

# On the Position of Women in Indian Folk Culture

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## Introduction

Bhojpuri Pradesh is not a political division of the Indian Union, but a cultural unit. *Bhojpuri* is a dialect of Hindi and is spoken in the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh and western part of Bihar. It comprises nine districts in U.P. and five in Bihar. The total number of *Bhojpuri* speaking people is more than forty millions which can be favorably compared with Marathi and Bengali speaking people. *Bhojpuris* is a term applied to the people who are the inhabitants of this area. They are very energetic and adventurous and can face any hardship to make a living for themselves.

The folk literature of Bhojpuri is very rich and varied. Here,

a humble attempt has been made to present before the readers some social aspects of the people who live in the Bhojpuri Pradesh.

In Indian folk tales, we find a true and genuine picture of the Hindu society. The joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, and happiness and miseries of the common man are truly reflected there. The bright as well as the dark aspects of Hindu society have been depicted in these tales. We find here a fine picture of family life. The cordial relations between husband and wife, the intense devotion of a son towards his parents, the natural love of the brother for his sister—all these have found vivid expression in the folk tales of the rural people of North India. Similarly, the religious beliefs of the people, the people, the economic condition of the common man, the political state of affairs, the historical facts, and the geographical conditions of the rural folk have also been fully described in their literature.

### I. The place of women in Hindu Society

The study of folk tales leads us to the conclusion that women do not possess a very high position in society. They are treated as a personal property of the man who can dispose of them in any manner he likes. The wife has no separate existence apart from the husband who is all powerful. Kalidas has mentioned in *Shakuntala* that the overlordship of the husband is fully maintained as regards his wife.<sup>1</sup> Manu, the ancient Hindu Law giver, has proclaimed the dictum that women should never be let free.<sup>2</sup> These old ideas have found their echo in the folk narratives of the people.

#### 1) The woman as a daughter

The birth of a daughter is never welcomed in Hindu society. When the wife is pregnant, a special ceremony, which is known as *punsvan*, is performed, so that the child to be born should be a son and not a daughter.

It is said that the poor earth could not bear the burden of a daughter, so when the daughter is born it is pressed with her weight. The daughter is compared with the dark night, whereas the son is described as a full-moon-lit night. In a Bhojpuri

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1. Kalidasa—*Shakuntala* Act. IV.

2. *Manusmriti*.

song a mother says that had she been aware of the fact that a daughter is going to be born to her, she would have committed suicide. Another folk-song mentions the sorrows of a mother for having a daughter. She would have refused sexual relation with her husband if she had anticipated the birth of a girl.

In Hindu Society the importance of a wife is estimated by the number of sons she begets. If a wife does not give birth to a son, she is looked down upon by the members of her family; and even her husband does not pay her much respect. Even the treatment meted out to her in her confinement differs. If she begets a son, she is properly looked after, food and drink are supplied to her in plenty. She is provided with sufficient clothes to cover her body. But, on the other hand, if a daughter is born, she is given "grass and torn clothes" to make her bedding, fruits grown in forests are served to her. When a father comes to know that a daughter is born to him, he begins "to tremble with fear like the leaves of the lotus in the pond."

The auspicious songs which are sung on the birth of a son are known as 'Sohar.' But no such songs are sung by the women of the house on the occasion of a daughter's birth. A "sharp golden knife" is used to cut the placenta of the son, but a blunt iron knife is required for the same purpose on the birth of a daughter. In one of the folk-songs a father expresses the pangs of his heart thus:

"O daughter! as soon as you were born, I became  
the object of contempt and abuse for others."

The anxiety of the father begins to grow with the growing age of the daughter. When she attains the marriageable age, the father's trouble knows no bounds.<sup>3</sup> The father cannot have a sound sleep, owing to the anxieties of his daughter's marriage. It is well said in one of the folksongs that a father sleeps soundly whose young daughter is still unmarried. A youthful daughter requests her father to look for a suitable bridegroom for her. The father goes to the far off lands to Bengal and Orissa, but he does not find a suitable groom for her.

To choose a suitable bridegroom is very difficult affair. First

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3. The Word "Sasur," or father-in-law, is a kind of abuse in India. So when a daughter is born every father has to become father-in-law sooner or later. This fact is referred to in the above song.

the caste and *gotra* of the groom is considered.<sup>4</sup> Then the horoscopic calculations are made. If a suitable groom is found the greatest stumbling block is the problem of paying a lump-sum of money to the bridegroom. This sum is known as *tilak*. When a handsome payment is made, only then is the betrothal performed.

The daughter is regarded as a sacred trust only to be handed over to her real owner, i.e., her husband, after marriage. Kalidasa has echoed the same sentiment in his immortal drama. Kanva, the god-father of Shakuntala, at the time of her departure to her husband's house, says, "Verily, the daughter is another man's property. Today my heart feels a bit of lightness, as if I had returned the "trust" to the proper person.<sup>5</sup> Another Sanskrit poet expresses the same idea, "the daughter is a constant trouble to her father."

## 2) The woman as a wife

A very high place has been assigned to the wife in ancient Indian literature. Manu, the greatest Law giver, has laid the dictum, "Where the women are respected and worshipped, the gods live there." The better-half (wife) has been termed as the half body of the husband—*ardhangini*. Her constant company is essential for performing any religious ceremony. Hence she is termed as *dharmapatni* (religious wife). In the *Upanishads* it has been truly said "A man is incomplete without a wife." Similarly, many Vedic and Pauranic texts may be quoted in which the wife has been placed on a high pedestal.

But a critical study of the Hindi folk narratives reveals the fact that the wife has been relegated to a very humble status. She is regarded as the property of the husband. In one of the folk tales, a wife entreats her husband to sell off the buffalo and purchase a cot, so that the pair may have a sound sleep on it. But the husband refuses to do. "Instead of selling the buffalo I will sell you and will buy a bullock for cultivation." In certain songs references to physical punishments are also available. A married daughter says, "I will not go to my father-in-law's house because all sorts of punishments are given to me

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4. The ancient lineage in which a particular man is born.

5. Shakuntala Act IV.

there."<sup>6</sup> The daughter-in-law, often not only receives scoldings and threats but is even beaten with sticks on a small pretext. For the loss of the finger-ring, she is struck with a stick even by her husband. She loses her nose-ring and again she receives the same treatment at the hands of her mother and sister-in-law. The wife is made to work hard. She has to grind the flour-mill, prepare the food for a large family and has to cleanse a heap of utensils. Still she is given little to eat and drink. The house of the father-in-law is a veritable hell for her.<sup>7</sup>

She is never consulted in any household affairs, and her opinion is flouted on every occasion. During the life time of her mother-in-law she has no position in the house. She is always coaxed and cursed if she is not blessed with a son.

But there is also a brighter aspect to this picture. In many songs it is clearly mentioned that the husband should always be accompanied by his wife while performing all religious ceremonies. In marriage, the father could not perform the *kanyadan* (giving away the bride to the bridegroom) rite without his wife. In fact, on all religious and auspicious occasions, the wife is a constant companion of her husband and no ceremony is possible without her. If the wife is dead, her golden image is put there to represent her. The *agnihotra* (the offering of oblation into the fire) ceremony can never be accomplished in her absence. So, the importance of a wife in religious affairs is great.

The wife occupies the most important place in the family. She is the center of family life. She is called *gharani*—one who is the mistress of the house. *Griha laxmi*—the fortune of the house—is another term which is applied to her. We find a fine picture of the chastity of a Hindu woman when she threatens the younger brother of her husband (*devar*) to get his arms cut off as a punishment for his indecent jokes with her.<sup>8</sup> Many women have rescued their chastity and honour by plunging themselves into the deep waters (of rivers) rather than fall into the hands of men of bad characters.

The husband's love towards his wife is no less significant. The lover who returns to his home from a far off land, after so many years, begins to weep bitterly not to find his wife in his

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6. K. D. Upadhyaya, *Bhojpuri Folksongs*, Vol. I, (Prayag, Sambat 2000), p. 126.

7. Upadhyaya—B. F. S. Vol. I, p. 126.

8. Upadhyaya—M. F. S. Vol. I, p. 119.

house. Similarly, in another folk song, a husband threatens to kill his near and dear relation if he does not inform him on the whereabouts of his wife.

### 3) The plight of a barren woman

In folk literature the importance of a woman is estimated by the number of sons she possesses. So, the foremost desire of a married woman is to have a son. In order to achieve this end, she observes many fasts and undergoes many sufferings. There is a particular fast known as *jivit-putrika*, which is observed by women to have a son. It is believed that the woman who eats *satputia*, a kind of vegetable, on this day will be blessed with seven sons. In a *sohar*,<sup>9</sup> we find a reference to daily baths in the Ganges by an issueless woman. When the Ganges asks her the reason she replies, "O Mother! I have enough of gold and silver. I desire a son and no other thing."<sup>10</sup>

The woman without a child is known as *banjha* or barren. She is looked down upon in society, and even in the family she occupies no respect at all. Her very look (face) is regarded as inauspicious, and her participation in any religious ceremony in the family is forbidden. She is the very embodiment of misfortune and inauspiciousness. Nobody wants to see the face of a 'barren' woman in the morning. Even her husband does not speak to her sweetly. In order to fulfil her heart's desire a woman asks her companions to give her a son. But the companions refuse to do so. At last the barren woman requests a carpenter to carve a son out of wood for her, so that by placing the wooden child in her lap she may satisfy the desires of her heart.<sup>11</sup>

Again, she asks the wooden child to cry aloud, so that she may experience the pleasures of lulling the baby in her lap. But the wooden figure replies, "O Mother! had I been created by God, I would have cried, but how can one cry aloud who is made by a carpenter."<sup>12</sup>

In one of the grind-mill songs it is said that without a son the lap of a woman is vacant. The mother-in-law who does not

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9. A song sung on the occasion of the birth of a son.

10. Upadhyaya, *Bhojpuri Folk-literature* (Varanasi), p. 242.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

have a son is miserable. All the womenfolk of the village call her 'barren' and avoid her company. So, being disgusted with life, she wants to commit suicide by taking poison in order to remove the blot of 'barrenness.' She goes to the forest and begs a tigress that she could not devour her, but the tigress turns down her request with the remark that she could not devour her, as she herself might become barren. Even the (she) snake fears to bite her. The mother-earth denies her refuge, and even her own dear mother does not want to give her shelter because of her barrenness.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4) The position of a widow

The position of a widow is no better in Hindu society. She receives the same treatment in the family as the barren woman. It is a curious custom amongst the Hindus that a male member can marry times without number but the same right is denied to the female members of the family. Even the child widow—she who loses her husband in her teens—is strictly forbidden to marry again. The Hindu Law givers are against the re-marriage of a woman. A Hindu widow has no legal status in society. She can not even inherit the property of her husband. She is entitled only to a sustenance allowance which is known as *khoris*. Her financial condition is very pitiable, and she lives on the mercy of the members of her family. At times, she is compelled to go to the court in order to get her petty allowance. The sorrows of a widow know no bounds if she is also a 'barren.' Her legal status is practically nil, her financial resources are slender; and she occupies no respectable position in the sphere of religion. She is not allowed to participate in any religious ceremony of the household, and her presence is positively avoided. She is looked down upon by each member of her family, and her look is regarded as inauspicious.

Widowhood is regarded as a curse in Hindu society. The widow is cursed by all. The Law givers have declared that a widow is the result of the sins incurred by a woman in her previous births.

To live long with husband, i.e., *sadhava*, is the highest desire for a woman. She performs many fasts and observance, so that her husband may live for many years. A woman without hus-

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13. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 244.

band is as worthless as a river without water or the body without spirit.<sup>14</sup> A woman has no separate existence in the absence of her Lord.

A widow is deprived of all her ornaments and cosmetics. She should neither oil her hair nor apply collirium (*kajal*) to her eyes. The lip-stick is forbidden to her and so is the application of *mahavar*—red colour—to her feet. Coloured garments are a taboo to her, and she is entitled to put on only a white lower garment (*sari*). She is strictly prohibited to apply red-paste (*sindur*) to the parting of her hair (*mang*) and to put on glass bangles in her hands. There is a long list of 'do-nots' which she has to follow strictly.

Besides these, there are certain dietary restrictions imposed upon her. She is totally denied the pleasure of tasting a palatable plate of meat, and the garlic and the onion are not meant for her kitchen. The Bengali widow could not partake the pleasure of eating fish which is her staple food. Thus, observing so many restrictions and prohibitions, the Hindu widow becomes the shadow of her former self.

In one of the folk-songs a child-widow informs her father of her pitiable condition. She says, "O dear father! my head does not look nice (weeps) due to non-application of the red-paste, and the eyes weep in the absence of collirium. My lap is vacant without a son and the bed without a husband."

There is an adage in Hindi which means that no one can bear the burden of a widow. The time hangs heavily on her; she cannot pass her days easily. The husband is the only breadwinner for a wife, and she is totally dependent upon him. A widowed sister expresses her sense of utter sorrow and grief before her brother who has murdered her cruel husband. In a long song she says, "O my dear brother! now tell me, who will prepare my hut and who will support me in days to come." We find a similar expression in one of the songs in which a widow laments thus, "O my lord! my life is meaningless without you. I could have pinned my hope on my brother and the brother-in-law in your house. But in their absence whom should I expect to support me."<sup>15</sup>

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14. Tulasi Das—*Ramayan*.

15. Upadhyaya—*B. F. L.*, p. 246.

## 5) Ideal Chastity

The Hindu wife is utterly devoted to her husband. She cannot entertain the idea of another husband's company even in dreams. She has preserved her chastity at all costs. She has refused to accept "tons of gold and silver," and no amount of worldly riches has bartered with her chastity. The Hindu woman has suffered all trials and tribulations, and has undergone tremendous sufferings and sorrows, and has welcomed poverty and pain in order to preserve her honour and chastity.

We find a fine picture of a devoted wife whom temptations of wealth could not dislodge from the right track. A traveller who is enchanted by the charming beauty of a lady begs her love by offering her gold, silver and precious stones. But the honourable lady replies, "Let your gold be destroyed and the pearls reduced to ashes. How can I maintain my honour by losing my chastity?"<sup>16</sup> A similar idea has been expressed in another folk tale in which a prince offers money to win the love of a fair lady, but without any success.

A woman who wants to cross the river requests a sailor to bring his boat. But the wicked fellow presents her with a necklace and a ring to win her love. She flatly refuses his offer, and swims across the flooded river. In order to wreak vengeance of this insult, she asks her brother to lynch him.<sup>17</sup> *Gopi*, a lover, falls in love with *Maina* and wants to buy her chastity with some coins of gold. When *Maina* goes to her father-in-law's house after her marriage, *Gopi*, the lover, follows her in the garb of a mendicant. But *Maina* rebukes him for his love and asks him to commit suicide by drowning himself in the river.

Many women have played the part of heroines who remind us of the brave deeds of the heroes of Rajasthan. Some of them have rescued their honour from so-called lovers at the point of arms. It is a well known fact of history that Padmini, the great Rajput heroine, saved her honour by playing *jauhar*, i.e., plunging herself into the blazing fire. But there is no dearth in Hindi folk-literature of Padminis who have sacrificed their life for their honour. We find a reference in the story of one of the kings, named Jaysingh, who became enamoured of the charming beauty of Mohini and asks her to give him her hand in marriage.

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16. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 247.

17. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 248.

Mohini at once becomes enraged at this proposal and thrusts her sharp dagger into his heart and this puts an end to his life. Similarly, a noble lady Reshami threatens a police officer for his indecent proposal and scolds him, telling him to burn his beard.

We need not multiply instances. Suffice it to say that the idea of chastity and devotion to one's husband or lover is not confined only to human beings, but the same is found in the animal kingdom also.

In one of the folk tales it is so mentioned that a she-deer asks Queen Kaushalya to give her the skin of her husband who has been killed for the royal kitchen. She will hang the skin of her husband on the tree and console her desolate heart to see it again and again.

## II. The custom of *sati*

The custom of *sati* (self-immolation) was prevalent in ancient India, and it reached its climax in the Mediaeval Rajput period of Indian history. The Hindu Law-givers in the past laid down the rule that a wife (who is the half of the body of her husband), should sit on the pyre of her dead husband and thus end her life. This idea of *sati* was carried too far in mediaeval times when hundreds of women jumped into the burning fire to save their honour and chastity from the hands of an unscrupulous enemy. This custom was known as '*jauhar*.' In the course of time, the custom of *sati*, which was spontaneous and voluntary, became rigid, and it was compulsory for every woman to climb up the burning pyre of her husband and thus end her life despite her unwillingness to do so. Thanks to the untiring efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the pioneer of Indian renaissance, the custom was prohibited by law in the thirties of the last century.

This custom of *sati* has found expression in many a Hindi folk-song. In a grind-mill song we find a reference that the wife of Basti Singh, who has been murdered by his brother, makes necessary arrangements for his pyre. She is consigned to the flames with the corpse of her husband and reaches heaven with him.<sup>18</sup> The story of Bhagawati, who was the most devoted wife, tells a similar tale. Her husband is killed in a fight. She prays God: "If I am a chaste woman, let fire be produced from

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18. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 251.

my lower garment." By the grace of God fire was produced from her garment, and thus she was reduced to ashes with the dead body of her husband.<sup>19</sup> A woman whose husband has been murdered by her brother-in-law wanders in the forest collecting the pieces of sandle-wood to prepare the pyre. As a proof of her chastity, the fire comes out from her garment and the couple is reduced to ashes.<sup>20</sup>

### III. Testing the chastity of women by ordeals

The system of ordeals was prevalent in ancient India. It was a means to know the true facts regarding thefts, borrowing of money, boundary dispute, the gift of land, and taking away beasts forcibly. In all such cases, the truth was extracted from the culprit by applying ordeals to him. When it was deemed quite difficult to find out the culprit by means of evidence, written or otherwise, only then the ordeals were applied. These ordeals are known as *divya* in Sanskrit which means "divine-method" of finding out a thing. It is termed as *kiriya*, i.e. swearing, in Hindi folk-literature. According to some law gives the ordeal and the swearing are two different things. They are of the opinion that the ordeal leads to immediate decision in a case when swearing leads to delay.

Narad says that when no evidence is available in a case, then the ordeal should be applied. Byas, another authority, lays stress on both the system, i.e., the ordeal and the swearing ceremony. Suffice it to say that in ancient India the ordeal was a well established practice in deciding law-suits.

Besides legal cases, the ordeal was applied even to ordinary affairs of daily life. Narad says that the chastity of a woman may be examined by means of ordeals. The historic example of the five ordeals of Sita, the wife of Ramchandra, is well-known in the annals of India. Ordeals are applied to various cases referred to above. But in Indian folk-literature, it is for testing the chastity of a woman that the ordeals are used.

There are several kinds of ordeals mentioned in the *Smritis*, i.e., (1) balance ordeal, (2) fire ordeal, (3) poison ordeal, (4) water ordeal, etc. But the last three ordeals are the most important. In folk literature the fire and water ordeals are fre-

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19. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

quently described. In order to test the chastity of a woman, she is thrown into burning fire. If she comes out unhurt and unburnt, she is hailed as a chaste woman. But if she sustains burns, her chastity becomes doubtful. In the water ordeal, the culprit is thrown into the water. If she is drowned, her chastity is not proved. Another ordeal which is also referred to is the oil ordeal. The culprit is forced to put her hand in hot oil in a cauldron. If she is not burnt her chastity and honour are above suspicion.

In a folksong it is mentioned that once Lord Shiva doubted the character of his wife. Parvati, his spouse, proves her innocence by going through fire and water ordeals. When she puts her hand into the fire, it becomes as cold as ice and when she jumps into the Ganges, she comes out unhurt.<sup>21</sup> Similar instances may be multiplied in which women have vindicated their honour and chastity by submitting to various kinds of ordeals.

#### IV. The wife in family life

India has a joint family system where all the members of the family live together and partake of common joys and sorrows. Generally there is only one bread winner in the family, and all other members are dependent upon his earnings.

In a society where several members of the family live under one roof it is but natural that their mutual relations may be pleasant or otherwise. There are some members of the family whose relations are always tightened. For example, the relation between the mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law, as depicted in the folk literature, is unpleasant. The mother-in-law has been described as the embodiment of cruelty, wickedness and apathy. Her treatment of her daughter-in-law is always bad. She speaks in a language which is taunting. She allots to her much work to do and abuses her daughter-in-law when she is unable to perform the same. That is why she is known as *daruniya*—the cruel one. Similarly the relations between the Nanand, husband's sister, and the Bhavaj are not happy. Like the mother-in-law, the sister-in-law is also depicted as a cruel creature. She is the natural enemy of her brother's wife. She always speaks bad of her and abuses her even on small pretext. In one of the folksongs it is mentioned that the mother-in-law

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21. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., pp. 257-58.

orders her daughter-in-law to powder wheat in a big basket (i.e., in a big quantity). She is unable to grind the wheat and begins to weep.<sup>22</sup> In another song, the Nanad and Bhavaj are mentioned going to fetch water from a well. The Bhavaj goes to see the temple of a Yogi and returns late. For this very reason the Nanad doubts her chastity, and in spite of her request she speaks to her brother about this fact. Thus, her constant effort is to create bitterness in the heart of her brother against her Bhavaj. But the role of the brother's wife is no less cruel.

She invites her to drink poison and puts her life to an end. When the Nanad goes to her husband's house, her mother and brother weep bitterly but the Bhavaj does not shed even the crocodile tears. The mother presents her with clothes, the father gives a cow, and the brother offers her a piece of opium. In one of the Sohar songs we find a reference that a Bhavaj threatens her Nanad to thrust a knife into her bosom if she will not help her in her confinement. It is difficult to decide who is more cruel—the Bhavaj or the Nanad. Even the classical Sanskrit poets have described the sister-in-law as an expert in speaking taunting words which pierce the heart.<sup>23</sup>

The relation between the younger brother of the husband (Devar) and the elder brother's wife (Bhavaj) are generally cordial and happy. The Devar often makes jokes with his Bhavaj. She never takes them ill, rather welcomes them. In ancient India, the Devar was permitted to marry the wife of his elder brother under certain circumstances which was known as *niyoga*. This custom was sanctioned by the Dharmashastra and none looked down upon it. It seems that the privilege of cutting jokes with the Bhavaj is a cultural survival of that ancient custom. However, the relationship between Devar and Bhavaj which is described in folk literature is not of a high order. The passion for sex plays a predominant part in it. A Devar requests his Bhavaj to have sexual relation with him while his brother is in a far off land. But, in many folksongs the Devar is depicted as a messenger and helper of his Bhavaj. She asks him to convey her pathetic message to her husband who has not returned home from distant land for many years.

In ancient India, polygamy was a legal institution, and it is still recognised by law under certain circumstances. It is a com-

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22. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 273.

23. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 272.

mon adage that even a wooden co-wife is never liked. The jealousy of a co-wife has become proverbial. A woman can never welcome her husband even to speak with other women. She desires to be the sole mistress of her husband's heart. We find a reference in a folksong that a husband threatens his wife to marry again. She replies, "It is better to drink poison and die than to bear the torments of a co-wife." A woman rebukes her husband for marrying another girl in a distant land and bringing her home with him. She asks him, "O dear one! why are you angry with me? The taunting words of the co-wife are piercing my heart and thus I am trembling with fear."<sup>24</sup> In another folksong a wife asks her husband the reason of his remarriage. She says "O dear one! I am the garland of your neck (i.e., most lovely to you); why have you brought a co-wife? Had I been a barren woman, or black in colour like a cuckoo, then your remarriage would have been justified. But my slender body is as shining as gold. Then why have you brought a co-wife for me?"<sup>25</sup>

Frequently clashes and fights occur due to the bitter relations between co-wives. A wedding song depicts the horrible picture of two co-wives fighting together by scathing and pulling each other's braid or hair. The husband, a witness to this sad scene, weeps and weeps sitting on the ground and laments over his misfortune. Really, a co-wife is regarded as the source of constant trouble and conflict in the family.

However, there is also a brighter to the life of a family. The relationship between husband and wife, mother and daughter, and sister and brother is very cordial and affectionate. Also a fine picture of the conjugal relation presents itself. The husband wants to go to a distant land for a living there. His wife does not wish that he should go away on his mission. Therefore she requests the "Lord of waters" to rain for hours so that the *muhurt*, the auspicious time of the departure of her husband, may be delayed. In another folksong, a wife insists on going with her husband to a far off land. He explains to her the difficulties. But still the wife goes on passing the point, "I will bear out the pangs of hunger and thirst and will try to make all arrangements for your comfort. "O dear one! I will leave aside my father

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24. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 279.

25. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 280.

and mother and be your constant companion."<sup>26</sup> This reminds one of the epic story of Ram and Sita where the latter requests the former repeatedly to accompany him in the forest.

The wife of a farmer whose husband never returns to his home in the night, requests the bull, who pulls the plough, to injure her husband so that he may return home to get his wounds bandaged and properly treated. This request seems to be a bit curious, but there is no other way for the wife to meet her husband.

The wife occupies a soft corner in the heart of her husband. A lover who returns to his home after a long interval of years, weeps bitterly when he comes to know that his wife has found a watery grave. A lover who is unable to bear the separation of his wife requests her to leave her ornaments with him, while going to her father's house so that he may derive consolation from the sight of the ornaments.

The pure and the unselfish love of the sister for her brother has become proverbial in Indian literature. There are many fasts and festival which are observed by the sister for the good health and welfare of her brother. The fast of Pindia is observed by an unmarried Hindu girl for a month, so that her brother may live in peace and plenty. On the second day of the bright half of the month of *Kartik* (September-October) which is known as *Bhatridwitiya* or *Bhaiya Duja*, a brother pays a visit to his sister at home and puts *tilak* on his forehead and offers him sweets to eat. The brother presents her with some clothes and money.

It is regarded sacred and auspicious for a brother and sister to have a dip together on this day in the waters of the Jamuna at Mathura. Such a day in the waters of the Jamuna at Mathura leads them to heaven. On the fifteenth day of the bright half of the month of *Shrawan* (July-August), which is known as *Raksha-Bandhan*, sisters tie a thread around the wrist of their brothers. This thread is known as *Rakhi* or *Raksha*, which means protection. It is believed that this ceremony protects the brother from all impending disasters at least for a year.

It is well-nigh impossible to record the over-whelming joy of a sister's heart when the brother pays a visit to her in her husband's house. When she sees, as the songs depict, through the window of the house her brother coming on foot slowly, her

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26. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 267.

joy knows no bounds, she rebukes her mother-in-law when she orders her to serve coarse rice to her brother. She refuses to obey her and prepares palatable dishes for him, and serves the food in a plate of gold.

In another folksong we find a sister asking the professional singers to sing the songs of joy as her brother approaches her house. She requests her mother-in-law to prepare *puris*—a circular bread fried in clarified butter, for him to eat. A man leaving his hearth and home becomes a mendicant. He goes a-begging and by chance reaches the house of his sister. While giving him alms, the sister recognizes him. She weeps after seeing the wretched condition of her brother and requests him to live with her till the end of life. The story of Gopichand, who pays a visit to his sister in spite of his mother's insistence not to do so, is a fine example of brotherly love. Many examples may be quoted from Indian history where brothers have laid down their lives for the sake of the honour of their sisters.

The mother's love for the daughter is natural. She loves her well-being. In the songs of Gavana—the departure of the daughter to her husband's house—the genuine love of the mother is found, she weeps bitterly and profusely so that the river Ganga is flooded. She sends a message to the mother-in-law that she should treat her daughter with love and should take all care so that she may not feel the pangs of separation. A mother rebukes his son who has returned home without taking the weeping sister from her husband's home. A sister relates to her brother the troubles and miseries of her house—Sasural—but she insists not to tell these to her mother because she will be grieved to hear her pitiable condition.

#### V. The marriage of children

In the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh and western part of Bihar there is the custom of child marriage which inspite of legal prohibitions still persists. The early marriage of a child is regarded as a symbol of wealth and honour. The richer the parents, the earlier the marriage of their sons and daughters in tender age who thus become free from all anxieties. It is a strange sight to see the little boys sitting in the palanquins going to marry girls of tender age who know nothing about sex.

In Hindi folksongs there are many references to the pathetic condition of married girls. A young girl is married to a little

boy. She expresses the agony of her heart in the following words, "Lord Shiva has blessed other people with wealth and gold, but alas, he has given me a little child for my husband. My whole body burns with anger when I sleep with him on the cot. In the night, he begins to fear and cry out when he hears the howling of jackals. He is so ignorant about sex that he does not even know how to loosen the strings of my bodice and to untie the knot of the lower garment."<sup>27</sup>

In another song, a woman worships Lord Shiva in order to get a handsome husband. But unfortunately she is married to a child. Thus lamenting her pitiable condition, she expresses her sorrows in the following words: "O my companions! I collected flowers from the garden and offered them to Shiva. But what was the result of my devotion to the Lord? A little husband has been assigned to my lot. My (girl) friends younger than myself have been blessed with children, but, I am unfortunate. How can I console my desolate heart?"<sup>28</sup> A Kahar<sup>29</sup> song speaks of a child husband whose young wife makes him drink milk in the day and massages his body in the night. Not only men, but gods also are described as having married at an early age. Ramachandra weeps to find his wife Sita of very tender age.

## VI. Marriages in old age

In Ancient India, polygamy was the order of the day. Men were free to marry as many times as they liked, but the same right was denied to the womenfolk. The result was that kings and noblemen had hundreds of wives in their harems which later on became hot-beds of intrigues and conspiracies. Polygamy led to many social and political evils. It practically ruined the peace and happiness of the family. In the royal palace only the principal queen (*Patrani*) was the object of love and respect, and other queens lived by her husband. It means that other co-wives led a miserable life in the house.

A picture of polygamy is described in folksongs. A faithful wife asks her husband, "What things will you bring for me when

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27. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 282.

28. Upadhyaya—B. F. L., p. 282.

29. A particular low Hindu caste.

returning from the far off land?" The husband replies, "I will bring a tight bodice for you and a young and beautiful Bengali wife for myself." A bread-winner returns home after a long time and he finds his wife slow in giving him a warm reception. At once he becomes angry and thus threatens her, "Had I known you to be such, I would have married a Bengali woman." A wife requests her husband not to murder his brother for her sake. If the husband kills his brother, he will become helpless in this world. But in the case of his wife's tragic death he can have another wife. A king married a woman of low caste. When the memory of his first wife flashes on his mind, he weeps bitterly. A man is extremely sorry because he is not fortunate to marry a beautiful wife. His mother consoles him and says, "O my dear son! do not be sorry; I shall get you married to a fair lady." We find even gods marrying a second time. Lord Shiva goes out to a far off land in search of a livelihood and returns home with another girl. When Parvati, his first wife, asks the reasons for his second marriage, he simply replies, "That it happened was my destiny, what could I do?"

Polygamy leads to old-age marriage. As there is no legal or social age-limit, people go on marrying several wives even in their old age. Generally, people who have no male issue from their former wives, marry again in their old age in the hope of being favoured with a son. Sometimes such a marriage results in tragedy and they breathe their last few months after their last marriage, leaving the newly-wed wife at the mercy of the gods.

Greedy people marry their young daughters off to old men so that after the death of the old man they may inherit his property. Sometimes greedy fathers sell their daughters to rich men and demand from them a heavy amount of bride-money. Thus, the young girls are sacrificed at the altar of wealth and riches. Scenes are not rare of old men with grey hair on their heads, with no teeth in their mouths and with failing eyesight, who are going to marry a little girl. Due to the *tilak* ceremony in which a large amount of money is paid to the bridegroom, it becomes difficult for a girl's father to find a suitable husband for her. So due to poverty, this father is compelled to marry his daughter to an old man who does not demand any money.

We find the pathetic condition of a young girl, who has been married to an old man. She says, "My greedy father has married me to this old man for the sake of money. Thus he has ruined

my life. I feel ashamed to go near him. When I go to the garden for a walk, the garden laughs at me by addressing me as the 'wife of that old man'." A graphic description of an old husband is presented in another folksong. The wife says, "When I went to sleep on the cot, I saw the old man sitting there. I was awfully afraid to see his white beard and his black and ugly body."

There are a good number of folksongs in which the pathetic lamentations of young ladies have found expression. They feel the agony of this unsuitable marriage and curse their parents for their action. Marriage is said to be the union of two souls. But an old marriage is nothing but a marriage of convenience.

#### VII. The *parda system* or the seclusion of women

In India, practically, there is no *parda*<sup>30</sup> system anymore. The ladies in Assam, Bengal, Punjab, Maharashtra and Gujarat do not observe any *parda*. In Southern India the women mix freely with men. They are free to go anywhere they like. Even in the western districts of Uttar Pradesh this system is no longer found. It is in the eastern district of Uttar Pradesh and in the western part of the State of Bihar that this old custom still lingers on. Here the system of *parda* is observed rigorously. No woman is allowed to go out of the house in daytime or at night. She could not and should not mix with the male members of the village. She could not talk with any outsider. Even in her household, she is prohibited to meet the elder male members. We find that women observe *parda* even among themselves. A newly wed girl will cover her face before the elder ladies of the house. The daughter-in-law observes *parda* before her mother-in-law. A wife cannot meet even her husband in daytime and cannot talk to him freely.

In one of the folksongs it is said that a husband goes to meet his wife stealthily at night. Owing to *parda* he cannot meet her in daytime. A mother speaks highly of her daughter-in-law before her son saying that none can see the toes of her feet.

When a bride goes to her husband's house after the marriage, she sits in a palanquin which is borne on shoulders by four men.

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30. Veiling of the face of the women.

The doors of the carriage are shut and it is covered with a sheet of cloth so that none could peep into it on the way.

The *parda* system leads to many misunderstandings and clashes in the family. The daughter-in-law cannot explain her position before other members of the house in a conflict with her mother-in-law who blames her for many acts of omission and commission.