

## **Waiting for Moonrise: Fasting, Storytelling, and Marriage in Provincial Rajasthan**

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Ethnographic encounters with women's ritual storytelling in North India provide the central substance of this essay and contribute to the study of narrative transformations over time. I highlight two distinct although related themes. First, and most importantly, I consider women's changing expectations of marriage, approaching these through intimate, conversational ethnographic accounts. Second, with an expanded scope stretching across regions as well as over decades, I observe variations as well as processes of standardization: how diverse tales associated with a specific ritual may ultimately be reduced to one standard plot. Such processes are hastened by all forms of media—print, film, and internet. My account here draws on long experience (intermittent visits and revisits between 1980 and 2015) in a single region of Rajasthan, North India. I focus on storytelling and other practices in the context of two women's ritual fasts: *Bari Tij* ("Grand Third") and *Karva Chauth* ("Pitcher Fourth"). The festival names refer to dates in the Hindu lunar calendar. In what follows I normally refer to Bari Tij simply as Tij.

I have worked on and off since 1979 in one region of Rajasthan—the Banas River Basin, spanning Ajmer and Bhilwara districts. Here both Tij and Karva Chauth involve explicitly difficult fasts undertaken by married women to protect the lives of their husbands. For both fasts in both places, participating women go without food or water the entire day and into the night until they are able to see the moon.<sup>1</sup> Some women told me that the ritual required a woman not only to see the moon but also to look at her husband's face before she can break her fast. Women are not merely waiting for something in the sky.

In 1980 as a novice anthropologist engaged in doctoral fieldwork on popular Hinduism while living in Ghatiyali (a large multi-caste village in Ajmer district, Rajasthan), I observed Tij for the first time. In 2010 as a senior anthropologist engaged in fieldwork on place and identity while living in the subdistrict headquarters of Jahazpur (a market town in Bhilwara district,

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<sup>1</sup>These total fasts contrast with the majority of personal vows which forbid only the everyday fare of grains, lentils, and vegetables; but usually allow tea, peanuts, fruits, fried potatoes, and so forth (each fast may have specific prohibitions). Indeed, among some of Jahazpur's middle-class housewives, frequent fast days appear to afford opportunities to vary an otherwise monotonous diet, and to inspire creative cookery (for example sweet potato halva) much as Passover does for kosher-keeping Jews in the US.

Rajasthan), I had another opportunity to see women celebrate Tij.<sup>2</sup> Two months afterwards the same group of neighbors participated in the apparently similar celebration of Karva Chauth. In Ghatiyali I had photographed the Tij ritual and recorded its accompanying story as told in Rajasthani which I eventually translated (Gold 2002:193-94). In Jahazpur at the request of my hosts, I photographed Tij worship but made no attempt to talk with participants about its meanings or to document the story. On the day of Karva Chauth, however, I recorded several conversations with small groups of women about the fast and its chartering narrative. At the actual worship I again played the role of respectful photographer but made no recordings.

This essay proceeds as follows: in the first and largest segment I introduce the festivals, noting the considerable documentation and analysis of both in anthropological and other literatures. Drawing on my own ethnography, I sequentially describe two rituals and their accompanying stories as I saw and learned about them. I begin with Tij in Ghatiyali, 1980, then turn to Karva Chauth in Jahazpur, 2010. The second section draws from selected secondary sources to scan the festivals and their significances within North Indian women's religiosity. My attempt is neither to survey fully nor to chart all variations from place to place, but simply to expand horizons and alert readers to the limits of conclusions based on any individual's ethnographic observations. Such observations will always swim in a vast sea of variation: lunar calendar dates, the direction of gift-giving, the castes that participate, and the worship tales' plots. Fortunately some significant commonalities resonate across contexts. It is also possible through this survey to observe the workings of an inevitably reductive standardization.

Finally, speculatively and briefly, I reflect across my fieldwork experience of 30-plus years spending intermittent time with Rajasthani women in village and town, in order to hazard a few thoughts on the ways that social change, ritual change, and the changing fates of particular devotional narratives may be interconnected if not exactly congruent. My limited observations of continuity and change are shaped by central concerns engaging meanings and motivations embedded in the two strict fasts. What might these rituals dedicated to husbands' well-being, and the stories that validate them, tell us both explicitly and implicitly about love and marriage—ideal and real, imagined and lived? How do participating women experience these meanings and incorporate them into their identities? What desires do women express in narrative performance, devotional traditions, or commentaries that an outsider's questions elicit?

By the time of my most recent fieldwork in the second decade of the twenty-first century, social transformations due to increased education, employment, and mobility were affecting both men and women at all levels of the social hierarchy in provincial Rajasthan. Associated with such changes were changes in gender roles, in the expectations surrounding conjugality and, as we shall see, in practices and ideas connected with vows and fasts. I wonder whether the appeal of fasts and accompanying rituals might lie in part in their ability to sustain an illusion of stability and continuity even while incorporating processes of change. That is, such rituals may offer participants a comforting contrast to upheavals in social realities, while in certain ways

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<sup>2</sup>Most individuals in both Ghatiyali and Jahazpur speak a regional variant of Rajasthani at home; anyone who has been to school also speaks and understands standard Hindi; the ubiquity of television contributes to Hindi competence even among the uneducated. For more about Ghatiyali, see Gold (1988); for more about Jahazpur see Gold (2014).

reflecting them. In titling my concluding section “moonbeams,” I mean to evoke the “inconstant moon” and its light, which is proverbially both romantic and unreliable.

### **Tij and Karva Chauth: Introductory**

Many outside observers—anthropologists, religionists, and others—have described, discussed, and collected stories told on the festivals of Tij and Karva Chauth in North India. Such documentation stretches back well over half a century. Perusing these sources reveals considerable variation from locality to locality, as well as over time. Unsurprisingly, different authors writing about festivals highlight different angles. For example, diverse ethnographers of rural or provincial India have been particularly concerned with the relationship between heterogeneous, local (“little”) traditions and a more monolithic, “great” tradition rooted in or at least linked with pan-Hindu Sanskrit texts (Marriott 1972:203); with shelter that women hope to receive from male kin (Wadley 1975:160-61); with gift-giving (Raheja 1988:182); with geospatial analysis (Singh 1989); with kinship and also perplexing irregularities of the lunar calendar (Freed and Freed 1998:63-65); with mythologically posited powers of the moon’s nectar (Pintchman 2005:57-58). Other authors catalog Indian festivals largely to celebrate the picturesque (Gupta 1990; Patil 1994). In addition, a number of manuals exist in both Hindi and English designed to provide literate women with instructions for how to maintain correct ritual practice (Jain 1988; Sinha n.d.; Verma 1997).

Sometimes Tij and Karva Chauth are described in nearly identical terms: strict fasts whose aim is the long life of one’s husband. For example, Patil explicitly likens Tij in Rajasthan to Karva Chauth in other North Indian states, describing it as a day when women “dress in their festive finery and fast all day . . . praying for prosperity and long life of their husbands and children” (1994:93). Marriott’s assertion, in 1955, remains essentially true of Karva Chauth everywhere: it is “a celebration of wifely devotion for the sake of the welfare and long life of the husband” (1972:203-04). In his “geospatial” study of festivals in a district of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Singh reports concisely of Tij only (for no Karva Chauth appears on his list) (1989:50):

[The motive of Tij is] to get long life of the husband his prosperity, health, and wellbeing of whole family; [on this day] In most of the houses, full day fast with fried cookies in the night; celebrated by married women only.

Verma has this to say about Karva Chauth (1997:75):

Karva Chauth is observed by married ladies . . . in order to ensure prosperity, sound health and longevity of their husbands. Widows and unmarried girls do not practice it. The married women keep a strict fast and do not take even a drop of water.

Elsewhere, and not all that far away, the two festivals may diverge significantly. In their exhaustive treatment of festivals in one village they call Shanti Nagar (just outside of Delhi), anthropologists Stanley Freed and Ruth Freed treat Karva Chauth as a traditional *vrat* (vow)

performed by high caste women and categorize it as a festival of “welfare fertility and protection” (1998:63-76). By contrast they place Tij in a different chapter, considering it to be, like Raksha Bandhan, which highlights the bond between brother and sister, a festival of “interaction” (241-56). Freed and Freed thus depict Tij as focused on the return of daughters to their parents’ homes to enjoy the simple pleasures of swinging: it is not about husbands and not about gods. Yet in my experience in both Ghatiyali and Jahazpur swinging and visits from married daughters, and the difficult fast for husbands’ long lives, are united in the Tij festival’s ambiance.

In Ghatiyali I was told that Tij was a festival celebrated only by those high status castes in which remarriage was forbidden: Brahmins, Rajputs, and Baniyas.<sup>3</sup> More than half of Ghatiyali’s population belonged to agricultural communities among whom divorce and widow remarriage were unremarkable and unforbidden. These included Gujars, Malis, Lodas, and others, all of whom ignored Tij. Years later in Jahazpur I found that Karva Chauth at least was celebrated by women across the social spectrum. Some women from agricultural communities stated clearly that their mothers and grandmothers had never kept the fast. They attributed the difference not to any change in marriage rules (for there hasn’t been one), but rather to the prohibitive strain placed on women’s bodies by agricultural labor. Once living in town and freed of such strenuous labor, women may choose to undertake total fasts.

In Jahazpur as in Ghatiyali women’s vows included the telling of ritual stories during worship. In Ghatiyali I never once saw a worship story read from a book, but in Jahazpur at the home where I attended both “Grand Third” and “Pitcher Fourth,” stories were read out from Hindi pamphlets. My fieldnotes describe this reading as disappointingly monotonal. The flat style of reading a worship story that I encountered in Jahazpur contrasted strongly with animated, dramatic, interactive storytelling performances by women I had known in Ghatiyali (Raheja and Gold 1994). In 2010, to my chagrin, I learned too late that I had missed, just down the street, another neighbor’s oral telling of the Pitcher Fourth story. Months later at another calendrical celebration I was able to hear and record this same



Fig. 1. Women in Jahazpur read the ritual story of Tij from a printed pamphlet; photo by the author, 2010.

<sup>3</sup>These categories identify the so-called “twice-born” of Hindu tradition: priests, rulers, and merchants who today of course follow many and diverse professional paths.

Jahazpur woman telling ritual stories without a text. Strangely, it seemed to me, she recited her charming tales without the slightest attempt to bring them to life through voice, gesture, or exchanges with her audience (Gold 2014). In short, although the language she used was Rajasthani, not Hindi, and she raced through her tale at a high speed that readers could never achieve, her oral telling actually replicated book-reading style in its flatness.

If I allow myself a tentative conclusion based on highly limited experience (but affirmed by a few persons I knew who had participated in such rituals in both village and town), I would say that Jahazpur women's rituals lacked that sense of shared delight in narrative imagination that was so characteristic of ritual storytelling events in Ghatiyali village. In our middle-class, small-town neighborhood, ritual storytelling seemed reduced to mere ritual function. In 2010 of course other forms of entertainment, most especially television, were pervasive; young and old were glued to family drama series daily. This downgrading of performative pleasures in ritual storytelling was all the more striking because collectively enacted women's ritual vows in Jahazpur were occasions for more prolonged, relaxed socializing than was the case in Ghatiyali where the daily grind of domestic chores afforded less time off.

New storytelling media in popular culture have had other more direct influences on women's rituals. Karva Chauth in particular has come to epitomize women's ritual action on the silver screen. One movie was repeatedly cited in Jahazpur interviews as influential: *Baghban* ("Gardener").<sup>4</sup> In *Baghban* aging stars Amitabh Bachchan and Hema Malini share their Karva Chauth worship in a way that appears to have altered understandings of the festival's gendered meanings and practices, instilling into Karva Chauth—or perhaps just legitimizing or rendering visible—a mutual tenderness between wife and husband. Such tenderness may spill over into (or out from) everyday couples' lives.

### Tij in Ghatiyali, 1980

The women were saying as they sat around after the ritual that *suhag* [the state of auspicious wifehood] was equal to *bhagvan* [the Lord]. (Gold 2002:191)

Lalas in his monumental Rajasthani-Hindi dictionary—a compendium of cultural knowledge as much as of vocabulary—describes Tij as “a fast celebrated by women whose husbands are alive and a day on which clothes, sweets, and jewelry are sent to married daughters from their fathers' houses” (Lalas 1962; my translation). Lalas' dictionary project was based in Jodhpur, far to the west of the Banas Basin where I have worked, but his regional definition perfectly matches Tij in Ghatiyali including the emphasis on gifts from fathers (not from in-laws as is reported by Minturn [1993] for another Uttar Pradesh location).

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<sup>4</sup>In English, the film title *Baghban* is regularly transliterated with an aspirated gh, although it is written in Devanagari as *bagban*. I have no expertise in media studies; Jahazpur women told me about the Karva Chauth episode in the film *Baghban* and I eventually watched the whole film (which is frequently shown on television) in their company. The fast comprises just one brief episode in the protracted family drama. Based on my Karva Chauth interviews, I had expected it to be far more central to the film than in fact it was. See Nava Bharat Times for a great collection of stills featuring Karva Chauth episodes in multiple Hindi movies; see also Uberoi (1998) and, for mention of Karva Chauth in TV soap operas, Munshi (2010).

In Rajasthan the lore surrounding Tij particularly stresses an emotional pull on husbands that is exerted by women's longings—for respect, attention, and love. This pull is understood to be enhanced by women's devotional practices working in tandem with seasonality. Chauhan, in his 1967 study of a Rajasthan village, describes Tij as “a festival on which a husband must find ways and means for reaching the abode of his wife. It is said that even heavy downpour and running brooks on the way need not deter him” (197). Chauhan's words, perhaps echoing those of his village informants, evoke the rainy season as a time of exquisite pleasure for lovers when they are together (in mythology the image of Radha trysting with Krishna in the dark and rainy woods); or of acute pain if they must remain apart (epitomized by Rama in the cave, pining for Sita).

A Tij song I recorded in Ghatiyali in 1980 commands husbands to hasten back to their yearning spouses who beckon them home irresistibly: “Leave your job at once, husband-lord, for the festival of Tij has come. / Whether your job's in Kishan Garh or Mukan Garh, husband-lord, Having heard [this melody of] Tij, come home!” I concluded (in an article originally published in this journal) that Tij songs insisted on “women's authority deriving from their participation in important festivals involving vows and fasts . . .” (1997:117).

The Brahmin women whose Tij I observed in Ghatiyali constructed a shrine for Tij Mother involving both wall art and branches of the *neem* tree (*Azadirachta indica*). My field notes reflect my own puzzlement at what this form might reveal of the goddess. The markings on the wall were rather nondescript. Before them, however, was set an arrangement of “[nim] branches tied together into the form of a beautiful plant,” as my Brahmin male assistant, Vajendra, admiringly recorded in his own separate notes. *Neem* has multiple religious meanings, and multiple ritual and medicinal uses. I had often encountered *neem* at healing shrines where sweeping with leafy *neem* branches purified both ritual spaces and afflicted pilgrims. But I had not known *neem* as a form of divinity. Thirty years later in Jahazpur Tij worship took place before a quite similar wall scene.



Fig. 2. Tij goddess shrine with *neem* leaves in Ghatiyali; photo by the author, 1980.



Fig. 3. Tij goddess shrine with *neem* leaves in Jahazpur; photo by the author, 2010.

Tij worship, in its ritual ingredients and actions, is similar to many other women's rites, but it calls for special attention to the signs of auspicious wifedom, which are also adornments—jewelry and *sindhur* (vermillion), the deep red powder married women use to mark their hair partings. In the course of the ritual, each participant made a series of offerings to the wall painting and *neem* branch seat of the goddess—including lighting lamps, and incense; token

cloth wraps, henna, and sweets. Each then mixed water and milk in her polished platter, and looked five times at the reflection of her jewelry in it. Following this she held a bottle of vermilion to her forehead, requesting Tij Mother to keep her vermilion (auspicious wifehood) immortal forever.

After all the women had finished the ritual, they sang Tij songs and then the hostess told the story of Tij and the requisite two others.<sup>5</sup> Then, all the women touched the feet of women senior to them, and took blessings from them—acts of closure for many domestic rituals. Finally they happily went up to the roof to see the moon; each then returned to her own house to break her fast by eating *satu*—blessed leftovers of the goddess and pivotal to the story. Tij story, as recorded and transcribed in Ghatiyali, 1980 (See Gold 2002:193-94):

There was once a shopkeeper who had seven sons and seven daughters-in-law. A few days before the holiday of Grand Third, six of the daughters-in-law received fine cakes from their parents' homes, but the seventh son's wife received none. Her family was very poor and they could not afford to send any cakes.

On the morning of Grand Third when all the women of the house were going to the well to fill their waterpots, the six older daughters-in-law were muttering angrily as they walked along: "We can never leave the cooking fire. We never have a holiday rest. *Our* families sent fine cakes for Grand Third but none have come for our husband's younger brother's wife and so we will be forced to work and prepare hers."

They were grumbling in this way when the youngest brother's wife heard them and said, "Leave off, it's my own trouble! Why are you complaining? Let it be, it's no business of yours." So she spoke. She had become very angry.

That night when it was time to perform the worship of Grand Third, the seventh daughter-in-law went angrily to lie down and sleep. All the other women did the worship, and after worshipping together they broke their fasts with the fine cakes sent by their families. But the youngest brother's wife had none, so she just stayed inside in anger.

Then her husband came and asked her, "Have you eaten or not?"

She replied, "Oh leave me alone. I am keeping a complete fast. I will take nothing but bitter leaves tonight and I will eat no food until tomorrow."<sup>6</sup>

Her husband said, "What do you mean? What's the matter?"

She said, "What can I do? Everyone else received fine cakes from their parents' homes and I received none, so what is there for me to eat? I cannot bear to take any of your brothers' wives' cakes so I will eat nothing."

Her husband asked her, "What do you need?"

She answered, "Even if you have to steal them, bring me fine cakes made of chickpea flour. If you don't bring them, then I will keep a total fast and eat nothing but bitter leaves and drink only water and I will not take any food until tomorrow."

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<sup>5</sup>In both Ghatiyali and Jahazpur three worship stories are always told: first: the main story special to the day; next, a story of Ganeshji; last, a story of an ill-omened being—in Ghatiyali called the "Greedy one" (*lobhya*); in Jahazpur "the creep" (*lungya*)—both of them beings whose desire to pilfer women's merit must be appeased with one story and a few grains.

<sup>6</sup>These are *neem* leaves; thus the story makes a connection with the physical ritual.

Then her poor husband thought, “Where can I go?” It was the middle of the night. He hurried to the house of a rich merchant, crept into that rich man’s house and immediately lit the cooking fire. Then he found chickpeas and ground them in the grinder. After that he took a clay pot full of butter and emptied it into a frying pan. He fried the ground chickpea flour in the butter, then he added a lot of sugar and made the mixture into round fine cakes.

Just as the husband was coming out of the merchant’s house carrying the stolen cakes, the village watchman, making his rounds, was passing by. The watchman saw him, shouted “Thief! Thief! Thief!” and grabbed him. He took him straight to the police station and sat him down there. Soon a crowd of people gathered and began to taunt him: “What a place you picked to do your thieving.” They mocked him and prodded him with sticks. They said, “Look, the son of a father of unblemished character has taken to thievery.”

But then a few wise and gentle persons came and said, “Let us hear his story. Listen to what he has to say.”

The husband said: “Look what’s going on here. They grabbed me and put me in the police station but meanwhile I don’t know if my woman will live or die. She is sitting alone in anger. For this reason I stole, for this reason I committed a crime. I went to that merchant’s house and ground chickpeas and lit the fire and took out butter and sugar and made fine cakes. I stole one kilo of chickpeas and a half-kilo of sugar and as much butter as was in the pot, for she is a stubborn woman and she won’t eat anything else. For this reason I was hurrying to bring her the cakes when the watchman came and shouted, ‘Thief! Thief! Thief!’ and grabbed me and took me to the police station. Everyone is calling me a thief. And meanwhile I am sitting here and who knows if she will die or live, or if she will eat or won’t eat.”

Now the merchant whose house he had robbed heard this whole speech and immediately said, “You should take twice as much, right now, as you have already taken. And next year before Grand Third, I will send fine cakes to your wife. Let my home be her parents’ home.”

So they set the husband free and at once he hurried home and gave his wife the cakes and she ate and he also ate. Both the husband and his wife ate and went to sleep.

[Town gossips repeat the whole event.]

The next year, four days before Grand Third, the rich merchant sent a long skirt, a shawl, cosmetics, bangles and everything— a complete outfit for the seventh daughter-in-law as well as the fine cakes. He also sent a separate outfit for the mother-in-law and for the husband’s sister. For the brothers’ wives he sent blouses and shawls. So from that very day the younger brother’s wife always received fine cakes from her parents’ home.

Grand Third Mother, as you made her parents’ home, so make the whole world’s.

The story of Tīj told in Ghatiyali in 1980 was unique among over 40 ritual tales I recorded during my dissertation research there. What made it unique was simply that it reversed gender roles for self sacrifice.

What are we to make of the young wife here who puts her husband in danger for her own seemingly selfish ends? The story might well be read as an ironic commentary on the many tales of self-sacrificing women who suppress their own needs and desires for the sake of their male kin. Why, it seems to ask in all simplicity, should men not sacrifice themselves too, to succor their wives—especially, as in this story, a wife who is suffering in order to ensure her husband’s

longevity. But in truth the story does not engage in such calculations. It is not reciprocity but passion and concern that move the husband of the stubborn young wife. She is stubborn in her asceticism as was Parvati, and like Parvati she has the capacity to discipline her body in order to get what her heart desires. The goddess rewards the stubborn woman, via her husband's efforts. In the context of rainy season sexual longings, this tale together with the Tij song—which places the wife's needs for company above the family's for income—hint at a sub-rosa complex of cultural motifs that approve the fulfillment of women's desires in marriage. For, at Tij, as Brahmin women told me, a mystified anthropologist, *suhag* is equal to *bhagvan*.

While I have not seen it in print in English or Hindi, I did find a very similar tale in English on the Internet—with a crucial difference, however: this version replaced the husband with the father as the caring male who responds to the fasting girl's entreaties and risks his honor on her behalf (*Festivals of India* 2014, story no. 3). That of course annuls all the precious marital intimacy that gives Ghatiyali's story its charm. For Ghatiyali's Tij story—without any help from Mumbai script writers—proposed a loving husband: a man with gumption but also a sensitive guy in tune with his wife's malaise in the joint family. But notably this has not been the story that prevailed in popular culture. Instead, Tij has come to celebrate Parvati's stubborn determination to follow her heart and to marry a God. Parvati's character and story are ultimately remote from those of the young wife in Ghatiyali's story, who takes to her bed and alarms her doting husband. Women keeping the Tij fast may have in Parvati a great role model for self determination in marriage, but Parvati obtains a divine rather than human husband. Shiva is hardly the type to cook treats for a sulking wife!

### **Pitcher Fourth in Jahazpur, 2010**

“We put henna on our feet. It is *suhag*; God should protect it. That is the main meaning of Karva Chauth.” [a young wife, interview]

Down stairs at the Pathaks they are making *alu paratha* [potato-stuffed flat bread] with plenty of *mirch* [pepper] and *churma prasad* [a sweet prepared to offer to deities, made with clarified butter, sugar and wheat flour] and *alu ki sabzi* [potato vegetable] and more things, none of which they will eat until after they see the moon. [A.G. Gold, fieldnotes]

In Jahazpur in 2010 Tij came on August 27 and Karva Chauth fell on October 26. In August I had been in Jahazpur less than a month, and having newly embarked on my urban research project, I felt reluctant to do the same things I had done in the village. Studying women's rituals was my old scholarship and not my Jahazpur program. By the time Pitcher Fourth came around two months later I had realized that the ad hoc community of neighborhood women that sometimes formed around festival events was a significant part of just those active place-making processes in small town life that I wanted to understand (Gold 2014). Moreover, I was truly curious about Karva Chauth because, although I had never heard of this fast while

working in Ghatiyali, my Indian-American students in Syracuse seemed to know all about it.<sup>7</sup> I decided to interview some of my female neighbors. On the day of Karva Chauth, I recorded four conversations with small groups of women, as well as casually questioning others I ran into on that day and a few days immediately following the festival.

Madhu Gujar, the daughter of my research collaborator, Bhoju Ram, was in her early twenties and sometimes assisted me in interviewing women. Together we visited various homes in our neighborhood. The story of Karva Chauth is well known and often recounted. I will provide it here, in two tellings by Jahazpur women recorded during informal interviews on the day of the festival, but before the worship (so presumably they hadn't heard the story since the previous year). In Ghatiyali my practice had always been to record stories during rituals. I found that asking women to relate them in interview situations yielded insights, helping me to see which elements of the tale were universally salient and which ones different women might emphasize or omit altogether.

The first house we visited was right across the street from Madhu's own. We spoke there with a middle-aged matron, Saraswati, whose daughter-in-law and small grandson had come to spend the Karva Chauth festival with her, although her son remained in the city where he worked. The younger woman had elegantly hennaed her hands in a delicate pattern that was drying at the time of our interview. She was fasting for the welfare of her husband, Saraswati's son. Saraswati agreed, with only the slightest urging, to tell me the story as she recollected it:

There was a sister who had seven brothers. So she was keeping the vow of Pitcher Fourth while visiting her natal home. Her brothers they loved her a lot, and because they loved her, they said to her: "You eat food."

She replied, "No, today is Pitcher Fourth and I can't eat!"

The brothers said, "No, please eat before the moon comes out." But their sister refused.

Then the brothers took a steel plate (*thali*), and a wick, and went up on the hill. They showed it to her and said it was the moon. They *deceived* her! She believed it was the moon and so she did her worship and broke her fast.

Then she got the news that her husband was dead. She began to weep. One of her brother's wives was a little intelligent. This *bhabhi* said to her, as she was leaving to return to her in-laws' home, "Whoever you meet on the road touch their feet" and they will give you a blessing."

On the road she met Fourth Mother (Chauth Mata), and she asked for forgiveness, and took the goddess' blessing. Her husband came back to life! So now women pray, "the way that you protected her husband, you should protect my husband."

Having concluded this stripped-down but fully accurate synopsis of the story's core plot, Saraswati continued speaking about the fast. She emphasized its difficult nature: "If there are clouds and no moon, then you don't eat! Some might not eat until midnight, and suppose they don't see the moon at all, not until the next day."

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<sup>7</sup>While writing this essay I asked my research collaborator, Bhoju Ram Gujar, by email, to ask his daughters and wife about whether or not Karva Chauth existed in Ghatiyali. The answer was, "Yes, many women do it, mostly Rajput, Brahmin and Jain"; but as to whether it was done in Ghatiyali in 1980 I have no information; that it was absent from my fieldwork experience of course does not mean that it was not practiced.

She added, “I did the Tij *vrat* [two months previously] and the moon did not appear until 1:30 a.m. It is Indian culture! You can’t drink. You can be terribly thirsty, especially if it is hot.”

Her daughter-in-law, who lived in the larger city of Kota, added the words I took as the first epigraph for this section: “We put henna on our feet. It is *suhag*; God should protect it. That is the main meaning of Karva Chauth.” Thus the beautified, enhanced, wifely body *is* literally the ritual’s meaning.

Around the corner on the main road lived a large family of Jats, an agricultural community whose members were not historically residents of Jahazpur town. The patriarch of this family had started a successful business in Jahazpur years ago when he was young and had prospered enormously. Eventually he built four large houses—one for each of his four sons along with their growing extended families—in the suburb called Santosh Nagar where my husband and I were living. The residents of these Jat houses spanned four generations. The grandchildren, mostly young adults, had grown up in town but their parents and grandparents had spent significant portions of their lives in villages; several still moved back and forth. The house we visited was where Madhu’s friend Surekha lived. She was the patriarch’s only granddaughter—for he had been blessed not only with economic success but with two generations of almost all male progeny. Surekha was not yet married. Tulsi Jat, somewhat older than Surekha and an in-married wife, explained to us that some women might drink water and take some fruit, but that there are others who “don’t even drink water until they see the moon.”

Surekha immediately announced, speaking of Tulsi in the third person and with pointed admiration: “She will not drink . . . she will eat nothing in the day nor drink a drop, and in the night she will look at the moon, and then look at her husband, and only then will she eat.”

I asked Tulsi how many years she had done the *vrat* and she answered nine! She said that women worshipped Ganeshji and Chauth Mata during the ritual. She described for us in fair detail the ingredients used for worship, beginning with the clay pitcher itself, then listing auspicious substances, some placed inside of it and some placed next to it on the worship tray.

Tulsi continued, “You can do the ritual at your own home, but it is more fun to gather with a group of women. It helps to pass the time of the hard fast.” I asked her for the story, and she first demurred, advising me to attend the evening’s ritual and hear “all the stories” (see note 5), but finally she agreed to narrate the one she knew. This was the same story Saraswati had related, but Tulsi elaborated a few additional elements. As her summary is also brief and her language more evocative, it is not redundant to include her informal telling:

There were seven brothers and one sister. The sister saw her *bhabhi* [brothers’ wives] keep the vow [*vrat*] and said, “I will do it too.” Her brothers forbade her: “Don’t try to do this! The moon comes out late. You’ll get hungry!” But she did not accept their advice. She undertook the fast [*upavas*]. Her face became pinched with hunger, and she appeared to be in great distress. Her brothers couldn’t stand to see her so distressed. So they thought they would just show her the moon. One went behind the hill and lit a fire. The others told her, “Look, the moon came out!” Then they all ate together.

God became angry, and even while she was eating, the news came that her husband had died. As she mournfully set out to return to her husband’s home, her mother gave her money and advised her, “Whoever you meet on the road, give it to them” [which she did].

[Tulsi now adds to the previous account some additional material omitted by Saraswati but present in most published versions.]

She did not go into the village but stopped at the cremation ground. She said, “I won’t let you cremate him.” She sat by her husband’s corpse. She made a clay pitcher [*karva*] and put water in it. During the year Chauth comes four times.<sup>8</sup> Every Chauth she would grab the feet of Chauth Mata, begging “Bring my husband back to life.” Chauth Mata said to her, “You deceived me! You weren’t able to keep this vow, so why did you try to do it? It is better just not to do it. If you undertake it, you should not break it.”

So each Chauth came and went and she stayed an entire year in the cremation ground. The very fast she had broken came around again, one year later—Chauth Mata told her to have no fear. The young woman joined her hands [in reverence] and begged Chauth Mata to bring her husband back to life.

So he came back to life. And their hut: the Goddess put her foot on it and it became a golden castle.

Tulsi concluded, “Women keep this vow so that their husbands will live a long time!”

There was a divorced woman in the neighborhood whom I knew well. With her parents’ help she was raising her two small children. Earlier that day I had expressed my surprise that she would fast for Karva Chauth, along with her brother’s wife. She told me nonchalantly that she was doing it for the benefit of her children.<sup>9</sup> I took this opportunity therefore to ask Tulsi if the fast could be done on behalf of one’s children. She answered firmly that it could not: “this is \*special for your husband.”<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 4. Offering tray with clay pitcher for Karva Chauth in Jahazpur; photo by the author, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Although there is only one Pitcher Fourth, some women celebrate a fast for Chauth Mother four times a year.

<sup>9</sup> As some readers have suggested, it seems possible that what this woman meant was that her ritual work protected the father of her children, and therefore naturally benefitted them if not her. I am skeptical of this explanation, however, because she had already won in court a sizable monetary settlement for the children’s education, and their father was not likely to offer them further support.

<sup>10</sup> An asterisk denotes a word that was English in the original.

Some conversation followed about Karva Chauth being celebrated very elaborately in the city: One of the Jat women said, “In the city there is so much fanfare. Women have to make \*bookings with the beauty parlor—\*bookings for their make-up.” I asked these women, who had been born in villages to families engaged in agriculture, if their mothers did Karva Chauth. Surkeha immediately replied, “My mother did not do it.” But apparently Tulsi’s paternal grandmother kept the Pitcher Fourth fast, and Tulsi, having learned it from her, was the one who involved the other Jat women who had married into the same Jahazpur family. This was contradicted later by two Brahmin women in two separate interviews, both claiming that none of the Jats knew anything about Karva Chauth until Lakshmi, a Brahmin woman who often took the lead in organizing neighborhood women’s rituals, told them about it. When I was able to speak with Lakshmi herself a few days after Karva Chauth, she took full credit for sparking the Jat women’s interest in the fast asserting: “I told all of them about it and so they started to do it. I said, ‘Do it for your *suhag*. It is for your husband’s long life.’”

Just to confirm my understanding, I asked again in a different way, knowing the name of the village from which the patriarch’s family had originated: “So in Maganpura the Jats don’t do it?” Surekha affirmed, “It is an urban thing. In Maganpura the women don’t do it.” Tulsi elaborated on why this was generally the case: “Village women, they have to go to the fields, they say that working in the fields is more important than keeping vows. But the women who live in the city, they don’t go to the fields, they stay home.” She added, matter-of-factly, “village women work all day so they can’t survive without water.” Tulsi’s grandmother, who introduced her to Karva Chauth, presumably came from a city.

As the conversation continued, another member of the extended Jat family mentioned that some women’s husbands fast with them.

I was truly surprised and exclaimed: “Husbands do it!”

“Yes, the husband says to his wife, “if you are going to fast, so will I.”

“Since when?” I asked.

Tulsi explained, “Men do it from their desire; the ones who have the most love for their wives, they do it. But men do not join in the worship; they fast and after they see the moon they eat with their wives.”

Surekha thoughtfully qualified Tulsi’s statement: “They all have love, but if they don’t have the *capacity* they don’t do the fast.”<sup>11</sup>

Madhu and I next visited a Brahmin household, where we spoke with an older woman, whose ill health now prevented her from fasting but who had kept the Pitcher Fourth fast regularly during the earlier years of her long marriage; and with her daughter-in-law who was currently keeping the fast.

They both described various aspects of the Karva Chauth fast to me, stressing that it was a *nirjala* or “no water” fast—considered the most difficult of all. When I asked about the day’s activities, they first listed dressing well and putting on henna. Next they spoke of readying the worship ingredients: the pitcher and the auspicious substances that went into it for the *puja*. And they talked about preparing sweets to eat after moonrise.

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<sup>11</sup> See Pintchman’s lovely account of women’s certainty that men lack the capacity for devotional exercises comparable with those achieved by women (2005:187-93).

These two Brahmin women spoke to me particularly of the care with which they adorned both themselves and the goddess. The younger woman said sweetly, “Women get ready and we make the Mother ready as well; we use all the sixteen forms of adornment [*solah sringar*].” This intimacy and sharing with the goddess is characteristic of women’s rituals. The goddess may be an arrangement of branches, a geometric design, a clay pitcher, or a pile of pebbles. But she is also fundamentally a woman in that she likes the same things women like; thus they are confident they can please her. I asked about the fruits of the ritual, and the older woman, using more Sanskritized Hindi, told me it was to obtain for the woman’s husband a life of long duration: *dirgh ayu*; this phrase others rendered in more everyday speech: *lambi umar*.

It was at this point that I raised the issue of men also fasting, telling them I had just heard something of the sort. Both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law readily affirmed: “That’s the truth.” The older woman first said, “Men do it; they can do it in place of a woman who can’t stay hungry or who is pregnant.” But she and her daughter-in-law also agreed that some men do it just to keep their wives company.

My friend and helper, Madhu, still unmarried herself at the time, brought up the influence of the popular film *Baghban* asserting that “the Gents started doing it” after seeing this movie. This led to an enthusiastic conversation about what a great picture *Baghban* was and there was general agreement among those present that it was admiration for the Amitabh Bacchan character that inspired numbers of men to share fasting with their wives.

I asked one neighbor, a young Vaishnav woman, whether people did Karva Chauth before marriage, she laughed a lot, “for what husband would you do it, before marriage?” In other words, what I had proposed was sheer nonsense. Yet Karva Chauth’s dominant tale is not about the husband—it is thoroughly the young woman’s drama. The husband might be necessary, but in the story he is just a lump of flesh: alive, dead, alive again—nothing but a prop if a necessary



Fig. 5. Neighborhood women greet the moon on Karva Chauth in Jahazpur; photo by the author, 2010.

prop. That would seem to change if husbands join their wives in fasting. In the night I sat at two different houses watching the ritual. If any men were fasting they made themselves scarce. All the married women—including Sindhi and Jain, whose religions diverged in other ways from their Hindu neighbors—came to participate; everyone was dressed gorgeously and mostly in red. Their collective *arati* to the moon, performed in the middle of a suburban side street, was as pretty a sight as any gracing the picture books about colorful festivals.

### Across Regions

There are multiple Hindu calendars, but the predominant system—used in many almanacs in Rajasthan and much of North India—divides each of twelve lunar months in half, so that dates occur twice monthly and are specified as bright or dark. Months begin immediately after the full moon with the dark half, counting the days of the waning moon up to the dark moon. Then the count restarts for the bright half, leading up to the full moon, the last day of each month. In Ghatiyali the day celebrated as “Grand Third” was the dark third of Sravan in the midst of the romantic rainy season. In Jahazpur about thirty years later and thirty kilometers distant, I observed a similar Tij ritual shortly after my arrival in 2010, but it was the dark third of Bhadva, the month following Shravan, and just three days after the major festival of Raksha Bandhan on Shravan’s culminating full moon. Sources for a number of other localities report two distinct thirds in the same two months, but falling in those months’ bright halves rather than their dark ones.<sup>12</sup>

Some sources distinguish these two rainy season festive bright Thirds by different names and functions. Verma, for example, reports that *Hariyali Tij* is the third day of the bright half of Shravan, and *Haritalika Tij* is the third day of the bright half of Bhadra.<sup>13</sup> The first is a festival for swinging; the second is a fast to honor Parvati (1997:42, 55). Tiwari describes a *Haritalika Tij* occurring on the third day of the bright half of Sravan (“or Bhadau” he adds casually), noting that it marks the beginning of the swinging season. On this day, according to Tiwari, both married and unmarried women fast and worship Parvati “in order to get (keep for life) a good husband, prosperity, and children” (1991:34). In Wadley’s account of the festival cycle in the village of Karimpur, Tij is the bright third of Sravan and equally commemorates Parvati’s winning of Shiva (1975:158). All these locations celebrate a bright rather than a dark third—but across every locality the festival or festivals take place in the last two months of the rainy season. Meanings and practices for Tij shift across localities and cannot readily be systematized. Nonetheless, whether dark or bright on the calendar, in most places Tij means festive swinging and a fast on behalf of husbands.

In contrast to the variabilities around Tij, Karva Chauth, extending through a wide swath of geography from western Rajasthan to eastern Uttar Pradesh, consistently takes place on the fourth day of the dark half of Kartik—leading up to the major autumn festival of Divali which is Kartik’s midpoint, its dark moon.<sup>14</sup> Meanings are correspondingly consistent in that Karva Chauth is about nothing but keeping your husband alive. This would contrast with Tij which engages additional themes such as cherishing of daughters and—perhaps even more poignantly—romantic attachments of husbands to wives. I could risk generalizing and say that Tij places more stress on gender mutuality and more stress on female initiative; Karva Chauth burdens

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<sup>12</sup> While transliterations of festival names, month names, and deity names frequently vary across sources, I use variant spellings only in direct citations.

<sup>13</sup> *Hariyali* means “greenery” and is perfectly appropriate for a rainy season festival; I find no reliable translation for *Haritalika*.

<sup>14</sup> Falk (2006:131) is an exception; she reports Karva Chauth in New Delhi on a bright fourth.

women with the need to save their husbands' lives but—until Bollywood pitches in as we will see—does not give husbands any part to play.

While the dates and purpose of Karva Chauth are consistent across regions, deities associated with this festival shift fluidly from place to place. Shiva, Krishna, Ganesh, and the goddess are all mentioned in various sources. I surmise that deities are not the point of women's vows on Tij or Karva Chauth (although they may well be at other fasts).

Freed and Freed recount the following episode from their Karva Chauth fieldwork: "At one house, we asked the senior woman what god they worshipped when they worshipped the pots. She replied, 'There is only one God. What shall I say?'" (1998:72). Thus do anthropologists exasperate long-suffering hosts with foolish questions. In my own 2010 interviews on Karva Chauth, when I inquired of one interviewee as to whether it was "Mataji," the generic Mother Goddess, who was the focus of their ritual, I was quickly and bluntly told "No!" The woman who corrected me said that the object of worship was "Chauth Mata" or "Fourth Mother"—whose name clearly possesses different implications. I was embarrassed by my error and did not pursue the topic, but it is easy to think with hindsight of the contrast between the lion-riding weapon-wielding warrior goddess represented in local Mataji temples and the beatific protectress of families worshipped by women at their ephemeral home shrines. This mother may reside in a clay pot, in tree branches, in wall drawings. The offerings she prefers are the same cosmetics and sequined cloth that women themselves covet as gifts, and wear to worship her—all emblems of auspicious wifedom. As recorded in my 1980 notes:

Tij said to be like Gangaur, all are *rups* [forms] of Parvati. [I was told by women]: The meaning is the same as Gangaur, to worship the condition? of the *suhag* [auspiciously married woman] and pray for its immortality.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, women are explicitly worshipping the idea of their own auspiciousness as *suhag*—an auspiciousness they embody in their own adorned persons.

In all published sources for Tij except mine (Gold 2002), if any story is supplied it is the tale of Parvati's ascetic practice to win Lord Shiva for her husband. Some ethnographies of women's rituals, such as Pearson's, see this as exemplary of women's quest to control their own lives by whatever means are available to them. Pearson writes, "by observing austerities one gets power not only to achieve one's goals but also to control one's own life, rather than be controlled by others (notably by men)" (1996:160-61). This quest for control, for female agency if you will, finds expression in collective solidarities at ritual events. At times, in some contexts, it even spills over to energize women's political agendas.<sup>16</sup> Ghatiyali's Tij story is unusual in that it features a husband who acts on behalf of his wife, respecting her suffering and risking disgrace to help her.

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<sup>15</sup> Gangaur comes sixteen days after Holi, at the start of the hot season; it explicitly celebrates Parvati's asceticism in winning Lord Shiva for her husband. In some Rajasthan cities Gangaur is the occasion for a major public procession. In Ghatiyali it was, like Tij, a festival observed only by those castes which forbid divorce and widow remarriage.

<sup>16</sup> See Holland and Skinner (1995) for Tij in Nepal as affording women opportunities for critical commentary on gender.

Today one Karva Chauth story has emerged as the prevailing narrative, replicated in oral tellings, ritual pamphlets, films, and on the internet. Collections made between the 1950s and 1980s (Freed and Freed 1998; Marriott 1972; Tiwari 1991) show that the story everyone knows today was earlier just one among a number of coexisting tales associated with the festival. The dominant story has its variants—largely whether or not it includes a secondary plot about a scheming servant girl. This subplot engages a folkloric motif reaching back to ancient Indian literature and with a global spread.<sup>17</sup> While the subplot appears in many Karva Chauth accounts both old and contemporary, I never heard it in Jahazpur. The core of Karva Chauth’s now dominant narrative remains highly consistent across contexts. The plot features a good wife deceived with a false moon by loving brothers—who have only the best intentions—into breaking her fast too soon with disastrous results for her husband. This chain of mistakes requires the woman’s fortitude and the grace of the goddess to remedy. It is a lesson in the imperative—never break a vow!—as much as it is a lesson in the power of a woman’s self-restraint.

Tiwari’s extensive collection contains a variety of Karva Chauth stories which he recorded from women in Kanpur district, Uttar Pradesh in the mid-1970s and 1980s; these were mostly women he met through his familial networks. Here we encounter some surprising twists: women tell stories of women who claim to fast but actually eat. They get hungry; they indulge their cravings; their husbands do not die. Rather, the suspicious husband spies on his wife, and finding that she breaks her vow, he recites mocking verses describing her behavior to shame her; he beats her too—which is how both variants conclude (1991:89-90). Tiwari’s collection also has a version of the prevailing tale: woman deceived by brothers into eating. It isn’t hard to understand why women might prefer ultimately to adopt the tale of a devoted wife deceived by loving brothers into breaking her fast, and discard the tale of a greedy woman caught out by a spying husband and punished for it. While Tiwari collected them both in the same region, the tellers of the “gluttonous wife” tale were older than the teller of the “false moon” tale (1991:91-92).

Marriott’s research in Uttar Pradesh in the early 1950s yielded versions of the tale of the deceived sister. He writes, “The story of the younger sister and her devotion to her husband, which provides the manifest rationale of the festival, is unmistakably built up out of the objects and life of the village.” He suggests that its “*purana* has yet to be written” (1972:206). The Sanskrit Puranas are vast mythological texts containing many stories of the deities. What Marriott means here is that the Karva Chauth narrative does not appear in Sanskrit texts. How might Marriott have guessed at that time that it would take Bollywood to write the Karva Chauth “*purana*”? For Karva Chauth has shifted radically from the pure “little tradition” that Marriott deemed it to be to the new great tradition, as Bollywood is sometimes thought to have become, because of its pan-Indian reach. Besides spreading through film, television, and YouTube renderings, Karva Chauth is now also frequently linked to Sanskrit epics; Patil’s survey of festivals, for example, tells us, as do various web sites, that “Draupadi observed this fast for the safety of Arjuna” (1994:93).

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<sup>17</sup> This is K1911.1.4 “False bride finishes true bride’s tasks and supplants her” (Thompson and Balys 1958:335). For a cross-cultural exploration of substitute brides see Doniger (2000:153-86).

### Moonbeams

Stories reflect lives and lives incorporate stories; oral traditions and commercially produced dramas participate in generative processes infusing meanings into women's ritual performances. Moonbeams in provincial north India may have a startling brightness. The Karva Chauth fast and tale ascend from scattered and diverse little traditions to a homogeneous "Indian culture," riding a wave of media dissemination and globalization via migration. Young women adapt ritual traditions as they seek balance between comforting stasis and potentially chaotic aspiration in their changing social world. There are radical alterations afoot in marriage including: changing patterns of residency; women's roles in the salaried work force; even a perceptible weakening of that culturally celebrated dogged commitment to one's arranged, or fated, marital plight. For some women, however, ritual solace may seem banal and no longer do the trick.

A dissonant fieldwork postscript: Kanta—young, defiant, hardworking, probably not much over 25—was struggling to raise her small daughter on her own. She told me that her husband was a drinker, and that he had deserted her when she was hospitalized for excessive bleeding following a difficult birth and the loss of their second child, a baby boy. She had been befriended, and recommended to us, by Jahazpur's only female social worker, for whom she did both cooking and housework. Kanta came to our flat and prepared one simple meal in the late morning or early afternoon (we cooked our own supper). On the day of Karva Chauth, not enough of a participant observer to keep the fast myself, I hurried home to eat between interviews, my head filled with the day's stories. Thoughtlessly I asked Kanta if she were keeping the vow. There were some grounds for my tactlessness because, as already related, I had conversed with one divorced female who claimed with enthusiasm to undertake the Karva Chauth fast on behalf of her children, and who clearly valued feeling herself part of a community of fasting married women. Kanta, however, retorted with a venom that startled me: "Who needs long life for a man like that!" (*aise admi ke lie lambi umar kyo chahiye?*)

I was taken aback by Kanta's words and tone. Although I knew well that marriages in provincial Rajasthan could be as fraught with tension as anywhere in the world, over several decades of ethnographic work in this region I had rarely heard spousal anger verbalized so bluntly (the sole exception being a very aged widow [Gold and Gujar 2002:193]). Traditional lore found the highest virtue in a woman who put up with the worst kind of husband. So I was instructed while living in Ghatiyali, where more than once I heard from friends a popular tale about a woman whose husband is in love with a prostitute. The husband contracts a hideous disease, which weakens him so badly that eventually he can't even walk to his mistress' house, but still longs to see the other woman. Although his body is loathsome and contagious, his dutiful wife takes him in her arms and carries him to his paramour. This tale (which I love to tell my American students just to watch their faces) was given to me in Rajasthan as instructive of the ideal behavior of a wife: dedicated to obey her husband-god no matter how low-down his wishes or behavior. The husband has no redeeming features. The point of the story, I came to realize, is that it isn't about the husband! Rather what matters is the ideal of woman as a *pati-vrata* (a

husband-devotee).<sup>18</sup> What would inspire a woman to such forbearance? Remember: *suhag* is equal to *bhagvan*; wifehood is the same as divinity. As Urmilaji explained to Kirin Narayan, “No matter how bad a husband is, no woman would prefer to be a widow” (Narayan 1997:34).

Kanta’s outspoken rejection of the entire “worship your husband no matter what” mystique gave me pause, radically departing as it did from the far subtler subversions of domestic hierarchy I had often celebrated in my ethnographic writing. Such blatant critique remains an exception, but during my year in Jahazpur I had plenty of occasions to observe that both the ideals and practices surrounding marriage are in serious and complicated flux (Gold 2014). Ritual traditions may respond to such flux in more ways than one. Two extremes touched on in this essay would be the real, if film-inspired couples, who share their fasts in mutual tenderness; and Kanta’s total dismissal of obligations to an undeserving man.

Most women live between extremes, and have considerable stake in their own familial and ritual roles. Many women I met evidently took pride in embodying “Indian culture” through practicing difficult rituals (whatever their marital circumstances). Many of the same women I knew who undertook difficult fasts, were also pursuing other strenuous endeavors far less traditional: getting educated up to graduate degrees; competing for government jobs. They spoke without hesitation of wishing to be financially independent from their husbands’ families

It is not insignificant that in both festivals processes of standardization have resulted in two dominant tales stressing the need for women’s empowering austerities explicitly dedicated to protecting husbands’ long lives. Yet ethnographic encounters reveal variegation, discord, and novelty fringing these austere narratives. Women redefine ritual actions and meanings according to their own emotional needs within changing social and economic circumstances. In Ghatiyali at Tij thirty years ago, women already imagined, with what seemed like almost wistful humor, a different kind of husband as reward for a difficult fast. In present-day Jahazpur, younger women especially reimagine conjugality, absorbing the input of popular film and television dramas. It is important to acknowledge harsh experiences such as Kanta’s that certainly disillusion some women. Yet North Indian women’s rituals and storytelling performances by and large remain occasions for pleasurable sociability; for claiming self-worth; for celebrating not only a benign female power portrayed in shrines and stories, but participants’ own auspicious beauty and potentially boundless capacities.

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<sup>18</sup> Incidentally a version of this story appears on the Festivals web site (2014), listed as Tij story no. 2—and providing a happy ending for the couple including the husband’s miraculous cure thanks to his wife’s virtues bringing divine intervention; he repudiates the extramarital connection.

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