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GENDERED REPRESENTATIONS OF SEED, EARTH, AND GRAIN : A WOMAN CENTERED PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONFLATION OF WOMAN AND EARTH

From very ancient times to the present woman's body and the earth have been conflated in the Indian mind. Both have been conceptualized and symbolized as possessing the awesome power of fertility. Women give birth to babies. The earth provides the grain, fruit, vegetables which nourish human beings. A Harappan seal, remnant of the Indus Valley Civilization, explicitly depicts a woman, upside down, in a yogic position – hands on the knees of her open legs – with what seems to be a plant emanating from her yoni. (Jayakar, p. 47). A similar schematic representation of a plant form emerging from triangular yoni is captured in a photograph of a contemporary wall painting on a Rajasthani house. (Mookerjee, p. 62). In a passage from the Markandeya Purana the goddess says:

Next O Ye gods, I shall support the whole world with the life sustaining vegetables which shall grow out of my own body during a period of heavy rain. I shall gain fame on earth then as Sakambhari. (quoted in Bhattacharyya, p. 19.)

Women possess the awesome power of birthgiving; and Hinduized cultures have acknowledged and celebrated that fecundity in a myriad of forms. But masculine hegemony over the symbol system has rendered woman, the birth-giver, silent within the dominant discourse. Thus the symbolic meaning and value of the birth event have been defined, by and large, in the dominant androcentric voice. The blood of childbirth, like that of menstruation, is stated to be highly polluting. According to the lawgiver Manu "When he has touched a Kandala, a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbed, a corpse, or one who has touched a corpse, he becomes pure by bathing". Both the Vedic warrior-hero Indra and the renunciate Gautama, the Buddha, are described in their respective traditions as being born through their mothers' side, thus avoiding birth through the yoni.

Indra actually depicts, in the Rig Veda, the yoni (s) as "... these are bad places to go through." (RV, 4.18.2). The masculine bias is obvious.

Rosemary Radford Reuther, in her "seminal" work, **Sexism and God-Talk, Toward a Feminist Theology**, exposes all classical theology as theology of experience. She states that scripture and tradition, the 'objective' sources of theology, are themselves codified collective human experience. Reuther argues that the special contribution of feminist theology "lies not in its use of the criterion of experience, but rather in its use of women's experience" as the basis for theological reflection.

The use of women's experience in feminist theology, therefore, explodes as a critical force in exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on male experience rather than on universal human experience. Feminist theology makes the sociology of theological knowledge visible, no longer hidden behind mystifications of objectified divine and universal authority. (Reuther, p 13)

I would suggest that the very notion of "mother earth," with its simultaneous conflation of the earth with the human woman can be viewed as a foundational theological symbol in almost all orthodox religious traditions. And that a woman-centered investigation of this fundamental metaphor must include female *experience* of such symbolic representation.

In the symbolic and belief systems of the Indian traditions the conflation of woman and earth, emphasizing the fertility of both, has functioned to

- 1) serve as a 'natural' model to legitimize the human male's domination and control of the human female and
- 2) confer sacralty and attribute power (*sakti*) to both the earth and woman.

This paper will explore the symbolic equivalence of woman and earth from two perspectives. First, drawing on the work of socio-

logist Leela Dube, I will present a critique of the patriarchal gender ideology which has been derived from the woman-earth simulacrum. Dube's work reveals an androcentric focus on *seed* as biological and social metaphor. Secondly I will present my own research on Delhi slum women's experiences of childbirth rites which suggests the existence of an alternative, woman-centered paradigm of ritual-symbolic conflation of woman and earth. Within this paradigm the ritual performance involves the use of *grain* as central symbolic medium. This interview material also demonstrates the ritual, cultural and experiential centrality of the traditional midwife, the dai, whose role I conceptualize as shamanic.

Before addressing the main topic of the conflation of woman and earth, however I would like to offer a tentative conceptual link between New Age Spirituality, human experience and shamanism. Recently I read a Christian fundamentalist tract which fulminated on the dangers of New Age spirituality. Included in that category were such dissimilar candidates as transpersonal psychology, Theosophy, Reichian and Rolfian bodywork, the women's movement and 'goddess spirituality', the Rosicrucians, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation, Native American shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism. Intellectually I was puzzled by the unlikely assembly of such geographically and methodologically diverse systems. Then I had a conversation with an American friend, a long-time resident of India, practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism and the personal secretary of a respected Lama. Being familiar with both the Buddhist traditions and the "New Age" phenomena, she stated her perception that the commonality amongst them was the desire for experiential connection with the 'spiritual' or 'transpersonal' energies and that quest often involved explorations into what could be understood as "shamanic" traditions.¹

Michael Harner, in his work, *The Way of the Shaman*, writes:

Shaman is a word from the language of the Tungus people of Siberia, and has been adopted widely by anthropologists to refer to persons in a great variety of non-Western cultures who were previously known by such terms as "witch," "witchdoctor," "medicine man," "sorcerer," "wizard," "magic

1. Personal conversation with Lia Terhune.

man," "magician" and "seer." One of the advantages of using the term is that it lacks the prejudicial overtones and conflicting meanings associated with the more familiar labels. . .

A shaman is a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness - at will - to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons. The shaman has at least one, and usually more, "spirits" in his personal service. (Harner, p 25)

For our purposes it is important to distinguish between the shaman and the priest. The priest is socially ordained as a functionary to carry on pre-existing religious ritual or worship of a deity. The shaman, however, usually works with a 'familiar' or deity of his own personal experience; his or her authority comes not from social legitimacy bestowed by ordination into a priesthood, but out of their own psychological experience. Wielded to state power, western ecclesiastical forces have for centuries marginalized or ruthlessly repressed heretical experiential systems from gnosticism to "wicca" - the knowledge of the European wise women. I understand the 'New Age' movement to be a motley conglomerate of seekers who are shopping in a global supermarket of world 'religious' or 'personal growth' methods - trying to discover, practice and primarily *experience* what their own Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition is failing to facilitate for them.

Man as Seed, Woman as Earth

Leela Dube, in her paper "Seed and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations of Production," traces the textual and folk traditions' use of the homology "seed and earth" as metaphor for both agricultural production and human reproduction. She quotes the Narada Smriti "women are created for offsprings; a woman is the field and a man is the possessor of the field. . ." and notes that the Hindu marriage rituals include the *Kshetrasamskara*, the consecration of the field, which is aimed at purifying the bride's womb for receiving the seed.²

2. I will not, in this paper, investigate the metaphysical underpinnings of the "seed and the earth" homology which exist in the Sankhya philosophical tradition systematized by Isvara Krisna c. 400 A.D. The metaphysical dualism of Sankhya is not self - consciously a gendered system as Purusha and Prakrti are

Dube reveals the negative consequences for women generated by belief in the symbolic equivalence that woman equals earth. She points out that in the sacred texts, although veneration of the mother is reiterated repeatedly, the child's dependence on the mother "has been turned into the strongest moral obligation for the woman". The mother is morally obliged, however social identity, privilege, and rights in the child belong to the father.³

According to Dube the metaphor of conception, the seed being sown in the soil, results in social constructions of 'biological' symbolization of descent and the relative rights and positions of the male and the female.

Two related points emerge clearly. First, an essentially unequal relationship is reflected in and emphasized through the use of these symbols, and second, the symbolism is utilized by the culture to underplay the significance of woman's contribution to biological reproduction. (Dube, p 38)

The subtle implications of woman's likeness to the earth also suggest that "like the earth a woman too has to bear pain. The earth is ploughed, furrowed, dug into; a woman too is pierced and ploughed." The analogy of sexual intercourse as ploughing works to render woman socially as passive and inert, whereas man is active, dominating and possessing.⁴

represented as philosophical principles, not as 'masculine' and 'feminine.' However, it is obvious that the seed and the earth metaphor which we are considering is paralleled conceptually by gendered notions of Purusha and Prakriti. Pure consciousness, non-activity, and knowing are attributes of Purusha (Purush is kshetrajna, 'field knower). Prakriti is described as matter endowed with qualities, unconsciousness (achetna), generativity (birth giver), and the stuff and force of nature. This "philosophical system" and its folk equivalents provide the foundational beliefs and symbols for the gendered equation which some feminists have described as "woman equals nature whereas man equals culture."

3. See Sukumari Bhattacharji's excellent article, "Motherhood in Ancient India" (Economic and Political Weekly, October 20, 1990) for a gender sensitive compendium of Brahmanic ritual and textual references to motherhood.
4. Radhika Chopra, Delhi School of Economics Sociology Department, has done interesting work on Dharti Ma, Earth Mother, in which she describes belief systems underlying Punjab agricultural practices. ("Invoking Dharti Ma", paper presented at Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies, Spring 1993)

By equating the woman's body with the field or the earth and the semen with the seed, the process of reproduction is equated with the process of production and rights over the children with the rights over the crop. (Dube, p 43)

As Dube notes the homology of seed and field functions to emphasize both the man's rights over the woman's sexuality and the woman's lack of legal rights over her children if the couple separates. The common practice is that when a woman leaves her husband she also has to leave her children because 'the crop should belong to him who has sown the seed.'

In social systems derived from this biological/agricultural-metaphor women, essentially, have no rights over either children or property.

Paternal identity is essential for group placement and rights of access to resources. "'The seed flows clearing the way for the flow of property'" is how an informant summed up the biological and social significance of the father-son bond' (Madan 1981: 231). The father's rights over his children are another aspect of the same logic, and signify rights over an important human resource. (Dube, p 43)

The 'seed and field' symbolism for human reproduction, with the woman identified as the 'field,' is far from being a benign, neutral and 'natural' metaphor. Biologically inaccurate, androcentrically constructed and gender-biased the homology has functioned for centuries to disempower women. This belief conflating woman and earth has alienated women from the power of their bodies and prevented the human community from structuring social relations which allow women full rights to their own bodies and in familial and economic spheres.

We have explored the misogynist use of the woman-earth conflation which involves an androcentric foregrounding of seed and the structuring social relations which control women's sexuality, divest mothers of rights in their children and prevent daughters from inheriting land. We shall now proceed to investigate the ritual-symbolic use of grain, in childbirth rites and attempt to discover an alternative paradigm of the woman-earth metaphor.

The Use of Grain as Symbolic Medium in Childbirth Rites: A Woman-Centered Analysis of the Woman-Earth Conflation

The birth rite is the only wholly female rite where male presence is precluded; yet it is solemn, awesome, throbbing with tension, presumably because (a) it uniquely empowers the female assistant and (b) it is the only rite where a new life enters the earth. The 'dai' (derived from dhatri)⁵ is symbolic of the mother earth; whereas the earth gives birth unaided, in a human birth she symbolically splits herself into two (a) the mother and (b) the dai, because human mothers, unlike the *prima dea*, are not self-procreative and also are exposed to dangers from the spirit world. (personal communication from Sukumari Bhattacharji)⁶

In a woman-centered ritual context the woman-earth symbolic conflation operates in a radically different fashion from the "seed and earth" homology considered by Leela Dube above. An examination of women's experiences of childbirth rites reveals the dai as ritual practitioner as well as health worker, atta and grain as a ritual and symbolic medium and a conflation of woman and earth devoid of patriarchal control. The woman-earth simulacrum as evoked ritually during birth functions to facilitate the physiological process of labour and birth evoke the presence of the goddess (nominated by our respondents as 'Baimata'); attribute power and sacrality to the female body; reinforce bonds among women; and empower the dai.

The Woman-Centered Ritual Context

In 1987 I worked with the Ankur-Action India health workers, many of whom were basti residents themselves, to collect the reflections of Delhi women on their experiences of childbirth. Almost all of

5. According to Monier-Williams dhatri means "a female supporter, nurse, mother, the earth."

6. Sukumari Bhattacharji, Sanskritist and historian based in Calcutta, is author of *The Indian Theogony* and many other works. I had personally requested her for any textual references to the dai for a paper I was writing, "A Woman-Centered Revisioning of the Traditional Indian Midwife: The Role of the Dai as a Ritual Practitioner." This quote is excerpted from her response. Much of the following material is drawn from my paper on the dai.

our basti respondents who gave birth at home described and valued the cooperation and support of the dai and neighborhood women during labour. Meera from Dakshinपुरi compares her experience of birth in the hospital and at home.

My first son was born in the hospital. In the hospital men stand in the front and the nurses stay behind. At home one calls the dai and women from the neighbourhood. In the hospital one keeps lying on the bed and shouting, crying in pain. The nurses keeps scolding "It's not time yet and you are screaming". But one doesn't know what's happening! During my daughter's time, I called Moti Jamadarni and gave birth at home. There is a lot of difference between the nurse and the dai. The dai explained everything affectionately.

Margaret Stephens, in her article "The Childbirth Industry, A Woman's View," provides a socio-psychological understanding of women's need for emotional support and guidance during labour and the value of a world view shared by the woman and her caregivers.

Expectant mothers who undergo successive emotional and physical changes during labour and delivery can have their experiences satisfactorily directed and controlled solely by those who possess knowledge of the way their feelings are structured. Since direction and control (i) can be exerted only by persons who have arranged their own knowledge around a cosmology embracing experiences obtained in alternate states of consciousness, and (ii) are the key to converting negative-inducing experiences to positive ones, the interventions of western 'professionals' in delivery can be seen simply as an obstacle which blocks adjustments required of the mother during the birth event. It prevents her from realizing the potential she has for 'experiencing' the birth. (Stephens, p 74)

Moti Jamadarni is able to "explain everything affectionately" because she, Meera and the neighborhood women, share common culturally formed perceptions of a cosmology and the meaning of the birth experience within that cosmology. "The nurses keep scolding," in part, because they perceive the "delivery" within a different frame

of meaning—that of western obstetrical medicine. Thus they are unable to facilitate the experiential aspects of the mother's physiological process.

The common medical-cultural construction of labour and birth define this process as a time of pain, usually necessitating drugs and an occasion for pathology, often requiring surgical intervention. Another model does exist. As Stephens documents' in her article, ritual and meaning systems of many traditional cultures facilitate the experiential aspects of the altered state of consciousness of the labouring woman by defining the same phenomenon differently, not as 'pain' but as an occasion for paranormal consciousness. A heightened state of consciousness which, as Sukumari Bhattacharji notes above, *both* mother and dai share.

One of the Ankur-Action India interviews with a Christian woman, Mary, from Nand Nagri, demonstrates this interpretation of labour as an altered state of consciousness. Here the dai refers to "the Devi-Devta" who have entered the woman and a charge of energy, *Sakti*, that she felt when touching her. Mary relates her experience of labour:

My husband was sitting in front of me. When I began crying he too started crying with me. The dai was even more interesting. She said "Look, Devender, the Devi-Devta have come into your wife." He said "No, we don't believe in such things." She said as soon as she came to my house and held my hand, she felt a current of energy—like an electric shock. She said this to other people too. After washing her hands and face she came and the child was born. My husband was with me. When the child was born, the cord was entangled with its neck and arm. But the dai was very samajhdar (knowledgeable). She said "Don't loose courage. When the pain comes then take it".

This conceptualization of the labouring woman in terms of Saktic power and gods and goddesses is certainly more empowering than the medical procedures which categorize her as a 'patient' similar to other 'sick' people.

Stephens uses the terms "transpersonal specialist" and "experiential guide" to describe the traditional midwife and notes the absence of

these roles in the 'childbirth industry' of modern medicine. Jean Achterberg sees the role of the midwife in terms of shamanic practice and its meaning for the community.

The shamans are pivotal figures in the rites of passage for their respective cultures Their wisdom is consulted in events that are believed critical to living, such as naming the infants, the vision quest or puberty rites that signify the beginnings of adult responsibility, and the ceremonial occasions of birth and marriage. This stands to reason in a shamanic culture, where the shaman, as well as being a healer, serves as a philosopher/priest who is privy to the supernatural. (Achterberg, p 19)

In the Indian context the Brahmanic priesthood asserted its primacy over a previously shamanic culture; and one ritual specialist of that pre-existing shamanic culture was the dai.

U P. Upadhayay, in his *Brahmanas in Ancient India*, notes the obstacles the Brahmanas encountered in their propagation of the orthodox culture among various tribes. In a section entitled "Brahmanas' Problems in Acculturation and Role-Taking" he writes of the priestly appropriation of shamanic functions.

What seems to be the most difficult situation for Brahmanas must have cropped up in substituting the primitive Shamans or in taking up their role. In a comparatively less stratified primitive society the Shamans functioned as priests, sorcerers, medicinemen, magicians etc among the primitive people the Shamans were the most dominant divine agents. (Upadhayay, p 168)

I suggest that Sanskritization involved in the extension of Brahmanic hegemony over life cycle events such as naming of the infant, marriage rites, and to a certain extent female puberty rites, but the actual process of ritual facilitation of labour remained in the hands of women and dais. Brahmanic categorizations of bodily process as polluting, by very definition, functioned to exclude the priests themselves from this ritual arena. The Sushruta Samhita perfunctorily mentions the need for "Brahmanas possessing knowledge of the Atharva Veda," at the time of childbirth, but this reads as almost an afterthought.

By viewing the traditional midwife as a shaman rather than a substandard obstetrician we situate her work more appropriately within the historical-cultural context of Indian folk culture. Having established the role of the midwife as facilitator of women's childbirth process and experience and as a cultural repository, we can now move to a consideration of one of her central ritual tools – grain.

Midwives Accounts of the Ritual of Separating the Atta and Baimata

The ritual performance by the dai at the time of birth involves the extensive use of grain as ceremonial substance. In the following section I will present interview material in which the dais state their perceptions of the birth event and its cosmological significance. The three interviews mention a birth ritual involving separation of one mound of atta into two and the invocation of a deity, Baimata. The first two, with Moti Dai and Shakina Dai, were done five years ago with the Ankur-Action India team. The interview with Asharfi, I did recently with two women health activists.

There is the custom of cutting the atta or rice. When the labour pains have come and the dai has arrived, the jachcha puts both hands full of atta in the thali. The dai holds the wrist of the mother and she, with her hand, separates the atta into two parts from the middle. Baimata is worshipped by putting money and gur on top of the atta, offering it to the dai, and saying "In this way separate the mother and the child-so that the child is born without any difficulty". It is said that when Ram and Lakshman were born Baimata herself came and acted as dai. Now it's the dai, herself, who represents the *Sakti* of Baimata. (Moti Dai – an upper caste midwife)

Look, sister, at the time of birth it's only the woman's *Sakti*. She who gives birth, at that time, her one foot is in heaven and the other, in hell. The woman's *Sakti* is indeed a lot when she gives birth to a child. In the hospital, oh sister, doctors abuse you straight away . . . and since they are well educated, they have too much pride in their education. And we are uneducated.

Before doing a delivery I wash my hands, apply oil and put two fingers inside the woman's vagina to see how much time

till the child is to be born. If the time is close then I boil water and sterilize my thread and steel scissors. Also I get old, washed clothes spread on the woman's bed. I get all the trunks, doors and so on, of the house opened. I pray to the One Above to open the knot quickly. I take off the sari, open the hair and take off the bangles or any jewellery. I put the atta on a thali and ask the woman to divide it into two equal parts. Also I get Rs. 1.25 in the name of Sayyid kept separately. But mostly I remember Baimata. Repeatedly I pray to the Baimata "Oh mother! please open the knot quickly." (Shakina Dai - a Muslim midwife)

Baimata writes the child's destiny. Her name is also taken at the birth. When I come to the house of the jachcha (birthing woman), the moment I arrive I *pranam* the threshold, the entry of the house, and move close to the woman who has the pains. We do a ritual with the atta. Rupees 1.25 is put on a thali and I move it up and down the woman's body, head to toe and back again seven times and say

Baimata relieve her,
 Take her boat to the other side,
 And like we have made this atta into two
 So separate the child and the mother.

Baimata is an old wise woman. She may come in a neighbor woman's dream and then that woman would tell the mother that her time is soon to come. (Asharfi - a Harijan midwife)

The Atta Ritual

When I first encountered this ritual splitting of the atta I was struck by the appropriateness of the analogy between the ritual act and the physiological event. Having taught natural childbirth classes for 15 years I was familiar with many teaching tools, metaphoric devices, women's fantasies and visualization techniques used to communicate and enhance the pregnant woman's understanding of the birth process. I was impressed by the simple elegance of the physiological analogy, the empowering facilitation of the symbolic meaning. Only later did I come to appreciate the cultural resonances of the ritual substance, 'atta,' within the meaning context of an agricultural people whose daily

lives are dependent on and preoccupied with seed-earth-plant-grain transformation processes.

We can interpret the efficacy of the ritual of separating the *atta* in terms of the cultural structuring of emotional and physiological response. James Dow writes of the importance of symbolic media and the mythic cosmology of healer and patient:

Generalized symbolic media are communication devices that allow processes at a lower level in the control hierarchy to be transacted in a higher-level system. Effective symbolic healing starts with a generalized symbolic medium in the social system particularized in such a way that it is able to affect the transaction of emotion in the self system. Symbolic healing allows unconscious and somatic processes to be controlled by symbolic communication occurring higher in the social system The cultural mythic world contains the symbols that express the emotional value of experience. (Dow, p 64)

On one level we can understand the *atta* ritual on the visual and physio-symbolic level. Doors, windows, locks, hair are opened so that the process of opening can be mirrored in the labouring woman's body; the cervix, too, will open facilitated by 'sympathetic' magic.⁷ Similarly one mound of *atta* is cleaved into two providing a symbolic and visual metaphor for the fetus separating from the mother's body. But the symbolic medium, *atta*, is imbued with traditional meaning within the social context of an agricultural people. The aptness of grain or *atta* as an analogy for woman's body is deeply embedded in cultural representations, an example of Dow's 'generalized symbolic media' which is particularized in the *dai's* ritual during labour. The *atta* ritual resonates with both physiological and culturally specific meaning.

The ethnographer, Abbott, describes and presents evidence of the ritual potency attributed to grain in ceremonial worship of deities, empowered persons, and life-cycle rites.

7. These 'sympathetic' and 'homeopathic' rituals have been thoroughly documented in Sir James George Frazer's monumental work, *The Golden Bough*. Although Frazer's Euro-centric and racist interpretation is abominable, his data is invaluable for an understanding of peasant cultures' ritual - symbolic forms.

The most interesting aspect, however, of the power of grain appears in practices in which it is used to control *sakti* in the interest of man (sic) grain is always used for kalasas installed in all *santi* ceremonies; in all ceremonies the betel-nuts and coconuts representing Ganpati are placed on grain as are also the nuts representing the Saptarsis or the Navgrah. Certain images are always placed on grain . . . that of Gauri, Ganpati, Anant Durga and that of Sasthi worshiped on the sixth day after a birth. Symbols into which *sakti* has been invoked, such as images and the devak; things which by association with something possessing power have themselves acquired power such as the arti waved around in image; persons again who for the moment have abnormal power, such as the bridal pair; all these are placed on grain. (Abbott, p 393-94)

Baimata

Now let us turn to an examination of the figure of Baimata. I find it amazing that a high-caste dai, a Muslim dai and a Harijan dai would all independently mention invoking Baimata at the time of birth. And each midwife in her conversation described the ritual performance with the atta. I have found no ethnographic, historical or textual reference to Baimata. Nor do D. D. Kosambi or N. N. Bhattacharyya (*The Indian Mother Goddess*) mention her. H.A. Rose, in his section on Muhammadan Birth Observances, states "If, while asleep, the child smiles, they say that Bihai is making it laugh. Bihai, or Beh Mata, is a Hindu goddess, who, it is believed, makes the child smile at times, and at others weep, by whispering in its ear that its mother is dead or alive". I asked a Garhwali pundit about Baimata and he was surprised that I had heard of her because he thought she was only a Garhwali folk deity. He claimed that the raspy breathing of the newborn was considered the "hasna" or laughter of Baimata and that any small girl while caring for an infant was encouraged in her nurturing behavior by being called "Baimata".⁸

Both Moti Dai and Shakina Dai combine references to orthodox religious figures in their accounts. The high-caste Moti Dai states

8. Personal communication from Surinder Kukreti.

"It is said that when Ram and Lakshman were born Baimata herself came and acted as dai. Now it's the dai, herself, who represents the *Sakti* of Baimata". Here the figure of Baimata is introduced into the Ramayana narrative as the archetypal midwife who personally appears to facilitate Sita's births. Folk versions of the Ramayana story are not uncommon and these narratives or songs sometimes focus on women's sexuality and motherhood.⁹

Shakina Dai, a Muslim woman, prays to "Upperwala" or the One Above, and has money put in the *atta* "in the name of Sayyid" – both in keeping with the Islamic faith. "Upperwala" is probably a reference to Allah; Crooke notes that tombs of the "sainted dead" – Sayyids and Pirs – were shrines at which both Hindus and Muslims worshipped. But Asharfi, the Harijan dai, "remembers Baimata" and it is she who seems to possess the power to "open the knot quickly".

Shakina also states the existential predicament of the labouring women as well as naming her strength. "Look, sister, at the time of birth it's only the woman's *Sakti*. She who gives birth, at that time – her one foot is in heaven and the other, in hell". I understand "one foot in heaven and the other, in hell" to have many nuanced meanings: the woman is simultaneously in a state of ritual pollution and yet is performing a profoundly meaningful task for the family and community in giving birth; she is in pain and yet may be experiencing anticipation of the fulfillment of her desire for a child. Finally Shakina Dai is acknowledging that the labouring woman exists in the liminal space between life and death, heaven and hell, ancestors and progeny, gods and demons. And Baimata is a powerful deity who can be invoked to move within that space, in a way that masculine figures of Ram, Lakshman, Sayyid and Upperwalla cannot.

While Moti Dai and Shakina combine references to dominant religious figures, Asharfi, the Harijan Dai, does not. When asked about Baimata Asharfi first answered in the context of one of the interviewer's, Shanti's, life. Shanti's husband died many years ago and Asharfi speaks of Baimata as the author of the river of fate – in this case the destinies of Shanti and her husband.

9. For example see "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu" by Velcheru Narayana Rao, in *Many Ramayanas* – which does not, however, mention Baimata.

Baimata writes the child's destiny. For example when she makes a couple, like Shanti and her husband, she throws them into the water. One may be ahead and the other behind in the water so one will die before the other. She writes both fortunes and misfortunes, the good and the bad. If you're thrown in the water together, she may help you to cross the river together. Her name is also taken at birth . . .

Asharfi continues the watery metaphor of life and fate in her invocation of Baimata during labour when she invoked Baimata to "Take her boat to the other side".

Shakina has described the liminal position of the labouring woman in terms of being between heaven and hell. Asharfi's description is less metaphysical and more primal. The woman's 'boat' is in the watery in-between realm, the domain of Baimata. The ritual of separating the *atta* is transacted and Baimata's power is evoked to ensure the labouring woman's safe passage "to the other side". Both the metaphysical and the primal metaphors, however, define the location of the birth-giving woman in an "in-between" or transitory space.

Not only is grain the ritual medium at the time of birth, but post partum as well. At Chatti, the rite culminating the post-partum period, the well is worshipped by an exclusively female entourage. Interestingly this rite, as described by the *basti* women, does not involve purification, but is an actual worship of the water source.

Grain and *chana* are roasted, called *ghoogri*. Seven mounds are made of *ghoogri*, money is put on them. In a *thali*, *puja* things are kept. A respected old woman keeps handing the things to the woman. With folded hands the well or water tap¹⁰ is worshipped and songs are sung.

10. The *basti* women, in their urban environment, no longer draw water from a well. Thus they have adapted the focus of the ritual performance of *chatti* from the traditional village well to the local community water source - a handpump or water tap.

This whole ritual involves only women relatives and neighbours. (Meera from Dakshinpuri)

At the time of the birth only women are allowed to be present, so with the rite at the well or water tap. The ritual use of grain is also similar; atta separated during labour and seven mounds of "ghoogri" during the well worship.

An ethnographer, H.A. Rose, describes the post - birth celebrations of one section of the Punjab: the distribution of grain to the larger community and the low caste ritual specialists. Traditionally the midwife's remuneration was probably given in the form of grain.

... Pinjiri and lumps of parched wheat are distributed to the brotherhood, and the females belonging to it place grain before the image of Bidh-mata. This grain is divided between the barber and the mid-wife. The mother is given strengthening food after this. The ceremony appears to be usually observed on the thirteenth day, but this is not always the case. (Rose, p 31)

Here the deity worshipped is call Bidh-Mata, rather than Baimata, but the offering made is grain. That the mother is given "strengthening food" is a reference the end of the ritual prohibition against the jachcha's eating the ceremonial substance, grain.

This sacred 'taboo' is a practice described even by one middle-class informant. During the post-partum period the jachcha is prevented from eating grain or her consumption is limited to ritually prescribed concoctions such as panjiri (which even I was given after childbirth). Suman, an educated young woman, reported that "after delivery the diet was different. I wasn't given any ann khana (eared food, grain). My mother-in-law wanted to go by their village tradition. She was scared of the city ways." The midwife, Asharfi also mentions this taboo, although she justifies it physiologically, not ritually, "Roti and chawal are not given to the woman to eat until after chatti puja. You see when the child is inside the stomach the large intestine becomes weak and sluggish and so she cannot digest grain immediately after the birth."

My very tentative interpretation of this taboo against the jachcha's eating grain would be 1) if the mother's body is symbolically conflated with the earth, then the infant would be the grain during the post - partum period. The mother's eating grain would symbolically be equivalent to devouring the child. (And women whose infants die are sometimes colloquially chastized with the words 'you devoured your child'.) and 2) grain, as the ritual medium and symbolic representation of the facilitation of the process of childbearing, must be ritually empowered and respected by not being consumed in a mundane manner by the jachcha. Finally it is the goddess, herself, during the parturition period, who has the 'right' to her food, the ritual oblation, grain.

These ethnographic reports, along with the descriptions offered by the basti women and the midwives, all define the rites surrounding childbirth as non - Sanskritic, women-centered ritual spaces with grain as central ritual symbolic medium.

Conclusions

I have attempted a cursory woman-centered exploration of some of the symbolic connotations of woman's body and earth in Indian traditions. A focus on women's *experience* of such representation reveals the repressive gender ideology and socio-legal formations derived from the seed and earth homology as analysed by Leela Dube. Within this patriarchal and patrilineal context woman's body is constructed in the male voice; woman is symbol rather than symbol maker.

The Ankur-Action India interview material on women's experience of childbirth rites suggest an alternative paradigm of the woman-earth symbolism. Within the context of these woman-centered birth rites the woman-earth conflation operates to facilitate the labouring woman, invoke and honor the *Sakti* of the Goddess and empower the dai.

The material we have considered demonstrates the gendered experiential bias which Reuther has posited. Predictably symbolic representations reflect the respective male and female sexual experiences of biological reproduction. The androcentric focus on *seed* reveals a

foregrounding of male experience of his physiological participation in human reproduction. Masculine contribution to baby-making is limited to possession and gifting of his seed-semen. An analysis of the ritual-symbolic meaning of gynocentric birth rites, however, reveals the centrality of *grain* rather than seed (or earth). As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and as the ancients recognized and celebrated, woman, *and only woman*, possesses in her body the awesome power to grow, birth and feed a new human life.

But it also must be acknowledged that woman possesses the equally awesome power to reflect on her experience and create symbolic and social representations congruent with her experience and knowledge. It is logical, then, that woman-earth ritual-symbolic forms, in the hands of the dai as a ritual practitioner, would involve a focus on grain, the fruition of the transformative mystery and power of the earth. Whereas man participates in and experiences but one phase of the human reproductive process, woman's rich experiential legacy involves menstruation, pregnancy, labour, birth and breastfeeding – the human equivalent of the total spectrum of earth's transformative power to grow life forms.

I would suggest that these uniquely female experiences are encoded in mythic and symbolic forms and constitute a foundational substrate of Hindu thought and culture. But as Leela Dube's work clearly shows, such symbolic forms, in this case the woman-earth symbolic conflation, are extremely problematic. I would argue that a well-intentioned but naive revisioning of "mother earth," with its implicit gender assumptions, is fraught with danger to the woman person. Finally the woman person, and groups of women, must be facilitated, 'midwifed' to reflect on their own experience and become symbol-makers rather than symbols.

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