Cultural Analysis of the Indian Women's Festival of *Karvachauth*

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CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE INDIAN WOMEN'S
FESTIVAL OF KARVACHAUTH

by

Puja Sahney

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of
MASTER OF ARTS
in
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ABSTRACT

A Cultural Analysis of the Indian Women’s
Festival of Karvachauth

by

Puja Sahney, Master of Arts
Utah State University, 2006

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The festival of Karvachauth is celebrated by upper class married women of North India and occurs in the month of October or early November. On this day married women fast to ensure the long lives of their husbands. They wake up before dawn and eat a meal. After sunrise they do not drink water or eat any food until they see the moon at night. The moon is watched through a sieve and prayed to before breaking the fast. An important part of Karvachauth is a ritual that is performed by women in the afternoon. This ritual is hosted by a woman of the neighborhood and other women assemble in the house where they form a circle. The narration of a folktale of a princess named Veeravati forms the center of the ritual. Women also dress up in festive bright saris and lots of jewelry for the ritual. Some part of the day is spent in putting intricate designs of henna on their hands and feet.
Although women's act of fasting for their husbands might appear as a sign of subjugation, in my thesis I argue that it is not. Rather, festivals like Karvachauth temporarily liberate women from daily restrictions and give them a licensed freedom to break away from customs that confine them to the threshold of their households. I argue that Karvachauth gives women a chance to move out of their confined private worlds into the public world, dominated by men, and out of their reach in daily life. I do acknowledge that women must satisfy the serious aspects of the ritual first if they wish to enjoy the liberties. But once they are able to do so, the freedoms are easily manipulated by women to empower them, albeit temporarily, in various ways.
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I give special thanks to my mother and father in India and to my sister and brother-in-law in Salt Lake City for their constant emotional support. My heartfelt gratitude also to Dr. Barre Toelken for his support and encouragement.

Puja Sahney
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his Postlude to a book on celebration, Victor Turner points out folklorists’ recent interest in festivals’ “reflexive” nature and their ability to help people “confront themselves wherever they may be geographically, with images of their identity…” (Turner 1983, 187). By reflexivity Turner means a sense of self-reflection. This idea underlies my intention for writing my thesis on the old Indian festival of Karvachauth. I wanted to understand my own changing identity as a modern, post-independence, Indian woman studying in America.

Being in the US, geographically apart from my own Indian culture, the study of Karvachauth enabled me, for the first time in my life, to reflect analytically on an aspect of my own culture. The process of writing my thesis drastically altered my own perspective on Karvachauth. For many years I have been guilty of misunderstanding the meaning behind Karvachauth, and the result of this study is my own realization that a culture’s identity has to be understood before one can judge it. Simply being born into a culture gives no guarantee that we know it or understand it. My study of Karvachauth is proof of that. My renewed respect, in a new light, for women of my culture and some of the old Indian practices is a result of this study.

Karvachauth is an old festival of North India that is celebrated by upper class married women who fast from dawn to dusk on the day in order to pray for the long lives of their husbands. Since childhood I had viewed women’s fasting on this day as a sign of
sacrifice, symbolic of female subjugation. But as I began my study of Karvachauth and interviewed my family members who participated in this festival, my long-held belief soon dissolved. The answer from my mother and other Indian women of their experience of fasting on Karvachauth was the same—“Fasting together is lot of fun, and we wait for Karvachauth every year.”

Based on their responses, I now wish to argue that far from subjugating women, the festival of Karvachauth empowers them. Karvachauth provides women an opportunity to spend time with each other, dress in festive clothes, and move out of their domestic world unaccompanied by men. On the surface, the act of keeping a fast for one’s husband may appear as subjugation. However, this is not entirely so. Once they have satisfied the serious aspects of Karvachauth ritual, the participating women earn licensed freedom to enjoy the rest of the day in each other’s company. In the guise of festival, therefore, women exploit their freedom and empower their positions by reversing gender roles and trespassing boundaries, particularly in realms associated with men. The gender restrictions on upper class women are more severe than on lower and middle class women. As a sign of their superior status, upper class women are not supposed to be seen in public places like the market. Their movement is restricted within the household. Karvachauth, as a festival celebrated by mainly upper class women, therefore gives them a chance to move out of their otherwise restricted domestic realm.

Since childhood, I have been familiar with this festival. In spite of the serious reason behind Karvachauth—praying for the long life and well being of one’s husband—the day of Karvachauth is no different from any other festival. The festive spirit is especially alive in the domestic world of women from the evening before, as
women cook a special *Karvachauth* meal of several Indian sweets. *Fioniyan*, a sweet made from refined wheat, is a very popular dish prepared for this day. This meal is made by women for themselves; men and children do not eat it. On the day of *Karvachauth*, women wake up before sunrise and eat their meal. After sunrise the fast begins and women do not eat or drink anything all day. But at the same time they do not cook either. They aren’t even allowed to touch scissors or knife or enter the kitchen for any purpose. Instead, women spend the day getting ready for the evening ritual. The ritual itself is performed by women in a circle. The narration of a folktale is at the center. Women dress up in festive bright *saris* with thick golden or silver borders printed on them. They wear lots of jewelry and bedeck their hair with flowers. Most of the morning and afternoon is spent by women in each other’s company putting elaborate *henna* designs on their hands and feet.

Women either carpool to the hostess’ house or walk. Since the house is usually in the neighborhood, women generally walk. It is a beautiful sight watching women emerge from their gates and walking in groups, with their bright *saris* glittering in the sunlight and their many articles of jewelry tinkling as they walk. In 1999, I accompanied my mother to a *Karvachauth* ritual. I was then eighteen years old. While women cheerfully talked while walking to the neighboring house, I felt the full solemnity of the purpose behind the festival when women formed the circle, covered their heads with the end of their *saris*, and began the ritual. They listened carefully to the folktale and passed their sacred plates around the circle seven times in the course of the narration. The ritual gives women an opportunity to bond with one another.
Previous studies in rituals have focused greatly on the solidarity among participants that rituals promote. A major contributor of this theory is Emile Durkheim who reasons that *rites* and rituals play an important role in bringing people together. They provide periodic opportunities for people to assemble together and arouse a passionate feeling of effervescence towards one another and the community (cited in Bell 1997, 24). Women’s formation of the circle, the act of listening to a common folktale, and passing of their plates around the circle are symbolic of this solidarity.

Another important contribution in ritual scholarship is made by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Both believe that ritual occurs in a transition period termed by them as a liminal period (Turner 1969, 95). Participants in a ritual are liminal entities whose position is ambiguous and who are neither here nor there. This phase of transition they argue is rich in symbols. A primary quality of liminality is that social differences are set aside. “Liminal beings have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role...” (Turner 1969, 95). In such an atmosphere, solidarity among participants develops and they share a feeling of *communitas* or equality. Indian women in the liminal phase of *Karvachauth* share a similar feeling of *communitas*, which helps them liquidate differences between them. Therefore, a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law who are otherwise at odds with each other can set aside their differences on *Karvachauth* and unite as married women praying for a common cause of their husbands’ long lives. By this I mean that *Karvachauth* gives them an opportunity to bond with one another and for a day forget their squabbles and celebrate the *Karvachauth* as married women first and as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law second.
However, the day of *Karvachauth* is not simply the ritual that women perform. Like any other festival, *Karvachauth* also offers women opportunity to dress up and enjoy each other’s company. Previous studies define festival as ‘time out of time,’ a term coined by Alessandro Falassi (1987, 3). This festival time is imbedded in elements of symbolic inversion that give people licensed freedom to do “something they normally do not or abstain from something they normally do” (1987, 3). These aspects of symbolic inversion are most often applied by scholars to carnivals on which day the daily social order becomes “topsy-turvy.” In my analysis of festival I apply aspects of symbolic inversion to *Karvachauth*, to show how women on *Karvachauth* are able to break away from daily social and gender restrictions and attain freedoms that they would never be able to enjoy in daily life.

My thesis analyzes *Karvachauth* as empowering women. I analyze the ritual, the festive atmosphere, and the folktale in separate sections. My thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter one is my introduction to the festival. Chapter 2 describes the festival and ritual of *Karvachauth* in detail. Chapter 3 acquaints the reader with the social life status of women in India in order to enable the reader to understand my analysis under the right cultural context. Chapter 4 is devoted to the ritualistic aspects of *Karvachauth*. It explains how by satisfying the serious elements of the ritual women obtain the licensed freedom to exploit the festivities that *Karvachauth* offers. I discuss *Karvachauth*’s five ritualistic aspects: transformation, liminality, performance, sanctity and repetition. They help elevate a woman’s status, drawing the respect and attention of society. Using van Gennep’s idea of *rites of passage* (cited in Bell 1997, 94-95), I argue how the performance of the *Karvachauth* ritual acts as a renewal of women’s married status.
Similarly, I argue how repetition intensifies the ritual and brings about a sense of communal bonding amongst women, which helps consolidate their positions and draws attention to their gestures of self-sacrifice. I discuss Turner’s aspect of liminality as a “betwixt-between” stage, symbolizing homogeneity and comradeship amongst women, both indicative of “control” and “support” expected of women in their marriage and their relationship with other women in the domestic world respectively. I end the argument showing how in the act of performing the ritual, women take on some of the sanctity attached to the ritual and symbolically elevate their position to that of goddesses.

Chapter 5 focuses on the festive aspects of Karvachauth and on symbolic inversion. My purpose is to show how women exploit symbolic inversion to empower their positions. I derive my argument largely from Alessandro Falassi’s four cardinal points of festive behavior: reversal, intensification, trespassing and abstinence. I also draw parallels with a La Have Island festival called Belsnickling, where youngsters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one dress in costumes and visit homes in their community on Christmas Eve, dancing, singing and acting foolish. I introduce Belsnickling to illustrate the opposing ways in which elements of symbolic inversion are exploited in each festival. Belsnickles, although boisterous in their exploitation of the elements of festive behavior throughout the day, are eventually forced to compromise. But this is not the case with the Indian women performing the Karvachauth ritual. These women, although cautious of their rare freedoms, exploit the elements of festive behavior to gain access to the public world, a sphere dominated by men and usually out of their reach in daily life.
In chapter 6, my conclusion, I raise two questions for further research. The first question is whether the festival unifies or divides women of different classes. The second is whether women actually achieve liberation in the public sphere of men. I briefly introduce Margaret Mills’ analysis of a Muslim woman’s veil as a weapon of power used by women to manipulate the public world of men. In the same way, I argue that the festival of *Karvachauth* acts as a social veil concealing women’s real intention of gaining freedoms usually denied to them, one of which being an opportunity to gain access of the public world of men. However, I question the nature of authority that women are able to establish in the public world. The transgression by women from the private into the public worlds forms my area of future research as I attempt to understand *Karvachauth* from this new angle.

Not being married, I never participated in the ritual of *Karvachauth* but I have observed the ritual several times since childhood. As a child of seven or eight, I observed my mother and aunt Promila perform the ritual with each other in Jhansi. We then lived in a joint family and mother and aunt Promila being sisters-in-law did the ritual between themselves. The second time I was in Bombay when mother made me sit opposite her while she performed the ritual. The third time that I observed the ritual I was eighteen. This time I was in Pune and a lot older, and therefore I remember the ritual more clearly. This time it was a big group, and I sat outside the circle formed by women. Last year I also observed my sister who lives in America perform the ritual with her friend in Salt Lake City. For most of my data I have relied on interviews largely with my family and friends. My two major informants are my mother who lives in Pune and my aunt Veena who lives in Jhansi. My interviews have been conducted through emails and
conversations on the phone. I have talked about *Karvachauth* the most with my mother. The interviews with her were mostly on the phone. With my other friends and family, the interviews were both by email and phone and I talked to them just once. I talked the longest with my aunt Veena. I also interviewed my aunts living in Canada who celebrate *Karvachauth* with the North Indian community living there. To some of my friends and neighbors living in India, I asked them questions by email. I have collected the rest of the data, especially for the analysis, through research in the library.

Although I conclude my thesis by questioning underlying differences and embedded social conflicts between married and unmarried women, my main concern here is to discuss *Karvachauth* as a festival that encourages female solidarity among married women and empowers them through public recognition of their sacrifices.
CHAPTER 2

THE FESTIVAL OF KARVACHAUTH: CELEBRATION, RITUAL AND FOLKTALE

In this chapter, I describe the festival of Karvachauth including the ritual, folktale and celebration of the festival in general. I have collected data for this chapter from my own observations of the festival growing up in India and from interviews with my mother in Pune, my aunt Veena living in Jhansi, my cousin Deepa Malhotra living in Canada and a friend Puja Trivedi living in Delhi.

The first time that I heard the folktale of Princess Veeravati was in 1988. I was seven years old. I clearly remember the year because we had recently moved to the city of Bombay. The festival of Karvachauth is celebrated in the month of October. The day of the festival is not fixed because Hindu festivals are decided by their occurrence in the Hindu calendar, which has thirteen instead of twelve months. But one factor that is constant is that Karvachauth is always celebrated nine days before the major Hindu festival of Diwali, the festival of lights. The name Karvachauth consists of two words: Karva which means a clay pot and Chauth which means fourth. Therefore the festival occurs on the fourth day after the full moon. “[In India] the phases of the moon are closely watched by both urban and country dwellers, since calendrical religious activities are timed in accordance with the lunar phases” (Jabobson & Wadley 1977, 22). As far as my knowledge goes, Karvachauth is only celebrated by high class women. In the Indian society, high class women are more socially bound to their domestic spheres than women of lower classes. It is considered a taboo for a high-class woman to be seen alone in the
marketplace. Even shopping for jewelry and heavy saris is done from home. Although in recent years, these restrictions are gradually being lifted, most high-class women will avoid poor neighborhoods and shop only in posh areas. On the other hand for centuries now, lower class women have worked to support their family, alongside their husbands and therefore are seen working on farms or as maids in high class households.

Customarily, both the festival of Karvachauth and the ritual contained within the festival are always performed in a group. But since we had only just moved to Bombay, my mother did not know many women in the neighborhood. Therefore, she kept the fast by herself. Besides, Bombay is in the western part of India, and so the celebration of Karvachauth was not very popular since Karvachauth is a primarily North Indian festival, and there is disparity in culture in different states.

On Karvachauth, women fast for the whole day. They eat food before dawn, but after sunrise they do not touch any food or water till they see the moon at night. After seeing the moon and offering the moon water, women break their fast and eat their dinner. The ritual of Karvachauth is performed in the afternoon. A group of women usually belonging to the same neighborhood assemble at the house of another woman in the neighborhood who hosts the ritual. Traditionally, a platform was raised in the corner of the house, where an image of Goddess Parvati was placed. This image was made from cow dung. But in my observation of this festival, I did not see this practiced. Instead women make wheat dolls of the goddess and place them on their sacred plates. The doll is made while the dough is still wet. Women take some of the wet dough, and flatten it in
their palms and then shape it so that the corners of the flattened dough look like hands and feet with a bit on the top as the head. Women generally put a small red dot on the top, indicating its head. Since the doll is made manually using just a little dough it is very small and can be easily placed in a plate. Some believe that the wheat doll represents Parvati. However, others believe that it represents the protagonist of the folktale, Veeravati.

Since my mother did not know any other woman celebrating Karvachauth in the neighborhood, she asked me to come to the kitchen. She made me sit on the floor opposite her and placed a plate between us. She then covered her head with the pallu of her sari and began the ritual. Since I was small, I hardly remember how mother performed the ritual, but I still remember that she lit a small diya, a sacred lamp, in the plate. I do, however, still remember the story that she told that day. Below is the story my mother told me when I recently interviewed her.

The folktale is of a young, innocent and beautiful princess called Veeravati. When Veeravati was of marriageable age, she was married to a king. On the occasion of her first Karvachauth, she came to her parents’ house and decided to keep the fast. On the day of Karvachauth, she maintained a strict fast and did not touch food or water. But Veeravati was delicate and could not cope with the rigors of fasting and fainted. Now Veeravati had seven older brothers who felt sorry for their young sister and decided to end her fast. They went outside and one of the brothers lit a torch. Two other brothers held a white cloth in front of it. The rest of the brothers went inside and told Veeravati to look outside at the moon that had just risen. Veeravati was duped. She took the lit torch for the moon and ate her food. The minute she broke her fast, news came from her in-laws’ house that her husband had met with an accident. Devastated, Veeravati rushed home to see her husband, the king, pierced with thousands of needles. She knelt at his bedside and began to remove one needle as a time. She did this for a whole year and by the next Karvachauth only one needle remained on the body of the king. Just then,
Veeravati was called outside in order to get some ingredients for the Karvachauth, and the maid removed the last needle. As soon as the last needle was removed the king awoke, and mistook the maid to be his queen. When Veeravati returned, she was made to serve the queen. But this time Veeravati did not break her fast and ate only when she saw the moon. In such a manner, several months passed and the king got ready to go abroad. He asked everyone in the palace what they wanted. The maid who was now the queen asked for diamonds and gold but Veeravati asked only for a parrot. When the king returned with the parrot, Veeravati was thrilled and she taught the parrot to sing— the queen has become a maid and the maid has become queen. One day the king heard the parrot sing it and got curious. He asked Veeravati what it meant and she told him the truth. The king punished the maid and made Veeravati his queen again. (Indira Sahney, Telephone Interview, January 4, 2006)

In another, more popular version of the folktale, Veeravati meets goddess Parvati on her way to her husband’s house after hearing of his death. Parvati is with her husband Lord Shiva when Veeravati meets her. Parvati tells Veeravati that her husband is dead because she broke her fast without first seeing the real moon in the sky. Veeravati begs Parvati to give back her husband’s life. Parvati understands Veeravati’s true devotion to her husband and agrees to give back his life but assigns Veeravati the responsibility of nursing him back to health. Like in the previous version she spends the whole year removing needles from the body of her husband. In this version of the story Veeravati asks for two identical dolls instead of a parrot with which she plays and sings, “Roli ki goli hogai, goli ki roli hogai” (the queen has become the maid and the maid has become the queen). The king hears Veeravati singing the song and finds out the truth and punishes the maid.

It is interesting to note a similar pattern of triumph of the good over the evil in an Afghan women’s folktale, analyzed by Margaret Mills, which is also narrated at the center of a women’s ritual (see Appendix). The ritual is called Ash-e-Bibi Murad and the
The folktale narrated is of a girl called Mah Pishani. In this folktale, the protagonist, Mah Pishani, is tricked by her female teacher into believing that she must murder her mother. Mah Pishani does so by pushing her mother into the storage cupboard while her mother goes to get vinegar. The teacher marries Mah Pishani’s father. The teacher and the father have a daughter and the teacher begins to mistreat Mah Pishani. In the mean time, the dead mother comes back in the form of a yellow cow. For three consecutive days, the step-mother sends Mah Pishani with the cow to spin thread out of raw cotton. On the third day the cotton is blown into a well. The cow tells Mah Pishani that inside the well, she will meet an old woman with whom she must be polite. When Mah Pishani goes to get the cotton, she meets the old woman. Mah Pishani greets her with respect and delouses her hair. The old woman blesses her with signs of beauty—a moon on her forehead and a star on her chin. When Mah Pishani returns home, the step-mother sees the moon and the star. She becomes jealous and the next day sends her own daughter with the cow to spin cotton. Once again the cotton is blown into the well. However when the step-sister meets the old woman inside the well, she is rude to her and refuses to delouse the hair. The old woman curses her with signs of male genitalia, which in the folktale are associated with signs of ugliness—a donkey’s penis on her forehead and a snake on her chin. In the mean time the step-mother figures out who the cow is and orders it to be killed. But Mah Pishani’s mother then comes back in the form of a hen and ensures that Mah Pishani reaches the wedding of the royal family where Mah Pishani meets a prince and marries him.
The parallels between the two folktales of Veeravati and Mah Pishani are striking. For example: 1) both folktales are central to women’s ritual, where men are absent; 2) both stories stress the importance of female solidarity; 3) both folktales have an underlying sense of conflict; 4) and both protagonists come off victorious in the end and establish authority over the maid in the case of Veeravati, and the step-mother in the case of Mah Pishani.

Furthermore, both stories told at the center of a women’s ritual, symbolize the support that women are expected to give one another in their daily life. Veeravati, for instance, would never have been able to win her husband’s life back without the support of Parvati, and Mah Pishani would not have been able to marry a prince without the help of her mother. At the same time, the stories also stress women’s determination to punish women who exploit other women. For example, as Mills explains, “the unkind sister is marked with sexual stigmata as a direct result of her and her mother’s attempted exploitation of other females” (1982, 190).

Both folktales highlight the aspect of female solidarity that forms a major part of my later analysis. The whole experience of keeping the fast for a similar cause and suffering the pangs of hunger together, help women overcome their internal problems within the household. This liquidation of differences help women feel secure within their domestic realm. Mythological legends also reveal goddesses to have kept the fast for their husbands, which further heightens the importance of the festival. My later analysis in chapters four and five will focus on both the ritual and festival of Karvachauth as opportunities to bring women closer together and consolidate their relationships.
Mythological Legends Connected with *Karvachauth*

There are many Hindu goddesses who are believed to have kept this fast. One is Savitri. Savitri is a Hindu goddess who is revered for her wifely devotion to her husband. Young married women are encouraged to revere her. According to legend, it was believed that Savitri’s husband Satyavan was cursed to die one year after marriage. In spite of being dissuaded by her father from marrying Satyavan, Savitri refused to marry another man and married Satyavan. When Yamaraj, the god of Death, came to take the soul of Satyavan, Savitri begged him to spare her husband. When Yamaraj refused, Savitri refused to eat and drink. Finally, Yamaraj relented and spared Satyavan’s life. Since then, married women follow the example of Savitri and keep the fast of *Karvachauth* with great faith and belief.

According to another legend, Karva was the name of a woman who was deeply devoted to her husband. One day when her husband was bathing, he was caught by a crocodile. Karva hurried and tied the crocodile’s mouth with cotton yarn. She then went to Yama, the God of Death, and told him to send the crocodile to hell. When Yama refused, she threatened to curse him. Afraid of the power of a devoted wife, Yama sent the crocodile to hell and blessed Karva’s husband with a long life.

Finally, it is believed that the festival of *Karvachauth* existed at the time of Mahabharat. Mahabharat and Ramayan are two religious text books of the Hindus. Paul Thomas describes the Mahabharat in the following words:

The Mahabharat is one of the most voluminous, running into some 1000,000 verses, the longest single poem in the world. It is ... a repository
of traditions, sacred and profane ... and deals with all conceivable problems of life, social, domestic, political, religious and philosophical. (1964:119)

The female protagonist of Mahabharat is Draupadi, wife of the Pandavas, who are the heroes of the text. In one incident narrated in the Mahabharat, Draupadi accompanies her husband Arjun to the forest. On the way she is gripped with a sudden fear that Arjun has left her alone. She becomes scared and prays to Lord Krishna whom she considers her brother. Krishna advises her that in order to overcome this fear, she must keep the Karvachauth fast and strictly follow all the rituals. He tells her that Goddess Parvati had also kept the same fast for her husband Shiva.

The Day of Karvachauth

My more vivid recollection of the festival is from the years I lived in Pune, a city close to Bombay. My parents decided to settle in Pune when I was ten years old and I lived in Pune for fifteen years.

In Pune, my mother met many North Indian women who kept the fast. I remember the excitement of Karvachauth in Pune. Much of the excitement lay in the phone calls between my mother and her friends discussing which lady was hosting the ritual, at what time it was going to start, how many women were gathering, and whether anyone was bringing along a friend or a daughter or daughter-in-law living in another city. This added to the festive atmosphere of the festival. On Karvachauth, my mother also took the opportunity to talk to many aunts living in other cities and discuss their plans for the next day.
On the day of Karvachauth, mother would get up early and eat food before sunrise. The typical food eaten on this day is: mithai (Indian sweet), fruit, fioniyan in milk. Fioniyan is a kind of sweet made from refined wheat. In the afternoon mother would dress up in a bright, heavy sari and wear beautiful jewelry. It is customary for married women to dress up in their best finery and adorn themselves with jewelry. The main jewelry articles consist of bindi (the red mark on the forehead), bangles, earrings, toe rings and, occasionally a nath or nose pin. All these articles symbolize a married woman. Among Hindus only married women dress up in bright clothes and wear make-up and jewelry. Unmarried girls and widows are not supposed to wear bright clothes or apply any make up. Since Karvachauth is a festival of married women, they dress up for the occasion.

Women also carry sacred plates, called puja ki thali. Puja is the term used for the sacred Hindu prayer and thali means a plate. The plates are a significant feature of the fast. They are carefully decorated by women and are usually either silver or gold plated. Some rich women even carry plates made of real gold or silver. The plate is always circular. The important sacred objects in the plate are a wheat doll representing Goddess Parvati, a sacred lamp called diya, which is lit just before the ritual begins, a karva, i.e. a clay pot containing water (my mother keeps a silver glass filled with milk and water instead of a clay pot with water), a red powder called sindur or vermillion, some mithai, dried-fruit, and some rice. These are placed circularly, around the edges of the plate. After the ritual, the daughter-in-law gives the mithai and dried-fruit to the mother-in-law.
Sindur is red powder that women put between their hair-parting. This is a sign that the woman is married and her husband is alive. Rice is used in all Hindu religious ceremonies and is considered auspicious. Women cover their plates with a bright cloth. This is done to prevent women from comparing their plates.

Women never go alone to the Karvachauth ritual. My mother and her friends usually carpooled or walked. My mother’s friends most often gathered at our house and would set out together to the host’s house. My mother and her friends always looked spectacularly beautiful on this day. In ancient India, women would buy new karvas and put bangles, ribbons, home made sweets, make-up articles, and small articles of clothing like handkerchiefs inside it. They would then go visit each other’s houses and exchange karvas. But today women do not do this anymore.

One of the customs that has survived, however, is the exchange of gifts between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. This is especially important on a daughter-in-law’s first Karvachauth. On the day of her daughter-in-law’s first Karvachauth, the mother-in-law gets up early and prepares what is called Sargi. Sargi is a term used for the sumptuous meal that the mother-in-law is expected to cook for her daughter-in-law in the morning so that she can eat it before sunrise. Along with preparing the Sargi, the mother-in-law also gives the daughter-in-law a gift in the form of a small jewelry article or a sari.

Puja Trivedi, my sister’s friend living in Delhi, told me:

It is a great feeling. Mummy also makes my favorite dishes to make me feel special. But in my case it might be different because I am an only daughter-in-law. You actually make sargi only on the first Karvachauth but my mother-in-law continues to do it. (Email interview, January 26, 2006)
In exchange, the daughter-in-law touches the feet of the mother-in-law as a sign of respect and seeks her blessing. The mother-in-law blesses her with the hope that she remains a suhagan. *Suhagan* is a term used for a married woman whose husband is still alive. In exchange for the *Sargi* and the blessing, the mother of the daughter-in-law gives the mother-in-law *Baya*. This *baya* is a gift of a *sari* and some dried fruit.

From the moment of sunrise until the performance of the ritual (which is simply referred to as *katha*, i.e. story), women of the neighborhood continue to spend time with each other. Most of this time is spent in applying *henna* on their hands and feet. *Henna* in intricate designs is put on the palms and feet of the bride. *Heena* is only worn by married or young unmarried girls. Widows usually decline from applying *henna* since it is associated with being a *suhagan* (a married woman whose husband is still alive). *Henna* is considered auspicious on the hands of a bride and its significance is felt more than ever on *Karvachauth* when women are fasting to pray for the long lives of their husbands.

About *henna* it is believed, and especially so on the hands of the bride, that if it leaves a good color on the palms of the bride, it is an indication that she will be loved dearly by her husband. When *henna* is applied on the hands, it is a green paste that is contained in a cone shaped small plastic bag. The tip of the cone is cut with scissors and the liquid *henna* is squeezed into patterns on the hands and feet. After a few hours, the green paste is washed with water and the green *henna* leaves a red pattern on the hands and feet. It is believed that just as *henna* gives away its color to beautify someone else’s
hands, in the same way a woman should be kind and generous so that she beautifies the 
life of people around her.

**The Karvachauth Ritual: A Symbol of Solidarity**

For the fast to be truly effective, it must also be accompanied by the performance 
of the right ritual. The ritual of *Karvachauth* takes place in the afternoon. When women 
reach the house of the woman hosting the ritual, they sit in a circle and put the *puja ki thalis* in their laps. The clay pot with the milk and water is kept at the side of the person 
so that the water does not spill. Then the women cover their heads, which is considered a 
sign of respect for the ritual they are about to perform. One of the women, usually an 
elderly woman or the host, tells the *katha* (story) of Veeravati to the group. The narrator 
stops at seven different intervals in the folktale and the women pass their plates around 
the circle. Each time women pass their plates, they chant the words *le suhagan* (take this 
plate, one who is married).

This performance by women conforms to the solidarity and the reality theses of 
Durkheim’s model of ritual. Durkheim’s solidarity thesis argues social solidarity as a 
“requirement of society” and ritual as “an indispensable element in the creation of that 
solidarity” (Bell 1992, 171), while his reality thesis is one that “focuses on how ritual 
models ideal relations and structures of values” (Bell 1992, 175). In both these reality and 
solidarity thesis, he manifests a ritual’s ability to bind people together. On *Karvachauth* 
both social and reality theses are evident in the immense amount of time that women 
spend in each other’s company. The tensions between the women in the house are also 
liquidated as women keep the fast together, exchange gifts, and suffer together the rigors
of fasting. The symbolic reflection of the solidarity and reality theses is also evident as women, participants of the ritual, sit in the circle, listen to a common folktale, pass their plates around the circle, and address each other with the common *le suhagan*. Sharing with me her experience of performing the *Karvachauth* ritual, my fifty-year-old aunt, Veena Sahney, living in Jhansi in India told me:

It is a nice feeling to sit by each other. It doesn’t matter who you are sitting with at that point. It is not like home where even though we all worship together as a family and our husbands are also present, it is still an isolated feeling because we are all praying for different things. We don’t know what is on the other’s mind. But on *Karvachauth*, the case is different. On *Karvachauth* we are all praying for the same thing and the same thoughts are in all our minds—that God keep our husbands safe throughout the year. (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006)

This commonly held belief that the fast and ritual of *Karvachauth* will keep their husbands safe from harm’s way brings women together. Like rituals, therefore, beliefs are also “social in nature, a matter of collectively significant activities rather than personally held concepts or attitudes” (Bell 1992, 183). Moreover, shared activities of rituals help mold beliefs, and the public identification with the group reinforces the individual’s attachment to the group (Bell 1992, 187). Therefore, the strong bond between commonly held belief and performance of the ritual together create a sense of solidarity and belonging among women that is both rare and precious.

The festival of *Karvachauth* did not originate as a fast by women to pray for the long life of their husbands. *Karvachauth* is believed to have begun as a ritual binding two women as friends for life, as god-sisters. This practice is believed to have begun in ancient India when a girl was married at a very young age and went to live with her husband’s family. Since transportation was not swift in those days, girls hardly ever
visited their birth families. Therefore, if they had problems with their in-laws or husbands, there was no one to turn to and nowhere to go. Thus in order to make a girl feel better about leaving home, on the day of her marriage she was bound to another woman in her husband’s family as a sister or friend upon whom she could rely. It is believed that *Karvachauth* started as a festival to celebrate this god-friendship. The fasting for the husbands was added later to the custom. Of course this addition is not surprising since the ritual binding two women as lifelong friends or sisters was performed on the same day as the girl’s marriage.

This celebration of god-sisterhood is further indicative of the female solidarity that *Karvachauth* upholds. This conforms to Durkheim’s reality thesis that focuses on “ideal relations” and “structures of values” that do not “control” as some scholars may argue but rather “define” social norms and present that for internalizing (Bell 1992, 175). By this Durkheim means that ritual helps “symbolic modeling of the social order” (cited in Bell 1992, 175). Often, what may appear as control is actually nothing more than society’s way to confirm that people get along in society. Durkheim is supported in his belief by Lukes who argues that rituals “helps to define as authoritative certain ways of seeing society: it serves to specify what in society is of special significance, it draws people’s attention to certain forms of relationships and activity” (cited in Bell 1992, 175). *Karvachauth*, for instance, ensures that women get an opportunity to bury their differences and live peacefully with each other. The customs of *Karvachauth*, especially confirm that the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law get an opportunity to overcome their problems, since the relationship is both sensitive and often strained. Moreover, due to the
importance that women get on this day, women actually await for Karvachauth every year. One of my cousins living in Canada, Deepa Malhotra said:

It is a privilege to keep the fast. Nobody ever forced me to keep the fast but since I was a little girl, I was eager about keeping the fast just like my mother. I am never more pampered in my life, like I am on Karvachauth. I get gifts from sassuma (mother-in-law), from my mother and from him (implying her husband). It is very exciting. You feel like a bride again. (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006)

The Custom of Fasting

The custom of fasting is very common among Hindus. Both men and women fast in the name of god. In the Hindu culture, it is believed that one must try to attain spirituality in one’s life. To achieve this one must discipline one’s body and soul by imposing restraints. One form of restraint is fasting. It is a training of the mind and the body to endure against all hardships, to persevere under difficulties and not give up. Fasting underlies the religious practices of Muslims as well. Catherine Bell explains:

Fasting (sawm) during the ninth month of Ramadan is a central event in the Islamic year and one of the five pillars of Islamic practice enjoined in the Quran itself. Over and above its place in the prescribed tradition, however, the practice of fasting is integral to many people’s sense of what it means to be a Muslim. Some describe it as the most central of Islamic rituals. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight hours. Some devout Muslims even shun medicine and do not swallow their own saliva. (1997, 124)

According to Islamic theologians, there are two reasons behind the practice of fasting. One is that “fasting disciplines human desires, to the point of enabling one to experience one of the divine attributes, freedom from want” (Bell 1997, 124). The second reason behind fasting is that it helps bring the community together. Islamic theologian Sayyid Abu al-A’ la Mawdudi explains:
Fasting for a full month every year teaches piety and self-restraint to both the individual and community. Both rich and poor alike experience together the pangs of hunger and prepare themselves to endure any hardship in order to please God. Demonstrations of enthusiasm and empathy for the common corporate experience support this interpretation, as does the evidence that fasting sets Muslims off as a distinct community in contrast to their non-Muslim neighbors. Nonetheless, aside from the demonstration of corporate unity, the logic of fasting in Islam and other traditions also seems to be concerned with the importance of purity, asceticism, and merit in demonstrating the individual’s submission to God. (cited in Bell 1997, 124)

Like their Muslim counterparts, the women fasting for their husbands feel a similar sense of community. They suffer from the same pangs of hunger and spend time with each other in order to endure it. The fast also brings them closer to their husbands because their husbands honor them with a gift in gratitude for their sacrifice. Fasts for the same ritualistic purposes to Karvachauth are celebrated in the rest of the regions of India as well, only they are called by different names and with marginal differences in customs. These include Vat-Savitri, Teej, Mahashivratri, Gangaur, Varalakshmi, Vratham, and Karadaiyan Nombu. The fast of Vat-Savitri, for example, popular in the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Orissa is celebrated for the long life and prosperity of the husband, except that instead of Parvati, the goddess Savitri is worshipped for her wifely devotion to her husband Satyavan whom she saves from death by her endurance.

The End of the Karvachauth Fast

Getting a gift from the husband on this day is a source of great happiness for women keeping the fast. As my aunt Veena Sahney said, “It is a sign that they are grateful for what we are doing for them” (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006). But more than the gift, women are most touched by the concern towards them that is shown
by both their husband and children on this day. Since women cannot break their fast until they see the moon at night, men and children are often seen on terraces of homes and apartments, looking out for the moon. This practice also adds to the festivity of the celebration, which at this point is extended to include not just women but the members of the household as well. My aunt Veena told me, “I like it when my daughters look out for the moon for me. I know my husband and daughters love me, but it is still a nice feeling when they show concern. I am touched by it every year” (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006).

As a child I remember being given the responsibility of looking out for the moon along with my cousins. We would run up the terrace of our house and stand there for hours, laughing and shouting about whether or not it had arisen. We eventually were joined by my father and uncles. On neighboring terraces, other children and men would also stand looking up at the sky. There would be conversations across the terraces inquiring what time the newspaper said the moon would rise. The first glimpse of the moon would often be from behind the clouds and that would be enough to cause excitement. Everyone on the terrace would point, bend and shift their positions to make sure the light coming from behind the clouds was the moon, and then we, as children, would run down the stairs shouting, elated that the moon had finally risen. The women would come up to the terrace and break fast in the midst of the entire family.

When the moon is finally sighted in the sky, it is never looked at directly by women with their naked eye. Women see the first glimpse of the moon through a sieve, or view its reflection in water. While watching the moon, women drop a little water three times into a *tulsi* or any other plant. This is termed as *aark*. The *tulsi* plant is considered
auspicious and every Hindu household has a bush in the house or courtyard. When I inquired about this practice of seeing the moon, my mother told me, “Women are supposed to see the face of our husbands in the face of the moon” (Indira Sahney, Telephone Interview, January 4, 2005). The husband is also expected to be present at this time when the wife is breaking the fast. The husband also helps the wife take the first bite of food and the first sip of water when the fast is finally broken. The family then eats their dinner together. After the fast is broken, the family goes out for dinner. My brother-in-law, Shamit Nakra, living in Salt Lake City told me, “It used to be a treat for us, too, but we would let Mom choose the place we ate” (Interview, December 30, 2005).

The celebration of Karvachauth is a reflection of female solidarity shared among women on this day. The deep faith and belief in the fast is evident in the strict performance of the ritual. But at the same time the festivity of the occasion is felt in the bright clothes and jewels that women wear and the time they spend during the day painting henna on their hands and feet. The celebration of the festival is extended to the rest of the household by the concern shown by the husband and the children for the woman keeping the fast and watching out for the moon for her.

Strong belief in the fast is therefore one of the underlying factors behind the successful celebration and practice of this festival for so many years. Whether this belief borders on superstition is open to debate. But a woman keeping the Karvachauth fast will never consciously break it. As Puja Trivedi told me, “I would never ever break the fast before seeing the moon. I don’t know. I will just never do it” (Telephone Interview, January 26, 2006). In one of his essays on practices and folk beliefs of fishermen, Barre Toelken explains why superstitions exist among fishermen. He says:
Disaster strikes fast at sea, and a sailor does not have time to learn everything from personal experience before he is in a situation which requires a quick, automatic response. I have come to believe that this can be said of all occupational folklore, but especially of those trades and occupations that are particularly dangerous or unpredictable. (1985, 201)

A fisherman, therefore, will be wary before getting into his boat and while he is at sea. He is facing a raging sea over which he has no control. If it is a dominant belief to consider a woman on the boat as inauspicious, he is likely to comply with it. While facing a raging sea, he does not want to test the validity of the belief. He will comply with it since the consequence is death.

I believe that women keeping the *Karvachauth* fast are also like the fishermen helpless in their control over nature. They are too emotionally and financially dependent on their husbands. The death of their husbands is a symbolic death for them too since as widows their life will be miserable. For their part, they can only pray for the long life of their husbands. Therefore, like the fisherman who will comply with a dominant folk belief and not allow a woman on ship, in the same way an Indian woman will comply with a dominant belief in the power of the fast and keep it every year. The fisherman fears the rage of the sea and an Indian woman fears the death of her husband. This common fear binds women together. It helps liquidate differences between women as the intensity of the fast supercedes personal differences between them. In the common act of praying for their husbands, therefore, women also celebrate female solidarity. In chapter four I illustrate how in spite of the *Karvachauth* fast being kept in the name of man, the day of *Karvachauth* ends up being all about women. But before I analyze the festival, I wish to familiarize the reader with the position and status of women in Indian society to
allow the reader an opportunity to understand the interpretation of the festival in its Indian context.
CHAPTER 3

THE INDIAN WOMAN: STATUS AND POSITION

In the present chapter, I describe how Indian society functions. I focus on women’s status, roles and duties within society. I will make references to Indian terms of purdah, pativrata, sati and dowry, and explain arranged marriages and the joint family system in India. This information provides cultural context for Karvachauth and offers an overview of Indian society.

Since Indian independence in 1947, India has been fast developing economically. However, socially it is still in flux. In my own observations of Indian society, having grown up there, though some sections of urban India are now willing to bypass old customs, many orthodox parts of urban India and all of rural India are still clutching on to ancient beliefs and practices. This is especially true of the position of an Indian woman in India. In my thesis I will concentrate on North India, which is predominately agricultural and patrilineal.

In matrilineal South India, for instance, women have more rights and freedoms in terms of property and education. Often young girls are married to cousins and therefore are familiar with their in-laws whom they have known since their childhood. But this is strictly forbidden in North India. Aileen Ross writes:

The patrilineal-patriloc al system presents a quite different experience for the young bride. Instead of going into a household whose ways she may know intimately, she must accommodate a completely new set of customs and people. Moreover, the woman is of relatively little importance in this system for it emphasizes the son and the son’s son. In earlier days, when she married as a child, she was also apt to lose touch with her own kinship
except for occasional visits, and therefore had little protection from them. (1961, 14)

Although the North and South India share many similar practices, there are marginal differences too. My chief concentration will be the position and status of a woman as wife and daughter-in-law in North India. Doranne Jacobson describes the lives of Indian women as containing three important threads: 1) separation of the sexes, 2) concern with hierarchy, and 3) restraint (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 20).

The Patriarchal Indian Society

In both South and North India, a woman’s position is defined in relation to other people. In her study of Indian society, Maria Mies terms a woman’s place as a “culturally defined sex position” (1980, 73). Women’s place as subordinate to man is defined by her gender and duties. A girl is expected to conform to this sex position from the minute she is born or at least by the time she reaches puberty. An Indian woman explains the function of a woman as three-fold: “to be an ideal daughter, an ideal wife, an ideal mother. These three concepts can’t be separated. To obey the father, to worship the husband, and to take care of the children— they all go together” (Cormack 1953, 187).

According to ancient Hindu texts, such as the Laws of Manu, for example, a woman must never be independent. In childhood a female is subject to her father; in youth to her husband; when her lord is dead, to her sons (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 121). The laws of Manu stress this repeatedly. Susan Wadley gives a comprehensive overview of the laws of Manu in regard to women. She writes, “Manu emphasizes again and again
that women are not created to be independent and must therefore always be watched, protected and controlled by a man" (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 121).

The reason for man’s control over woman is due to her “evil and weak nature” (Mies 1980, 44). According to ancient Hindu texts women have love and desire for “bed” and “ornaments,” which symbolize impure desires and reflect wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct (Mies 1980, 44). It therefore becomes the responsibility of every man, whether rich or poor, to watch over women. He must do this in order to ensure the purity of his offspring. Since the Indian society is based strongly on the caste system, this protection is also essential to ensure the purity of caste lineage (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 119). There are four castes in India: Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. It is absolutely forbidden that a woman of a high caste sleep with a man of a lower caste and vice versa. Due to the loose and evil nature of woman, it is feared that she will sleep with a man of a lower caste and thus pollute the lineage. Therefore, she has to be controlled by her husband.

Manu stresses that the duty of a woman is to worship her husband like a god, since it is the only way that she can hope to make spiritual gain (Mies 1980, 44). In Hindu terminology this is called being a *pativrata*, a term I will elaborate on later. But briefly, a *pativrata* is one who is completely committed to her husband and worships him like god.

This popular belief is manifested in the training that Indian girls receive from childhood. It is the responsibility of the mother to give her daughter this training. Regarding this training Sudhir Kakar observes:
Late childhood marks the beginning of an Indian girl’s deliberate training in how to be a good woman, and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles. She learns that the virtues of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as skill and grace in the various household tasks (1988, 51).

Therefore, rebelliousness in women is looked down upon, and girls are encouraged to listen instead of expressing their views.

**The Purdah System**

One conspicuous part of this training is learning the segregation of sexes popularly known as *purdah*. Maintaining *purdah* forms an important part of daily life for a North Indian woman. Although all North Indian women keep *purdah*, the maintaining of the *purdah* is especially significant for the higher class women on whom the gender restrictions are more severe. It is considered inappropriate especially for a high-class woman to talk to or even be seen by men, other than her husband. A high-class woman seen openly conversing with men on a daily basis tarnishes her family’s name. *Purdah* is an old custom, and it is still practiced in certain conservative sections of India. Mies gives a comprehensive overview of the term. She writes:

*Purdah* means literally “curtain,” or more precisely, the door curtain between two rooms. But as a system, *purdah* means not only the veil that covers Muslim women or the upper *sari* end that Hindu women draw over their face or their eyes, but *purdah* is also symbolic for a comprehensive system of rules, codes of conduct, folk-ways, the principle of which is the most radical form of sex segregation and seclusion of women. This seclusion can be achieved through walls, railings, curtains, veils, separate compartments in trains for men and women, separate seats in buses, through gestures like turning away of the head or looking down and also through silence. *Purdah* means above all that a woman should never appear in public, and if that cannot be avoided, must protect herself from being looked at by men. (1980, 65)
My sixty-year-old aunt, Namita Sony, living in Canada, told me, “When I got married I would always be expected to cover my head in front of my in-laws. Now many girls don’t do this anymore. But when I got married, they were very particular about it” (Telephone Interview, February 1, 2006).

Apart from the literal meaning, Purdah can also be maintained in day to day interaction between members of a family. Mies explains:

*Purdah* regulates the conduct of individual family members among themselves. An exact code of conduct lays down which women are allowed to speak with which men, at what time, at what places and in which matters and how this communication has to take place. (1980, 65)

Daughters-in-law, for example, keep *purdah* from the male members of the household and sometimes even from their husband in public. In fact women do not talk to their husbands in public until the couple reaches middle age (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 65).

Often *purdah* also puts daily restrictions on women that they find difficult to break. For instance, women are discouraged to travel. Jacobsen describes restrictions on travel for women in North India in the fifties. She writes:

*Purdah* restrictions on the mobility of traditional women do contribute to their subservience to males. A village woman of good reputation should not travel to another village or town except for an approved purpose. It is significant that in a country where travel has traditionally been on bullock cart, women never drive bullock carts. Even among the wealthy urban classes one seldom sees a woman driving a car. Thus unless she has access to a bus line, a woman cannot journey far without a male accompanying her. (1977, 64)

The practice of *Purdah* is also reflected in religious practices in Indian society. Wadley explains:
Purdah is generally associated with sexual division of labor and existence in separate worlds. As a corollary, women's concerns are very different from those of men. This separation is found also in religion: the many folk practices of women focus on the prosperity and well-being of the family. Women's rites seek the protection and well-being of crucial kinsmen (especially husband, brother and son), the general prosperity and health of family members, and "good" husbands. This emphasis is found in both calendrical and life cycle rites. (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 131)

The use of the word purdah in the above example is symbolic. By having different religious practices from men, women further separate themselves from the world of men. Both in daily and religious practices, therefore, the gender division between men and women is rigid.

On the other hand, the conservative obligations of purdah strengthen female solidarity since women spend so much time with each other. On the religious practices of Hindu women Wadley says:

The sexual segregation of Hindu society also articulates with the role that religion plays in drawing women together: female solidarity is continuously reinforced through religious practices.... Men's rites do not seek "good" wives or ones who will have long life; rather, they are concerned with a good wheat crop, ridding the village of disease, etc. It is not surprising to find this religious division of labor in the sexually segregated purdah society of traditional India. (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 131)

Therefore purdah is not only a way of life for women in India but it also has psychological influences on the way women think of their own freedoms and of themselves. Purdah is often the guiding factor in the way the Indian society functions. It delineates women's gender roles more specifically for them. Purdah is also a custom that partly constitutes the private world of women. In regard to the sexual segregation of society Ross writes, "In most parts of India, boys and girls are still trained for a separate adult social life. They usually play together freely as children, but after the age of six
there is a gradual separation of the two sexes until, after the age of ten or twelve, segregation is almost complete” (1961, 240). Ross further elaborates, “The taboo on the social mixing of the sexes meant that the women of the household formed their own social group. But there were enough of them in each home to share mutual interests and supply affectional support. River banks, where women went to bathe, clean vessels or wash clothes, were important mileus for entertaining gossip” (1961, 236).

**The Indian Joint Family**

An Indian woman does not interact with men in daily life. The *purdah* custom ensures interaction with other women of the house, especially in joint families. Driver defines an Indian joint family as “a couple, and its married son(s) or married brother(s) or parents of the male member permanently residing together in the same household” (cited Mies 1980, 75). Ross describes a joint family as “a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common family worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred” (1961, 9). Living in a joint family is again characteristic of a high class who generally own big family businesses.

A joint family is usually headed by a male member, usually the grandfather. In fact, life in a joint family is conducive to creating a private world for women since the gender divisions are very strict. The domestic sphere, for example, is completely run by women. It is usually run by the mother-in-law, and if the mother-in-law is dead, then it is run by the eldest daughter-in-law. Ross writes:
Planning the menu and cooking was the exclusive duty and privilege of the women. Male members were rarely allowed to interfere, and indeed were not anxious to do so (unless they had domineering personalities), as household work was considered to be beneath their dignity. It was the mother’s responsibility, too, to see that her husband and children were well fed. (1961, 55)

In regard to the daily functioning of a joint family, Ross says, “The wife of the head of the house, or the eldest woman, would supervise the work of the other women in a common kitchen. Men and women did not eat together. In fact, the typical pattern was for women to first serve the men of the household, and later to eat by themselves…” (1961, 10). Usually men eat first, then children and finally the women.

All women come as “outsiders” into the family and are incorporated into the “jointness” (Mies 1980, 75-76). They have different family backgrounds. But once they are married, they have to conform to the rules of their husband’s house. The different sisters-in-law living together have to learn to get along together and treat their mother-in-law and father-in-law as their real parents. In the following paragraph, I will describe a woman’s position and her status in the joint family. Although many Indians now live in nuclear families, living in joint families is still the most popular trend. My cousin Deepa Malhotra in Canada told me:

Getting married into a joint family has one big drawback, which is adjusting to a new household and their habits. I would have preferred to spend that time getting to know my husband better. But I had a dominating mother-in-law and so I was forced to learn the ways of the household more than getting to know my husband. I would get time to talk to him only when we would retire to our bedroom at night. There is no privacy in a joint family. (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006)
Due to the drastic adjustments required of a young bride, one can understand why the need would have been felt in ancient times to bind a young bride to a woman of her new family as god-sisters. Every young girl after marriage enters into a new family and her position at first is completely subordinate. Every joint family has its own working mechanism. The mother of a young girl, therefore, begins to train her for her future ability to adjust from the very beginning. My aunt Veena Sahney told me:

I kept telling my daughters from the very beginning that I am only their temporary mother and this is only their temporary house. Their real mother will be their mother-in-law and their husband’s house. This was the only way I could mentally prepare them to adjust to their husband’s house and live happily. (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006)

For a young bride, the most important person in her life even today, apart from her husband, is her mother-in-law with whom she spends most of her day. Regarding the new wife’s position, Ross writes:

Her exact position within the new household was strictly defined. If she was the wife of the eldest son, she had an important place, second only to the mother-in-law, and would eventually replace her as the head of the household. The mother-in-law’s direct and complete authority over the young bride was due to the necessity of integrating the new wife into the female side of the family. The new wife’s obedience to her parents-in-law came first, and her husband was not expected to interfere in their treatment of her. (1961, 115)

The scenario described above hasn’t changed. Puja Trivedi tells me, “My husband and I have fun, like we go and stuff, but couples rarely get this freedom. My cousins tell me that they have to take permission from the elders of the house if they want to go out” (Telephone Interview, January 26, 2006). The other women in the house are generally the sisters-in-law who are married to other family brothers. There is often jealousy and quarrels between the sisters-in-law but the most important relationship that a daughter-in-
law is expected to maintain is with her mother-in-law. Within the household the bride is not called “wife” but bahu, which means daughter-in-law. Mies writes:

With this name is denoted a position of almost complete dependence, which differs decisively from that of the daughter in her own family. The young bride comes as an absolute outsider into the family, that has already, by virtue of the mere fact that it accepts the daughter-in-law, a higher status than the family from which the girl comes. Families and even villages that “give” daughters have always an inferior status as against families and villages that “receive” daughters. In the general notion it is considered a kind of favor from the “receiving” family if it accepts the daughter-in-law. (1980, 98)

When she arrives into the family, the daughter-in-law has no rights, only duties. Sometimes a mother-in-law can even go to the extent of asking the daughter-in-law to massage her legs, which the daughter-in-law must do. Although sometimes the daughter-in-law may be lucky and have a kind mother-in-law, it is very rarely the case. My neighbor in India, Smita Kogekar, told me, “When I got married, my mother-in-law was so cruel, I began to lose weight. I was just so nervous around her” (Email Interview, February 2, 2006). The mother-in-law is the mistress of the house. If her husband is dead, then her power is all the stronger inside the house. The bride is usually a young girl and very rarely fights back. It is only after a few years that the bride begins to get comfortable in her new home and begins to fight back. I. Karve reports that the pair sas-bahu (mother-in-law- daughter-in-law) are described in the North Indian folk literature as “natural enemies” (Mies 1980, 99). It is believed that the enmity begins from the side of the mother-in-law who is jealous of the new and young bride who steals her son away from her (Mies 1980, 100). Another neighbor in India, Vinita Mahajan told me, “My mother-in-law wasn’t nice to me from the very beginning. When my younger sister-in-law came, she favored her and her treatment to me worsened” (Email Interview, January 25, 2006).
The struggle between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is one of dominance. The mother-in-law feels threatened by the arrival of a new woman in the house and dominates her from the very beginning in order to ensure that the daughter-in-law remains submissive to the demand of the family members within the house. Srinivas explains:

The mother-in-law is strict because her house is her kingdom and she does not want her daughter-in-law to rival her power. The actual transfer of authority from one to the other must eventually take place, and it is institutionalized and expected. But it is not easy for the mother-in-law to reconcile the growing independence of her daughter-in-law. (cited in Ross 1961, 116)

For her part, a daughter-in-law is always eager to keep the mother-in-law happy. A girl I know often accompanies her mother-in-law to the temple in order to keep her happy. She also tries to participate in and win small contests, like embroidery, cooking, etc. within the community in order to remain the favorite of her mother-in-law among the other sisters-in-law.

In some cases the mother-in-law is also known to interfere in the sexual life of the couple. Mies explains:

This authority (of the mother-in-law) is not limited to the domestic sphere, to giving orders for the household work and regarding the rearing of children. She also interferes in the relationship of the spouses and even exercises a certain control over their sexual intercourse. K.H. Gould, who investigated the interpersonal factors in family planning in North Indian villages, reports that the mother-in-law, in her desire to have a male heir as early as possible, impels the young bride in the first year of marriage to intensive sexual activity, by which all attempts at family planning before the birth of a male child are thwarted. On the other hand in traditional Rajput families the mother-in-law made sure that the post-partem sex taboo lasting several weeks after the birth of a child was observed. (1980, 99)
A daughter-in-law is also expected to get along with her husband’s sisters and her other sisters-in-law that live in the same house with her. There is often rivalry among the women, especially between sisters-in-law. The mother-in-law may deliberately even try to aggravate this rivalry by playing one daughter-in-law against the other. A mother-in-law in my neighborhood in Pune voiced the fact that she deliberately did not want her daughters-in-law to get along. She believed that if her two daughters-in-law got along too well, they might plot to kick her out of the house. While common woes of homesickness and cruelty of the mother-in-law may help bond the sisters-in-law, it is not often the case. Ross explains:

[R]ivalry over children, desire to be the favored daughter-in-law or to get a larger share of the common purse, carrying tales to their husbands, or siding with the mother-in-law against each other tended to strain the relationship. The first daughter-in-law had an advantage over the others, for by the time they entered the family she was already somewhat assimilated to the family way of life. The mother-in-law could always enhance the position of one by favoring her against another. The relationship between sisters-in-law might become very critical after the death of the parents-in-law, because the wife of the eldest brother then became the head of the household. As she could never exert as much authority over her sisters-in-law as the mother-in-law, she might have difficulty in keeping them in order. (1961, 174)

On the whole a daughter-in-law gets along with her husband’s sisters and they get along well. But after the sisters get married, they may begin to become jealous of the growing control of the daughter-in-law in the house that was once theirs. Moreover, although outwardly they may get along with the daughter-in-law, they could also be her worst critics and may side with their mother against her. “Sometimes sisters-in-law may take sides with their mother and wage a ruthless war against a young bride” (Ross 1961, 120). Ross writes:
The only persons to support her (the daughter-in-law) are her husband and her father-in-law. The males support her, and the women are against her. But the men will be absent from home most of the day. And the women will always be there ever ready to get at her. Hence many daughters-in-law have jumped into tanks to end their lives” (1961, 120).

A position of a daughter-in-law improves if she bears a son. In fact Indian society’s obsession with the birth of a son is so strong that there is a ritual called Pumsavana that is performed on a pregnant woman in hope of “eliciting the birth of a male infant and to magically change the sex of the unborn child if it be a female” (Kakar 1988, 47). But even after producing a son, her position may improve slightly but not extensively. Ross explains:

In a traditional joint family a daughter-in-law entered her husband’s home to a position of very low prestige, because of her age and the fact that she became the mother of sons, but even then her control extended only to trifling matters and sometimes even the care of her children was taken out of her hands by the older women. (1961, 114)

The strong affectionate relationship between a mother and son often prevented the husband from stepping in to side with his new wife. Ross says, “The new wife’s obedience to her parents-in-law came first, and her husband was not expected to interfere in their treatment of her” (1961, 115). In fact one way that a mother-in-law successfully dominates the daughter-in-law is by controlling the son. She controls her son by being overly affectionate. Ross writes:

Moreover, traditionally close relationships with their sons meant that they could dominate them though affection and love. It might even mean that a son would be so overpowered by his mother that he would not develop leadership qualities, and would, therefore, be dependent on her when he became head of family. Many Hindu men still lean heavily on their mother’s decisions. (1961, 102)
One reason that husbands and wives are not encouraged to become too close to one another is because that closeness disrupts the internal foundation on which a joint family is built. A couple who is emotionally close to one another may decide to leave the joint family and set up their own nuclear abode. Ross writes:

If she was attractive enough to elicit her husband’s support, her position might become even more difficult. If he sided with her, the delicate balance of family relationships was upset, and tensions created which might react back on her. Her supervision was not given over to her husband for this might have developed a warm, personal relation between them, which again might have caused strain to the joint family system. (1961, 115)

One informant tells Ross, “My husband was a spoilt son and so didn’t help with anything around our house at first. He liked to be waited on. But now he does help, but is embarrassed if his mother comes in and finds him helping. Even if he is only standing at the kitchen door talking to me as I cook, he will move quickly and look ‘lordly’ if his mother comes in” (1961, 58).

The mother-in-law, therefore, has a full responsibility for keeping the house together. She is the central mediator between the women and the men of the house. In some cases a mother-in-law may dominate the whole house, especially if her husband is dead. Ross writes:

The wife of the eldest male member, usually the grandmother had a clear position of authority as head of the domestic side of the household. Important household matters were theoretically controlled by the grandfather, but day to day routine matters were completely under her control. She administered the household, supervised or did the cooking, organized the work of the women of the household, and saw that the children were properly cared for. In the close confinement of the house, from which women rarely escaped, her main task must also have been that of mediator although this element of her role is never mentioned. If she had exceptional qualities she could even wield great influence over the male head “behind the scene.” If the grandfather died before her, as he
often did, she might inherit his mantle of authority over all family affairs since her influence over her sons was usually so strong that she could dominate the family. (1961, 95)

It is therefore incorrect to say that a woman’s position in a traditional Indian family is completely subordinate, because the mother-in-law has complete control over the domestic sphere of the household. It is true that a woman had to wait several years before she could assume this position. Or she would have to bear a son in order to gain some respect. But nonetheless, even the most orthodox men agree that without a woman, the traditional joint family would perish. As one of Cormack’s Muslim informant comments, women never felt discriminated because they simply believed that men and women have separate roles. The traditional Hindu marriage is even today not based on romantic love. Marriage is considered a “natural” thing that happens to everyone. As Coomaraswamy comments:

According to Hindu sociologists, marriage is a social and ethical relationship, and the begetting of children the payment of a debt. Romantic love is anti-social. The Oriental marriage...is the fulfillment of a traditional design, and doesn’t depend upon the accident of sensibility. The formula is predetermined; husband and wife alike have parts to play. A wife should look on her husband as god, regardless of his personal merits or demerits. Hindu society is based on group morality, with the freedom of the individual subject to the interest of the group. The concept of duty is paramount. It is logical that Hindu marriage should be dissoluble. It is logical that Hindu marriage should allow a second wife if the first is childless. (cited in Cormack 1953, 147)

The System of Arranged Marriage

Generally girls in India learn the right codes of good and proper behavior through observation of other women in women’s private world. If they do not, then they are forced to conform to the rules of society by their mothers. For example, one of the most
important lessons that a girl learns through observation is that she must never talk to or touch any boy, except her future husband. Her husband will be a person chosen by her parents. Marriage is very important for an Indian girl. On average, even today, most girls have arranged marriages. By arranged marriage I mean that marriages are arranged by parents who look out for potential grooms for their daughters. Ross says, “Parents (are) morally obliged to find mates for their children and the children to accept their choices” (1961, 251). The children do not have a say in the matter. Marriages are often arranged through advertisements in the newspaper or through word of mouth. The parents of the girl try to find a boy who is of a higher or similar class to them. A boy, on the other hand, can marry a girl of either a higher or lower class. The parents of a girl are also usually the initiators. David G. Mandelbaum explains the desperation of the girl’s parents:

The negotiations are usually initiated by the family of a girl. This is in accordance with traditional prescription and with the fact that a girl’s family feels under pressure of time as a boy’s family does not. A girl has only a short period during which she is properly eligible for marriage. After that, as has been noted, her unmarried state raises questions and dark suspicions. (1970, 105)

A young girl who is attractive has more chances of finding a well-settled and educated boy than a girl who is unattractive. Mandelbaum writes, “The family of the boy looks for counterpart attributes in the girl; her demeanor, health, and diligence are politely but firmly ascertained. Fairness of skin is a decided boon as is also her general attractiveness of appearance” (1970, 105).

One custom of arranged marriage is the practice of dowry, which remains widespread in both urban and rural India even today, although it is illegal. This practice subordinates the status of a woman before she even steps into the house of her husband.
Ross says, “Finding a husband for a daughter is made more difficult for some by the need to pay dowry to the bridegroom. Fathers had to induce men to marry their daughters by offering large presents and dowries” (1961, 260). This practice of giving dowry to the bridegroom’s family puts a financial burden on the family of the girl. Dowry is one reason that girls are still unwelcome in India. The price of dowry is negotiated at the time of marriage. The richer the family of the boy, the higher is the expected dowry. In my own observation of this custom, I have seen a boy’s family demand a car. My fifty-eight-year-old aunt, Raksha Bhandari, living in Delhi told me:

I was engaged to someone else before I married your uncle. That was also an arranged marriage. But soon after we were engaged the boy’s side demanded a lot of money, or else they threatened to break off the engagement. In our culture it is considered a black mark on a girl’s reputation if this happens and she rarely ever gets any other proposals. But my father stood his ground and refused to give them any money. But my father was in the minority. Parents generally give in to the boy’s demands. (Telephone Interview, January 31, 2006)

Sometimes the demand for dowry does not stop with marriage. Even after marriage, the in-laws may constantly demand things. A woebegone informant narrated her miserable experience with dowry to Ross:

My daughter has had a lot of trouble with her in-laws. Although I was a widow and wasn’t earning any money, I tried my best to satisfy their demands for a dowry and other articles. When the marriage was settled, they all came to our place and we had a discussion about the list of articles, such as silver vessels to be included in the dowry. But during the marriage ceremonies they added many things to the list, which I was not prepared for. By then it was too late for me to back down. We tried our best to satisfy them. Even after my daughter’s marriage they used to send urgent demands at every festival for something, such as a diamond ring or a wristwatch. I wept for five or six years I was so miserable for my daughter. (1961, 262)
*Dowry* is therefore treated with worry or even terror for most girls’ parents. A girl who comes to the in-laws’ house with a huge *dowry* is respected. On the other hand, a bride who comes into a house with little *dowry* is looked down upon and even her husband loses the respect of the other brothers (Ross 1961, 261). A mother-in-law gives preference to daughters-in-law who bring a huge *dowry* with them. My aunt Veena Sahney, living in the small town of Jhansi, told me:

In spite of all the progress India has made, the system of *dowry* continues to exist. I had a love marriage, which was considered very rare so many years ago when I got married. I didn’t bring anything with me. On the other hand my husband’s twin brother had an arranged marriage and his wife brought a lot of *dowry*. My mother-in-law always favored her. That’s one reason why I was so particular to get my daughters married in an arranged fashion. There is definitely more respect for women who have arranged marriages. (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006)

**A Girl’s Education**

Education of girls is encouraged but only to a particular level. Once a girl is engaged, her education is stopped. Higher education is especially not encouraged. It is feared that a highly educated girl will not find a suitable match. A twenty-seven-year-old girl, Aditi Shah, a neighbor whom I had played with in childhood told me, “I had finished my engineering in India and wanted to go to America for further studies. I had even given my GRE and done really well. But then I got this proposal from a very rich boy from Bombay and my parents felt that it is better if I marry him right now” (Email Interview, February 2, 2006). The boy’s family usually prefers a girl who is not very educated because it is believed that highly educated girls are too opinionated to adjust to the boy’s family. Often less attractive girls prefer to choose career over marriage. One informant told Cormack, “The majority of Indian women who have chosen careers
instead of marriage have done so because they are physically less attractive than others. It is lesser of the two evils, because unmarried women can’t go out and have their fun-as men can. You might as well work at a career” (1953, 169). Attractive women who willingly choose a career over marriage are a social curiosity. Another informant told Cormack, “A single woman is respected all right, but if a man is seen coming from her compound at night, God help her! There are very few single women, and they are treated as freaks. Society pities them. It is a pity to see anyone unmarried” (1953, 168).

Marriage is the most significant moment of a girl’s life. Every girl must get married. Marriage of a girl is compared to the initiation rite for boys, which is called the upanayana-ceremony. “Just as the deeds and sacrifices of man who has not received this sacrament has no value, so even the strictest ascetic exercises are of no use to an unmarried woman for her religious salvation. If a grown up woman dies without this sacrament she roams about after her death as an evil spirit” (Mies 1980, 50). In fact there are only two aspects on which a girl is judged: her role as wife and mother.

Since marriage is so significant in a girl’s life, mothers begin to prepare their daughters for marriage from childhood. A huge part of the training is to become a humble wife and a docile daughter-in-law. In the book Women in Indian Society, a Kannada man, M.N Srinivas states:

It is the mother’s duty to train her daughter up to be an absolute docile daughter-in-law. The *sumnum bonum* of a girl’s life is to please her parents-in-law and her husband. If she does not ‘get on’ with her mother-in-law, she will be a disgrace to her family, and cast a blot on the fair name of her mother. The Kannada mother dins into her daughter’s ears certain ideals which make for harmony (at the expense of her sacrificing her will) in her later life. (cited in Kakar 1988, 51)
This training as a daughter-in-law is also extended to the girl’s training to be a good wife. Before I go into describing an Indian woman’s status within a family as a daughter-in-law, let me begin by describing her role as a wife first. In Hinduism a good wife is called a *Pativrata*. I referred to this term in my first chapter in relation to wifely devotion. The young girls are encouraged to emulate and become little Sitas and Savitris, two chief characters from Hindu mythology who are the epitomes of wifely devotion and virtue.

**The Hindu Concept of *Pativrata***

*Pativrata* is one of the most common terms used for a married woman in India. The word *pativrata* comes from the word *Pativrityam*, which means devotion to husband to the exclusion of all other consideration (Thomas 1964, 156). A *pativrata* worships her husband like a god. She is virtuous and humble to all his wishes. A true *pativrata* is also expected to allow the sale of her, if her husband desires (Leslie 1997, 199-200). Through her devotion, a true *pativrata* is believed to be able to even save her husband from the clutches of death. In other words, gods fear the devotion of a *pativrata* for her husband.

Married women are expected to emulate this intense devotion from childhood. Sita and Savitri are two mythological characters who were true *pativratas*. Every Indian girl knows the story of these women. Sita represents the ideal towards which all married women should strive. Ross describes the virtuous of Sita in the following words:

Sita, the wife of Rama, embodies the ideals of utter unselfishness and complete self-sacrifice. She never returns an insult and has all the characteristics which are idealized in womanhood. "Sita is wholly the Indian ideal of a woman: tender and mild, soft and dreamy as moonlight, self-forgetting, filled with love, devotion, sincerity, faithfulness, and yet, where it is a case of defending womanly virtue, nobility of soul and purity
of body, a strong heroine, great above all in long-suffering, but great too, in her unyielding, daring pride. (1961, 158)

Sita represents “chastity” and “obedience” to a husband that is considered characteristic of a good wife. Due to her devotion to her husband and virtuous nature, Sita was able to pass the test of fire that her husband Rama put her through (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 68).

On the other hand Savitri is a goddess whose renown emanates from her extreme devotion to her husband, through which she saves him from the god of death. The story of Savitri is held up as prime example of the lengths to which a wife should go in aiding her husband. The good wife saves her husband from death, follows him anywhere, proves her virtue, remains under his control and gives him her power. These aspects of wifely behavior and norms are also found in oral traditions. The theme of love between husband and wife is a minor one in the classical written literature, whether Sanskrit or vernacular; rather, devotion and dutifulness dominate (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 123).

The laws of Manu state that a *pativrata*'s prayers, sacrifices, fasts, ascetic exercises and pilgrimages are for the salvation of her husband. She must always try to please him and to serve him. Above all, she should in no way give the impression of violating marital fidelity, either during the lifetime of her husband, or after his death (Mies 1980, 44).

Manu also states that although a man may be destitute of virtue and seek pleasure elsewhere, a woman must not waver in her devotion to her husband. A dishonest wife is disgraced in the world and after death enters the womb of a jackal. It is only a virtuous wife who resides in heaven with her husband after death (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 121).
Women in India grow up listening to the stories of such devotion and are encouraged to emulate this devotion to some extent, depending on how conservative the family is.

Ancient Hindu law puts a woman in a “lowly” position, on the same level as servants and slaves. Ross argues, however, that this position is not considered humiliating to the woman. Bachmann interprets this satisfaction of the Hindu woman. He writes:

To us ‘I am the servant of your feet’ is humiliating, but later Hinduism so deeply impressed the ideal of a wife’s complete devotion and self-denying service to her lord and master, whether he be human or God, as the only means of attaining bliss...that there is no humiliation in the expression to them. With religious enthusiasm the wife took up her ‘Dharma.’ This dharma is her complete devotion, obedience and service to her lord and master (cited in Ross 1961, 105).

In fact when a girl gets married, she willingly wears the bangles, although bangles are symbols of slavery. As Ross argues, the concept of pativrata is so deeply imbedded in girls that they do not mind being controlled by their husbands. Although symbolically bangles represent slavery and a sense of control, women wear them with pride.

Ross explains that the term “obedience” is not understood in the same sense in India as it is in Western countries. He says, “…for it does not imply external compulsion, but rather is seen as the natural wifely desire and duty to please him, to serve him” (1961, 106).

It was this notion of pativrata for which women committed sati in old India. In the custom of sati, a woman sat on the burning pyre of her dead husband and burnt herself to death along with her husband’s body. This practice was abolished by the British in 1857. Coomaraswamy explains the word sati. He says, “sati, the root meaning of which is “essential being,” refers to “she who refuses to live when her husband is dead...It is the last proof of the perfect unity of body and soul, devotion beyond the
grave…” (cited in Cormack 1953, 174). Although the custom may seem barbaric, conservative Indian women refuse to view it as a sign of subjugation. Cormack quoted an Indian woman who said, “And they (the British) took that privilege from us too” (1953, 173). Since the ideal of pativrata is manifested in the minds of women, they treat devotion to the husband as a privilege not an obligation at all.

This ideal of pativrata is also manifested in one story of a devoted wife named Anasuya from an ancient Hindu text called Markandeya-Purana. Anasuya’s husband, who is a leper, orders his wife to carry him on her back to a courtesan. On the way, the husband kicks an angry rishi, who curses him to die at sunrise. Rishis in Hindu mythology are religious saints with enormous power. Because of her intense devotion to her husband, Anasuya prohibits the sun from rising. The sun is unable to disobey the intensity of the devotion of a true pativrata and does not rise. Darkness covers the earth and the gods are forced to intervene, and they persuade the rishi to take back his curse (Mies 1980, 44). It is therefore strongly believed in Hinduism that a married woman has unshakable power. If she decides to protect her husband, even death cannot touch him. The gods are believed to shudder from the power of a pativrata.

The Indian Custom of Fasting

It is this belief in the power of the pativrata that encourages women to keep fasts for their husbands and pray for their long lives. In talking about the role of fasts in the life of Indian women, Jacobson emphasizes its religious and festive dimensions. In India, fasting is a common religious practice. Although both men and women fast, women are known to fast more than men. Even the reasons behind fasting are different for men and
women. While men may fast for a better crop or business, women fast for the well being of the members of the house. This is another form of the purdah that women maintain in their religious life (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 95). These fasts are generally for the well being of the male members of the house, especially the husband, brothers and sons. Women are also known to make minor sacrifices in the name of husbands, sons and brothers. For example, my grandmother washed her hair on specific days of the week only, because on other days she prayed for her husband or brothers and it was not considered advisable to wash your hair on those days.

In addition to keeping fasts, Jacobson also points out that women’s most important contribution to religious life in India is performing rituals connected with the “life cycle and calendrical festival” (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 95). Examples include festivals like Karvachauth or daily religious practices like lighting the religious lamp every morning or praying to the religious Hindu herb tulsi every day. Participation in ritual activities brings happiness and a sense of importance to most Hindu women (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 97). Although both men and women are religious in India, women tend to be more superstitious. Therefore they are very particular about performing rituals in only a certain way. Jacobson notes, “It is believed that only through proper performance of rituals can deities and spirits be placated and persuaded to bring benefits of good health and wealth to a woman and her family. In carrying out these rituals, a woman feels she is doing something important to benefit her family” (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 97).

Jacobson also observes the festive release and freedom that rituals provide women in India. She writes:
The many worship services, rituals, ceremonies, and pilgrimages that are part of the religion are not only occasions to worship god but also entertaining and fun at the same time. Participation in religious activities is a socially and morally acceptable reason for a sequestered woman to leave her house to interact with other women or for a hard-working family to enjoy a trip to the Ganges or other holy place. In fact, failure to perform prescribed rituals outside the home could bring divine retribution. (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 98)

I must also point out, however, that women are not given any religious powers of their own. They cannot become priests in temples. Traditionally women are not even allowed to attend religious ceremonies or keep fasts without their husbands. Wadley comments, “Women as non specialists are ‘invisible’ religious practitioners, since most of their observances are performed non-publicly (in the home or “domestic” sphere) and their role is not textually sanctioned; indeed, the Laws of Manu forbid a woman to fast or participate in rituals without her husband” (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 130).

For a Hindu woman to remain in uninterrupted married life until her death is a most cherished wish even today. This is another reason that women keep so many fasts for the well-being and long life of their husbands (Joshi 1997, 227). This is not surprising, since widows are severely exploited in many sections of India. A widow is considered impure, and is not included in many religious rituals, particularly weddings. Mies gives a good overview of the injustice done to widows. She writes:

Since she [a widow] was thoroughly impure, she could purify herself only through strictest asceticism. Like Buddhist nuns she had to cut her hair, remove all ornaments, wear only white *saris* and remain mostly in an inner room of the house, so that her sight or touch could not pollute the other members of the house. She was not permitted to visit the sanctum sanctorum of the temples, to attend the family rituals connected with sacred fire and to join the greatest *samskaras*, because the holy fire played a role there. It was considered a bad omen if one happened to meet a widow on the road. (1980, 49)
While this severity of penance is practiced only in very conservative sections of India, it is still common practice for a widow to wear only sober colors and not involve herself in too many social events. The color of the clothes that men and women wear in daily life are symbolic in India, especially for women. Unmarried women and widows are expected to dress soberly and widows are expected to wear white. Married women are expected to wear very bright colors and a bride must wear only red since it is an auspicious color (Sharma 1966, 282).

However, while women in India tend to be more bound to rules and social laws compared to men, they are also treated with respect in many cases. For instance, motherhood is highly respected. The earth and the cow are considered as symbols of motherhood and highly respected. For example, the earth is called mata or ma, which means mother. The cow, which is the most sacred animal of the Hindus, is also called Gao-mata, which means mother-cow. The Hindus also worship many goddesses and they are all called Matas. At the same time, it is believed that a goddess gains power by controlling her sexuality (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 61). Shiv Prasad, a learned Brahman explains, “Matabai (in reference to a Hindu goddess) is not married. She is the mother of us all, the mother of the world. She creates everyone and also destroys them” (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 61). In one religious ceremony amongst Hindus, young girls (kanyas) below ten years old are worshipped and given food. It is believed that at this stage girls are most pure and reflections of goddesses.

Laws of Manu also stress that a man should treat a woman well or else she can destroy him. The passage reads as follows:
Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law who desire (their own welfare). The houses on which female relations, not being duly honored, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. Hence, men who seek (their own) welfare, should always honor women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes and (dainty) food. (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 123-124)

As Jacobson explains, “Men do dominate activities outside the home. They take positions of leadership in their communities, make important decisions pertaining to agriculture, and make most purchases. Nevertheless, women affect men’s actions and have important spheres of influence of their own” (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 60). Although most women are quite aware of their lower status and accept it, they say that it does not get in the way of life. One educated Muslim girl explained, “We don’t feel inferior or superior to boys. We each have our separate roles” (Jacobson & Wadley 1977, 60).

In a relationship defined not by romantic love or choice but duty and morals, men and women feel more secure amongst their own gender. The economic dependence of the women on the men gives them a subordinate position in the household, but their freedom to dominate their own domestic arena gives them satisfaction. Some ambitious women try to control the whole household, but most often a mother-in-law is satisfied to be able to control the daughter-in-law and enjoy the politics within her domestic sphere. Women are therefore central to the smooth functioning of the household but their roles, restricted to the domestic sphere of the household, often deprive them of the public recognition that they deserve. Festivals and rituals are occasions that allow them to step outside their confined domestic world and partake in the public world and get respected for the daily sacrifices they make for members of the household. By fasting, women are able to draw
attention to themselves and achieve respect. My analysis of the festival of *Karvachauth* is based on this very idea. My conclusion of the argument is based on women’s empowerment of their statuses both in the domestic world and outside.
CHAPTER 4

THE KARVACHAUTH RITUAL: A SYMBOLIC FREEDOM

My focus in this chapter is on the ritual of Karvachauth. In the subsequent chapter five, I focus on the festivities of Karvachauth. My reason for distinguishing between “ritual” and “festival” is influenced by Roger Abrahams. He argues that the separation between the two words “ritual” and “festival” in our secularizing world is important because both words perform different social functions (1987). He points out that ritual has “serious” purpose while festival is only celebrated for “fun.”

This distinction between the two functions becomes evident on Karvachauth. While the purpose behind the strict fasting, the narrating of the folktale, and the ceremonial ending of the fast are serious; women’s dressing up in bright festive saris, their applying of henna on their hands and feet, and the talking and laughing is playful. The daily social restrictions on Indian women do not allow for carefree enjoyment, unless the purpose behind the celebration is more serious. Fasting for a long life of their husbands is one such serious reason, which elevates women’s social status and gives them social recognition. The ritual also gives an opportunity for female solidarity, homogeneity and comradeship between women.

Previous ritual studies have focused on the solidarity that a ritual promotes. Durkheim is a major promoter of the solidarity theory (cited in Bell 1997, 24). He believes that rituals give opportunity for people to bond and feel a sense of “effervescence” and passion for their community. Victor Turner argues that the middle
stage of transition, which he terms the liminal stage (1969) promotes homogeneity and comradeship among the neophytes who, removed from the rest of the social order and stripped of their rank and role in the liminal stage, feel a sense of belonging with each other. They all emerge from the liminal period transformed and with their statuses elevated. They are incorporated into the society with new rights and roles.

Turner talks about two kinds of rituals— life crisis that accompanies an individual’s major stages of life like birth, marriage, and death, and calendrical rituals that are performed periodically (1969). Abrahams assigns repetition as an important aspect of ritual since it intensifies the moment or occasion (1987). Calendrical rituals, performed periodically, therefore intensify the beliefs behind their celebration. Roy Rappaport stresses the invariant messages imbedded in a performance of a ritual and the sanctity derived from it (1992). He argues that a ritual cannot exist without a performance. If there is no performance, there is no ritual. The imbedded sanctity in the performance of a ritual is transferred onto the individual performing the ritual and gives him the opportunity to partake in the divinity. This, Rappaport argues, is man’s way of communicating with god and coming closer to god. Sacrifices and offerings made to god are two ways that man communicates with god and both form important features of a ritual (1992).

My analysis of the Karvachauth is based on these five ritualistic elements: Turner’s element of transformation and liminality, Abrahams’ element of repetition, and Rappaport’s elements of performance and sanctity. My intent in applying the ritual of Karvachauth to the above elements is twofold: 1) to show how Karvachauth
incorporates all these five ritualistic elements 2) and to show how satisfying these ritualistic elements elevates women’s status and therefore gives them licensed freedom to venture forth and enjoy the festivities and freedoms that Karvachauth offers.

**Transformation**

Transformation is achieved in moments of social transition in the life of a human being. It is generally accompanied with elevation in the status of the individual. Birth, marriage and funerals are often accompanied with rituals that mark a person’s new status. Van Gennep describes these rituals as constituting three stages: separation, transition and incorporation. He terms them as *rites of passage*. Rituals are mainly performed in the middle stage. Turner terms the middle stage as the “liminal” a “betwixt-between” stage. These rituals of transformation are of two types: life crisis and calendrical. Rites of life crisis “culturally mark a person’s transition from one stage of social life to another” (Bell 1997, 94). They generally accompany and dramatize major events like birth, coming-of-age initiations for boys and girls, marriage, and death (Bell 1997, 94). Calendrical rites on the other hand give socially meaningful definitions of the passage of time, creating an ever-renewing cycle of days, months, and years. They make time appear to be “an ordered series of eternal re-beginnings and repetitions” (Bell 1997, 102).

An example of life crisis ritual is an excision rite called *blaon* practiced among the Guere of the Ivory coast in Zambia. Elizabeth Tucker analyzes the ritual as having four phases instead of the classic three as suggested by van Gennep in his pattern of *rites of passage*. She explains:
In the first phase, the woman who administers the ritual symbolically "captures" the novices, whether they are willing or not, and makes them march single file, like prisoners, into a special secluded area in the forest. In the second phase she performs the excision there, with the help of some female assistants and the supervision of a powerful female mask, the nyenonglae-gla. In the third and the most lengthy phase, lasting anywhere from a week to a month, the neophytes remain secluded and receive secret knowledge. In the fourth phase, the girls-turned-women have their final "coming out." They return to the village in new and colorful finery. They wear adult clothes and jewels of copper and gold, and their faces are painted with liquid clay in traditional geometric patterns (1987, 277).

Any men caught spying the secluded section where the girls remain are taken back to the village and beaten. The girls captured and brought into the forest remain there under the supervision of the nyenonglae-gla, the chief instructress, and must do whatever is asked of them. After a couple of weeks girls return to the village. Tucker describes the process:

The girls’ transformation is immediately visible of the clothes they wear, badges of their new adult status. Instead of their usual school uniforms of pink or blue cloth, skimpy garments that have no sleeves or ornaments of any sort, the girls wear several layers of bright-colored cloth that cover their bodies from shoulder to ankle. (1987, 280)

The girls at this stage are not submissive anymore but sing praises of their instructresses. The image of panther, the female symbol of bravery, is evident in all songs, and dishes of rice, considered female food, is served in the feast that follows this ceremony. This ritual of crisis, of female initiation, is therefore marked by status elevation. Girls come out of the forest transformed into women, with their faces painted and their bodies adorned with jewelry. Songs are sung and feasts are served by their families in their honor.
The ritual of *Karvachauth* is both a life crisis and a calendrical ritual. As a calendrical ritual, it occurs every year around the same time. As a life crisis ritual, it can be divided into van Gennep’s *rites of passage* (cited in Bell 1997, 94). The first stage is the “removal” stage, which van Gennep defines as one that “comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a state) or from both” (cited in Bell 1997, 94). On *Karvachauth*, women wake up before the rest of the house and eat food especially cooked the evening before for *Karvachauth*. Men and children do not eat this food. In this sense, women detach themselves from daily social norm of cooking for men and children first and eating only what remains for them later. After sunrise they do not eat food or drink water and neither do they go about with their daily duties like cooking. In fact they do not enter the kitchen or even touch knife or scissors. On the other hand, they spend the morning in activities like applying *henna* on their hands and feet. Other members of the household like men, children or young girls do not participate in this activity. Lastly, it is only women who begin to dress up in bright *saris* as the afternoon approaches. At this point, their detachment from the rest of the household becomes all the more explicit.

The next stage of transition is defined by van Gennep as the intervening liminal period wherein “the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (cited in Bell 1997, 94). The afternoon *Karvachauth* ritual forms the transition stage. Transition means that women are passing from one stage to another. This transition is explicit in three ways. Firstly, the ritual ensures women’s transition from the domestic to the public
world. In order to perform the ritual women leave the threshold of their domestic world inside the household and venture out into the public world. Secondly, they also surpass the social hierarchical differences within the household and venture out as married women first rather than, for instance, as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. While performing the ritual, they address each other with the common *le suhagan*. Thirdly, they come out of the transition phase transformed not in a permanent sense as in the girls in the *bloan* ceremony, but with renewed statuses as married women and enjoy status elevation. By this I mean that socially they are more respected. As I will argue under the point of sanctity, by performing the ritual, women take on some of the sacredness of the ritual and elevate their positions to that of goddesses.

But their status elevation is evident in other ways as well. For example, their elevation in status is evident in the rare freedoms that they get to enjoy on this day. For example, they trespass boundaries and hierarchical differences as I mentioned above. Secondly, they dress up in bright festive clothes and leave the threshold of their homes, unaccompanied by men. Thirdly, they perform the ritual without assistance or even presence of men. Fourthly, they receive a gift from the husband. Fifthly, they do not cook food on this day and take a break from all their daily chores. Lastly they break the fast in the company of the husband who simply stands on the side giving support to his wife but not initiating any active role. This passivity in role is usually reserved for the woman in all religious ceremonies except on *Karvachauth*.

The last stage of incorporation is defined by van Gennep as a phase where the “passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and by virtue of this has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others”
(cited in Bell 1997, 94-95). Women's reincorporation into society is demonstrated by the breaking of the fast and women's return to their daily activities. However, they resume their duties in a state of renewed respect. This status elevation in women is made explicit in society's tolerance of freedoms that women enjoy on this day, as I demonstrated above. Moreover, the differences between women of the house are liquidated and women resume their duties in a relatively friendlier atmosphere than before the festival. For example, the festive atmosphere of Karvachauth and the fact that both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law suffer through the same rigors of fasting helps them loosen up a little with each other and set their differences aside. The transformation in position of the daughter-in-law is especially noticeable. From being a submissive woman with no powers and only duties, she is able to match the status of her mother-in-law on Karvachauth and resume her duties the next day with a sense of pride of successfully having fasted and received gratitude and attention from her husband and the rest of the household.

Repetition

Repetition also is an important feature of ritual and is especially prominent in calendrical rituals. Calendrical rituals are most often celebrated by farmers in order to pray for a good harvest. In Japan, for instance, "the traditional New Year celebration is calculated according to the lunar year and therefore celebrates the inception of spring and the planting of the rice. In the pre-modern period, Japanese New Year festivities included the erection of a pine tree, a symbol of both constancy and renewal, which served as a temporary shrine for the rice deities (kami) who come down from beyond the mountains."
They give offerings of rice, the “essence” of which was embodied in glutinous cakes called *mochi*” (Bell 1997, 103).

*Karvachauth* also is celebrated every year by women to ensure the long life of their husbands. Repetition works at two levels on *Karvachauth*; one is at the calendrical level, and the second is at the level of the ritual where women pass their plates around the circle a fixed number of times. My aunt from Jhansi, Veena Sahney, believes folk belief to be the reason behind repetition. She says:

If you decide to keep *Karvachauth* fast one year, you have to do it every year. You cannot stop it. This goes for all kinds of fasting. It is considered a bad omen to stop a tradition after you have begun it. This holds especially true of *Karvachauth*. Whatever you do on your first *Karvachauth*, you have to continue it the rest of your life. Therefore, if you do decide to drink tea on your first *Karvachauth*, then you are allowed to have tea on *Karvachauth* always. The only time that I discontinued and broke the *Karvachauth* fast early was when I was pregnant. But that is allowed. (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006)

The fear of tragic repercussions also prevents people from discontinuing a tradition. My aunt Veena says, “Even if one hates their husband, no woman will break a tradition like this. Divorce is so deeply looked down upon by our society, that a woman is far happier with a cruel husband alive than dead” (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006).

Abrahams believes that repetition intensifies a moment or practice. He believes that by repeating an act, you draw importance to it. For example, women’s fasting for their husbands’ long life intensifies women’s belief in the power of the fast. Secondly, it intensifies a woman’s wifely devotion for her husband. Thirdly, the narration of the folktale every year intensifies its messages. As Kirin Narayan puts it, “Through stories, morals are fleshed out, gods acquire character, saints become exemplars, tenets are made
real” (1993, 31). Fourthly, the repeated performance of the ritual intensifies society’s respect for women. Lastly, it intensifies husbands’ gratitude for their wives who fast for them every year.

On the level of the folktale women pausing at intervals in the narration of the folktale make the folktale special. The number seven is important for Hindus. In the marriage ceremony as well, the bride and groom take seven circles around the circle, each circle signifying a special and tighter bond between the couple. As a symbolic reflection of marriage, women’s act of passing their plates seven times around the circle draws similar religious connotation. My aunt Veena Sahney says, “Numbers become especially important because how else do we judge whether we have done the ritual right? A ritual is insignificant if it is not done the right way. We will reap benefits from a ritual, only if it is performed correctly” (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006).

But apart from the intensified moments, the cyclical nature of the Karvachauth fast provides women other benefits. For example, men feel grateful towards their wives for keeping a fast for them. The cyclic nature of Karvachauth ensures men’s indebtedness towards their wives for life. This reflects women’s more symbolic control over their husbands. Men feel dependent on their wives for keeping the fast every year. The fast also helps develop trust between the husband and the wife. This is especially necessary for a recently married couple who having had an arranged marriage hardly know each other. Secondly, if a marriage is going through a rough patch, a wife’s decision to keep the fast helps smooth things between them and resolve differences. This is also indicated in the folktale. Veeravati’s determination to keep the fast in spite of her husband’s decision to banish her as maid finally makes the king acknowledge his errors. Therefore,
repetition ensures a healthy marriage between the husband and wife because it has a cyclical, binding effect.

**Liminality**

Ritual is also believed to occur in a liminal period. Liminal literally means middle. Liminal is a word coined by Victor Turner. It refers to the middle stage of transition of van Gennep's *rites of passage* (cited in Bell 1997, 94). It is characterized by 1) a sense of homogeneity and comradeship which Turner terms as *communitas* 2) and as an ambiguous phase with rich symbolic meaning. Bell gives a more comprehensive description of Turner’s liminal phase. She writes:

In a number of studies, Turner focused on the transition stage, a period of liminality and *communitas* that is “betwixt and between” the structure of society that is affirmed at the end. In analyzing the elaborated transition stage found in initiation rites, Turner interpreted the symbolism as expressing ambiguity and paradox: the initiates are simultaneously treated as if they are neither dead nor alive, yet also as if they are both dead and alive. For example, young boys undergoing tribal initiation might be treated as polluted corpses or helpless fetuses in positions of burial not unlike those of gestation. Their names are taken from them and countless other details express “a confusion of all the customary categories” of the culture. For the duration of this stage of the ritual process, the initiates “have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows.” They are effectively outside the structure or organization of society, in a state of liminality or anti-structure which nonetheless fosters an intense experience of community among them. (1997, 40)

Women performing the *Karvachauth* ritual are liminal entities in the sense that they, too, like neophytes are stripped of their hierarchical positions within the circle. The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law sit beside each other as married women first. This identifies mother-in-law and daughter-in-law as secondary. Their names are discarded
when they sit side by side in the circle, and each addresses the other as *le suhagan* (take you married one) when they pass their plates around the circle.

As the girls in the *bloan* ceremony are subject to orders and instructions from the *nyenongbae-gla*, so are women performing the *Karvachauth* ritual submissive and silent entities to the messages of the folktale narrated at the ritual. Turner describes this process of instruction in the following words, "The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status" (1969, 103). In the case of *Karvachauth*, the story must be listened to carefully and attentively. The wisdom that is imparted is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value; it refashions the very being of the neophyte (1969, 103). While women listening to the folktale are not new to the messages of the tale, the act of listening is symbolic of the renewal of the values upheld by a married woman.

Homogeneity and comradeship are reflected both superficially in the similar bright festive *saris* and the *henna* colored hands of the women, and symbolically in the circle that they form while performing the ritual. The *saris* are usually in colors of bright orange, red, pink or maroon with gold or silver work on the borders and intricate designed jewelry. Most women have intricate *henna* designs on their hands and feet. *Henna* designs are quite typical in their patterns, sometimes running throughout the palm or just across it, depending on how heavy and intricate the person wants her design to be. Brides, for instance, wear very elaborate designs that start just below their elbow right down to the tip of their fingers, while designs on their feet run from knee to the tip of their toes. Often the letters of the husband’s name are embedded between the intricate
designs. Many women on Karvachauth follow this custom and have elaborate designs on their hands in order to feel like a bride.

The ritual of Karvachauth is also symbolic of marriage and female solidarity. Women’s sole performance of the ritual is symbolic of the control society gives woman over her marriage and husband. Puja Trivedi told me:

When I was engaged, my mother advised me that it is a woman’s responsibility to make sure that her marriage remains strong and healthy. She forewarned me that there will be many times when I will get angry with my husband. But that I should never forget my duties as wife and my responsibilities towards my marriage. (Telephone Interview, January 26, 2006)

But at the same time, the ritual is also symbolic of the comradeship that women are expected to maintain in their relations with each other. While Karvachauth is an opportunity for women to strengthen their marriage, it is also a chance to liquidate differences between themselves and especially with other women of the household. In a way then Karvachauth is symbolic of two things that are most significant to a woman—her marriage and her relations with other women within the household and outside.

A primary quality of liminality is that social differences that are set aside. As Turner points out, “liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands” (cited in Bell 1997, 40). As a result, women sitting in the circle have a sense of belonging with each other, which is liberating. Temporarily away from daily duties like cooking and without social hierarchical restrictions, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, for instance, get a chance to build on a new relationship as married women first. In the liminal period of the ritual, one woman is indistinguishable from the
other. With their heads covered and their plates passed around, no one woman stands out as superior to the other. Each woman briefly holds the plate of the other, as a sign of support and understanding and more so as a sign of sisterhood. The liminal period does not recognize social hierarchies or differences, and exemplifies female solidarity.

The second aspect of a liminal phase is that it is ambiguous. This feature is highlighted in the symbolism evident in the way women perform the ritual. For example, although women assemble together to pray for the long life of their husbands, the formation of the circle, or the way that women pass their plates around the circle chanting le suhagan symbolizes female solidarity and their support for each other. Therefore, as liminal entities assembled to pray for their husbands, women by the performance of the ritual also demonstrate the support and understanding that they need from other married women. Along with the love of a husband, therefore, the support of other women is equally important for a married woman’s happiness. It is only another married woman who can understand her and empathize with her woes and the ritual of Karvachauth symbolizes it.

As liminal entities women translate their sentiments of love for their husband and support of other women into a ritual because it helps draw social attention to them. As Turner puts it, “Ritual dramatizes the real situation, and it is through this dramatization that ritual does what it alone does” (cited in Bell 1997, 42). In the case of Karvachauth the ritual is highly dramatic and therefore, is able to draw social attention. Firstly, it is performed in a group and therefore, attracts more social attention than if women performed it individually. Secondly, each action in the ritual is loaded with symbolic meaning, which adds to the drama. For example, women sit in a circle, they pass their
plates around, and they listen to a folktale, all symbolic gestures of solidarity. Thirdly, women also dress up as brides to perform the ritual, which further dramatizes the situation. The fast is a symbolic gesture of the many sacrifices for the family that women make; but the liminal period of the ritual makes these sacrifices stand out because it dramatizes it. Society is, therefore, forced to recognize the efforts that women take to keep the family happy.

Performance

Performance, another important feature of ritual, is discussed by Roy Rappaport who says “if there is no performance, there is no ritual; performance itself is an aspect of that which is performed” (1992, 250). In Karvachauth there are two important performances: one which women perform together in a circle, the second that they perform individually on seeing the moon.

The symbolism evident in both is loaded with messages defined by Rappaport as invariant and variant. Invariant messages are “apparently changeless messages signified by the invariant order of the ritual’s canon” (1992, 250), while variant messages are those “concerned with the immediate states of the performers, expressing among other things, the current relationship of the performers to the invariant order of the canon encodes” (1992, 250). For my discussion, I will concentrate on only the invariant messages since they sanctify the performance and add further credibility to the ritual.

The many invariant messages like that of female solidarity, faithfulness to the husband, and determination to keep the marriage alive and healthy become immediately evident on Karvachauth because traditional performances symbolizing these virtues do
not change. For example, the rigidity of maintaining the fast from dawn till moonrise, the formation of the circle during the ritual, the narration of the folktale, the passing of the plates seven times, the wait till the moon rises, the indirect watching of the moon though the sieve, and the aark are all performances that are rigid in their practice. Invariant performances dominate the day.

A woman will not break these practices if she can help it. My aunt Veena Sahney explained to me, “If you’re pregnant or sick, you are excused from some of the practices but not otherwise. But the truth is that a woman can always sneak off and secretly eat a bite of food, no one will know, but she will not do it, even if she gets the opportunity to do so” (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006). No woman wants to go against these rigid practices because the perceived repercussions are too severe. The folktale tells of the consequences of breaking such practices. Veeravati eats her food before seeing the moon and is therefore almost widowed. Narrating and performing the folktale reveals the fears of widowhood that women harbor within themselves. No woman wants to be widowed and therefore she will perform the same rituals every year to ensure her husband’s safety. Ritual in the words of Rappaport is “an order of acts and utterances … enlisted or realized only when those acts are performed and those utterances voiced” (1992, 250). As a protection, therefore, women’s performing of a ritual prevents such an occurrence of accident or death in her family and especially of her husband. It is the faith in the power of the ritual that is realized in women’s performance of it.

A performance constitutes a strong relationship with the performer. As Rappaport puts it, women performing the ritual “are not simply transmitting messages they find encoded in the canon. They are participating in, that is, becoming part of, the order to
which their own bodies and breath give life” (1992, 252). As a result of the performance, the power believed to be in the ritual is transferred to them as well. This fact is highlighted further in the next point of sanctity.

Sanctity

Rappaport stresses the factor of sanctity in ritual. He lays importance to the communicational aspect of ritual. According to him it is the invariant feature of the ritual process that gives a ritual its sanctity. But he is forceful in his belief that it is not the objects used in the process of ritual that are sacred. It is the ritual discourse that is sacred. The objects used in the ritual obtain sanctity because they are used in the process of the ritual. Therefore, the plate that women carry on Karvachauth is not sacred in itself. The objects and the plate become sacred once they are passed around in a fixed number of times around the circle.

According to Rappaport a ritual is performed as a medium of communication with god. Sometimes mediating objects like incense are lit in the process of the ritual in order to carry the messages of the ritual to god as they burn. Offerings to god in the form of food is provided to appease god or as a sign of devotion. Therefore communication is intrinsic to ritual. Every act is embedded with a message.

Mantras, spoken in a Hindu prayer, for instance, are fixed and, therefore, Rappaport would argue are sacred. They are never questioned because they are considered fixed and without any alternatives. Rappaport would argue that mantras do not even give any information because theoretically information reduces “uncertainty among alternatives” (1992, 257). But because mantras are fixed, they don't have
alternatives. No one at a Hindu wedding understands a word of the Sanskrit mantras that they recite verbatim with the priest. Rather it is their recitation that is more important than their understanding.

Sacrifice is also considered important in a ritual because it encodes sacred messages. The word sacrifice is believed to have derived from the Latin word *sacer facere* which means ‘to make holy’ (Bell 1997, 112). The act of sacrificing food or living beings to god is done as an economic exchange in order to get something in return. But human beings’ desire to communicate with god is strengthened by the consecration of the sacrificed victim. The sacrificed object becomes divine. Therefore, consumption of meat of a sacrificed animal transfers some of its sanctity to the person who eats it. By consuming the meat of the same object that is offered to god, man is able to get close to god.

Women fasting on *Karvachauth* are both sacrificing food and performing a ritual. As forms of communication both elevate the women’s position. As performers of the ritual, the women embody some of the ritual’s sanctity, and secondly, by sacrificing food they consecrate their own bodies and therefore embrace divinity.

Consequently, as performers of the ritual and sacrificial victims the women symbolically reflect the goddesses whom they pray to on this day. The women who make wheat dolls of Veeravati on *Karvachauth* are worshiping her for the same devotional qualities that they are practicing. Just as her position is elevated to that of goddess, so is that of the women keeping the fast.
Summary

The five ritualistic elements of transformation, repetition, liminality, performance and sanctity, therefore, help women elevate their statuses. From this superior position, women are able to authorize their positions and enjoy freedoms that *Karvachauth* offers. Society respects women for their gesture of fasting for their husbands and therefore does not stop them, for example, from trespassing boundaries or reversing gender roles. Women on the other hand enjoy each other’s company and spend the time dressing up for the evening ritual. *Karvachauth* as symbolic of marriage encourages women to look like brides. It also gives women a chance to renew their married status. But as sole performers of the *Karvachauth* fast, it symbolizes woman’s control over her marriage and responsibility to maintain a healthy relationship with her husband. It also gives her an opportunity to liquidate differences with other women and enjoy a sense of solidarity with them.

But as we’ll see in the next chapter, women do not simply enjoy their elevated position and leave it at that. They work hard to achieve the rare liberties on *Karvachauth* and manipulate their licensed freedoms to achieve further ends. They take advantage of their elevated status to empower their positions further and transgress into the public sphere of men, a sphere denied to them in daily life.
CHAPTER 5
SYMBOLIC INVERSION AND FESTIVE BEHAVIOR

In the last chapter, I discussed the ritualistic dimensions of *Karvachauth*. Once the ritualistic aspects are satisfied, women can enjoy the festivities that *Karvachauth* offers and have some fun. In this chapter, I focus on the festivities of *Karvachauth* and argue how these socially licensed freedoms are exploited by women to empower their positions. I draw upon Falassi’s four cardinal points of festive behavior: reversal, intensification, trespassing and abstinence as aspects of symbolic inversion (cited in Falassi 1987). In order to accentuate the festive elements of *Karvachauth* more strongly I will briefly draw parallels with La Have Island’s festival of Belsnickling, which is celebrated on Christmas Eve and encompasses all elements of symbolic inversion (Abrahams & Bauman 1978).

My second reason for choosing to introduce this festival of Belsnickling is to highlight how differently aspects of symbolic inversion are exploited in both cases. Belsnikles are young boys between ages eighteen and twenty-one, exploit the aspects of symbolic inversion to the point of abusing them. On the other hand, women celebrating *Karvachauth* manipulate aspects of symbolic inversion cautiously. Yet in spite of the Belsnikles’ abusive exploitation, the inversive elements are eventually compromised. In contrast, although the *Karvachauth* participants are cautious, inversion is never compromised but instead used to transgress into the public world, a sphere dominated by men and outside women’s reach in daily life.
Symbolic inversion is central to my discussion in this section for two reasons: 1) it gives women a chance to exploit their acclaimed freedoms and empower their positions in a socially permissible manner and 2) it does so without disturbing the social order.

Scholars differ in their theories of symbolic inversion. Barbara Babcock defines symbolic inversion as "any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary, or artistic, religious, or social and political" (1978, 14). However, a general consensus among scholars is the belief that temporary disorder, which is provided by symbolic inversion, is essential to life. Scholars have also assigned several functions to the role of symbolic inversion and what it achieves for society. Aspects of symbolic inversion are especially significant in relation to carnivals, where rules and restrictions of daily life are especially overturned. Max Gluckman’s theory in which symbolic inversion acts as a “safety-valve” to let off steam against maintained social order is commonly applied by scholars in their studies. However, in relation to women celebrating the Karvachauth, the theory of “safety-valve” is not true. One drawback of this “safety-valve” theory is that the inversive aspects not only preserve established order but also hinder emergence of revolutionary consciousness (cited in Babcock 1978, 22). Ironically, therefore, aspects of symbolic inversion favor the dominating class. But contrary to this, women celebrating Karvachauth empower their position and get back to their daily lives with renewed respect from the members of the family and with dissolved differences with other women of the family.
Falassi calls symbolic inversion and its functions “time out of time.” He explains symbolic inversion in relation to festival in the following words:

Both symbolic inversion and intensification must be present in the festival, and in addition there will be the element of symbolic abstinence, for instance, from work, from play, from study, from religious observances. In sum, festival presents a complete range of behavioral modalities, each one related to the modalities of normal daily life. At festival times, people do something they normally do not; they abstain from something they normally do; they carry to the extreme behaviors that are usually regulated by measure; they invert patterns of daily social life. (1987, 3)

Falassi identifies the terms reversal, intensification, trespassing and abstinence as four cardinal points of festive behavior. In my discussion I refer to them as aspects of symbolic inversion. All four elements dominate in both festivals of Belsnickling and Karvachauth. However, while they are blatantly enacted in Belsnickling, they are more symbolically reflected in relation to Karvachauth.

**Reversal**

Although Falassi does not define his terms, the obvious meaning of the word reversal to ‘change to the opposite’ is clear in both festivals. In the case of Belsnickling, the Belsnickles disguise themselves as women or animals for fun. They act the parts of the animal they portray. “Those belsnickles dressed as women use ‘squealy’ voices and exaggerated feminine movements...” (cited in Babcock 1978, 197). The costumes allow them to act the ‘fool’ without any danger of feeling like one. The more grotesque their costume, the more intensified is their act of revelry.

On the other hand, reversal in the case of women celebrating the Karvachauth is subtle but strong. There is reversal in gender roles, in daily practices and even space.
Participants who fast and perform ritual become responsible for looking after the well-being of the family, a task usually assigned to men. Moreover, the spiritual responsibility of performing the ritual underscores the gender reversal further, since Hindu women are assigned a secondary role in religious ceremonies, which can even be performed without them. But the Karvachauth ritual is performed by women without assistance or even presence of men. This highlights gender reversal even further since religious Hindu ceremonies are always conducted by a male priest and performed by male members. About the Hindu marriage, my aunt in Canada, Namita Sony, told me:

The role of the girl's mother and father are very important in a Hindu family. If the father is dead then another male member has to take his place. The mother cannot sit by herself before the holy fire without the presence of her husband. It is considered inauspicious. (Telephone Interview, February 1, 2006)

Gender reversal is also revealed in daily roles during Karvachauth. Firstly, women cook food that is not served to men. The Fiyoniyan and sweets are prepared by women the evening before for their own sole consumption the next morning. Moreover, women wake up before dawn and eat food before serving men. This is contrary to women's daily practice of serving the husband first and consuming the remaining food later.

Secondly, women do not cook on Karvachauth. This is contrary to the nature of domestic cooking duties that are performed daily without a holiday. This once again underlines the gender reversal, as men, who usually get a day off in the week, work on this day while women spend time with each other and pamper themselves with festive activities, applying henna on their hands and feet. My mother, who is a physics teacher, told me, “One might feel like we working women come off worse on Karvachauth, but it
isn’t really that bad. We hardly feel the hunger since we are busy working and it is a great relief that we don’t have to go home and cook” (Telephone Interview, January 4, 2006).

Thirdly, there is role reversal in the attitude of the children in their concern for their mother whom they worry hasn’t eaten all day. Since it is usually the women who look after the physical well being of children, it is a good change for them to receive the attention of their children.

On this day, there is also reversal of hierarchies in the domestic world of women inside the household. On this day, the mother-in-law pays attention to the physical comfort of the daughter-in-law. Especially in the case of the new bride’s first Karvachauth, the mother-in-law cooks the Sargi, special food solely for the new daughter-in-law. She also dotes on her and gives her a present in the form of a sari or jewelry. If there are many daughters-in-law, the youngest, who is usually the most exploited by the older daughters-in-law and mother-in-law, is pampered the most. The fact that the mother-in-law cooks the special Sargi for her elevates her position before all other daughters-in-law. On a bride’s first Karvachauth, her parents also visit her, which is a special privilege. They bring gifts for the whole family and usually an expensive gift for the mother-in-law called Baya. This adds to the prestige of the new bride who in all other occasions is the one with least rights and most duties. The celebration of Karvachauth is, therefore, most encouraging to a new daughter-in-law and functions to make her feel more comfortable in her new home, at least temporarily till she adjusts better to the new household.
Intensification

Once again Falassi does not define the term but the obvious meaning of intensification of “extremity” is obvious in both festivals. It is especially significant in Belsnickling where the Belsnickles, already notorious for their mischievous natures in daily life, become all the more notorious on this day and cross the boundary of socially acceptable boisterousness disguised in costumes and drunken revelry.

However, in the case of women celebrating Karvachauth, intensification emerges through the intensification of women’s traditional roles as devoted, loyal and self-sacrificing wives, all qualities summed in the Hindu term for women called *pativrata*, one who is completely committed to her husband and worships him like god. The self-sacrifice of wives is reflected in women’s denial of food on this day for the sake of their husbands’ long life. The significance of this fast is intensified in the story of goddess Savitri who, unsuccessful in her pleading with the God of death Yamaraj to spare her husband Satyavan’s life, refuses to eat food or drink water until Yamaraj relents and spares Satyavan’s life. Consequently, the intensification of faith in the power of the fast is transferred onto women who successfully endure the hardships of the fast for a whole day until they break it on seeing the moon at night. They remain resolved in their belief that their penance for a whole day will in similar fashion yield god’s favor to answer their prayers and spare their husband’s life.

Women’s loyalty to their marriage is also intensified. This is reflected in the folktale of Veearvati who, unperturbed by her husband’s banishment of her as maid, continues to keep a fast for him for the coming years until he sees the error of his ways
and recognizes her as his wife again. Like Veeravati, women keeping the fast believe that as long as they continue to remain loyal to their marriage and successfully keep the fast every year, no danger either in the form of another woman or death can break their marriage. As one of my aunts living in Jhansi told me, “With every passing year, faith in the fast only consolidates our loyalty to our marriages. Even if it is only a mental satisfaction, the fast gives us assurance that we are doing everything in our part to keep our husbands safe and our marriage intact.”

Intensified feelings therefore soar high on this day even in relation to husbands who, grateful for their wife’s gesture of sacrifice for their sake, give the wife a gift at the end of the day as a gesture of both love and thanks. The intensified respect for the women who keep the fast is also indicated by the society which spares them the usual restrictions on movement and habit and allows them free access of the public world, a point I shall elaborate next.

Female solidarity is also intensified on this day as women suffering similar pangs of hunger and praying for the same reason not only perform the ritual together but also enjoy one another’s company. The ritual itself is symbolic of this feeling of solidarity as women form a circle and later pass their plates around the circle in rapt attention, listening to the same folktale. Each woman holds briefly another woman’s sacred plate as a sign of support to each other. This solidarity is also symbolic in women’s similar saris of bright colors and heavy jewelry, each article of jewelry symbolizing her status as a married woman. The bangles, the toe rings, the nose pin, the red dot on the forehead called tikka and the red powder called sindur between their hair parting are all symbolic of their married status.
Trespassing

In both festivals, participants trespass boundaries though unauthorized intrusion.

For example in the case of Belsnickling, Falassi writes:

Belsnickles trespass the private-public boundaries. Disguised in grotesque costumes and wild masks, belsnickles enter the private sphere of the kitchens in several homes and dance, sing and act the fool. As Abrahams and Bauman point out, “Here again, through the symbolic inversion of masking and costume, the members of the community who are associated with license throughout the year put off their individual identities and become the embodiment of disorder itself. But instead of merely confronting the respectable segment of the community from their own domain in the public areas of the island, and devoting themselves to an intensified celebration of the motive of disorder, which they represent, they come into direct interaction with the respectable people in the very stronghold of respectability, the kitchen. (1987, 204-205)

On the other hand, Indian women, who are generally denied access to physical presence or any symbolic role in the public world, are suddenly welcomed into some public spaces by society. By public here I mean a “space” that is dominated usually by men, for example, the market area through which women pass as they go to the hostess’s house, or the living room, where men meet other men to socialize or make business transactions. The trespassing of boundaries is in extreme contrast to the otherwise maintained purdah by which women live their daily lives. Purdah ensures that women stay inside their domestic private world of the kitchen or inner rooms of the household, hidden from view of men. Women, therefore, don’t only trespass boundaries, they do so with pomp and fervor in bright sari and heavy jewelry. The trespassing is further achieved in the public space of the living room that women carve out for themselves while they perform the ritual. Thus the public space of the living room taken over by women is converted into a somewhat sacred space that women alone are entitled to in the
brief moments of the ritual. Men’s inaccessibility to this space is a successful reflection of women’s authority over it, an idea that I discuss again later. Women, therefore, manipulate the space of the living room to suit themselves. Women take a bold step by trespassing boundaries, since culturally they are usually constrained. On Karvachauth, women’s presence is felt more in the public world.

For example, women leave the threshold of their private domestic world unaccompanied by men, which is a freedom they rarely enjoy. Secondly, they perform a ritual without assistance or even presence of men, another privilege they rarely receive. Thirdly, in the process of leaving the threshold of their private domain, they also leave the social hierarchies within the house behind. In fact, as they perform the ritual, they simply call each other le suhaga and not by their positions of saasuma or bahu inside the household. But more than trespassing of boundaries, social hierarchies and gender restrictions, women trespass their daily domestic duties. Even on grand festivals like Diwali or big occasions like weddings, they are never privileged to enjoy without working doubly hard in the kitchens.

**Abstinence**

While reversing gender roles and trespassing boundaries may appear to be more in line with the festive elements of symbolic inversion, abstinence is also an important factor. Although feasting appears more synonymous to the spirit of celebration than fasting, Falassi argues that the origin of the word festival constituted both aspects of revelry and abstinence. He explains, “...originally Latin had two words for festive events:
festum, for “public joy, merriment, revelry,” and feria, meaning “abstinence from work in honor of the gods” (1987, 2).

Therefore, part of the celebration when the word originated was not simply the aspect of “noise” that we associate with celebration today but one of devotion and togetherness. In the case of Karvachauth, abstaining from food, a basic element of life, inverts the regular norm more than anything and is a central aspect of symbolic inversion. But not eating on one day, women draw attention to themselves.

Moreover, fasting also gives women a reason to abstain from their daily chores. My aunt Veena from Jhansi reasoned, “On Karvachauth we are not even allowed to enter the kitchen, let alone touch knife or scissors. I believe it is dangerous to touch such sharp objects when one hasn’t eaten all day” (Telephone Interview, January 30, 2006). Therefore abstinence is one reason that women can take a break from household duties and daily chores.

Symbolically, sacrificing food reflects the self-sacrifices that women make every day. It is only on this day that women get recognized for it because 1) firstly, they give up food, a most intrinsic entity of survival and 2) secondly, they accompany it with a ritual that sanctifies their purpose and gives them a chance to get away from home and enjoy freedoms otherwise denied to them. Therefore, abstinence from food extends to abstinence not only from domestic duties but from daily restrictions of space, customs and gender roles. The belsnickles do not need to abstain from food because unlike Indian women bound by restrictions that they hardly ever get to break, belsnickles can abuse their freedoms and intensify their usual boisterousness and only this time get a social permission to do so. But Indian women, cautious of their rare liberties, do not dare to
abuse them. Abstaining from food and intensifying their wifely devotion gives them freedom to trespass boundaries, break away from gender restrictions and briefly enjoy, exploit and manipulate their way into the public world and get recognized for sacrifices, and efforts they take everyday, for their husbands and family.

In the following paragraphs I will show how women, while exploiting the freedoms they achieve from the inversive aspects of reversal, trespassing, intensification and abstinence, do no abuse them; instead they attempt to improve their positions and draw attention to daily sacrifices that they truly deserve.

**Symbolic Inversion: A Mechanism of Manipulation**

It is a natural tendency to associate symbolic inversion with chaos, especially because symbolic inversion is often associated with Carnival, a boisterous occasion. But Abrahams and Bauman do not agree. Using the example of belsnickling, they argue that in spite of the disorder inherent in the festival, besnickling draws upon its energy to underscore the primacy of order and respectability. They explain that at first glance, it may appear as though the respectability of the house is being compromised. But this is not so. “First of all, the belsnickles must ask to be allowed in; control is in the hands of the householders, they are the hosts and the maskers are the guests. This relationship is underscored when the belsnickles ask the woman of the house for food, thus acknowledging her place in the household and her primacy in the kitchen. The belsnickles are frightening only to the children, but in this they are themselves agents of order, for in their guise as inquisitors of the children they act as powerful agents of
socialization, testing the children for proper behavior during the past year, and exhorting them to good behavior in the year to come" (1978, 205).

A similar relationship of symbolic inversion to the question of social order is explicit in *Karvachauth* as well. In the case of *Karvachauth*, and my analysis of it as a festival of symbolic inversion, I analyzed how the gender reversal, trespassing of boundaries, intensification of values and abstinence of food provided women freedom from daily tasks and an opportunity to spend time with one another, both of which they cherish. Comparing it to belsnickling further highlighted its festive elements. Yet the significance of symbolic inversion to the festival of *Karvachauth* is not only in the freedoms that it provides women but also in the way it helps them empower themselves within the household and outside.

But women empower themselves subtly. In fact it is in a way manipulated by them. But by this I do not mean guile or cunning on the part of women; instead I want to stress that the atmosphere of festivals allows women a chance to gain some recognition and improve their position within the household and outside. But being the suppressed lot and holding the secondary status in society, women are forced to do it more subtly, in the merry atmosphere that only a festival can provide. Unlike belsnickles, women celebrating *Karvachauth* are not young boys whose only purpose is to have fun. These women use the elements of symbolic inversion to liquidate differences within the household and strengthen relationships.

Fasting for a whole day and not breaking it until nightfall is a woman’s way of developing trust between herself and her husband. This factor becomes especially important for the young bride in her first few years of marriage when she and her
husband are still getting to know each other. It is also a way for women to make their husbands emotionally dependent on them. But they do so innocently and not in a cunning way. Fasting is simply an Indian woman’s way of expressing that she cares for her husband. Because Indian society is closed and emotions are not revealed openly, fasting is a way of showing love. The husband, grateful for this gesture, gives a gift and stays beside her when she breaks her fast. Therefore the reversal of gender role and element of abstinence while constituting the festive element also goes beyond simple playfulness. It engenders the power to build relationships and manifest emotion.

In the same way when women leave their domestic and private world inside their homes to venture out to perform the *Karvachauth* ritual outside, they choose to conduct it within the walls of another home. The privacy of the home not only sanctifies the ritual further but also increases its sense of mystery for men. Therefore the ritual gains its sense of importance for society especially men.

Similarly, the intensification of wifely values that the festival entails is another way for women to call attention to the acts of self-sacrifice they make in daily life. Empowerment is therefore achieved in a subtle and sensitive manner. Within her domestic sphere, a woman empowers her own position among other women. She liquidates differences with her sisters-in-law and releases tensions with her mother-in-law by giving her the *baya*. The mother-in-law for her part prepares the morning *sargi*. Similarly, outside the domestic sphere, *Karvachauth* participants tie the husband closer to them, expressing her love and elevating her own position in his eyes. In the eyes of the society her act of sacrifice is a sign of righteousness and purity and she is respected for it.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In spite of the strict fasting on *Karvachauth*, women await this day more than any other. The attention, respect and love that they get on this day supercede the rigors of going without food and water for a day. The grateful husband gives his wife a gift, the concerned children look out for the moon, the mother-in-law wakes up early to cook the daughter-in-law a meal, and society in general shows her the respect she deserves. The woman on her part ensures that she follows all the rituals and, satisfying those, she spends the rest of the day with her friends, bedecked with flowers, jewelry, bright *sari* and *henna*, all constituting qualities of a truly festive behavior and atmosphere. The symbolic inversion prevalent in reversal of gender roles and transgression of boundaries are easily manipulated by her to win freedoms she is otherwise denied. The fasting then becomes a symbol of all the self sacrifices that she makes as a woman and wife, and on *Karvachauth* she ensures that society acknowledges it and respects her for it.

In spite of the concern, attention and respect that women receive, the festival of *Karvachauth* has an underlying hidden conflict between married women and unmarried women or widows. Although *Karvachauth* promotes female solidarity amongst married women, it does so at the cost of alienating widows and unmarried women. If it provides married women an opportunity to celebrate their married status, at the same time it also makes a widow realize her own inferior position. Therefore, while married women keeping the fast draw closer together, they do so at the cost of moving further away from
women who unlike them are not married. These hidden conflicts question the very basis of solidarity and togetherness that festivals are known to ensure.

The issue of prevalent conflicts embedded in festivals is brought up by many scholars who are only recently questioning a festival’s ability to liquidate class and political differences in all cases. For example, Sabina Magliocco comments that “conflict is intrinsic to society; there is no conflict-free community in which conflict-free festivals exist” (2006, 5). In one incident narrated by her during a festival celebration in Italy, a young shepherd who attempts to join a conversation of intellectuals is welcomed into the group only briefly but then allowed to wander off while the intellectuals resume their conversation (2006, 123).

The resurfacing of conflicting class divisions during the death of Lady Diana in 1997 between Royal elitists and the middle class is another example of the failure of public events to constitute common solidarity. Jack Santino elaborates on the evident disparity between two groups in a moment of crisis. He explains:

The social drama surrounding the death of Lady Diana occurred across class and status hierarchies. We see two different traditions: official (royal) display versus popular display, making conflicting claims on space and contesting for visuality, for determining and defining public statement. It is clear ... that ritual events do not always bring about the status-dissolving condition that Victor Turner has called communitas. (2001, 103)

In the case of Karvachauth, disparity between women is further extended to divide even the married women from other married women on the basis of class. Even in a festival organized in the same neighborhood, women of similar classes celebrate it together. Therefore, groups experiencing solidarity are formed on the basis of class and status as married women. This class disparity is evident even in the folktale. The maid,
earlier an outsider suddenly achieves the superior status as queen and Veeravati is shunned as a maid. As an outsider to royalty, Veeravati has no access to the king whom she has to reach through a parrot. In the second version of the folktale where Veeravati asks for identical dolls, this class disparity between Veeravati and the maid becomes evident when Veeravati sings the song, “Roli ki goli hogai, goli ki roli hogai” (the queen has become maid and the maid has become queen).

These realities raises doubts of whether festivals like Karvachauth are not simply dividing mechanisms in the guise of “safety valves” controlled by men that give women a brief opportunity, lasting only a day, to break gender barriers but at the same time stop them from rebelling all together and disturbing the social hierarchy. This concern is also brought up by Max Gluckman who believes that “rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order” (cited in Babcock 1978, 22). But he explains that these are let to continue only till they do not question the order within which they symbolically protest. In fact he elaborates by stating that folk rebellions as steam valves preserve the established order and thereby hinder the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness (cited in Babcock 1978, 22).

If we apply Gluckman’s views to Karvachauth, we have to agree that the evident disparity between married status and class weakens the aspects of solidarity that we so strongly uphold in our discussions of festival. Does this festival promote solidarity at the cost of class and widows? This question requires further elaboration. Additionally, a festival like Karvachauth lasts for just one day. Even the symbolic inversions that give women the rare freedoms cease to exist after a couple of hours. Doesn’t the limited duration of festival then further accentuate Gluckman’s belief that festivals like
Karvachauth merely preserve the established order and hinder revolutionary consciousness?

The answers to these questions require further investigation and research. At this point, I will simply state that in spite of several disparities in class, status and in the way symbolic inversion works during a festival, the roles and responsibilities that married women undertake on this day offer an alternative way of viewing society and considering gender. On this day, women show themselves as capable as men in undertaking the task of securing their family’s future. By trespassing boundaries and successfully performing a ritual in the public world, women prove themselves as capable in the public world as in the private.

My second question is whether this transgression by women between the private and the public world allow real opportunities for women in the public sphere. Influenced by Margaret Mills, I am eager to further my research on women’s ability to trespass boundaries on Karvachauth. I have touched on this point several times in my thesis. However, I believe that the area has potential for my further research. Margaret Mills in her analysis of a Muslim woman’s veil interprets the veil as a weapon of power. In her interpretation, Mills talks about two aspects of the veil 1) its manipulative purposes 2) its ability to conceal identity. Having collected stories about veiling and women’s resistance to its abolition, Mills explains that many women do not look with favor on going public without wearing the veil because in doing so they “forfeit the power of anonymity, a power which they have learned to exploit to give themselves mobility and certain mechanisms to manipulate the public, masculine sphere as well” (1982, 191). She continues that women have more knowledge of the public world than men because men
are “compelled to regard only the public sphere of male-male relations as significant do not learn about the women’s domestic private world” (1982, 191). But this is not the case with women. Women know about the public world as much as they know of their own domestic world. By wearing the veil, women are able to “conceal identity and thereby manipulate people” (1982, 191). Mills also refers to an incident where a fourteen-year-old boy faints on seeing two women in veils at night begging ingredients for a festival. She explains, “The young boy who was frightened by the silent, veiled women, which emphasizes the power of the veil for manipulative purposes. The boy’s fear was fear of the unknown” (1982, 191-192).

In the same sense then it is possible that a festival like Karvachauth acts as a social veil to hide women’s real intention of overcoming the problems between themselves and empowering their positions inside the household. Keeping the fast in the name of their husbands is then only an excuse of achieving selfish motives and getting an opportunity of moving out of the domestic world and getting out into the public world to have some fun. But at the same time we have to question the nature of authority that women are really able to achieve. Even if the public space of the living room is briefly taken over by the women, it is to perform the ritual for their husbands. The purpose behind the ritual is so male dominated that even if the men have brief inaccessibility of the living room, the performance of the ritual is a source of pride for men. Therefore, men are not humbly succumbing to women’s invasion of their space; on the contrary they are allowing women a brief intrusion in their world for a purely chauvinist ideal. Therefore, acting as a social veil, does Karvachauth really allow women a lasting control over the public world? Yet, the argument of women’s brief authority over the public
world becomes more complex if one views this intrusion of space as an opportunity by women to break a rigid restriction of movement that society expects them to comply with. For a high caste woman, who never leaves the domain of her household without the accompaniment of a man, even a small opportunity like this is a big step. As I argued earlier, even the brief control by women over the living room as public space of men is symbolic of a possibility of women’s authority over the public world that may emerge over the years. Trespassing of boundaries as an aspect of symbolic inversion, thus, needs further understanding. It is a complex argument and as a future topic of study, I wish to understand the nature of this transgression of space in a society rigid in its customs and gender segregation.

In recent years, the festive spirit of Karvachauth has become more pronounced as women throw lavish parties in their homes. While the sanctity of the ritual is still intact, the celebration of the festival has become more glamorous as women have become financially independent and the economy of India more secure. How are the current social conditions then reflected in a festival like Karvachauth? Unfortunately, Karvachauth’s gradual evolution requires further study and I am unable to provide definite reasons at this point. It is true that Karvachauth continues to be widely celebrated as before. But at the same time women are no longer as financially dependent on their husbands and many educated women are seeking jobs outside their homes. However, a closer look at the Indian society reveals an underlying tension. While the middle class is seeking social changes, the higher class is still attempting to retain old practices by living in joint families and continuing the practice of dowry. Karvachauth, being a festival of the higher class, therefore, continues to be celebrated for the traditional reason of looking
out for the well-being of the husband. But at the same time women’s less financial
dependence on their husbands is releasing some of the tension of fasting. Today, most
women are known to eat some fruit and drink tea after performing the ritual. Is women’s
financial independence then symbolic of their gradual establishment of authority in the
public world? As an occasion, Karvachauth is becoming an opportunity to show wealth
too. These constituting changes in Karvachauth enable us to question whether festivals
reflect current social values or vice versa? There continues to be yet more potential for
argument and understanding in relation to Karvachauth, as my many unanswered
questions on conflict and public and private spaces illustrate.

In relation to festivals, one can argue that although festivals are temporary, their
real context lies in the entire year. On the question of the temporariness of festivals,
Dundes and Falassi in their interpretation of the Palio of Siena attempt to explain the
significance of the 90 minutes that form the basis of the whole Palio and in which the
horses run the length of the tracks, not in time but in spirit. “What the tourist may not
realize is that the palio does not last for a minute and a half, but rather for the whole year,
or rather for all the lives of those Sienese who participate” (1975, xii). In a similar way,
Karvachauth is not a celebration solely of a festival, or a ritual, it is a celebration of a
spirit, of belief and faith that is kept alive the whole year. It is a celebration of virtues
women uphold and insecurities of illness and death they fight. Like the Palio of Siena,
Karvachauth is “neither a revival nor a survival” (1975, 185) but it will be interesting to
research how it has evolved over the ages.


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Sahney Indira. Interview by author. Telephone Interview, 4 January 2006.


Shah Aditi. Interview by author. Email Interview, 2 February, 2006.

Sony Namita. Interview by author. Telephone Interview, 1 February 2006.

Trivedi Puja. Interview by author. Email Interview, 26 January 2006.
APPENDIX
A merchant enrolled his daughter in the *madraseh* (religious school). The teacher, a female *axund* or teaching *mulla*, was a widow, and she asked the girl about her family’s financial position, which the girl reported was good. She asked the girl what they had in their house, and the girl replied, “Vinegar.” The teacher convinced the girl that she, the teacher was good and her mother was bad, and she told the girl to tell her mother that she wanted some vinegar, and when she went to get it, to push her in and cover the storage jar. She told her not to tell her father, just to say he fell in. The mother was dead when the father found her. Later on, the father found a yellow cow in his stable in the place of the murdered mother. The teacher and the father became engaged; then he had both a wife and a cow, and he sent the daughter out to pasture the cow. The new wife gave birth to a daughter, and she began to mistreat the first daughter, giving her one rotten piece of bread to eat when she took the cow out for the day, and sending her with raw cotton to clean and spin while the cow fed, but no tools to work the cotton. Out in the fields, the girl began to cry because she could not spin, and all she could do was hook the cotton fibers on a thorn and back away from them, twisting them with her fingers. The cow spoke and asked her why she was crying. She complained about the task, and said, “If I don’t do it, my step-mother won’t let me back in the house.” The cow asked to see her bread. The girl gave the bread to the cow, and then the cotton to eat, and the cow spitted cotton thread until evening. The girl collected all the thread and took it back to her stepmother. For three days in a row, the stepmother gave the girl bad bread to eat and more cotton to spin. On the third day, when the girl gave the cow the cotton, the wind blew a piece away, and it dropped down a well. The girl was about to go down the well after it, and the cow told her, “When you go into the well, you’ll see an old woman *barzangi*. When you see her, say ‘*Salam!*’ and ask for the cotton. The old woman will say, ‘Delouse my hair.’ You should say, “Your hair is perfectly all right- it’s cleaner than mine.” The girl follows directions. When the old woman asks her to delouse her hair, she begins to do it, and the old woman asks, “What does my hair have?” The girl answers, “Nothing, your hair is cleaner than my mother’s. Your hair is like a rose, my mother’s head is full of dirt.” The old woman tells her to take her cotton from a certain room. The girl goes in and sees that the room is full of jewels, but she takes only her cotton, sweeps the room, and leaves, saying goodbye to the *barzangi*. She starts to climb the ladder out of the well, but when she is halfway up, the *barzangi* shakes the ladder to see whether she has stolen anything and hidden it in her clothes. When no jewels fall from her clothes, the old woman prays for her to have a moon in the center of her brow. When she reaches the top of the ladder, the *barzangi* shakes it again and blesses her again, “May you have a star on you chin!” The girl returns to the cow, who tells her to cover her forehead and chain so that her stepmother won’t see them. She returns home with the cow. That night, while she sleeps, her veil slips and the stepmother sees the moon and star. The next day, she sends her own daughter with the cow instead, giving her raw cotton to work and sweet nut bread to eat. The girl can’t spin, but she guesses that the cow did the spinning for her sister, so she gives the sweet nut bread to the cow, and the cotton, but the cow produces only a little thread. On the third day, her cotton, too, is blown into the well, and
she follows it and sees the old woman. She asks for the cotton with saying, “Salam,” and the old woman asks her to delouse her hair, the girl replies, “Your hair is filthy, my mother’s is clean.” The old woman tells her to go into the room, sweep it and take her cotton. She takes some jewels, which fall from her clothes when the old woman shakes the ladder. The old woman says, “May a donkey’s penis appear from your forehead!” At the top of the ladder the old woman shakes it again, and more jewels fall, and the she adds a curse, “And a snake from your chin!” The girl goes back to the cow, who sees the penis and the snake, but says nothing. She takes the cow home, and her mother cuts off the penis and snake with a knife and covers the wounds with salt, but both objects reappear overnight. The step mother realizes the cow is behind this and feigns sickness, bribing the doctors to tell her husband that she must eat the meat of the yellow cow and have its skin thrown over her in order to recover. Meanwhile, the first daughter has realized that the yellow cow is her mother, and she feeds her candied chickpeas and bread. One day the cow cries and tells her: “They’ll kill me today, and if they kill me, your life will become very hard. When they kill me, don’t eat the meat. Collect all the bones in a bag, bury them, and hide them.” The daughter cries and goes to plead with her father, saying that all their wealth means nothing to her compared with the yellow cow. The father says the cow must be killed, because it is the only medicine for her stepmother. The girl follows the cow’s instructions, gathering up the bones after she is killed. The stepmother “gets well,” and a few days later the family is invited to a wedding in another city. The stepmother and her daughter decide to go, so the mother cuts off the penis and snake and applies salt to the wounds, then mixes millet and togu (another tiny seed), places her stepdaughter in front of the empty pool in the garden, and tells her to separate the seeds and to fill the pool with tears. The two then leave for the wedding. The girl is sitting and crying when she sees a hen with a lot of chickens come into the garden. The hen speaks, telling the girl to put salt and water in the pool, take the horse and good clothes she will find in the stable, and go to the wedding, while the chicks separate the seeds. The hen adds, “When you come back, one of your shoes will fall into the water; don’t stop to get it—go quickly so that your stepmother won’t know you.” The girl finds a magically provided horse, fine clothes, and gold shoes in the stable, and she rides off to the wedding, with her forehead and chin covered. They place her at the head of the guests in the women’s party when the dancing starts. She dances, and the stepsister recognizes her and says to her mother, “This is our Mahpishani.” The stepmother says, “Impossible!” but they leave to go and see whether she is at home, to see whether the guest was really she. Mahpishani rushes ahead on the horse to get home before them, but realizes that the hen had changed into the horse. She puts on her old clothes and sits down to separate the few remaining seeds. The stepmother and stepsister see the seeds and the pool of “tears”, and the stepmother says, “I told you so!” Two days later, a prince is riding by the waterside, and his horse refuses to drink. He looks down, finds the shoe, and takes it to his father, saying that he wants to wed the owner of the shoe. The king and his viziers try the shoe on everyone, and all wish that it would fit, but it does not. Finally they come to Mahpishani’s father’s house. The stepmother “cleans and cuts” her daughter’s head, but the shoe does not fit. The vizier is about to leave. The first daughter is locked in the bread oven. A cock flies up on top of the oven, and begins to crow: A moon is in the oven! A head is on there, ku-ku! Where is the foot, like glass? A head is in
there, ku-ku! The stepmother and her daughter try to catch the cock, who escapes them and crows twice more. The vizier gets annoyed and insists on looking in the oven, where he finds the girl. The shoe fits, and she marries the prince. (Mills 1982:185-187)