

Jalwa Puja of Haryana, India: A Feminist Perspective

Pavitra Kumari¹

Abstract

Rituals and ceremonies are an expression of the cultural consciousness embedded in the tradition and heritage of the past. Each culture has its own grammar, that is, its own rules of composition of meaning which creates the reality of that culture. These rituals along with the proverbs, riddles, myths, legends, tales, rhymes, songs, charms, performances, and more are a system of symbolic acts, just as language is a system of symbols¹. In order to understand any ritual it is crucial to bear in mind that the ritual is part of a grammar particular to a culture and will not make meaning outside the context. As a particular expression would communicate no meaning if taken outside the context of that language, so would not a ritual or a symbol tried to be understood in isolation. Therefore, it becomes important to understand the collective psyche² of the community. It is this collective psyche, which is given expression through various rituals and ceremonies. These expressions can in turn be used in order to understand the constituents of the collective consciousness of a community. The present article tries to understand this relationship between rituals and community through investigating a particular ceremony in a particular context.

Keywords: Ceremony, Feminist Perspective, Jalwa Puja, Performance, Ritual, Social identity

Introduction

Jalwa Puja as the term itself suggests is a prayer offered to jal, that is, water. This ritual is performed across all regions of Haryana with subtle but crucial variations. Because of the limited scope of the article the discussion here is limited only to one particular area in Haryana that is Satrod Kalan near Hissar³. This ritual is usually performed by the mother known in the local language as Jacha after 35 or 37 days of delivery of the child. The purpose of the ritual is multiple and so are its significations. The ritual interweaves the personal and social functions and requirements together. It becomes an occasion that celebrates the new life which has joined the family and through the family has become an intrinsic part of a community. This community is going to become a marker of the child's identity and shape the way the child would define his/her existence in this world, and the mode of its expression for the rest of his/her life. The ritual also embodies the role of the child within the family and the community, and finally it marks the symbolic re-entry of the mother into the social space.

The ritual is mostly performed in the afternoon but before the sunset. The reasons behind the choice of the time are practical. As it is a community event and requires the participation of village women the time period is in accordance with their daily time table. The village women usually get free from their chores in the afternoon hence the participation becomes convenient for them all. The duration of the puja⁴ is usually between 10-15 minutes. Though, the whole ceremony takes around an hour to complete.

During the interviews an interesting fact revealed itself. Even though, the nomenclature of the ritual remains the same in the case when a daughter is born but the idiosyncrasies in the performance of the ritual are huge. Another intriguing fact to note is that the difference in the performance of the ritual in the case of the birth of a boy remains almost

¹E60A, 3rd Floor, Mahavir Enclave Part-1, New Delhi-45.

E-mail Id: pavitrachaudhary91@gmail.com

Orcid Id: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9746-0027>

How to cite this article: Kumari P. Jalwa Puja of Haryana, India: A Feminist Perspective. *J Adv Res Eng & Edu* 2017; 2(1): 21-24.

uniform across the regions, but the varieties found in the case of the birth of a girl are multiple⁵. The article would first look at the performance of the ritual in the former case.

The birth of a son is a much awaited and much celebrated event in any patriarchal society but more so in Haryanvi society. And the ritual of Jalwa Pujan reflects and reinforces sense of jubilation, significance, and pride associated with the birth of the family heir. On the day of the performance of the ritual the brother and this is important only the brother of the Jacha⁶ brings several gifts for the new born son, the mother, and the in-laws. The gifts include things ranging from clothes for the whole family, jewels for the son, sometimes even for the mother, toys, Palna⁷, utensils and vessels, sweets and fruits, ghee, goond⁸, and etc. the list can be never ending. The economic and material basis to the rituals becomes pretty evident to any observer at this juncture. But the most significant thing that the brother brings with him is a yellow and a red colored dupatta⁹ which is called Piliya¹⁰. Piliya functions as a marker for the woman who has delivered a son and has completed her duty of providing the family its heir. It is brought only by the brother on the birth of the eldest son of her sister. This is for the first time after the birth of the child that the woman wears new clothes, because during the period of Japa¹¹, she is supposed to wear old clothes. The new clothes and jewels she puts on are those that are brought by her brother. She gets ready like a newly wedded bride.

Women from the village are invited to celebrate the occasion. The village women sing songs throughout on their way to the village well. The songs are specific to the occasion and express the realities of the culture weaved around these rituals. All the songs are oral, have been composed by women and are sung by women folks. A few of these songs provide a feminist perspective to this ritual. They are essentially radical and subversive in nature and upturn the conventional conception of the community. Following song is one example of the alternative narratives available within the dominant perspective of patriarchy.

Udja udja re kale se kaag, meri maa ne ja ke keh diye
Teri beti ne jamya nandlal teri beti maange piliya,
Udja udja re kale se kaag, meri beti ne ja ke keh diye
Meri chaldi na kunbe mein baat, main kyukar bheju piliya,
Udja udja re kale se kaag, meri bhabhi ne ja ke keh diye
Teri nandi ne jamya nandlal, teri nandi maange piliya,
Udja udja re kale se kaag, meri nandi ne ja ke keh diye
Va to roj jamyegi nandlal, main kyukar bhejun piliya,
Udja udja re kale se kaag, meri bebbe ne ja ke keh diye
Teri bebbe ne jamya nandlal, teri bebbe maange piliya,
Udja udja re kale se kaag, meri bebbe ne ja ke keh diye

va to roj jamyegi nandlal, main roj bheju piliya.

(Fly fly o black crow, go and tell my loving mother,

Her daughter has given birth to Nandlal¹², Her daughter is asking for Piliya,

Fly fly o black crow, go and tell my loving daughter,

None listens to me in the household, how can I bestow Piliya?

Fly fly o black crow, go and tell my loving sister-in-law,

Her Nanadi¹³ has given birth to Nandlal, Her Nanadi is asking for Piliya,

Fly fly o black crow, go and inform my Nanadi,

She will bear Nandlal every other day, how can I send her Piliya?

Fly fly o black crow, go and tell my sister,

Her sister has given birth to Nandlal, Her sister desires Piliya,

Fly fly o black crow, go and tell my loving sister,

She will bear Nandlal every other day; I will send her the Piliya every time.)

The translation of the song with all its connotations and signified meanings is difficult. Like the term Nandlal that has been used for the new born boy. This term connotes the divinity and significance that is associated with the birth of a son. Despite this the song makes its subversive, satirical, and ironical tone pretty evident. Interestingly all the characters in the song are women, but their status in the society is different. These hierarchies are referred to in the song. The girl who is in need of support from her family occupies an inferior position because she is dependent in this particular context. The poor mother again is shown to be helpless because she is no longer the master of the house. On the other hand the sister-in-law who here is the one from whom the support has been solicited attains a position of power. It is fascinating to note that all these women are aware that it is a ritual that has to be performed and is a compulsion. This very centrality of the ritual decides their position vis-à-vis one another. So the song recognizes the actual social and economic consequences and impact of these rituals. The women then are aware. Furthermore, it shows how these relationships then have been naturalized and women made to believe in them. But the song gains a satiric and ironic edge by the virtue of its tone, and how it ends. It is finally the sister, on whose birth no celebrations occurred who becomes the savior of her sister. She happily takes up the responsibilities that are a son's. Hence, the song not merely investigates into the ritual and its social significance; it also in more than one ways satirizes it or at least presents it ironically. These songs give an alternative, if not a feminist perspective to this whole ritual at large. The ritual is also an all women affair. The women create a

space for themselves within a ritual which celebrates the patriarchal setup.

When the women reach the well the Jacha worships water, through bajra¹⁴ which is anaz¹⁵, corn which is crucial to the agrarian economy of Haryana, red and yellow thread, colors which are considered auspicious, and gur¹⁶. As a symbolic act she fills up the pot made of copper which is again considered sacred and pure in the culture, with water and carries it back into the house. The Prashad¹⁷ is distributed among seven young boys of the village. The women then return home in the similar manner singing songs and performing. The family also arranges for food and drinks for the villagers and relatives on the same day, this function is called Disotan.

On the birth of the daughter people do not usually wait for 35 days after the delivery. The ritual is performed 25 days or a month after the birth of a daughter. In the villages near Narwana in Haryana the woman puts on the clothes brought by her brother and goes to the place where cattle are tied, there she worships the small pole known as khunta in the local language, to which the cows or other cattle are tied. No one accompanies her. In Satrod Kalan, a village near Hisar, the woman collects dust and dirt from the house and along with her sister-in-law goes to throw it on Kurdi, place where villagers throw the garbage and offers her prayers there. Like the symbolic work of fetching water to the house hold on the birth of a son, these are some of the symbolic works that the woman is required to perform on the birth of a daughter.

Now as has been already stated in the introduction, rituals can be seen as an expression of the culture they belong to. This ritual too then is intertwined with the culture it belongs to. Haryana is a patriarchal state, the society is male dominated, and as the sex ratio of Haryana itself reflects, 857 girls to 1000 boys, the birth of a girl child is not considered a matter of rejoice. From the very birth of the child then, he/she is introduced into this cultural milieu symbolizing in a way their status and function in this society. The significance and the importance of the ritual as told by the native women is discussed below, these women though were unaware of the origin of the ritual. The reasons recorded were:

1. Celebration of the happiness.
2. Praying for the well being of the child and the mother.
3. The mother who does not involve herself in any household work, which is her basic function within the society until the ritual is performed, enters back into the social and community life with it. And the work she does is symbolic marker of this.

Now, the works that she performs are ideologically laden, an ideology which formulates the realities of the people. Water is the most essential, the basic necessity for the

survival of humankind. This symbolizes the necessity of a son for the survival of a family name. Also, it is something that she brings back home, emblematic of the fact that birth of more sons is welcome whereas that of a daughter is not. The ritual resonates and enforces social roles and functions particular to a gender. Dichotomy between the two genders is visible across India including Haryana, but this particular ritual demonstrates the atmosphere that surrounds the birth of a son. It contextualizes the whole scenario.

The ritual is a cultural one, a social one, the importance of a son in a patriarchal set up is economic one, the fact that who will inherit the name, the property of the father is of utmost significance. This economic condition is wrapped into a cultural and social necessity of a son. It will become clear by looking at this very ritual or by hearing a few songs sung on the occasion, one of which has been quoted before in the article and which engages deeply with these notions. The ritual will begin with the acceptance of the gifts brought by the brother of the woman who has delivered the child. The songs sung are mostly in reference to this aspect only, where the woman sends a message to the brother demanding Piliya, just like the song that has been quoted before in the article. The dependence of a woman on the father, husband, brother, and son are very evident in the folksongs of the state. The presence of a male member is crucial to her identity. There is not a single song that has been addressed to a girl infant; all the songs of celebration have been addressed to a male infant.

During the interviews the question was posed to women that why having a son was so important for the society? None of them accepted the discrimination was based on the economic factors, but because a son is essential for the social existence of a woman. One requires the presence of a brother in order to perform various rituals ranging from child birth, marriage, to death. To an outsider these reasons might appear just a façade to justify the birth of a son. But what was striking was the fact that these rituals are so important and crucial to the women themselves, they are so indispensably linked and intertwined with way of life and the society that the women are unable to look through it. On all social occasions the presence of a brother is essential. The presence of a brother then becomes a necessity for her so that she can actively participate in all these ceremonies which create an identity within the social system. The presence of the brother is a requirement then to define her. These rituals, these ceremonies, which are performed during her marriage or gifts that are brought to her every year actually become crucial arbiter of her happiness within the culture.

Like all traditions, this tradition has passed from one generation to the other. The interviews were fortunately enough conducted with women belonging to three different generations. Like all traditions this tradition has undergone

changes too. When questioned now, none of the women was out rightly able to support the birth of a son over a girl; they tried to justify it through social and cultural mores. This change even though minor could be seen as an effect of the changing times in India. Where earlier it was considered a social taboo for bringing Piliya or observing Disotan on the birth of a daughter many people do that on the birth of a daughter now. But these cases are exceptional. One woman who had delivered a daughter and her brother did nonetheless brought Piliya for her she had to perform Jalwa Pujan by throwing garbage out of her house. And even though she loves her daughter a lot, there is still a lot of pressure on her to deliver a son.

One of the reasons which become socially important for the birth of a son may be that he is considered the support for the parents in the old age. The married woman also has a Mayka¹⁸ after the death of her parents. Now in an increasingly globalized world where even the sons prefer living in a nuclear family instead of a joint one, the importance of a son is not as necessary as it was earlier. Still the birth of a son is much harped upon and the equality of the gender which our constitution talks about, and all the rights and freedom associated with it will take some time to translate into reality. These realities have not yet become intrinsic to the social and communal psyche. The resistance and gradual change can be seen in the coming generations, who have begun questioning the validity of such rituals in changing times.

The changes are reflected in the way women dress up, instead of wearing Daman, Kurta, and Chundar¹⁹ women today wear suit salwar or a saree depending on their convenience. Instead of walking long distances in search of wells they can also perform rituals on tanks nearby. The ritual then like the culture and people is evolving and must have never remained in a state of stasis. Because these rituals are a result of an oral culture which is reflection of its people, it is not rigid; it adapts itself with the changing times. Hence, it remains an integral part of that culture. In studying the development and evolvement of a ritual one can actually trace the cultural history of a specific place. The rituals, ceremonies, oral tradition then become an accumulation of the history of a community.

Notes

1. This understanding of culture has been borrowed from Saussure's understanding of Langue and Parole in the field of linguistics.
2. Borrowing the idea of 'Collective Unconscious' by Carl Jung.

3. The source material for the paper has been collected through field study and interviews conducted by the author in the referred area, along with interviews of women belonging to a few other regions of Haryana.
4. Performance of the ritualistic prayer which is offered to the village well during the ritual.
5. During the interview with the women married into Satrod Kalan, Haryana and Dharodi Near Narwana three local variants of the performance of the ritual on the birth of the daughter were revealed to the author. It is a supposition that more local variants would be found on further research.
6. Local term for the mother who has recently delivered a child.
7. Cradle.
8. It is a local dish made specifically for the woman who has delivered a child. It provides the woman strength and energy and is thought necessary in re-building her health and also providing nourishment to the child through her breast milk. The major ingredients include ghee, sugar, Euryale Ferox, almonds, walnuts, goond, etc.
9. "a long, multi-purpose scarf that is essential to many South Asian women's suits and matches the woman's garments".
10. The root word for Piliya is Pila which would mean yellow in English.
11. The period between the delivery of the child and the performance of Jalwa Pujan.
12. The term has been used as an adjective, referring to Lord Krishna himself.
13. Sister-in-law (husband's sister).
14. Pearl Millet.
15. Corn.
16. Jaggery.
17. Sacrament.
18. Parents' home.
19. Traditional clothing of women in Haryana.

References

1. Bharna D. On Jalwa Pujan. Personal interview. 30 September, 2014.
2. Jung CG. Collected Works. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London. 1970; 10: 185.
3. Saussure FD. Linguistics and the Overall Theory of Language. Course in General Linguistics. London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd. 1983.
4. Sunita R, Saroj B. On Jalwa Pujan. Personal interview. 1 October, 2014.