

Some Instances of Consanguineous Relationship Patterns in Hindu Joint Family as Depicted in Bhojpuri* Folksongs

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I. Father-son

Despite its having a great significance in the Hindu joint household, the father-son relationship is mentioned least of all in the folksongs. Perhaps men preferred to both quarrel and settle disputes among themselves than to compose folksongs to express their agony and hatred for each other, as women usually did. However, there is an occasional attempt on the part of the folksongs to idealize this relationship to a certain extent. Hindu society expects "absolute obedience" from a son. Under the injunctions of the Dharmashastras, the father is the object of the sons' deepest reverence. He is the first member of the family to whom respect must be paid by the children of the family.¹ Manu says that the father is the Guru (a spiritual teacher) of his son.² Emphasizing the above point, a Bhojpuri folksong says: "A son is he who serves his father, otherwise the birth of a mischievous son is of no use."³ Another folksong speaks of an obedient son who wishes to be a servant to his father: "O Mother, I will become a servant of my

*Bhojpuri is a dialect of Hindi which is spoken in Eastern U.P. and Western Behar, India. This paper is based on the collection of Bhojpuri folksongs which the author did during his field trip in Ballia, U.P. India, in 1961. The informant was a high caste Hindu woman. She was about eighty years old when the present collection was done.

1. *Manusmritih*, ed. P.H. Pandya (Bombay: Gujarati Printing Press, 1913), II, 145. Hereafter cited as *Man. Gautama-Dharmasutram*, ed. L. Srinivasacharya, Government Oriental Library Series (Mysore, 1917), VI, 1-3.

2. *Man*, II, 145.

3. Krishna Deva Upadhyaya, *Bhojpuri Lok-Sahitya Ka Adhyayan* (Varanasi, 1960), 261.

father, and my wife will be your slave.”⁴

But this should not be construed to mean that in reality sons always respect their fathers and seldom rebel against their patriarchal authority. In fact, according to Ross, the greatest incidence of “dislike and hatred” in family relationship is found between fathers and sons.⁵ Cormack mentions sons who resent and rebel against their fathers’ authority.⁶ Thus Karve advises men under the rule of Ashrama “to retire gracefully so as to avoid the evils of gerontocracy or the tyrannical rule of the elder and the rebellion of the younger generation. . . .”⁷ A father is viewed as a lawmaker and as one who imposes restrictions; naturally enough, then, the son’s attitudes towards him are those of “respect, awe and fear, rather than love.”⁸ These attitudes have resulted in little “companionship” between the two:

There is no closeness between father and son. They never seem to get to know each other. The father is always a little like a stranger to the son and the mother acts as intermediary between them. The father learns what goes on in the family from her, for the family never gets together and ‘chit chat’ over things. . . .⁹

There are fathers who are “very lenient” and “fairly affectionate” to their sons. Mention of men clasp ring their sons to them, and of lads playing in their fathers’ laps, is not wanting in the folklore and ancient Indian literature. Speaking of kindhearted fathers, Kapadia writes: “The father was kind and easily accessible to his sons. He chastised them, no doubt, but that was for gambling.”¹⁰ A gentle and good-natured man takes a personal interest in his son and considers it his prime duty to help him out whenever there is a need. In one Bhojpuri folksong Rama expresses anxiety to his father over Sita’s well-being during his absence, and his father assures him that he will protect her:

Rama stands, in the father’s courtyard, in golden sandals.
 Son: “O Father, I shall go to the Madhuvan,
 How will you keep Sita with you?”
 Father: “O Son, I will have a well dug out in the courtyard,
 I will have a silken rope to draw water.
 And I will bathe Sita.”¹¹

4. *Ibid.*, 261.

5. Aileen D. Ross, *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting* (University of Toronto Press, 1962), 145.

6. Margaret Cormack, *The Hindu Woman* (New York, 1953), 23.

7. Irawati Karve, *Kinship Organisation in India* (Poona, 1953), 70.

8. Ross, *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting*, 144.

9. *Ibid.*, 144.

10. K.M. Kapadia, *Hindu Kinship* (Bombay, 1947), 83.

11. Field Collection. 13: 5-9. Hereafter cited as FC.

During the critical days of their lives, sons have to lean on their father for help.¹²

In the joint patrilineal household comradeship between the two appears at times stronger and closer than in the matrilineal homes. "This is because work in the fields brings fathers and sons together. . . ."¹³ Whatever differences may exist, there must also be an enduring respect, love, and co-operation between the father and son otherwise the joint family structure would have never been able to bear the strained relationship for so long a time.

II. Sister-Sister

The relationship between sisters is never fully described in either ancient Indian literature or in folklore. Because of the similarity of their social position, and the fact that they all have their home, sisters have a feeling of togetherness. There is a tendency among them to form a close, well-knit group while growing up, and to maintain cordial relations after marriage. The younger sister treats her elder sister with respect and love: "My elder sister and I love each other dearly." "My elder sister is my ideal." Sometimes elder sisters take the place of their mothers because of their love for their younger siblings. A younger sister often says, "I love her (the elder sister) more than my mother." "I was more attached to her than to my mother."¹⁴ If a mother has several children or if she is deceased, an older sister, as long as she is unmarried, may completely take over the role of the mother. Even if she doesn't assume this role, however,

. . . the eldest sister's power over younger sisters was clearly defined and seldom questioned. She had an important position in the family in regard to the supervision of her younger siblings, and this gave her prestige as chief assistant to the mother.¹⁵

If the sisters are close in age they communicate well with each other and discuss the problems they share in common. They even talk about their parents behind their backs, mentioning their good treatment of their sons and lack of interest in their daughters. At times a girl may incur the displeasure of her parents and brothers and still maintain a close, affectionate relationship with her sisters. A Bhojpuri folksong,

12. FC 91: 6, 8.

13. D.N. Majumdar, *Caste and Communication in An Indian Village* (Bombay, 1962), 206.

14. Cormack, *The Hindu Woman*, 200.

15. Ross, *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting*, 111.

tells of a daughter who visits her parental home without an invitation and consequently is rebuked by all of her parental kinsmen except her younger sister. The latter rushes to greet her, offering a wooden plank and a goblet full of water.¹⁶ Village elders say, "Sisters are always in league with each other."

The folksongs never mention hostile relationships between sisters. In fact, sisters feel little jealousy toward one another. Their residence at their father's home is so short that they find little time and few things about which to get upset. However, "jealousy could develop between them (the sisters) if the parents favoured one daughter, or gave a large dowry for one to gain a better husband."¹⁷

III. Grandparents-Grandchildren

In the joint family structure, grandparents occupy "very important positions and are usually regarded with veneration and respect, for, having lived long and through many family crises, they have gradually assimilated the wisdom of the group."¹⁸ "Grandparents love their grandchildren more than they do their own children."¹⁹ As the head of the family a father has to act as a disciplinarian, and consequently causes fear to his sons and daughters. After relinquishing the leadership of the family and assuming the role of a grandfather, however, his position undergoes a considerable change. He no longer retains the image of a strict father, and as he advances in age he becomes more and more lenient. It is commonly said, "Men become like children in their old age." They like to be friendly with grandchildren and develop a great affection for them. Grandparents are believed to be indulgent, and it is said that they always spoil their grandchildren. Emphasizing the importance of the grandfather, Ross quotes one of her interviewees:

We all used to adore our grandfather. He deserved it. He was a very kind-hearted and noble man. He could instill high ambitions and ideals in the hearts of his grandsons. He was a symbol of love and sympathy.²⁰

Grandparents are generally a storehouse of folktales, riddles and proverbs. In their limitlessly free time they amuse their grandchildren and in

16. FC 141:22. The wooden plank serves as a cushion for the floor or as a dais. It is usually decorated with ornate carving. Water, with a dish of sweets, is always offered to guests immediately upon their arrival.

17. Ross, *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting*, 166.

18. *Ibid.*, 138.

19. Majumdar, *Caste and Communication in An Indian Village*, 206-207.

20. Ross, *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting*, 139.

return are amused too. Grandchildren may joke with their lenient grandparents, particularly the grandfather, who is the protector of mischievous grandchildren. "When their parents are angry with them, young children often take shelter with their grandparents."²¹ They like them so much that "very few grandparents ever complain about the behaviour of the little ones, and they would rarely spank them."²²

The grandmother plays a more active role in the life of her grandchildren than does the grandfather. She baby-sits for them. When the children's mother is busy with domestic work the grandmother looks after them: she massages their bodies with oil, gives them baths, dresses them, and decorates them with various types of cosmetics. It is generally said, "A baby is born to his mother but he belongs to his grandmother." A woman may hate her daughter-in-law but she loves her grandson, thinking of him as the child of her own son. Nevertheless, it is possible that a woman might despise her daughter-in-law to such an extent that she may wish to kill her grandson. A Bhojpuri folksong speaks of a woman who intends to kill her grandson because she does not like her daughter-in-law:

Daughter-in-law: O, Rama, the sinner mother-in-law
twists my son, O, Rama.
If you would have spoken such words,
O, Mother-in-law, in presence of
my husband. . . .²³

It is curious to note that out of five hundred songs collected by the author from the Ballia district there are only two folksongs which make a direct reference to the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

IV. Father's Brother-Nephew

The relationship between a paternal uncle and his nephew entails affection and concern on the part of the uncle and respect and obedience on the part of the nephew.²⁴ The *tau* (the father's elder brother) must be treated like one's own father. The role of the *tau*, who is older than the father, is similar to that of the grandfather: he is feared and respected by his nephews. But the *chacha*, being younger than the father and closer in age to his nephews, may be regarded as a superior type of an elder brother who sometimes assumes the role of consultant and advisor.

21. S.C. Dube, *Indian Village* (New York, 1955), 158.

22. *Ibid.*, 158.

23. FC 424:23.

24. Ross, *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting*, 166.

Some uncles are friendly. They allow us considerable liberty and shield us when parents are angry. We like them, and willingly do odd bits of work for them.²⁵

At times, however, uncles grow too friendly with their nephews. A saying characterizes this situation: "Uncle is a thief, nephew is mischievous. Uncle is caught and beaten with shoes."

The paternal uncle always depicted in the folksongs is a *chacha* who is usually close in age to the boy's father.²⁶ Traditionally he is expected to treat his nephew like his own son, and during crises a nephew may turn to his *chacha* for help and support. A Bhojpuri folksong speaks of a boy whose father has turned down his request for initiation into the sacred thread ceremony. His *chacha*, however, consoles him by saying, "I will give you a sacred thread."²⁷ Sometimes the father's younger brother appears to be chief protector and guardian of his nephews even during their father's lifetime. However, if he pays too much attention to his brother's son, there is the danger of strain and rivalry between his own sons and his nephews. Some men injure the development of their sons' personalities by an over affectionate attachment to their nephews. Very often favoritism is shown to the sons of the elder brother in order to gain the favor of that brother, or to form an alliance with his wife.

V. Father's Brother-Niece

Convention requires a girl to give the same respect to her paternal uncles, the *tau* (the father's elder brothers) and the *chacha* (the father's younger brothers), that she gives to her father. In turn, the uncles are expected to treat their nieces as they do their own daughters.²⁸ If a girl's father were to die before she married, her uncle might be responsible for her protection and marriage. During the crucial days of the girl's life some uncles prove themselves to be more dependable than the girl's own father. However, since this relationship is of a distant nature and custom does not permit frequent meetings, the folksongs from Ballia seldom mention it. There are only a few songs which speak of uncles who actively participate in the marriages of their nieces and help their brothers. In one song, a girl says: "My

25. Dube, *Indian Village*, 158-159.

26. FC 93:2.

27. FC 80: 7-8. See also 81: 3,78:3.

28. Sexual relationship is tabooed between a girl and her father's brothers, and the folksongs do not mention it. However, there are several instances found in actual life of such incestuous relationships.

chacha takes care of my entire wedding party.”²⁹

VI. Father's Brother's Wife-Nephews and Nieces

No precise statement concerning the role of an aunt (the father's brother's wife) is made in the folksongs, and there is only an infrequent mention of the word aunt in the songs. However, in the joint family aunts do play a somewhat important part in the life of their nephews and nieces. Custom requires an aunt to be treated as a mother by her husband's brother's children. “We loved our aunt more than our fathers and mothers when we were growing up.”³⁰ Although it is natural for a woman to love her own children more than those of anyone else, a good aunt may often care for all the children of the household almost indiscriminately.

VII. Mother's Brother-Nephews and Nieces

“The traditional relationship between the child and the mother's brother (the *mama*) is one of casual affection,”³¹ but it has a special significance. Respect and love for the sister's son (the *bhayane*) are greatly emphasized in the Hindu way of life. One of Bhojpuri songs speaks of a girl who tells her brother, “Even if I give birth to a calf, treat it gently and call him a *bhayane*.”³² A well-known folktale manifests that this relationship is so sacred that not only human beings but also animals show deference to their sisters' children.³³ This tale tells how a tiger caught a cow in the forest and wanted to kill her. But before he killed the cow, the tiger asked, “What is your last desire?” The cow answered, “I want to go and feed my baby, and then I will come back to you.” The tiger said, “How can I trust you to come back?” The cow said, “I promise to return.” The cow went to her calf, tears rolling from her eyes. Her calf asked her again and again the reason for her tears, but she refused to say a word. After feeding the calf, the cow said goodbye to him and turned toward the forest. The calf, however, followed her. When the tiger saw her coming back, he was moved. With no fear for his own life, the calf went up to the tiger and called him *mama* (mother's brother). How could anyone kill one's sister's

29. FC 86:11. See also 103: 13-14.

30. Ross, *The Hindu Family in Its Urban Setting*, 167.

31. Cornell University, Subcontractor's Monograph, HRAF-44. Cornell-8: India. Sociological background. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1956. 258.

32. FC 28:9-11.

33. Story is entitled “Bagh Aur Ga Ke Katha.”

offspring, the animal thought to himself. So the tiger killed neither the cow nor the calf. "The mother's-brother having no great disciplinary responsibility for his nephew, is expected to be, and frequently is, a kind and benevolent figure who provides emotional refuge as well as material aid."³⁴ If a crisis occurs a child might look to his *mama* for the material and spiritual help which the latter is expected to provide.

Bhojpuri folksongs depict a sister's son as semi-divine. His person is considered sacred. Socio-religious tradition prohibits a man from spanking his sister's son; if he does his hands may shake in his old age. The wives of the *mama* worship their nephews as little gods. A barren woman may take her *bhayane* to a holy place and serve him a meal in order to procure a son for herself:³⁵ an occurrence that is mentioned in one of the folksongs. Even if she is not barren, she may take him with her to the temple or shrine in order to perform a particularly efficacious act of worship. The *bhayane* is more sacred to his *mami* (mother's brother's wife) than he is to his mother's brother. Although a boy pays infrequent visits to his mother's parental home, he is received there with great warmth and courtesy. From the time of his arrival until his departure every effort is made to please him and treat him with respect and honor. For this reason people are heard to say, "Children are spoiled at the *mama's* home."

VIII. Mother's Sister-Nephews and Nieces

A joking relationship and the customs of junior sororate marriage and sororal polygamy have in the past provided a man with ample opportunity to establish a close emotional tie with his wife's sisters. Unmarried girls are likely to look toward their elder sisters' husbands as their prospective husbands, and they feel quite attached to their brothers-in-laws' households. As children, sisters develop strong emotional bonds among themselves which may last all through their lives. Married sisters may wish to remain close to one another and often treat each other's sons with great affection. The aunt-child relationship is reflected in the following proverb in which a child says, "I do not care if my mother dies, as long as my mother's sister is alive." After a woman's death her sister sometimes replaces her so successfully that the children regard the aunt as their mother.

The relationship between mother's sisters and their nephews and nieces is not mentioned in any of the Ballia district folksongs. This may be due to the fact that the nature of the relationship provides little chance for the development of dramatic themes in the songs.

34. Mckim Marriott, *Village India* (Chicago, 1955), 233.

35. FC 20:11-12.

BHOJPURI-SPEAKING AREA.

