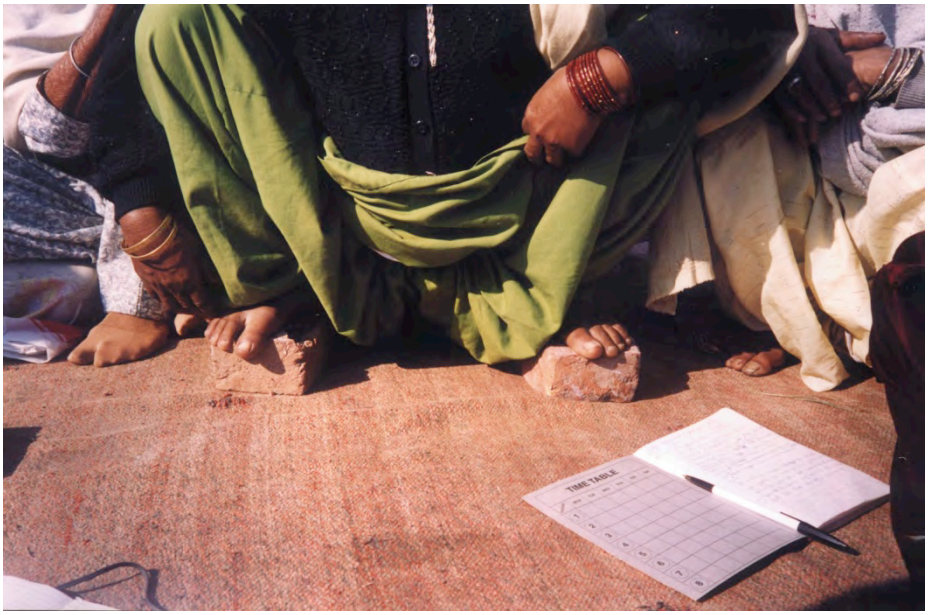
Voices from the Ground

Many years ago, Kalawati in Delhi compared giving birth at home and hospital.

"We had planned from the beginning to have the child at home, at my mother's house. At home I had my mother, bhabhi—everyone to support me and the dai too was very nice. In hospital the doctor's behavior is not good. Neither can one cry with pain, nor is there any one to listen to your troubles. I am also afraid of their long instruments—what if

they hurt you inside your body? In the hospital, the doctor helps deliver the baby by making the woman lie down for his convenience. I like to squat and deliver. If one sits up one can exert more pressure. All my children have been born this way.

With my youngest daughter, I had pains for a long time but the child was not coming, so we went to Dr. Pandey's Hospital. Pandey doctor told me that in the hospital children are born with the mother lying down and not in the squatting position. The nurse asked me to push. I tried but couldn't push the baby out. I said, "Lying down I'll not have the child even if I keep pushing." So I insisted on getting on the bricks. Even at Pandey's hospital I gave birth squatting on the bricks!"



Woman simulating squatting on the bricks in a workshop

The custom of squatting on the bricks, giving the mother the advantage of gravity, more ability to push and widening the pelvic bones is not at all new. Kalawati and the slum women of Delhi actually have ancient regal precedents!

Egyptian birth brick used by queens 3700 years ago

Egyptologists have long known from ancient texts that the standard form of childbirth in ancient Egypt was for the woman to deliver the baby while squatting on bricks. In the year 2000 University of Pennsylvania Museum archaeologists discovered a 3700-year-old "magical" birth brick inside the palatial residence of a Middle Kingdom mayor's house in southern Egypt. The colorfully decorated mud birth brick—the first ever found—is one of a pair that would have been used to support a woman's feet while squatting during childbirth. The ancient brick still preserves colorful painted scenes and figures: clearly visible is a mother holding her newborn baby, as well as magical images of gods who would protect and aid the mother and baby at the time of birth.

Opening Rituals

One thing I noticed when I came to live in India and started researching dais was the different attention birth caregivers paid to pre-partum and postpartum. In California at that time childbirth educators were mainly focused on getting the baby out—breathing and relaxation techniques and comfort measures, of course. They left problems of resuscitation and dealing with newborn problems to the doctors. Whereas with the dais and women reporting their birth experiences the focus was on postpartum and all the caretaking of women required *after* the birth. This may be because of the ritual facilitations of birth. There are many analogies of 'opening' what might be called the power of suggestion, or the 'shamanic' use of the imagination.

Reshmo, a dai from Himachal Pradesh, spoke of these rites and acknowledged doctors' inability to understand or appreciate them. She reports that the opening of knots externally will help the opening of women's body and heart.

"When the woman is in labor we open her braided hair or any knots in her hair—if a woman is wearing any thread on which mantra has been done by chela, we open that also. Baby comes out slowly. If knots are opened, then all the knots of woman's body and heart also open up and pain increases.

You cannot talk with doctors about this, as it is difficult to make them understand. They will say 'do the dais know more than us?'"

Meera, a dai from Jharkhand, similarly describes this mimetic magic.

"At the time of birth, I open the woman's hair. If she put a lock to anything then open that lock, if she has latched her house then open that too. If she has tied any knot then open that too, only then will birth door open. This is our belief."

A Tamil midwife, Nagamma, narrated a comparable opening, or separating ritual to me years ago in Tamil Nadu. In this case the custom is prophetic and prayerful. She also mentions the 'spirits' which might have been lurking and clinging to the midwife.

"Just before I enter the house I wash my legs and pour water over my head—spirits may have been attracted to me as I came. In the hut or the stone house the woman's people would have tied a long thin palm leaf over the door of the house and placed a knife beside the door. When the midwife comes she takes the knife and makes a cut on the leaf. She cuts it into

two parts—one part falls to one side of the door and the other falls on the other side.

This separates the one into two. When the dai cuts the leaf she prays to the household god or goddess—or sometimes the many goddesses: Kayana, Selvi, Ganga, Kanya. If the cut is clean the birth will be easy, if not there will be complications."

The splitting of the atta, as well as the slicing of the leaf, are mimetic of the baby separating from the mother. Kivani describes the rite.

"Some jaggery and grain is kept in a plate. Then we pray. "Bhagwan, everything should happen smoothly and be over." After praying the mother separates the jaggery and grain into two portions. With one portion sweet pudding is made for the birthing mother. The other is put in a sieve and circulated seven times over her head. While doing this we pray to Bemata asking her to take care of the mother and the baby."

Also from Delhi one dai said,

"Here we take on mound of wheat flour and put is on a plate. The birthing mother takes a coin and separates the flour into two portions. It hastens birth."

In an Adivasi area of Maharashtra, just south of the Narmada River, male as well as female midwives shared their invocations or prayers during labours—asking for opening. Selya, a popular male dai as well as a shaman, invokes the 'Huarki' or spirit midwife and bargains with her offering liquor and chicken.

"You are ours, Earth Mother, I appeal to you!

I implore you!

Quick open, with straight head let it come.

Give us what we pray.

If we've made a mistake then forgive us for it!

Huarki, opener of hair, placer of barriers,

Let the door open into this habitation!

Huarki, remover of barriers, opener of hair,

We'll give liquor, chicken at the doorway.

Now I pour the sacred liquor for you,

You are acting crazily!"

In this area of Nandurbar, hyper-Hindu priests are claiming that tribal traditions around birth and death should be abandoned as they are against religion. One midwife shared, "The work of holding the belly [their way of saying attending a woman during birth] is our dharma (spiritual duty) but some people see it as sinful..."

Hands-on Descriptions from the Ground

Huseini Bi from Karnataka describes her experience of handling labour. Notice that she uses the phrase 'give the pain' to speak of the mother's activity of birthing.

"Pain comes and goes, strong pain means she becomes nervous. When it is strong pain, it comes over and over again and face is drawn, there will no freshness on the face. Then I say lie down and let me see whether the baby has come on the path yet. When the pain becomes more if she has the strength to move around we tell her to walk. If she says I don't have

strength, then we say lie down and give pain. If she walks and gives pain then we say hold on to something hanging and give pain. Nothing gets cut. For one woman I said I will perform delivery but she went to the hospital... A male baby was born. They took a blade and cut. The place where urine is passed, where delivery takes place all became one!"

Supporting (literally) a laboring woman—image from the side of a temple courtesy Stella Dupuis

When you don't cut and rather work with the energies of the body, this doesn't happen. Giriyamma, aged 76 also from Karnataka, speaks of how women experience pain differently. Particularly in Karnataka dais spoke of 'swallowing' the pain meaning keeping

control of the breath and not letting the power of the contracting uterus out of the body—making each 'pain' more effective.

"If they give pain lying down then they lose the pain. If she swallows the pain inside the body, then baby slips down. If she leaves the breath (exhales) with mouth then the baby will not slip down it will come up."

Mangalibali, also elderly, speaks of negotiating childbirth and state compulsions. She helped the mother birth the baby and sent them to the hospital without cutting the cord!

"Once a birth took place, so I tied the cord and put the placenta in a bag and I didn't cut the cord and sent them in the ambulance. We should not tell that it happened in the house, then they will not get the government benefits. I didn't cut the cord because if the delivery takes place at home then they will not get Bhagyalaxmi bond, so I sent like that placenta and baby still connected."

Dhapo, an elderly dai from Delhi describes a very common maneuver which we also found in our Jeeva research. Many dais said that this would never happen in the hospital because the

nurses consider the rectum a 'dirty place.' In some reports, the dais' hand is used not the heel.

"See, this is the wonder of nature. At the time when the baby is coming, even the anus comes down. Its mouth widens. However the baby cannot come out from there. So a piece of cloth is pressed up against the anus. We place it with our heel. Lot of pressure is applied so the anus is raised up and the baby comes through the right path."

Pouring oil over the navel, to determine the lie of the fetus and the nature of the contractions is often done in early labour. A few drops of oil are poured above the navel; if the oil flows directly downward the dai feels the birth will happen soon and easily. If it spreads to the sides it seems that it may take time and there may be difficulty. She determines the lie of the fetus. There may be a need to do this many times and the dai massages, and perhaps shakes the belly making hands-on contact with and comforting the mother. Mallama from Karnataka describes this.

"I put oil on the belly and massage it, and then I shake her belly and thighs. I pull the muscles and loosen the nerves. Then standing her up I drop the oil. If the oil flows straight down then delivery will take place soon. So we don't have to touch the vagina with our fingers. We just watch how the oil flows."

Giving birth squatting on bricks is mentioned in this narrative of birth by a dai from Delhi. The dai speaks of how she adapts her birth position according to the condition of the mother.

"When she observes that the woman is ready to deliver, the dai asks her to squat on two bricks, or to lie down. She exercises her own judgment. Traditionally squatting is preferred but if the woman is weak or has given birth to many children or has a history of prolapsed uterus it is considered better that she lie down for birth."

A common use of the dai's own outstretched legs to aid the mother in pushing is described by this Rajasthani dai. The mother can then push against the dai herself.

"Dai helps the woman with her own legs. She sits and places her own legs on the inside portion of the woman's thighs, so the mother can bear down more effectively and the birth takes place."

Lost wax statue of birthing woman showing how dai is using her feet to widen mother's pelvis—helping her to push—Delhi Crafts Museum

Miraculous Births

The following miraculous births are neither 'hands-on' nor are they 'from the ground.' They are miraculous stories drawn from the Puranas. Of course, the male contribution, semen, gets a lot of attention. *According to the Matsya Purana Mitra and Varuna were*

practicing austerities when the saw Urvashi plucking flowers. They were excited on seeing her and their semen fell on the deerskin on which they sat. Being afraid of a curse they placed the semen in a jar full of water. From it were born the sages Agastya and Vashishtaha.

But there is no mention of women in labour or normal births.

Miraculous, but real, Conceptions

Rites reported from both Himachal and Jharkhand aided those women who were having trouble conceiving. In all the stories, the woman desiring a baby was exposed to the sensual stimulations of sight/smells/touch/sounds that accompanied the birth. One such ritual was described by Anarkali Devi from Himachal.

"A woman who is not conceiving even after many years of marriage goes to the woman who has many children and says to her that I will take your placenta, then I will get children. Then at the time of birthing, they call that woman and put the placenta in her lap. Then she conceives. It is wrapped in a clean cloth and that woman keeps it for 5-7 minutes in her lap. Then the placenta is buried. After some time, this woman gets children. Then both women become sisters to each other."

Burdhi from Jharkhand spoke of taking both the newborn and the placenta in her lap.

"If someone is not having a child, sometimes she may be given the newborn child of a newly delivered mother while the baby is still attached to the placenta. They give her both the placenta and the child. After my oldest daughter I didn't have another child for seven years. Then my sister-in-law had a child and my mother-in-law told me to take this infant-placenta in my lap and I did so. After this my children started coming again. In different castes of people, in this same way, a woman may be allowed to 'adopt' the child of another same-caste woman. No one disapproves of this."

It is relevant that the term for adoption in Hindi is 'god lena' or to take in the lap.

In the early 1950s, 88-year-old Rabbo Dai, who lived in Jama Masjid's fish market used to say that her great-grandmother and grandmother were frequently called to the poor quarters of the harem to deliver babies, treat women after a miscarriage or to carry out abortions, as a result of incestuous liaisons. Rabbo used to say that an illegitimate child, especially if a girl, was suffocated at birth by the midwife on the orders of the family elders to save

the mother's honour and keep the possibility of a decent marriage alive.

Midwives usually got a pittance for their labours but there were rich and influential women too in the *zenana* who paid some handsomely. If Rabbo *dai* was to be believed, prosperous *dais* were able to buy houses in the Walled City and become landladies. Their detractors called these properties "haram bacchon ki jaidad" or the property of illegitimate children.

Wet-nurses were in demand for the harem as some could not produce enough milk. However, there were also cases of princes preventing their wives from breast-feeding the infants as they thought it would mar their beauty. Along with wet-nurses, *lori* singers were also welcomed to sing lullabies to royal babies. They were hired from the city but some were housed in the fort, as they had to sing both in the afternoon and night. One popular lullaby was: "Chandan ka hai palna/resham ki hai dor/Aur Kabul se Mughlanian/khadi hilawein dor" A loose translation is "The sandalwood cradle and silken rope, from Kabul the ayah came, she is pulling the rope. (a reference to Pathan women lulling the infants to sleep in gilded cradles).

I was also wondering, on a recent trip to Agra, why Mumtaz Mahal, Empress though she was, died during childbirth in 1631 at age 38. Of course, one reason was that she travelled with her

husband, Shah Jahan, even in advanced stages of pregnancy. The other was that she didn't breastfeed her babies, in keeping with the royal custom. Breastfeeding delays conception because it keeps a mother from ovulating—necessary for conception. But it isn't foolproof because ovulation occurs before the first menstruation. However, it does usually postpone ovulation for 3 to 6 months.

Birth Songs or Sohar

This *sohar* or birth song sung at one of our MATRIKA workshops is blatantly proprietary of the *jachcha* or birth-giving woman. 'My *jachcha*' is the first line. We don't know the relationship of the singer to the *jachcha*, allowing everyone to claim her. Not only is the pregnant woman conflated with the most beautiful 'full' moon of the year, but the activities of all her attendants are listed: the mother-in-law makes the herbal concoction; the older sister-in-law makes the celebratory sweets; the husband's sister prepares to draw the auspicious symbols on the walls — and the husband's younger brother is ready to play the flute — and they are all **beneath** (at the service of) the *mahal*/woman/*jachcha.*

"My jacha is the full moon of Sharad [as round/full/bright/ radiant/beautiful as]

Beneath the mahal the dai waits

With all that's needed for the jachcha.

Beneath the mahal saas (mother-in-law) waits

With all that's needed to make charua.

Beneath the mahal jethani (husband's brother's wife) waits

With all that's needed to make laddoos.

Beneath the mahal nandi (husband's sister) waits

With all that's needed for sathiya.

Beneath the mahal devar (husband's brother) waits

Ready to play the flute."

We also know there are problems with relationships and their demands. In the following song the jachcha does not have control over the resources. Nor does she control the errant husband who has gone off with the keys. Naek is the formalized gifting at the time of birth and pardes means abroad or out.

"Jacha has climbed up to the upper room/attic, how shall I manage/what shall we do?

Dais come, cut the cord, ask for their naek

My Sajanwa has taken away the keys, how will I manage/what shall I do?

Saas comes, makes the bed, asks for her naek

When it's time for giving, Jacha says, "my Piya has gone to pardes,

There is no money in the house"

Nanad comes, offers charua and asks for naek

When it's time for giving Jacha says, "my Piya has gone to pardes"

Devar comes, lights the diya and asks for his naek

When it's time for giving, Jacha says, "my Piya has gone to pardes""

With all this valorization of tradition it is important to acknowledge its problems. Among them is son preference. One basti woman claimed "It would be nice if a boy were born. Then only would I be accepted as a real mother."

This Ovi or Maharastrian Folk Song describes the difficulty.

"To many daughters have I!

Oh, don't say that, mother!

To a strange house they'll go,

and then you'll quickly pine for them.

In my heart I feel,

a daughter is a nail of gold;

To stranger's house she'll go,

Heat of the sun she'll feel.

Father says of daughter,

She is my farm of carrots;

Mother and father, the fools,

What gained they by giving her birth?

Father says daughters

Are like my sacks of rice.

Amongst the people,

Father acted as a trader by selling daughters."

Chapter 7

Postpartum—the Magical Six

DD Kosambi writes of the Magical Sixth, mainly in Maharashtra. "There existed a remarkable, primitive and dangerous mother goddess Satavai, or Satavi… (the last is now a term of abuse in Marathi for an unpleasant harridan). The goddess Satavi is to be propitiated on the sixth night after the birth of any child with a lamp burning through the night…The goddess comes in person that night to write the fate and character of the child on its forehead in invisible but immutable words…. She is herself also the sixth date of the lunar month, which is her special worship day."

Whether it's called Chatti, Shasti or Satavi the sixth day after the birth of a child assumes a great ritual importance. One biomedical interpretation of the sixth day was that by then tetanus would have appeared in the newborn, and once passed a boundary had been drawn and the birth celebrated. I doubt that speculation. It reflects the concern of the researcher rather than the general vulnerability of the newborn.

Chatti Puja and Chat Puja

I was staying with our Jeeva team members and field level researchers when I woke up at 5:30 am hearing patakas or fireworks going off. Oh, I thought, it must be Chat Puja and the Biharis are setting off fireworks while their women, fasting, are worshipping the sun as it is reflected in the water during sunrise.

Jeeva Research Project Team assembled at a workshop. From left Leila, Anuradha, Imrana, me, Sandhya and Mira

I tell Leila, my roommate, about this festival and how it is related to birth. She thinks I'm nuts—that I'm seeing birth everywhere. We are at a Jeeva workshop for orientation and training and our

focus IS birth. I explain to her the parallels between human birth and this calendric festival. First the big celebration post-birth is Chatti Puja, also meaning 6th, which happens 6 days after the birth of the child. There is Chat puja, 6 days after Diwali. There is a parallel in the timings of the celebrations.

Secondly, I have watched Chat Puja at dawn and noticed how the sun virtually pops out from the horizon—similar to the way a baby's head pops out from the mother's body. Thirdly this is a women's festival in that the women fast, dress up in beautiful rangeen capre (colors of the sun—red, yellow, orange, pink, lavender) and walk to the river or water source barefoot and carrying baskets of offerings, fruit, sweets and pray for the wellbeing of husbands and sons. I have watched this rite performed years ago, first in Bodhgaya, Bihar and then Patna. Delhi people never used to be aware of Chat Puja—but with the influx of Bihari folks, particularly as government bureaucrats, now it is observed and even written up in newspapers. I live not too far from the River Jamuna—laying in my bed early morning on Chat for the last few years I have heard the sound of fireworks going off at dawn, men's contribution to the festivities.

When I was in Bodhgaya, years ago, staying at the Burmese Vihar across from the river, it was a time of drought—the river was completely dry, only sand was visible. I remember men coming

days before Chat and digging holes and troughs to get down to the water…so that their women could have access to the water in order to do the puja properly. I had also seen in Patna city, on the way to the train station, women doing the puja in puddles and small drain-like streams. Just like I had heard of the post birth well worship done in villages transformed into a rite performed at the water-giving hand pump where women in slums procured water. Important rituals morph into new environments.

While Leila was laughing at me for my birth-Chat Puja equation I said hey, wait a minute. You have in your own Indian Christian tradition the same kind of calendric-human life commonality. We don't know historically when Jesus was born, but at some point, the date was fixed at December 25th, suspiciously close to the winter solstice when the sun/son of god is reborn (in the Northern Hemisphere). I went on to detail the Sikh equivalent—and now we're talking not 'mythic' but historical time. When Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th and last Sikh guru, was fighting Aurangzeb, his two younger sons, Zoravar and Fateh, were bricked up alive by the Emperor's men in Fatehgarh in Punjab. (Two of my young grandsons totally coincidentally happen to be named Zoravar and Fateh) This place and the sacrifice of the young martyrs is now marked by a Gurdwara, Fatehgarh Sahib.

During our MATRIKA research project we held a workshop with Mazbi Sikh dais (Sikhs claim they don't observe caste but although Guru Nanak and many others made efforts in that direction, this claim is untrue. Mazbi Sikh women are often dais and are from the lowest caste.) I felt an abject grief on my visit to this Gurdwara and the meditation on the brutal entombment (bricked up alive) of the Guru's young boy children. This was long before my grandsons were born.

To return to calendric co-incidences this bricking up, and the darkness portrayed in the images of Zoravar and Fateh (ages 9 and 6) being walled up alive is mirrored by the time of year…12th December 1705, when the sun is fading. In the paintings that I have seen in the Harmandir Saheb (Golden Temple) in Amritsar, this darkness contrasts with the radiance of the halos surrounding the heads of the young martyrs. A dark time of the year mirrored in the dark enclosing, bricking up of the young boys alerted me to the calendric significance.

Female Blood: Narak, Chatti Puja and Dirt

We have elaborated on the concept of Narak and use it again as a tool for understanding the concerns, rites and idioms that defined postpartum time. Female blood, both menstruation and postpartum bleeding are marks of the female power and capacity

to manifest new human life. These biological phenomena are by and large outside of normal social control, or have been before the dominance of biomedicine. We can understand priestly injunctions (Leviticus and Dharma Shastra) as attempts to control the uncontrollable, or at least banish them from 'spiritual' life. Before we consider the Indian postpartum rites let's look at an equivalent, 'the churching of women' in the west.

Rachel C. Newell writes that the rite of the purification and thanksgiving of women after childbirth found its way into the Christian prayer books by the eleventh century. This rite is the only ritual in the western Christian church to address women specifically, and that at a time of considerable significance: women who have recently given birth.

I have viewed priestly attitudes towards female bleeding mainly in terms of misogyny, womb envy and constructing laws and customs to control women—but not in terms of men's fear of their own embodied mortality—a fear of death. Women have periods and babies—we know about blood and body—perhaps we know, in a way men don't, that we are going to die. It is inviting to view the reverence with which dais handle and bury the placenta in terms of their own comfort with the whole life cycle and the fact that whatever is born will die. My brother put this beautifully after an operation where he had to wear a kind of diaper or nappy. "I think

women would be more comfortable with this because they have periods and all."

Newell claims that in Christian 'churching' the maternal body is again rendered symbolically clean or pure, as it is within the Indian postpartum rites. She points out that in England within a secularized National Health Service maternity system, postnatal women undergo another rite--that of the 'six-week postnatal examination.'...The maternal body is again 'clean' or given a 'clean bill of health.' Perhaps the practice of churching with its concepts of dirt, uncleanness and pollution is not obsolete. It has emerged disguised within a secular health service!

In the Indian context Chatti ritual observances also end the period of 'pollution' but less under the influence of religious authorities and more under the watchful eye of female relatives and particularly the dai. Both birth and Chhati rites were domestic activities and the cultural code of 'pollution' ensured that women were in charge.

Voices from the ground—Postpartum Experiences

The 'polluted' period postpartum traditionally functioned not only as marking an 'unclean' time but also offered the new mother rest, relieving her of social, ritual, domestic and family responsibilities. This is only ideally, however in the context of poverty—was not

always observed. The time observed also varied according to place and community. Isolation of the mother and newborn protected them from infections and/or evil spirits. It also established the dai, or whoever cut the cord as the person who had the skills and responsibility to negotiate this time and space. Unfortunately it also often marked the dai as permanently untouchable. Now most of these practices have almost disappeared.

Sitapati speaks of postpartum customs and her religious practices and philosophy.

"We cannot take water from the well after childbirth until we perform the well-worship ritual. If for some reason I couldn't do it in the first month, then I'd worship it in the third month. I think that during birth, God's shakti is there. If His shakti was not there, then this child, a whole human being, how could I have made it? But if I don't do anything, just sit or sleep, and think that child would be born – this too is not correct. God is the one to give. To do the rest is in our hands."

Hemkala also describes her experience of postpartum in terms of religio-cultural practice and 'untouchability.'

The baby was born in the evening. After a while I drank milk, then ate halva. We buried my daughter's placenta inside the house. When she was 11 days old, we called a pundit, had the havan, and kept her name. We gave food to the villagers through five kumari (virgins). My sister cooked all the food. For 21 days I mostly remained in bed. When my sister went away, my husband did all the work, my own and the children's, for a month quarter. Amongst us, we practice untouchability for 11 days. People of the house stay away from the jachcha for a month and a quarter. After that the woman takes a bath in Ganga water and goes to the mandir. I, too, went to the mandir and then came home and cooked food..."

On Chatti day the Narak period ends as the dai does her work of cleaning and lessening pollution. In Bihar the 'narak upwaas' or 'fasting' postpartum ideally is congruent with the mother's diminished ability to digest heavy food. Her bodily energy has been directed towards the birth and not the ability to digest food. When the family has little to eat this this fasting should not be valorized.

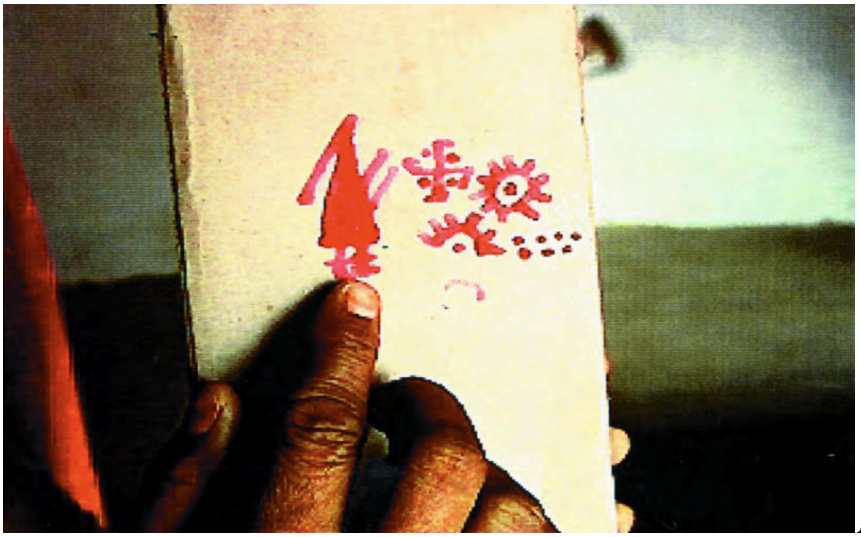
The mother may experience postpartum contractions of the womb as it reduces in size. Often painful, especially after repeated childbearing, these contractions are sometimes called ‘gola’ or ball and are understood as the womb ‘searching’ for the baby, attributing agency to the womb. As one dai from Punjab poetically explained

“Gola is baby's home. When the house becomes empty, only dirty blood is left. When this comes out there is pain. Hot drinks of ajwain, saunth, pipar and gur are given. This drink cleans the belly. After the baby is born, the gola roams around. This gola has taken care of the baby, now it must leave.

On the 13th day after birth, the new mother is allowed to enter the kitchen. (Chauka Charhana). Some do it on 7th or on 11th day. Everybody celebrates. There is singing and dancing. On this day, the new mother and baby bathe and wear new clean clothes. She comes out to get everyone's blessing. Friends and relatives are invited and eat food together. The Dai is given clothes, food and grain.”

Another dai from Rajasthan describes their celebrations and the worship of the birth goddess, Bemata. Bemata leaves on the sixth

day, as does the dai. Here the birth goddess and the dai are conflated, they leave at the same time.

 A

Dai points out Bemata drawn on a charpoy leg along with other auspicious diagrams

"On the day of the birth ritual Chhatti-6th day the woman wears everything that was taken off at the time of birth. She puts on bindi, bangles, henna and nose ring. We make ritual drawings of Swasthik, worship Bemata and light a lamp. We make a foot impression of the mother on the floor and then the woman enters the main house. Till the 5th day Bemata roams around in the house. After the birth celebrations Bemata leaves, she goes to another house. The dai also goes to serve others." (Paana, Rajasthan)

From Jharkhand, Subhadra describes a post birth rite at the talab or pond. This is analogous to the well worship ritual. She expresses milk from her breasts and attributes these practices to the elders.

"We work a lot on that day, bring earth and plaster the floor where the placenta is buried, take new mother's clothes to the pond and bring them back washed, wash the cot then give bath to the baby. After finishing the work at her home then I take the woman to the pond and she takes a bath with soap and oil. From her home we take sindur, kajal turmeric rice. When she has finished her bath then she does ghaat pooja and offers those things and milk from her breasts on the stone at the pond and bows to that stone and then washes it. This is all offered to god. What our elder women started, we follow that."

During some postpartum rites, the birth goddess writes the baby's fate on the third day after the birth. The goddess has different names in different languages. In some areas of North India, she is called Bemata, in the South Vidhmata. Old gazetteers recorded that Brahmins would place a notebook and pen for a boy, or cooking implements for a girl. For fisher folk it would be fishing net. Below is a rather humorous report from Karnataka.

"On the third day below the cradle one pot of water is kept and around the cradle puffed rice is spilled, one coconut is broken at the door. On that day Vidhimunde comes and writes the fate of the child and when she comes children should not make noise and trouble Her. If they sit eating puffed rice then she can write fate of the child without being disturbed. If children are disturbing then how can she write the fate? She will write something wrong, so they do like that."

In Karnataka, in Billary district the Hole Puja is equivalent to Chatti in the North. There, in our Jeeva data, it was repeatedly said that besides giving thanks this puja involved praying that the new mother's post-birth bleeding would stop.

"On the third day they do Hole puja to stop bleeding. On that day they keep a sickle and neem leaves near the baby and do the Puja. They make mutton curry and feed everyone."

I questioned a Bondo tribeswoman about why women who helped at a birth would bath before resuming daily activities. She said that having participated with a woman while giving birth would change a person. She would be different from her normal self. "My spirit would be different from your spirit." This is an eloquent way of putting women's seclusion or 'confinement' and the notion of

uncleanness. Birthing energies profoundly affect those present. If one allows those energies to enter ones' consciousness then ones' psyche-self is different from that of the person walking down the street or cooking dinner. Bathing is the way of literally washing away or changing those energies.

Washing and 'purification' rituals are also required after attending a cremation. The beginning and end of a human life are messy bodily affairs, not amenable to social or religious control. Low or outcaste people handle both birth and death. Dom men are the ritual specialists of death. Dais, bais, suins, almost always female, are the expert handlers of birth. Gupasing is the Bondo postpartum ritual equivalent to Chatti. I learned about this from Bondo women.

"Till "gupasing" the mother is not supposed to do any work at home. Her plate, the pot in which they gave hot water for her to take bath and the gourd for drinking are kept separately. Others are not supposed to use those. The old ladies will tell her not to carry heavy loads for three weeks, or she will get a prolapsed uterus. Those who helped in delivery won't give food to guests till "gupasing". Neighbors won't take fire from that new

mother's house because then they can't give food to their guests.

The shaman will do puja and sprinkle turmeric water on mother and baby. They give the turmeric water and food to those who helped her. Then everyone does all the normal work."

I always thought that the fertility of women and the fertility of the earth were the same. After all we use the same word in English for both, 'fertility.' A woman who has recently given birth explains that the 'untouchability' after the birth also extends to the fields. Nobody works in the fields, as they are also ritually untouchable.

"In our village when the prasoota (birth) is done no one goes into the fields to work as we consider it jooth (untouchable) for 3 days in the entire village. On the 3rd day we clean the house, plaster the house and also wash the clothes. Only after that can people go into the fields to work."

A new mother's father-in-law, also from a Himachal village, stated

"If a birth happens in anyone's house then we call it out in the same way the night guard calls out at night. A family member

gives the call that jooth has fallen and then no one goes to the fields to work as the fields are god's land. Even if someone dies we don't work in the fields. It is like this in our hills."

Another rite common among agricultural communities points towards the idea that the fertility of women and the earth were similar. The baby is placed in a winnowing basket, just as the grain is put there after harvesting. Both birth and the husking of the grain involve separation. From Karnataka came an example.

"Hole includes a prayer so that her bleeding will stop. As soon as they come from the hospital they make holepuje after giving bath to the mother and to the baby. After the bath they put the baby in the mora (winnowing basket). On the third day they keep coconut, betel leaves, betel nuts, sickle, dates, one measure of jawar and do puja. After the puja they give all these things to sulagithi (traditional midwife). They must give these in the winnowing basket. Empty basket should never be given to sulagithi."

Postpartum Threats: Textual

S.A. Dange writes of Puranic beliefs and practices surrounding the malevolent female powers that threaten women and infants. They

define childbearing women and newborns as tasty food for ghosts but they also mention the risks of leaving a laboring woman alone. He states that according to the Varaha Puran the evil female-powers produced by Camunda asked for food as soon as they were created. Camunda allowed them various types of persons as food; among them are women in delivery and newborn babies. Some of these cruel ones take their victims from the delivery rooms, entering by holes and crevices. Some may take away the new babes; these powers are allowed to possess pregnant women who weep alone and are forlorn at such places as their own home, at a religious place, at a tank or in a garden. Even sensitive midwives and doctors would not want pregnant women to weep alone or be forlorn—anywhere.

According to the Skanda Puran, if women with fetus sleep at the evening twilight, their fetus will be attacked by these evil female powers, (the matrs) Pregnant women who stand alone at the cross-roads or where three roads meet shall see their fetus taken away by evil powers. Similar beliefs are also recorded in the Markandeya Puran, mentioning the evil power Jataharini ("the usurper of the newborn"). She frequents delivery rooms that are devoid of fire and water, and which are not properly incensed, which have no lamp, weapon, pestle, ashes and mustard seed.

In these texts, pregnant women are proscribed from sleeping at twilight and frequenting crossroads. It is important to note that the crossroads are spaces used both for magical purposes and ritual offerings to the matrs, or "mothers"- female ancestors.

Postpartum Threats: Voices from the Ground

A lost wax image of the churel with her hands on backwards (but not her feet, as usually portrayed)

Women, themselves, often talk of the vulnerability and threats to the new mother and babe. These intruders into the birth space go by many names. Jharauli, dayan, churel, munishwaran, 'the evil eye' all lurk and threaten. Asharfi, an elderly midwife whom I interviewed 30 years ago, spoke of the churel. The churel is an interesting figure—often depicted as the woman who died while pregnant, during birth or post birth. She was said to be

attached to her family—baby, other children, husband—and thus haunted the family home, particularly plaguing the next wife of the husband.

She told me that to defend against the churel the Dakshinpuri (then a slum colony to the south of Delhi) women used iron, fire, mustard seeds, which were all seen to afford ritual protection against the churel. Asharfi, however, mentioned that the churel only comes if a woman is left to labour alone. Implied in Asharfi's statement is that it is the presence and support of the women that protects the laboring woman from the harm of the churel as well as the protection afforded by fire and iron, both textually prescribed.

I find it interesting that a naughty small girl used to be affectionately reprimanded by being called 'churel'—a sophisticated communication that this behavior will be tolerated now as you are young, but as you grow up, it might not be.

Another spirit, according to Tamil Nagamma an Irula tribal herbalist and dai, munishwaran or manusha, can create problems. According to her this spirit is found in wells and has matted locks of hair. She claimed

"It jumps out of the well early in the morning and sits with folded legs by the well. It wears white clothes. You

can't say if it is male or female. When it sits praying, early in the morning, you can go quietly and see it. I have seen one such munishwaran. If you go near, when it knows you are there it will just fall forward into the well with a big splash.

You see, there are places inside the well with no water, where the munishwaran can go and sit. It sometimes stays in trees—the trees have to be hollow so the spirit can live there. They go after the mother and fetus mostly for revenge—it usually happens with the first child or the seventh. (She is very emphatic about this*) Enmity between families may have been going on for generations. The fact that the munishwaran has possessed the woman and is creating problems for the unborn child is revealed by some man or woman during a trance. Then that person will say what needs to be done."*

During our Jeeva research we also encountered many methods of protection and understandings of threats.

"To save mother and baby from evil I keep a fishing net and mustard seeds enchanted with a mantra from a person who knows jhard phoonk." Meera Jharkhand

"If a woman is in labor but not giving birth she has probably caught some evil spirits or evil eye. Then water and mustard seeds that have been infused with mantra are brought from the chela. Water is given to the woman to drink and smoke of the mustard seeds is wafted for her to inhale." Purna, Himachal

A chela from Himachal

"I keep the daane so that her place (vulva) should not get torn...but if the daakin is hungry to eat then nothing is possible. There is no use saying any mantra." Velki Maharashtra

"If a daakin has done some work (witchcraft) we see it in the daane. If we take the daane in hand, make 5 groups out of them and repeat that twice again with only one dana remaining that means chivdu (curse) has been done...If chidvu has been done and it is possible to reverse it though a herb medicine then I do it." Seyla, Maharashtra

A woman working in Uttaranchal wrote about this threat in her area."The phenomenon of the dain (witch) is widespread in the Jaunpur area. Particular women or men in the village may be socially set apart and called dain. These individuals are said to have dangerous supernatural powers, and are able to fly through the village at night, enter homes at will, and destroy people by their supernatural powers. They are said to be able to devour unborn babies in the womb, and also to cause madness among their victims. Dain are genuinely feared and they attempt to protect themselves against the dain by social ostracizing her."

Unfortunately, women, especially older women and those with property are being victimized as 'dain' unfairly. And the project of discrediting magic continues.

Dain Puja

I was invited by a friend to come to Bodhgaya at Diwali to witness what she called 'dai puja.' If anyone was doing puja to dai I wanted to see that so I decided to go. It turned out this rite was actually 'dain' puja and that was what I investigated.

In Bodhgaya, Bihar, just after sunset on the Amavasya night of Diwali people of all castes performed "dain puja." Having studied different Hindu representations of the Devi, I was curious about this rather unusual ritual.

I was drawn towards this dain puja because I suspected that it provided an image questioning the orthodoxy of religion-endorsed gender roles. An exploration of the power of the dain might undermine the religious ideology which posits that woman should be long-suffering, self-sacrificing and accept her powerlessness in socio-political and economic realms.

When I arrived at the thatch-roofed mud hut of Kamleshwari, a Chamar woman who works as a midwife, the puja was beginning. The girl children were on their haunches in front of the little house— "ghar kula," a Brahmin woman has called it. This rite, at this time, was performed by all castes in the area. Protruding from the outside wall of the house, it was like a dollhouse— the girls placed little bartans full of grains and sweets into the different "floors" of the house. The littlest girls put theirs on the bottom, and the biggest on the top.

Photo of the dain with her cooking implements

Kamleshwari lit the dias in the hands of the "dain"—a colorful, obviously female image holding aloft, over her head, a series of dias painted light blue. The dain silently presided over this rite, in this realm of the parallel world enacting the blessings of the goddess. The kumaris put grain in the house, between giggling and socking their pesky little brothers, so that in this new year the

goddess will repeat the performance in the bigger house on which the little “ritual” house is perched.

After much jostling, ooing and ahing the girls applied sindur on the dain image, a bit around the ‘ghar kula’ and then on their little brothers’ foreheads. I, too, requested sindur, and they were only too happy to oblige. Five or six little hands smeared my forehead and nose with the red powder. I was blessed. Then they fed us with varieties of prasad, we admired the scene, the family, the “doll” house and the enigmatic (to me) figure holding the dias. We thanked them and left.

I spoke with many local people about the “dain” and the puja. Most now call it Lakshmi puja; only when pressed do they admit that the image holding the dias is that of the dain and not of Lakshmi. When asked, “who is the dain?” many respond with some version of this story.

“On dark nights the dain goes to the graveyard and digs in the soil to unearth a newly buried young child. She then massages the child’s body with oil until he comes back to life. Then the dain picks up the baby—playing and dancing wildly with it. Some say she has a broom

tied to her waist during this dance. When she tires of her play she puts the child down and goes away."

Kamleshwari says that the dain sings a special song that one can learn and then they, too, can devour people. Another woman says that the dain has "goon" or powers and the oja or male healer, or witchdoctor was watching the dain during her dance and wanted to learn her powers. Everyone says that they don't know any dains and that these are only stories they have heard.

I suggest that the "dain" can be understood as the unitary and holistic goddess. She possesses both the power to bless one bountifully or curse one, whimsically, by withholding (grain from the land; money from business; health; children). She moves easily between the world of the living and the dead; she can revive even the dead child and play (the lila of life and death) with it. She is both the generative birth mother and the destructive death mother.

Orthodox iconography and text tends to separate the beneficent-auspicious feminine just as gender convention separates the 'good' woman/pious wife from the 'bad' and 'loose' woman or whore. Perhaps the Bihari "dain puja" retains a holistic theology of the goddess; she who transcends and encompasses blessings and deprivation; life and death.

The Precious Placenta Post Birth

Generally sophisticated people do not like to talk about placentas--that is until stem cells were discovered to have amazing properties. Even public health or reproductive health specialists are reluctant to discuss placentas. During cocktail parties, academic seminars, amongst new age healers—it's also taboo to mention the maroon, fleshy organ which interfaces ma and babe in utero providing all the nutrients, oxygen the fetus needs during its development in the womb. However dais' eyes light up and they speak animatedly about the placenta or 'phool'.

About 30 years ago I had seen (and smelled) placentas hanging in gunny sacks from trees in Tamil Nadu. I'm sure it's not the same now. Driving north from Madurai, just past the village of Vadipatti, if your eyes are particularly keen, you might notice 3 or 4 Banyan trees laden with unusual fruit. Drooping down in bunches are remnants of baskets and gunny sacks containing placentas—those organs which once nourished the baby growing in the womb. Villagers of that area carefully preserved the placenta after the birth and ritually hung the wrapped organ over the Banyan's widespread branches. Only a Banyan, or other tree with milky sap, was used because it is believed that only then will the mother produce enough milk for the child. One can see the logic of it: the organ which sustained the child in utero will be

replaced by the mother's milk: so that organ must be ritually associated with a milky tree in order for the process of nurturing to go on in another manner. The imagery of fertility and milky sap associated with the tree ritually affirmed the mother's lactating ability.

An elderly very upper-class Punjabi woman once told me that in her family they used to bury the placenta. If the newborn happened to get an infected umbilicus, they would go out into the fields and beat the earth where the placenta was buried thinking that the placenta was rising to the surface thus causing the navel infection.

Place where the placenta is buried by the Seri People of Mexico

"Where is your placenta buried?" In an article on disappearing languages, in National Geographic "Vanishing Voices" the Seri People of Mexico are described. "Where is your placenta buried?" is how the Seri ask, "Where are you from?" Those who were born before hospital births

know the exact spot where their afterbirth was placed in the ground, covered in sand and ash, and topped with rocks.

Birth and the placenta are part of the richness of our rural informants' lives. As interviewers were thanking her Burdi, in Jharkhand, said proudly, "This is the room where all of my children have been born. The placentas of all my children are buried here." The interviewer looked with awe around the room, made of mud and almost empty – only some clothes were hanging on a bamboo rod. Then Burdi said, "We call the womb *'koop ghara'* (well house or source) and opening of the womb as *'koop muha (mouth of the well)'*. And we call the *jagah* (place—here referring to the birth canal) as *'bhuiya'* literally meaning 'earth'—or place from which the baby comes onto the earth." Simplicity, poverty—yes—but another kind of richness and embodied belonging.

Burdhi and her child

Midwife Robin Lim describes an amazing event which occurred when a couple chose to have a 'lotus birth' that meant leaving the placenta attached to the baby, wrapped in a nappy and

packed in herbs daily to fall off on its own. She described that over the first week the cord actually dried up and there was no unpleasant odor. On the fifth day, the baby's grandmother observed that when her grandson nursed, the placenta lying approximately 14 inches away, would pulsate. She pointed this out to her son-in-law who was a biochemist. Both were astounded.

Nagamma, the Irula tribal woman mentioned above, spoke of the reverence for the placental connection between ma and babe. The rite honouring 'Garbage Mother' reflects a sophisticated and ecological recognition of the inter-connectedness of human beings and nature.

"We don't throw away the placenta. The mother herself buries it near the house. Water from the first bath of the mother and baby should flow on the ground where the placenta is buried. We bury it near the bathroom so the water from bathing goes to that place. Neem leaves and the bundle of the afterbirth are covered with earth and then we put a stone on top. On the ninth day when the woman is given a bath, we clean up the place where the afterbirth is buried. On the stone we put kumkum and turmeric and cooked rice on top of a banana leaf—all this is put on a winnowing basket. Also a

sweet made of rice powder and jaggery. On the other side a copper dia is lit. We put the child on the ground near this.

This ritual is called coopa ma (garbage mother) because we bury the placenta near the bathroom, near the garbage heap—but not on it—but we do not do this for subsequent births, only the first child of the next generation. Only when this generation grows up and they have children, then they will again pray to her. When they light the camphor the mother will prostrate herself on the ground before the stone and then the baby will be given to her. They pray "if in the future there is any sickness or trouble—anything good or bad—even then we will not come here." Till this ceremony they will not sweep the floor with a broom, and nobody walks near that place."

Ritual performances dramatize the beliefs and values of the community. The deification of the afterbirth, the sacralisation of the ground where it is buried and the water which has bathed family bodies displays a reverence for the human body, especially the female body. Notice that many birth rituals involve the winnowing basket.

"Baby's life is in the placenta"

No dai would have ever cut the umbilical cord before the placenta was delivered. The Indian subcontinent is a varied place, culturally and geographically. Few statements can be made which are true across regions and cultural differences. However, this is one that was true across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent. The connections between placenta, cord and newborn were valued and used, when the need arose, to revive the baby. Often the revival of the newborn involves stimulating the placenta with heat.

"I was there when this woman's bachcha was born and it was completely unconscious. The people of the house started to cry. They all told the woman 'you have given birth to a dead baby.' She also started crying and then fainted. I saw every part of the bachcha's body. It felt warm and I could also sense a very light breath. Then I asked everybody to stop crying. I put the phool (placenta) in warm water and after some time and a lot of effort, the bachcha started to cry. But this whole procedure took about three to four hours. Then I could assure the family that the baby was ok." Burdhi Sahis from Jharkhand

"If the baby does not cry then we breathe into the baby's mouth, blow into the ear of the baby, and hit the foot of the baby. I the baby still does not cry after doing all this then we heat an earthen pot, wrap the placenta in a cloth and put it in that pot. We pat the baby's feet and usually the baby starts to cry." Dhusari from Himachal

"I have handled childbirths where the baby didn't cry. First I put my little finger in the mouth to check if there is anything. If the baby still won't cry then I deep burning coals on a clay roof tile and hang the placenta over it holding the cord. I don't put it directly on the coals. All this time the baby is held on the mother's lap and I rub the cord from the placenta towards the baby. If the baby is going to live, it lives." Jemali from Maharashtra

As one dai put it "Newborn's life and breath is in the placenta."

Post Partum Care for Mother

Elaborate post birth care to the mother was often traditionally given by dais. In my early work, sometimes it seemed that dais were more concerned about the wellbeing of the mother than that of the newborn. I know now that most newborns die if their

mothers are not living—so this makes sense. The dais in our Jeeva study, particularly in the Jharkhand and Karnataka sites, gave routine postpartum care and service from the second day for at least a week. Oil-massage and heat-giving or application of herbal paste on the body were central features of this care, along with a warm-water bath.

Husaina from Karnataka describes her process of fumigation of the vagina or birth canal. And this practice was imaged on the side panel of a temple!

"In the fire we toss dry neem leaves, garlic peels, ajwain (carom seeds) and raagi (finger millet). She should spread her sari wide with her legs apart with the fire placed between them. Smoke and heat should go to her lower parts. It relieves pain and if she sits and takes the warmth to her hands and face... then her face will not swell, she will not catch cold. If she sweats properly all cold in her body goes away.

Image of fumigation on a temple courtesy Stella Dupuis

Because the body has accumulated fluids during the pregnancy post birth care, both diet and hands-on, involves lots of heating and drying.

Before the woman's bath, she was given heat with oil-massage. Next morning, I refresh the fire to give sek (drying heat) to mother-baby with a poultice of some herbs. ... or neem paste spread and kept over her body, including over any soreness or tear in her vulva. Then she was bathed with hot water. I wash the clothes too." Karuna, Jharkhand

Because of government policy pushing institutional birth many dais are abandoning their customary care.

"Earlier I used to take neem, turmeric, carom seeds and salt and grind it. These days I've stopped doing all that." – Giriyamma, Karnataka

Madhubani image of the dai receiving her payment from the mother-in-law

Breastfeeding

I learned a few things when I first started moving about in rural areas and paying attention to what women said and what observances, customs and rituals were being commonly spoken about. One was that the 'first milk' or colostrum was not given; the baby was not put to breast immediately, which is what was being touted in the US. There was often one rite, done before breast was

given, when the bua, the father's sister, would wash the breast and some colostrum was squeezed out onto ash. 'Oh my god,' I thought, 'I can't imagine my sister-in-law doing that!'

Now I think time and context relate to this practice. Before a baby is born the only way for others to care for it is by caring for the mother. Afterwards, when baby is born, the family's hegemony over this infant begins. This washing of the breast by the husband's sister can be understood in that when the joint family all lived together in the same house, the bua (newborn's paternal aunt) needed to be included and not overshadowed by the new baby and his/her mother—thus the breast washing ritual.

Later I actually wrote an article challenging the Ayurvedic prohibition of giving colostrum and a Vaidya claimed that this milk did not pass the Ayurvedic test for breast milk. I responded that of course it didn't because it wasn't breast milk it was colostrum!

Now I know that putting the baby to breast immediately is good not only for the newborn but also for the mother, because it stimulates the contraction of the uterus. What's good for the mom is good for the baby. Women die postpartum mainly from hemorrhage and putting the baby to breast immediately causes the womb to contract helping bleeding to stop.

Throughout human history, the vast majority of females have had numerous family members who they could count on to pass down the art of breastfeeding. Grandmothers, aunts, sisters, mothers, and cousins were all versed in appropriate breastfeeding management, and these role models were expected to pass their knowledge through the generations. In the past, breastfeeding became an intrinsic component of mothering.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization have stated unequivocally that breastfeeding ensures the best possible health, developmental, and psychosocial outcomes for children. However the prestigious American Academy of Pediatrics continued to align itself with the manufacturers of formula. They carried advertisements for formula in the Journal *Pediatrics*; had received three million dollars from the industry to build its headquarters; received significant contributions used to fund major medical conferences and research projects; and so on. Many medical schools around the world are not adequately training physicians in the area of human lactation, and prestigious medical associations continued to profit economically from a product that has been scientifically found to be inferior to human breast milk.

Breastfeeding and breasts are inherently political. During British times Nangeli was an Ezhava woman from Cherthala, where lower castes were forbidden to cover their breasts. She belonged to a family that could not afford to pay the prescribed taxes. In an act of rebellion, Nangeli refused to uncover her breasts whenever it was demanded of her. When the tax collectors of the province came to

her home to collect, Nangeli bravely defied them with a final blow. She cut off her breasts and nonchalantly presented it to the collectors in a banana leaf. The tax collectors immediately fled in fear as Nangeli bled to death at her doorstep, and the news spread across the state like wild fire. In another act of protest, her husband jumped to his death on her funeral pyre, the first recorded instance of a man committing *sati* instead of a woman. Following her death, the crown annulled the breast tax in Travancore, a direct repercussion to her mutilating her own body in defiance. And the land where she lived came to be known as *Mulachiparambu* (meaning land of the breasted woman) in her honor.

Birth Songs or Sohars

I heard this sohar in Patna during an NGO workshop more than 30 years ago. That NGO had called me as sort of a 'handshake' with dais they were gathering because they had become aware that some dais were killing girl babies on the instructions of the families they served. Of course the dais wouldn't immediately speak out about this, but soon they realized they were not going to be blamed or arrested. The NGO folks were concerned about the issue and wanted to learn more about it. One dai said that the patriarch of the family had put a gun to her head and said he would shoot her if she didn't suffocate the newborn and bury her. The dais reported that they, and the mothers were aghast at this situation. Nevertheless they sang this most beautiful song.

"On a branch of the neem tree,

The Mayas' jula (swing) is hanging.

The seven sisters are swinging

And singing a song.

While singing the sisters feel thirsty

And say to the malin (woman gardener or gardener's wife)...

Mayas: O sleeping malin, please wake up and

Give us a drop of water.

Malin: How can I give water to all of you sisters,

I have your girl-baby in my lap.

Mayas: O malin, take this golden cradle

And Make your girlchild sleep in this.

Malin: O mayas, the golden cradle will break

And the baby will fall to the floor

Mayas: As your child is falling

We will catch her.

Malin: Mayas, in which bucket,

With which rope

In which pot,

Should I get pure water for you?

Mayas: In a golden bucket,

With a silken rope,

In a silver pot

You will fetch pure water.

Just as you, malin, have given us this blessing,

May your daughter and daughter-in-law

Receive our blessings.

Malin: My daughter-in-law is in her maike.

My daughter is in her sasural,

Why are you giving these blessings?

Mayas: May your daughter-in-law live well.

May your daughter live well, wherever they may be."

The identities of the goddesses and the singing women are conflated as are the identities of the caretaking mothers – the Mayas and the Malin. They emphasize the precious girl child, worthy of a golden cradle, of care by both Malin and Mayas, a baby who will be held safe should the cradle break. The theme of water relates to the waters of life and the life-sustaining amniotic ocean. And the Mayas are swinging from the tree of life. It is paradoxical that this song valorizing femaleness and the girl child was sung at a meeting on female infanticide.

Similar images of gold and gems are evoked in this Lullaby from Karnataka. Chutike is the hot needle used to mark the newborn stimulating its responses. (We turn away with disgust from this 'branding' tradition but happily vaccinate our babies.)

Jogulapada Lullaby

"Giving chutike with golden needle

Cutting the cord with gem studded sickle

Washing the thighs with cold water and hot water

Put the baby next to the birth giving woman

Give the food appropriate for the recently delivered woman

Keep cotton and garlic in the ear."

Chapter 8

The Mother who is not a Mother: Paradoxes

One *seeming* contradiction in the Goddess is how a woman can be a mother and not a mother at the same time? However, Indian mythology from the Rig Veda on is replete with multiple mothers. If there are multiple mothers there are definitely some mothers who are not exactly the birth mother of the child. D. D. Kosambi wrote about an ancient tradition of mothers-in-common that he claims cannot be reconciled with Vedic father-right. He says it would be difficult to explain Panini 4.1.115 unless mother-in-common were taken for granted by the master grammarian. But in the current scenario we forget about these things.

Kosambi states that Tryambaka, which is now dismissed as meaning 'with three eyes' originally meant 'with three mothers'. He suggests that "this notion, which seems fantasy to the patrilineal mind, appears in 'the legends of Jarasamdha born of two, and Jantu, born of a hundred mothers-in-common show". According to Kosambi this demonstrates that there was an undeniable tradition of many mothers with equal status, even for a single child.

I had observed this when I first came to live in India. In some joint families, many sisters-in-law cared for all children equally. To indulge one's own child or children and neglect others in the family was not approved of. Sometimes a child would not even be clear as to who was his or her biological mother! The concept of the collective mothers is also present in the plentiful textual and sculptural references to the Yoginis, the Matrikas, Dakinis and perhaps even the Matas.

An example was when I met a young man at a Transactional Analysis Conference in Calcutta many years ago. For years he had been told his biological mother was his sister! Well, we were taking a walk one day and sharing our life stories. It emerged that he had grown up thinking that his mother, who apparently became pregnant while not married, was his sister. The family had decided that this is how the story should be told. I shared that my older son was not the genetic child of my husband, and this was in a way my 'secret'. We shared our narratives and marveled at how we came together.

Another question arises 'how can a woman be a mother while remaining virgin?" As mentioned in the chapter on conception, a virgin can be fertile, as in the expression 'virgin forest'—a forest can be abundant without being controlled or 'husbanded', just as a woman can become pregnant without being married. Virgin, in its

original meaning, is free and also fertile. This is straightforward biology.

V. Subramaniam has acknowledged these apparent contradictions in his 'Stages and Paradoxes in the Evolution of the Supreme Hindu Mother Goddess' when he writes of the inconsistencies. He says that paradoxes form an integral part of theologies including Hindu theology, but the concept of the supreme Hindu Mother Goddess accommodates the most of them. She is virgin and she is also mother. She is a mother goddess but should not be physiologically a mother. She is the Shavite Parvati and also Vaisnavi and also, she is the Tantric's orgiastic mistress, yet purest of the pure. She is bloodthirsty Kali and also the very embodiment of the merciful and beautiful as Amba or Lalitha. She is the invincible Durga and Shakti but is also the weak Bharatmata in need of protection. How do we explain this?

From where do we inherit simplistic either/or and good/evil ideas? Perhaps we can draw lines between upper and lower; cities and villages; acceptable and murky; and of course, caste. We, the English-educated upper strata of society, have inherited so much from British perceptions and attitudes.

Reverend E. Osborne Martin wrote in 1914 displaying a scornful attitude towards folk forms of the Matas. He simply cannot understand the paradox, the both/and because of his own world

view. He says that it is difficult to say where demon-worship ends, and mother worship begins, in considering the malevolent Mothers, the goddesses of disease, of cruelty, of hate, of malice and revenge. “These goddesses, euphemistically called “Mothers” are replete with every characteristic of demonology… they are mere village godlings, spiteful, irritable and uncertain in temper; fierce and terrible by nature.”

Both the Matas and the Birth Goddesses, (dealt with below) are complete within themselves—encompassing both the ‘negative’ and the ‘positive.’ They tend to have been more accepted and invoked by lower castes and classes. Rituals and beliefs utilizing this undivided and complete energy for healing are congruent with holistic or energy medicine—as well as contemporary biomedical understandings of the powers of the immune system, prayer, Reike, Pranic Healing and ritual practice.

Medical anthropologist Geoffrey Samuels claims the biomedical perspective is unable, because of its own internal logic, to admit an understanding of the cultural level as any other than a marginal addition to healing. He states that as long as ‘mind’ and ’body’ are regarded as separate entities, and the basic explanation is at the level of the body then any cultural analysis is awkward if not impossible.

Samuels uses the word 'shamanic' to describe practitioners who work with this energy saying that cultural 'symbols' (including spirits) can be seen to refer to many factors and so enable a healer to operate with multiple dimensions of reality. Culturally specified interactions with spirits (possession and exorcism, spirit-mediumship, shamanic encounters etc.) can provide ways of transforming and renegotiating one's own mind-body complex, with others and with other aspects of one's environment.

We also see the political enter these analyses. Michel Foucault refers to these 'alternative' philosophies and customs as 'subjugated knowledges' and links these practices with power structures. He believes that by "subjugated knowledges" one could understand a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated. They are naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the 'required level' of cognition, of scientificity.

Matas of Disease

In both the 'Matas' and the birth goddesses seemingly archaic notions view a powerful female force that is inclusive of both positive and negative energies. So much of what the modern world does is struggle against the 'negative' and trying to move to the 'positive.' The Matas material mostly comes from old British

writings and Birth Goddesses from recent research that is undoubtedly ageless. Both are inclusive of positive and negative 'outcomes' (as the current health jargon goes.) The child or mother may live or die—but the powerful Feminine is responsible for both.

H.A. Rose writes that 'Devi' is, in Hissar, the word used for the smallpox goddess. He says that if a child is suffering from a mild attack, the disease is called Shukar (Venus), and gur is placed under the stand on which pitchers of water are kept and songs are sung. This is termed nam-rakha, or 'naming' the disease. In case of a more severe attack a more complex rite is enacted.

Rose writes of the tradition of inoculation for smallpox as organized remarkably and having had considerable success. "In Marwar and Bikaner a Huda, a tribe of Jats, had received from Mahadevi the gift of suppressing smallpox and the tribe had been ever since the licensed inoculators of a great many scattered villages. When the disease came, one of the practitioners was sent for and he on his arrival began with rites and offerings to Devi. Children were then given the treatment by scores." He claims these inoculators had a high reputation for efficiency. He also stated that other cholera goddesses are Hulka Devi, the onomatopoeic simulation of vomiting, and the dread Mari Mai, or "Mother Death" said to be Shitala's sister.

Martin writes that in parts of Uttar Pradesh, Kali Devi is worshipped when cholera is present and a magic circle of milk and spirits is drawn around the village over which the cholera fiend will not step. However, he sees the main smallpox deity as Shitila or 'she who makes cool' as the usual symptom of smallpox is high fever. Again, he lucidly describes the paradox of the Mata. He writes that this goddess may either avert smallpox or, cause smallpox or herself be smallpox. And that in some parts of the country persons who die of smallpox are not burnt lest the goddess should be burnt too. They dread its coming, and pray and sacrifice to it in their temples and before the shrines of "the Mother goddess" in order to avert it; but when it comes the family in which it appears, profess to be honored by its presence in their midst.

Crooke writes that Shitala is "she who loves the cool" and lists her other names. She is called Mata Jag Rani, "the queen of the world" as well as Kalejewali, "she who attacks the liver."

Chechek Mata, one of the Matas of Disease. Notice her broom and bowl because she not only gives the disease, but also sweeps it clean.

Mallamma from Karnataka describes chicken pox using Amma (Mother or Mata) She says that if the baby gets chicken pox Amma, we make it cool on the 11th day. We shouldn't comb the child's hair or give it a bath. We don't do anything until we make baby cool. After baby becomes cool we give neem leaves in the child's hands.

In a recent trip through Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan I encountered some of these Matas still being called upon. In these places, they are mostly invoked to prevent or cure children's illnesses. And they are considered to take up residence in the house while the disease is present.

One is Coco Mata—an onomatopoeic word—Coco is cough-cough—mothers come to her for their child who has a problem of coughing. This was a small shrine, an orange-painted rock, part of a larger Chausath Yogini temple in Ujjain. Another temple for Gulfaia Mata (Gul meaning throat) was set into the wall of an old Haveli in Kota. She was invoked to prevent and cure throat diseases like tonsils, mumps and other throat problems. People bring their children, especially on Sunday. This had been going on before the family residing in the Haveli came—at least 150 years ago! People come, do puja, get better and then come back to give thanks.

A photo of the author bowing to Gul Mata

Similar to these Matas are the Birth Goddesses/Demonesses in that they themselves are responsible for negative or positive outcomes. And while they are present in the home they are considered special and powerful.

Birth Goddesses

When women and men participate in common rituals, as in all of the dominant religions, the special female experiences of the body, become inserted in a male-centered, often abstract, conceptual or 'mystical' domain—leaving behind uniquely female bodily experience. The *dai*s' religio-cultural practice proceeds from ways of perceiving and knowing which are deeply female. Birth goddesses are not like the 'high' goddesses: Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi or even the more recent Santoshi Ma. There are no temples, pilgrimage sites, texts or icons nor do they have a place in the ritual calendar. They exclusively deal with birth, death sometimes, and fertility.

Traditional midwives are considered to have the ability to influence the cosmic forces of procreation. Shosthi Ma in Eastern India; Bemata in Delhi, UP, Punjab, Rajasthan and Satavi in Maharashtra all share some attributes. They all preside over women's reproductive capacities and are invoked during labour, especially difficult labours. They are holistic including both 'good' and 'bad' and kept separate from the 'male' world. As well they are all transient, they come—do their work—and then go, are sent away often after 'writing the child's fate'.

Bemata

In interviews conducted by health workers who were themselves Delhi *basti* residents, women spoke of Bemata as she was invoked during a ritual that I call "the cutting of the *atta*". Moti *Dai* describes the rite invoking Bemata emphasizing that the *dai*, herself, is empowered by Bemata.

"There is the custom of cutting the atta or rice. When the labour pains have come and the dai has arrived, the jachcha puts both hands full of atta in the thali. The dai holds the wrist of the mother while she, with her hand, separates the atta into two parts from the middle. Bemata is worshipped by putting money and gur on top of the atta, offering it to the dai, and saying 'In this way separate the mother and the child - so that the child is born without any difficulty.'" Moti Dai—an upper caste midwife of Delhi

A drawing of Bemata by one of our Matrika team members.

We drew images and showed them to dais to make sure that we understood what they were saying. Here Bemata lives under the

ground, throws up babies to some wombs and not to others and the blood should go back to her (the earth) post birth

When I first encountered this ritual splitting of the *atta* I was struck by the appropriateness of the analogy between the ritual act and the physiological event that it is meant to facilitate. The *atta* rite is an analogy--one mound of atta becomes two-- just as the baby separates from the mother. As we have seen doors, windows, locks, and hair are opened so that this opening can be mirrored in the labouring woman's body. Similarly, one mound of *atta* is separated into two providing a sign and visual metaphor for the fetus separating from the mother's body. *Dai*s from all religions have invoked Bemata. In workshops in the Punjab, Mazbi (outcaste) Sikh *dai*s said that they, too, pray to Bemata.

Shosthi Ma

In Jharkhand Gods are mentioned (Bhagwan, Allah) but it is Ma who governs this field of fertility where the dai is the ritual practitioner.

"When the child doesn't come out easily then I ask the labouring woman to remember Shosthi Ma" Thandi Devi

"People believe is that if the Shosthi Ma puja is not done, then the mother's milk will dry up." Khuni Devi

We people call to Shosthi ma, but we don't ask anything of her. We remember Allah. Only Allah is paak, we say that we shall offer you sacrifice. We remember Shosthi Ma just like that. Subejaan

Satvai

The goddess Satvai, according to the gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency, was celebrated by feasts for relatives 5-6 days after the birth of a child. She was considered to be able to write the fate of the child on the sixth day, and a temporary image made by women during that night was not to be seen by the father lest the child fall ill.

Deepra Dandekar claims that Satvai is used to understand, explain and heal women's reproductive problems in the Ghodegaon in Maharashtra. She suggests that gender relationships and control over female sexuality play a large role in Satvai worship. According to Dandakar's informants *traas* affliction would happen if one transgressed values of family dignity, sexual morality and gender roles. In that area, the Satvai shrine is outside the village and is represented by a group of seven stones. A goddess without consort or children she afflicts women who stray near her shrine during certain times in an 'impure condition'. Many women believe that she is formed from the souls of women who die in

childbirth. As with Bemata and Shoshti, She is believed to govern all obstructions during childbirth as well as the infant's mortality or survival.

Dirt, Demons and Diagnostic Categories

I am not an historian, nor is my clumping together of texts at all authoritative. But I am interested in probing the linkages between the dirt (or ritual pollution) of menstruation and childbirth with demonic entities and 'morality.' I wonder how the threats to maternal-fetal-child wellbeing came to be so graphically imaged in both text and women's beliefs.

As Doniger says in what she calls her "Inconclusion" in *The Hindus*: "India is a country where not only the future but even the past is unpredictable." I am also rewriting the past. Doniger points out the obvious when she declares that Indian goddesses continue to evolve. However, at least in the index of *The Hindus an Alternative History*, she does not cover 'menstruation' or 'childbirth' so that leaves out a lot about women.

Perhaps Puranic times and texts cast some light on the persistent beliefs in the 'dirtiness' or demonic aspect of menstrual and postpartum bleeding and the righteousness separating them from the sacred. (Or as mentioned above, the change from mystic powerful to polluted powerful). Observe the recent controversy

surrounding women entering temples and mosques—in fact because they may be bleeding. If female bleeding is associated with demons and dirtiness then they are strong determinants. Women are considered vulnerable and attractive to bad spirits at the time of menstruation and postpartum so 'demons' or negative energies may afflict them. We also know that they are considered 'polluted' or ritually unclean and thus not fit to participate in 'sacred' or 'clean' activities. Perhaps this means that they are more 'embodied' than men are.

Vedic Sources

According to scholar and Sanskritist Laurie Patton, "certain imagery informs moral, legal and medical thinking about embryos and their losses" and of course this imagery would have had an impact on women followers. From textual details on Vedic rites we also know that human reproduction symbolically paralleled reproductive cosmology. When man and his wife had sexual intercourse, it had metaphysical implications.

Patton states that in the late Vedic period texts show an increased anxiety over the potential loss of lineage in the imagery of miscarriage. And in doing so wrests the embryo further and further away from the body of the mother. This is written evidence

of the complex history of great religio-social control over the female body.

Sukumari Bhattacharji writing on Vedic and subsequent texts documents the extreme pressure on wives to bear progeny, particularly male children, heirs for the patrilineal family. She also points out that mothers only received honor from her sons, almost as an afterthought. “An outcast father may be forsaken, but not the mother, she is never an outcast to the son.”

In the Puranas two things emerge pertaining to women--blood and birth. One is that Brahman morality is introduced in a big way in order to influence previously ‘tribal’ peoples. And secondly the Goddess is asserted and elaborated on in sacred text, particularly the Devi Bhagwat Purana.

Puranas

The Puranas actually lay the foundations for what we know today as Hinduism. Vijay Nath, an expert on the Puranic process, states that besides its sheer quantum, what is amazing about Hindu custom and mythology is the fact that it is derived from varied sources, ranging from Tantric to highly diversified tribal and folk traditions. She attributes this to the Puranic synthesis of various heterodox customs and beliefs.

The forces of acculturation took place in part because of an expanding agrarian order during Gupta and post-Gupta times, (beginning 300 AD). It seems that the Puranas served to disseminate mainstream religious ideology, that is Brahmanism, amongst pre-literate and tribal groups. Simultaneously Puranic texts absorbed varied local traditions.

An important distinction between the Vedic and the Puranic was the very open recitation of the Puranas—quite a public relations exercise! This new genre of Brahmanic literature was not meant to be deliberated by oneself as were the Vedas. It was for public recital and collective listening. Nath suggests that the Brahmans during that time began to attach more efficacy and spiritual merit to those rituals that required group participation. Ritual practices such as bathing in holy rivers and tanks (snana), taking out religious processions (ratha-yatra), celebrating festivals (parb), performing puja in shrines and temples, collective singing (kirtana) and listening to recital of Puranic tales then became integral to the Brahmanical belief-system.

But more than anything else, it was the adoption of the puja mode of worship (Agni Purana, chs. XXI; XXIII) which undermined the Vedic practice of offering oblations into the sacred fire and cast Brahmanism into a more popular mold. The puja ingredients such as flowers, leaves and fruits of those trees that grew in forests,

indicate a dependence upon and proximity to the natural environment.

Brahman Morality—sin, curse and purity

Perhaps myths and narratives read aloud also supported the idea of curse or hell that evoked awe and fear in the hearts of nature-oriented common folk, leading them to conform to a new set of moral values and conduct. Notions of hell and curse would serve as strong moral deterrents. According to Nath, this had to be done by first changing habits stressing the importance of physical cleanliness and ritual purity. As well as away from common practices as ceremonial drinking of toddy and ritual killing of animals-- particularly cattle for food. These customs prevented their adoption of a new agriculture-based technology.

Puranic mythology and narrative combined with certain ideological constructs such as those related to sin (mahapataka, Agni Purana, ch. 168; Varaha Purana, chs. 131-36). The emergent system aimed at making the indigenous folk conform to a new set of moral values and behavioral norms.

Insofar as these ideological constructs impinge on mothering and the female body I quote from the Sushruta Samhita, an Ayurvedic text probably existing at the same time.

"These malignant stars (Graha) or demons affect if the conduct of the mother or the nurse during the time the child is brought up on the breast are not followed, and consequently where proper benedictory rites are not performed and the child is allowed to remain in an uncleanly state... The demons make their appearance for the purpose of getting proper respect and worship... I should, therefore, discourse on the symptoms of their presence as derived from the authority of the sages of yore." Sushruta Samhita, Vol. III, 1963, P 141

It seems that demons were used both for diagnostic purposes *and* to propagate Brahman ideology. The text goes on to vividly describe symptoms of the childhood diseases or attacks of various demons and then proceeds to suggest remedies, both ritual and material/medical.

"Children of the families in which the gods, the Pitrs (departed fathers), the Brahmans, the pious, the preceptors and the seniors and the guests are not properly worshipped and attended upon the wherein the rules of cleanliness and virtues are not observed and the members of which do not make daily offerings to the gods and give alms to beggars would be the proper persons whom you might strike with impunity, and by

your malign influence lay them up with diseases peculiar to infant life.... There the parents of those children will worship you in their calamities and you shall get plenty to live upon." Sushruta Samhita, Vol. III, 1963, P 163

The text is both diagnosing and admonishing. Of course, babies and children need to be cared for and somewhat clean. The focus on demons and actually invoking them to attack when parents do not 'worship properly' (in the Brahmanic manner) is disturbing.

According to Dange's Puranic study, sin is often personified—and the instances he presents are provocative and reinforce my own ideas on caste, class and tribal people. At times sin is indicated by the smell of iron...and Adivasi people were the first ironworkers! In the Padma Purana, a sage once came across five persons who were dark in complexion. When he asked them who they were, each of them told him they were a sin of a particular type.

Anamika Roy, in writing *Sixty-Four Yoginis: Cult, Icons and Goddesses*, notes the same bias. She writes that even when tribal goddesses were adopted in Brahman society, they continued to carry the stigma of their origin. Thus, the *Jayadratha Yamala*, a work located in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, states that in order to worship Kali, it was necessary to go to the houses of oilmen and potters...Actually, in the countryside it is believed that

the Goddess prefers to be worshipped by the lower class than by the Brahmins.

The Goddess

Mother-goddess cults had always been an inherent part of preliterate religious systems throughout the world, however they were not a prominent feature of Vedic texts. The two principle deities during Puranic times were Shiva and Vishnu along with a third, not Brahma but Shakti.

It was only from the beginning of the Christian era that Shakti as Devi emerged as an object of worship in her own right. The long lists of names of Shakti or Devi are furnished in the Puranas especially in the Devi Bhagavata Purana. The Yoginis collectively are also mentioned in numerous Puranas: Candi Purana, Skanda Purana, Kalika and Agni Purana and others probably drawing from preexisting local folk beliefs that were incorporated into Puranas by the Brahman scribes.

The conflation of *prakṛti* and *shakti*, appears beautifully in the way the Puranas present the Devi. Puranic cosmology deifies *prakṛti* (the material world) and subsumes all cosmological goddesses within *śakti*.

"Oh Brahma! I am Gauri, Brahmi, Raudri, Varahi, Vaishnavi,

Shivaa, Varuni, Kauveri, Nara Sinhi, and Vasavi Shaktis.

I enter into every substance, into everything in nature.

I am the coolness in water, the heat in fire, the luster in the Sun,

the cooling rays in the Moon;

And thus I manifest my strength.

Oh Brahma! Verily I tell you this as certain,

This universe becomes motionless if it be abandoned by Me.

So the creation that you perform,

Know Shakti, power, to be the cause thereof."

Devi Bhagwat Purana

Some Puranic narratives are not only philosophical and beautiful, but also very practical, including how to get out of bed in the morning prayerfully and even how to die.

From Devi Mahatmya is a prayer said on getting out of bed in the morning:

"Devi, you whose garments are the Oceans

Whose breasts are the Mountain Ranges

Wife of Vishnu, I bow to you

Forgive the touch of my feet (on your body.)"

From the Devi Gita comes the advice upon dying (before attaining the final absorption) one should contemplate within one's own self the triad of letters known as the sacred syllable of the goddess...Hrim

"H is the gross body

R is the subtle body

I is the causal body

M—the whole sound hrim is I myself as the transcendent fourth."

Demons

But what are we to make of all these demons populating both text and narratives of women's voices? NN Bhattacharyya says something important in the title of his book *Indian Demonology, the Inverted Pantheon.* The gods of yesterday often become the demons of today and vice versa. In the 1950s-people thought that cars, dams and factories were fantastic (gods) and today we know that they cause so many pollution problems (demons). But what about menstruation and birth and all the demons lurking around to afflict bleeding women? That explanation just doesn't fit. Many social structures and man-made artifacts change. But female procreative powers and associated bleeding have not changed since Vedic times. How this female capacity was represented has transformed, but the basic bodily process has not. But perhaps the change occurred from mystical powerful to polluted powerful...and maybe it's changing back again?

Interestingly, Wendy Doniger, in writing of the origins of evil in Hindu mythology, states that demons are identified by matronymics rather than patronymics. This is significant. We know from texts that demons were named as the sons and daughters of mothers, not fathers. The idea that patriarchy replaced matriarchy is questionable. But it does seem that a primordial matriliny— that descendants were traced through

their mother—may have existed in pre-history—and that the 'story' of history often names this matrilineal social and familial order as demonic.

Janet Gyatso finds that even the land of Tibet existed as a pre-Buddhist demoness in many early sources.

"Kong jo [a Chinese writer] understood that this Snow Land Country (Tibet) as a whole is like the Srin-mo demoness lying on her back. She understood that the lake in the Plain of Milk is the heart-blood of the demoness. The three mountains surrounding the Plain of Milk are the two breasts of the demoness and her lifeline. The eastern promontory afflicts the west; the western afflicts the east; the southern afflicts the north; the north afflicts the south."

Thus, Gyatso claims, the entire shape of the landscape is perceived as highly deleterious…" It is a violent conception indeed: a ferocious demoness as the land upon which stand the architectural structures of the normally pacific tradition of Buddhism, structures that here suppress and dominate."

Gyatso writes that the similar creation narratives (which *Srin-mo* resembles) all begin with a pre-existing primordial chaos that is perceived as a female being. And these female 'demons' need to be

subdued. "Partition, demarcation and order: the structural theme of these various myths aptly conveys the act of the institution of civilization."

The details of Indic and Buddhist scholarship can complicate history and pre-history immensely. But I question the controls exerted over bodies and babies; reproduction and religion. And we may find that there really was a 'takeover' of primal, mother-centered formations by 'civilization'. This 'takeover' is repeated again and again. And now it is the takeover of medicalization and technology.

Shanti Rosario and Geoffrey Samuel, in their book *Daughters of Hariti: Childbirth and female healers in South and South and Southeast Asia* trace some of that overthrow as they write of the figure Hariti who was converted and turns to 'good' under the influence of the Buddha.

Hariti holding a baby obviously having been worshiped

"Hariti herself is a figure of some interest. Her worship seems to have been particularly important in Gandhara and Mathura (present day Pakistan and North India, first century BCE to fourth century CE). Her legend describes her as a child-eating demoness who was converted by the Buddha. Perhaps, though, this negative depiction reflects a process in which respected yaksha and yakshi (nature spirits, deities of prosperity and fertility) such as Hariti and her consort Pancika were brought into a subordinate relationship with the newly developing Buddhist and Brahmanical pantheons."

As I was pondering demons and their representation as grahas I went to a Chi Gong workshop conducted by an Indian master who was knowledgeable about both Indian and Chinese philosophies and physical disciplines. In some traditional medical systems, both Chinese as well Indian, each planet or Graha does correlate to one organ of the human body—Mercury/nerves, Venus—etc.

If one accepts the cosmic view of microcosm replicating macrocosm then this makes sense. Our bodies are made up of the same matter that the planets are. This worldview is now mostly considered hocus-pocus. But traditionally it was thought that if your liver is afflicted it is the 'graha' for liver that is acting up or afflicting—diagnosis and treatment, both natural and 'supernatural' (both herbal and spirit) will be detailed in terms of that graha-demon! Is it possible that so-called primal peoples were much more sophisticated in matters astronomical and astrological than we the moderns or post-moderns are?

But the question arises, why are the threats always cast in terms of the female sex—dains, jhatarini, Hariti, widows, the evil eye, the barren woman...and my answer is 'because more happens in the female body than in the male body.' As stated in the outset of this work, if you seek to pathologize the human body (whether ancient, modern or postmodern) the woman definitely gets more attention and thus more pathology precisely because more happens in the

female body. It's just that that pathologizing in the ancient Indian context was done via the spirit world, or the socio-emotional world not the biomedical. Bleeding and baby making carried a heavy load of spirit meaning. The threats to the vulnerable dyad, mother and infant are mentioned in many Puranas: in the Skanda Purana the threat is executed by the Matrikas. In the Varaha Puran it is Camunda who is responsible. Similar beliefs are also recorded in the Markandeya Puran and the Brahmanda Puran—all female imaged threats.

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Conclusion

My point of view and the connection between caste, birthing and bleeding women and ritual pollution is best summarized by Durga Das, a doctor in a remote mountain village of Himachal Pradesh as he speaks of birth and caste-based pollution practices.

"Here we do the childbirth only in the cattle shed. We have our deities hence we consider birth impure. We are priests so we consider our houses as pure. All these ideas are created by crooked people to earn money.

If Prasad can be eaten out of Harijan hands by our gods then who are we to make any objection in eating from their hands? All this has been spread by crooked babas, but our own history doesn't show any such thing. Our village was a Harijan village earlier and had only Harijan families. There was an iron mine here and people were miners. People from our community came from another village. Harijan people have moved from here but half our land is still in their names. Now we call them daagi. (stained)."

I am not pro-natalist. I don't think all women should have babies—but I am for the 'multiple mothers' of long ago.

Nature and women are preservers of life whether they are literal mothers or not. We no longer believe in or act out 'mother' nature but rather a female nature that can be conquered by an aggressive masculine mind. Balance and harmony are experienced and not seen. Disruption is violent and visible.

Yes, in a way I am an essentialist—a term very frowned on by many academics and feminists recently. I do believe in essences—the earth, the polluted air and water, the mothers' wombs cut open to pull out the fetus. But our bodies are not 'intellectual property' to be possessed, farmed or 'husbanded.' Women are whole, and the goddess-demoness is also.

Perhaps we are missing something here. We often speak of the symbolic in Indian traditions—but symbolism implies that there is a rupture between what is symbolized and the symbol. I have wrestled with this for a long time. For example, woman and earth. Woman is not a symbol of the earth, nor is the earth a symbol of woman—but both partake of a similar essence or a similar quality, fertility. Both are fertile.

Throughout this book you have seen parallelisms, not just 'symbols' but things that partake of sameness but in different forms, seeming paradoxes. In Chapter 1, Yoni is pictured as source—both metaphysical and physical female anatomy (vagina-womb). In Chapter 2, menstrual bleeding marks both time and lunar cycles. The Brahmaputra runs red and the Devi bleeds. In the pregnancy chapter - two hearts beating – mother's and the placental swish. In postpartum the remarkable sixth: Chat Puja and Chatti—birth of the year and of the baby as well as postpartum rest for both the mother and the agricultural field.

And finally, Ma being both goddess and demoness—requested to stay away but prayed to while She is present in the house. These, indeed, are the paradoxes.

Acknowledgements

Seema Kohli for reading and encouraging. Vidya Rao for forever friending and help with songs. Writers group (Manju, Anuradha, Deepti, Sujatha, Sonam, Amy, Mala and now Noor) for making a decent writer out of me. Roberta, Marilyn, Cynthia for befriending from afar. Stella for being a travel buddy and sharing photos and India-obscure knowledge. Jeeva Research Project (Mira, Sandhya, Leila, Imrana, Anuradha and Bijoya) for quotes and focus on dais and their environments. MATRIKA, especially, again Deepti and Renuka. Divya for doula-ing at countless births, and being the best birth buddy ever. My teachers Ramchandra Gandhi, the Jesuits, my Yogini buddies (Seema Kohli, Nilima Chitgopetkar, Anamika Roy, and Stella Dupuis) and the innumerable medical midwives who have shared their knowledge and sensitivities with me. And especially, totally, irrevocably the countless traditional birth attendants, usually called dais, who have given of their precious time, vast knowledge and experience, not to mention rituals, to my colleagues and myself. I am forever indebted to Rupali for her enthusiasm and bringing this work to fruition.

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