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## Fasts, Feasts, and the Slovenly Woman Strategies of Resistance among North Indian Potter Women

**Abstract:**

On the occasion of *Jiutiya*, a woman's *vrata* (ritual fast) in eastern Uttar Pradesh, potter women near Banaras tell of the *phūharī* (slovenly or disorderly woman) who is ultimately rewarded with half the kingdom for her outrageous behaviors of overeating and defiling food and even the gods. The teller of this tale also related personal stories of joining with other young women for "illicit" eating to survive starving at the hands of mothers-in-law and mothers. These images and others I will discuss, counter earlier prevailing ethnographic pictures of the essentialized, silent, oppressed, and acquiescing "Indian Woman" that signify "her" utter submission to patriarchy. But can these "oral" behaviors of eating, fasting, and ritual tales be seen as resistance?

**Key words:** gender folklore—women's ritual—North India—resistance—personal narrative

THE TEMPLE COURTYARD was crowded with small groups of women; it had become, uncharacteristically, a woman's space. Each woman was dressed in her brightly colored finest, with articles of worship set out before her. The air was filled with excited voices and laughter as each group recited stories amongst themselves. The colors, the incense, the voices, the temple bells, all blended into a sometimes overwhelming feast for the senses. In the midst of her Jiutiyā fast, Aarti Devi, a potter woman from a village bordering Banaras, told four of the required five stories for her group that day.<sup>1</sup> It was late afternoon, and it was hot. As prescribed by the fast, she had not eaten, nor drunk water, nor swallowed her saliva since sundown of the night before, nor would she do so until after sunrise of the next day. I marveled at her ability to orate under these conditions, especially as I knew she had spent a good part of the afternoon frying *gujhiā* (a special treat cooked only on festive days) on a smoky stove in an unventilated room.

Jiutiyā is an annual *urat*, or ritual fast, performed by some women of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar during the Hindu month of Kartik (usually October). It is one of a yearly cycle of women's ritual fasts, undertaken to ensure the protection of offspring. Women's ritual fasts are seen as a major means of maintaining family welfare and prosperity and are often important occasions for women's expressive genres of story and song (WADLEY 1989). They are also a rare space where women can come together. According to Aarti Devi, Jiutiyā was one of her family's most important ritual festivals. In this paper, I address issues concerning the relationship of women's personal narratives, folk genres, and resistance.<sup>2</sup> Can the following story, one that Aarti told that day, as well as her personal narratives of fasting, eating, and other "oral" behaviors, be seen as arenas of women's agency in resistance to the powers that dominate their lives in North India?

#### GANESH AND THE DISORDERLY WOMAN

Once there was a *phūharī* [slovenly or disorderly woman]; her name was Savita. Her habit was to taste the food while cooking it. While

doing her work, she always took food. Once, her mother-in-law had vowed to have a *kathā* [religious storytelling ritual usually done when a prayer or vow has been answered]. She thought, “Where should I send Savita away? If I send her to her parent’s home, who will do the work? And if I let her remain here as a *jībwalī* [one who is driven by her tongue, who will both overeat and talk too much], she will foul the *prasād* [the food left after it has been offered to the god] of Satyanarayan Bhagwan. How much can I watch out for her? Where can I remove her temporarily so that the *pūjā* [worship] may be safely over before she comes?”

The mother-in-law did this: she instructed Savita to clean the house and smear it with fresh cow dung. Then, as the fruits and things to be offered arrived and the *jībwalī* began moving from room to room waiting for her chance to snatch some food, the mother-in-law gave her a black blanket to wash totally white in the water of the Ganges [the sacred river that runs through Banaras] before coming back. The mother-in-law thought that this will engage Savita long enough for the ritual to finish. Savita thought sadly, “Today I’ll have to go hungry.”

There was a Ganesh [a prominent Hindu deity] temple there. So, before leaving, she packed some flour and jaggery [unprocessed sugar]. Instead of going to wash the blanket, she went to the temple. There at the temple, the lamp was burning, and it contained ghee [clarified butter]. She picked wood from the forest, cooked *litti* [thick unleavened bread, popular in rural areas] and ate it smeared with the ghee from the lamp. By the time she returned home, the *kathā* was over.

Now, when the ghee of Ganeshji’s<sup>3</sup> lamp was fouled, he covered his nose with his finger. The news spread quickly that the Lord Ganesh had covered his nose with his finger. Word was out that he who will bring the idol back to its normal pose will be given half this kingdom by the king. The *phūharī* said to her mother-in-law, “Mother, if you allow me, I can take up the challenge.” The mother-in-law replied, “Look who is talking! She is busy eating all the time, and she will go to take up the challenge? Hah!” But the *phūharī* felt guilty, so she said, “No, Mother, I’ll go and take the challenge.” The mother-in-law replied, “Shut up Savita, and sit here quietly.” But Savita left anyway, with the excuse of going to fetch water; and leaving the pot near the well, she went and took the challenge. Everyone said, “The *phūharī* has taken up the challenge! The *phūharī* has taken up the challenge!”

When she went there she said, “Hey *Ganeshvā!*”<sup>4</sup> Remove your finger from your nose or else! The first time round I merely fouled the lamp,

this time round I'll slash with the knife and your sweets will be spoilt!"<sup>5</sup> Ganeshjī then slowly removed his finger from his nose. Now the *phūharī* emerged from the temple and said to the priest, "See, I've gotten the finger removed from the nose. Now I want my half of the kingdom." The priest took her to the king who gave her half the kingdom. The *phūharī* began ruling happily. Her good old days of eating returned, even better than before.<sup>6</sup>

Food, its preparation, and its serving are important arenas of social discourse in South Asia. Food is a means of controlling, defining, and contesting relationships in several contexts, both public and private. In the household it is especially important in issues of intimacy and distance, of power and prestige (APPADURAI 1981; KHARE 1986; TOOMEY 1990). Food is served in a hierarchical fashion in rural extended families: the elder males eating first, women and children later, with the lowest in the hierarchy eating last. It is, therefore, common practice for women, especially the youngest daughters-in-law, the lowest in the hierarchy, to feed the entire family first and then to take whatever may be left over for themselves. Too often there may not be enough. This is a potential arena of manipulation for the senior women to reinforce the structures of power over their daughters-in-law.

Aarti had previously recounted to me her suffering in the early days of her marriage when the eldest mother-in-law (in this case the wife of her father-in-law's elder brother) would allow her to grind and cook only so much grain for *rotī* (unleavened bread, a staple of the diet), often leaving her without anything to eat for days. She once hid a *rotī* in a folded umbrella hanging on a hook so that she might eat it secretly later. But that particular day her father-in-law uncharacteristically asked for second and third helpings, so she had to serve him her hidden stash.

Just a few weeks before the ritual, Aarti had told me the following story about her life as a young daughter-in-law. She and two other young women together survived starving by their mothers-in-law and mother. They formed what I like to think of as a "subversive eating group." The context of her telling the following story suggests its connection in her mind with Jiutiya and perhaps with the formal stories, the *vrat kathās*, she later told at the ritual.

I asked, "Do you keep fast for Jiutiya?"

"I keep fast for Jiutiya and also Ekadashi of Jeth, which is done without water, and Janma Asthami [all special days in the Hindu yearly

cycle of rituals]. There used to be long rows of *mūng dal* [a kind of pulse] where Jawalhar's house is. I used to go to that side for cutting grass. She also came and joined me. Her mother gave her a lot of trouble for food."

"Who?"

"Parvati. She was beaten badly by Manulal's mother.<sup>7</sup> She beat her daughter. So we three, I, Rekha, and Parvati used to keep company. Rekha's mother-in-law had a pot where she collected money but the old lady would keep it locked up. Rekha would take the key from where it was tied at the end of the old lady's sari while she was sleeping and open the pot and gradually smuggle out five rupees, five rupees each time. Nobody would realize that five rupees was missing as there were lots of five rupee notes in there. We would take the money and Parvati also would join us, hiding money from her mother."

"She, being the daughter, would also sneak money from her mother?" Aarti nodded her head and continued.

"She would be the one to move ahead, then Rekha would follow, and I would trail behind them. We would all pass through the market and would sometimes buy bananas, apples, or grapes, and eat a lot, all of us. We would sneak out [from our houses] rice, sometimes chick peas, and we would get them cooked in the market, maybe we would bring jag-gery.... Then, we would go towards Akele Baba [a small temple to a local deceased hero], that side. Nobody would go there at that time. Then after cutting the grass, we would all come back with full stomachs. We came back separately, one from this side, the other from that side."

"That time Grandmother (here refers to Parvati's mother) gave food to her sons, but not her daughters?" I asked incredulously.

"She gave but she herself would prepare and eat. Sometimes she gave and sometimes she did not. When Grandmother went to market, she would fill up her stomach and come back. Milk, ghee, she'd have all by herself and she scolded her daughters if they tried to eat. So, that is why we three would go and eat."

It must be noted here that the potter caste occupation of these women allowed access to the market that would not be available to all rural women, especially higher caste women, because of *purdah* (veiling restrictions).<sup>8</sup> These potter women have always participated in their families' work. Their

tasks include digging clay in nearby ponds, wedging it, forming hand-built articles (not wheel-made articles), loading, firing, and unloading the kiln, and sometimes selling goods in the market. In this village some women did work on the wheel.<sup>9</sup> The economic necessity of this caste has never allowed women to observe a strict purdah, which would require them to stay inside their homes. They often had to do other tasks outside the home as well, including the collection of fodder for the animals, farm labor, etc. These chores and the potter's work are done in addition to household work and childcare. Given the staggering work load these particular young women were required to maintain, it is all the more remarkable that they were able to organize themselves, to come together and feed each other.

Now Aarti is herself a mother-in-law and has more control over her household's food. That same day she also told us how she fed her neighbor's daughter, who was being starved by her parents. The girl, Gita, had returned from her husband's house because he had beaten her. But the treatment she received at her parents' house was also far from ideal. They would not give her anything to eat for two or three days while expecting her to do clay work all day. This was, Aarti explained, how they lived in such comfort. They required her to cook in front of them to prevent her from eating while cooking. At that time this girl was nursing her own daughter, then about one year old. Aarti told how the baby would hungrily drink water with a little salt, the only thing given to her in addition to her mother's milk. Aarti instructed Gita to come to her secretly whenever she got a chance. She fed her and the baby leftover food from her own family's meal. She gave them clothing when their own was ragged from age. Along with the food and clothes, Aarti also gave Gita advice to return to her husband's family, even though her parents were not ready to send her back and were discussing the possibility of marrying her off to another. Aarti related to me the following discussion with Gita.

I [Aarti] told her [Gita] that, "You have a daughter." She also thought she wanted the second marriage. Her mind had wandered off as there was nobody to make her understand. I told her, "Whenever your husband comes, you must always talk to him properly. One day your mother won't even give you a morsel of food."

He [Gita's father] searched for a lot of grooms. I told her, "Wherever you go, everyone would say, 'Oh, she has left a living husband and come here with a child.' My parents used to say that they would marry me off to another, but I said, 'If I go, I will go to him only. If you don't want to be called a loose woman, then you work somewhere and eat...'" I told

her, "Your husband abuses you, beats you, but does he give you adequate food to eat or not?"

She said, "Elder Mother, he gives me enough to eat."

I said, "When he gives you enough to eat, you will work also. Then for sleeping only, you are ready to go to another person? Your husband fights with you, but he sleeps with you, doesn't he?"

She said, "Yes."

I said, "In which house would you not have fighting? Once he will beat you and once he would cajole you..."

Then she started saying, "I would die but would not marry again." When her parents came to know that the girl would go only to that former husband, otherwise she would give her life.... Well, her husband came and took her with him. Her mother said that she had just gone crazy without being screwed.

As Aarti came to the end of the story she told me how the girl, looking well fed and happy, had visited with her husband a year later. Aarti, with tears in her eyes, said she had wept then, too, and the girl's husband had laughed at her emotion.

#### THE IMAGES AND STRATEGIES OF WOMEN

This remarkable woman was my closest friend in the village. She had sought out my friendship during my first visits to the village and invited me inside her house to chat, while other women, although interested in asking endless questions about my country and my presence in their village, initially kept me outside their homes. We shared intimately early in our relationship, when one day she asked me about my daughter. I was quite overcome with the struggle of being a single mother in a culture that assumes an extended family support system for childcare, and I could not control my tears as I told her about it. She comforted me, relating to my pain, and told me how she is unsupported by her husband and her extended family in the raising of her four children. I appreciated her support all the more because I knew that sometimes she had to endure ridicule from her extended family in order to continue her association with me. She answered the question put by in-laws, "What good is so much talk?" with an assertion that we were the only ones who cared to listen. Her choice to continue articulating her life story to me, to not be silenced, in spite of their obvious disapproval, was life-affirming and one way she claimed a space for herself in history.

Among the difficulties Aarti was enduring at that time were an extra-marital affair of her husband and his failure to provide her with enough money to feed their children. It was presumed that the money went to his mistress instead. He even threatened to make his mistress a second wife. In her opinion, this would make her lose face among other village women. Her husband would not come home for one or two days at a time. When he did come and she served him food, he would not eat it, showing he had eaten elsewhere. Food and sex are interrelated in various ways (WADLEY 1994b; RAMANUJAN 1992); the words for eating and digesting sometimes are used to refer to sex. Thus, in saying he had “eaten,” her husband acknowledged he had sex elsewhere. She refused food until he had eaten. On the surface she was acting as *pativrāt*, or ideal wife. But to me and others, she cried that she had not eaten for two days and he did not care whether she “ate” or not. Her meaning, although the statement was within the prescriptions of a good wife’s behavior, is apparent. Perhaps it was ineffective and probably only caused a slight embarrassment to her husband and his family, yet it undoubtedly gave her satisfaction in knowing that she at least had reacted to his rejection.<sup>10</sup>

She later made a remarkable comment to my research associate that indicates her conscious redefinition of the “strategies” of the patriarchy into her own “tactics” of resistance (to borrow the terms of DE CERTEAU 1984). She said that she formerly understood stories and songs as actually working to maintain family prosperity and auspiciousness, but now she tells or sings them only to strike out at her husband! As her husband’s behavior is common knowledge throughout the village, her actions as a “dedicated” and good wife speak to his failure to be a providing and faithful husband, and they would be understood as such by other village women, if not by their husbands.

Since most Indian village women’s resistance is analyzed as muted, some question whether it can really be called resistance. But some of these strategies seem quite direct, and expose the diverse ways that woman may use eating, feeding oneself and others, fasting, and oral discourse as resistance to the norms of socially sanctioned behavior for women and to the often cruel and abusive treatment women receive from husbands and their families. Susan GAL has stated, “Resistance to a dominant cultural order occurs whenever devalued linguistic genres and strategies are practiced and celebrated despite widespread denigration; it occurs as well when these devalued practices propose or embody alternate models of the social world” (1991, 177).

Certainly women’s *vrāt kathā* (ritual tales) are not a resistance genre; they uphold oppressive traditions perhaps more often than they resist them,

and they occur in a ritual structure designed to reinforce the patriarchal Hindu values. Yet, the meaning of stories lies in their telling. Each performer changes the story slightly, adding a nuance here or there, molding the meaning to her purposes of the moment. The woman in the story was a *phūharī* (slovenly woman), and a *jībwalī* (one driven by her tongue). She was so named and ridiculed for her excessive appetites and for tasting food as she was cooking it and thus polluting it. (If a person's saliva comes in contact with food, it becomes polluted [*jhūtā*].) Indeed, as Aarti introduced the character, both she and her audience laughed at her disorderly, uncontrolled habits.

This story was told in the midst of one of the most severe fasts undertaken by women in their yearly ritual cycle. Fasting in South Asia has religious, moral, and political connotations and is an important mode of obtaining power for the disempowered. (It is perhaps best known for its role in Gandhi's struggles for Indian independence from the British and unity within India.) It is a complex and varied phenomena.

Women's fasting speaks to important issues in the construction of gender hierarchies in rural North India. Women, according to the dominant ideology of householder Hinduism, fast in order to increase the well-being of their families, particularly their husbands and their children, and not for individual *śakti*. Women's power (*śakti*) is viewed as dangerous if uncontrolled. Women and lower castes are seen as having greater appetites for food and sex than higher caste men. A woman who can control her appetites is a good wife. Lower castes and women are considered by nature "disorderly" and must be controlled by men and higher castes. Control is thus a caste and gender issue. Women (like children) have less self-control and need more external control in the family structure. Likewise in an intercaste community, lower castes (like children) need more external control.<sup>11</sup> A women's *vrāt kathā*, her vow of fasting, is perhaps a tool to teach her more self-control.

Women who indulge in physical appetites, as the *phūharī*, are portrayed as overeating, or stuffing themselves.<sup>12</sup> Overeating and self-indulgence are considered abnormal, both morally and practically. However, they are more often seen as abnormal for women than for men. Women's uncontrolled power can bring about disaster; yet if controlled it brings prosperity. Through fasting (the control of women's appetites), women's power that is not diverted into food consumption supports family welfare (WADLEY 1994b). Yet fasting is a kind of asceticism, and ascetics are believed to have personal, and sometimes supernatural or psychic, powers. In this ambiguity, women who can control their appetites may also be a subtle threat, they may use that power to their own advantage. Women's ritual fasting and the traditional *vrāt kathās* provide many opportunities for making new and alternate meanings exactly because they are ambiguous.

## TALES AND REAL LIFE

Several folktales, discussed by WADLEY in *Struggling with Destiny in Karimpur, 1925–1984* (1994b) support this belief in the importance of control of women's appetites. In one, also a *phūhari* story, a slovenly woman brings ruin to her husband because she created disorder in the house. The *phūhari* is a symbol in women's ritual stories told in several caste communities. She is usually seen getting the discipline she deserves, or reaping the consequences of her disastrous actions. The ridicule of the *jībwalī* in this story suggests that women who talk too much with others are a threat as they will create bonds with other women. Under purdah women do not generally have contact with any others except those in their households. Men are thus frightened of the consequences of women who talk too much or who eat behind their backs. If women talk they will create outside friendships and family honor may be at stake through their gossip. If women eat "out of turn" or while men are out working, they will gain advantage in times of food shortage. Hence the *jībwalī* and the *phūhari* threaten family harmony.<sup>13</sup>

But the potter's story discussed here seems unique in that it rewards the woman, who is both a *phūhari* and a *jībwalī*, for her slovenliness, for her appetite, for her implied loose tongue, for her lack of control and disorderly behavior in defiling the food, especially the ghee offered to Ganesh. Furthermore, her audacity in defying her mother-in-law to take up the challenge and in threatening the gods ultimately gained her half the kingdom and the means to indulge and expand her excessive appetites, an incredible fantasy to many Indian village women.

Is this merely an inversional tale? I believe not. It is a story about the power of disorder, of overindulgence in a cultural setting where control and moderation are presumably the only options within the dominant paradigms of patriarchy and caste. Not surprisingly, those who are not in control, who must struggle to survive, present different understandings, a counter discourse to the politics of moderation. Untouchables have stated that the higher caste injunctions of moderation were a luxury they could not afford, saying, "We do hard manual labor and eat heartily" (KHARE 1986, 170). They felt that when food was available it must be eaten in abundance as insurance for times when it was not available. Aarti's stories also suggest an alternate gender discourse, one which, in the words of Lynda MARIN, "reflects and constructs simultaneously a working model of subversion, resistance, and survival" (1991, 58). This is not a discourse that expresses an agenda of liberation. But young women who are starved by mothers-in-law and mothers cannot practice the rules of moderation as traditionally expected. This is a discourse that redefines and has many meanings, many levels, many uses for eating, feeding, and fasting, for appetite and control,

that may be deployed as necessary for survival. I believe that Aarti's actions, both as a young daughter-in-law sneaking to the market with others to eat, and as an adult woman feeding her neighbor's daughter and telling stories to "strike out" at her husband, go beyond mere survival, into subversion and resistance.

Do the story worlds flow into lived worlds? Do the genres of ritual story that suggest an alternate discourse shape and/or reflect the everyday worlds of their tellers? RAHEJA and GOLD (1994) ask these questions, not sure that they do in a South Asian context. But I believe that this telling of the formal tale, in conjunction with Aarti Devi's uses of fasts and feeding herself and others, definitely reflects her own life experience. I believe these acts, both the behaviors and the telling about them, are acts of agency, of conscious recontextualization (BAUMAN and BRIGGS 1990), of resistance.

Paradoxically, some of these same behaviors can, and also do, reinforce women's suffering and oppression. The meanings of women's eating and ritual fasting are ambiguous and highly context-sensitive.<sup>14</sup> Eating can be seen, as it was in Aarti's life, as an act of resistance, an act of oppression, and an act of acquiescence: resistance, when the young women sneaked out to feed themselves and each other; oppression, when Parvati's mother, a powerful mother-in-law of nine daughters-in-law, ate in the market to satisfy herself while her daughters and daughters-in-law went hungry;<sup>15</sup> acquiescence, when Aarti resisted eating to protest her husband's behavior. Furthermore, advice to return to an abusive husband is difficult to interpret as resistance, even though Aarti advises the girl not to comply with her parents' wishes. She is, in fact, helping the girl to see and choose between (or to resign herself to?) two possible futures.

It is in this ambiguity that women's resistance may ultimately become or be perceived as another form of acquiescence (GAL 1991). RADNER and LANSER (1993) note that the "monocultural" or dominant groups assume that their own interpretations are the only possible ones. Such arrogance makes them unable to "read" ambivalent coding in the texts. To understand this phenomenon in the South Asian context one must look at the interconnection of the traditional and the resistive in Indian literature. The traditional genres of song and story are viewed not only as statements of consensus, but also of dissensus (RAHEJA and GOLD 1994). Singing traditional women's songs lamenting their common suffering, rather than popular film songs sung by the young, can be resistance to Westernization and consumerism (NARAYAN 1996). Also, inconsistencies in ritual practice may represent counterpositions in arenas of struggle (DIRKS 1991).

"In any cultural field *it is not possible to be* original except on the basis of tradition" (Winnicott cited in MAHONEY and YNGVESSON 1992, 63; italics

in the original). Indeed, one could make a counterargument that Aarti was only following her “traditional moral duty” to eat well and feed others (KHARE 1986). Resistance and domination, tradition and change, are thus not in fixed opposition, but are perhaps “intentional ambiguities” (TRAWICK 1990). They interweave, sensitive to the context of the moment, to the audience, the mood of the teller. What may be heard as a woman’s traditional tale (upholding the ideals of the patriarch) by men, may be heard quite differently by women (see SCOTT 1990 for more on differing interpretations of performance). The ability to hear it differently, to “de-code” it and understand the teller’s intended hidden meaning is empowering for the listeners and strengthens the bonds between them (RADNER and LANSER 1993).

Nonconfrontational resistance in the South Asian domestic arena is, according to OLDENBURG (1991, 28), “not a part-time or sporadic activity, but a way of life.” Thus, even though some mothers-in-law and mothers, who are in positions of limited power and who are expected to uphold the patriarchy, may accept and enact these ideologies, there is, as we have seen, an alternate discourse. This discourse is one that, in all likelihood, has been operating for a long time in a myriad of ways. It may even be an unspoken and unseen “tradition” for young women to support each other against the actions and ideologies that oppress them.

How are we to understand these nonacquiescent behaviors that do not overtly challenge dominance as resistance? Is it, as GAL suggests (1991), an “alternate model of the social world” if it simultaneously upholds and challenges ideologies of patriarchy, and goes almost unnoticed, not only by the various formal and informal governing bodies, but by the individual family patriarchs? Certainly it was not often noticed by earlier South Asian historians and anthropologists, nor by British colonizers. (Was it this spirit of women that Gandhi recognized when he encouraged women to join the struggle for independence from Britain, and when he said that hope for the future rests in the hands of women?) It is an “invisible activism,” intertwined with the dominance, that simultaneously creates, maintains, and contests gender hierarchies (HAYNES and PRAKASH 1991, 13). And it reminds us again that social and power relations, no matter how oppressive, are never static. ABU-LUGHOD has recommended that these forms of resistance be used as a “diagnostic of power” in relations of domination (1990, 42). The stronger the oppression, the more hidden will be the resistance.

#### WOMEN’S AGENCY

Thus, even though one may question the effectiveness of this “invisible activism,” to ignore that the dominant discourses are contested daily in women’s everyday speech and actions and in women’s formal genres of song

and story, would be to deny these women their agency. Women living under staunch ideologies of gender domination must code their expressions of agency, even of humanity. Without understanding the highly context-sensitive need for coding in women's expressions we can easily miss their meanings and their agency altogether. The meaning can be made static, can be essentialized, rather than be understood as alive and ever changing (HOLLAND and SKINNER 1995). I believe that it is important to see the agency of these "marginalized Indian women," who have been largely essentialized and unseen, and whose agency has been denied in the literature and traditions of South Asia.

My understanding of agency is situated in the subject, and defines one's ability to make meaning in one's interactions with others. Aarti's actions characterize this understanding of agency in her life, her ability to make new meanings that will be understood as such by herself and by those she lives with. The ability to actively resist or to support relations of power comes not from being "subject to" outside conditions, nor is it merely inherent in the conflicting discourses or in the relational contexts in which meaning is created. Resistance, I believe, is an act of conscious agency, an act of innovation or creativity within a social structure. Agency and creativity are developed and held in the tension between being with and being apart, between self and other (MAHONEY and YNGVESSON 1992). Aarti has consistently chosen to tolerate "being with" herself and others.

A closer look at the concept of the individual and the group, self and other, in South Asia makes Aarti's agency seem even more pronounced. The space between "being with and being apart," between self and other, is construed quite differently in India from the way it is in the West. ROLAND (1988) speaks of an inner sense of "we-ness," of a "we-self" that subsumes all relationships. There is a different mode of giving, asking, caring for, and depending on, of influencing and being influenced. "The centrality of relationships completely transcends any other considerations of the separate individualized self" (ROLAND 1988, 226). I question the completeness of this "centrality of relationships" and may agree more with MINES's (1994) concept of a "contextualized individual" where one's individuality is recognized, but only within the context of the various groups (family, caste, village, etc.) where they have a known set of statuses and rules. Still, I have experienced several different "we-selves" in my relationships in this community, some of which were continuously in a state of flux.

Women's personal narratives both in formal tales and informal speech can be seen to function as the construction of self where that self is so often denied (APPADURAI, KOROM, and MILLS 1991). Indeed, the rewarded *jībwalī* might be seen as affirming the agency of women who talk. Aarti in her

actions has, I believe, shown an ability to define and redefine her own sense of identity, of self and “we-self” within the contexts of her various social groupings. Agency may thus create new “we’s,” such as when it cut through and across some of the traditional identities and created a “we” of the “subversive eating group,” or the “we” of Aarti, my research associate, and myself. The agency of these subjects may be differently constructed in different situations, but it is indeed present.

Agency, then, needs to be seen as located not just in the person, but in the context of the subject. In this case it needs to be situated in the “we-self” or the “contextualized individual.” Taking another look at the ambiguity of resistance in the domestic arena, one can see that in the actions of these particular village women the “we” of the intergenerational family control or discipline seems to be subverted by Aarti and her friends’ “subversive eating group,” yet the “we’s” of the patrilineal and the caste identities are not contested. The “we’s” are not threatened, yet the agency of the “self” or subject in the “we” is still heard, seen, or felt from within. Likewise in the formal tale, when the *phūharī* is rewarded, the “we” of the potter caste may be consciously affirmed as *phūhar* or disorderly against the higher caste injunctions of moderation, while the structures of hierarchy are not threatened.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

I believe that Aarti Devi has demonstrated her agency and has shown herself to be an exceptional human being, one who is able to transcend the limits of her particular cultural milieu, to reach beyond the prescriptions of the patriarchy in order to assert her humanity. She does not believe in starving young women to make them “better” wives. Furthermore, she acts on her beliefs, which are counter to the prevailing sentiment and practice of her community. This, I believe, is what sets apart “resistance” from mere “survival”: it is the ability to transcend one’s personal and cultural limitations in order to give to another. It is the rare ability to act nonoppressively within the midst of one’s own oppression or pain and in the midst of a social fabric that condones or encourages oppressive behavior. As MANI has stated, “structures of domination can best be understood if we can grasp how we remain subjects even in the moments in which we are being intimately and viciously oppressed” (1989, 21). This particular reality of control, and the use of starvation in that control, is decidedly oppressive. Aarti’s actions and reactions to that reality are innovative; they are a conscious recontextualization, a redefining of the context, a reordering of this reality that is so much a part of the natural order that it is invisible to most.

But what does subject or agency mean to a North Indian village potter woman? Aarti Devi would not see herself as a feminist, nor perhaps even as

resisting social order, although she apparently does see herself as resisting her husband. Her consciousness is not the “I/self” consciousness of Western psycho- or social analysis. She did not reflect on her actions in the ways in which I have. She just told me many stories, narratives about her life and the lives of others in her world. Her “rambling” style of everyday speech, which never seemed to stay on “the subject,” produced interesting connections between stories. It was clearly important to her that I hear these stories and others that reflected her power of resistance, her playfulness and creativity, her indomitable spirit, and her dignity. It is important to me to pass them on. They are stories of a life worth living and surviving, of voracious appetites for life, and of passion. They are stories that need to be told.

#### NOTES

1. Each informal group of five or six women must tell at least five stories that are not a set of fixed stories. Anyone may tell any story that she remembers from a familiar repertoire of ritual stories. Some of the same stories may be told at other ritual fasts. One of them is usually a story about the particular fast and its meaning. That story about Jiutiya is not included here. It may be found in my forthcoming book on Aarti's life. Aarti was thus not a formal representative of her group, she simply filled in as others could not be coaxed to tell stories that day.

2. See also RAHEJA and GOLD 1994, HOLLAND and SKINNER 1995, APPADURAI, KOROM, and MILLS 1991, and RADNER 1993.

3. The addition of the suffix *ji* connotes respect in many South Asian contexts.

4. The name Ganesh taken in contempt. In Bhojpuri (the language spoken in and around Banaras) the addition of a *vā* suffix to the name is a sign of contempt or condescension.

5. Ganesh, himself, is known to eat enormous amounts of food and to be especially fond of sweets. He is depicted with a huge belly that testifies to this.

6. Another version of this story, “Ganeshji and the Brahman Girl,” was told to Ann GOLD by a Rajasthani woman of higher caste. In “Purdah is as Purdah's Kept: A Storyteller's Story” found in *Listen to the heron's words* (1994, 166–67), Gold does an excellent job of relating her version of the story to the storyteller's life, showing that the devotional actions of women may and do diverge from the norm established and maintained by high caste males, and still please god. Gold showed how in the story and in the woman's life, purdah (literally “veil,” but commonly used to refer to the veiling restrictions of women) can be stretched and redefined to fit a particular woman's needs. The differences in the two versions are striking, as implied by the titles alone, and must reflect different caste-related sensibilities and issues. For a third Kannada version told in Karnataka see RAMANUJAN 1991, 33–38.

7. Manulal is Parvati's brother. This is a characteristic way of referring to a woman. She is identified by her relationships to others.

8. Ann Gold's storyteller would probably never have admitted going to the market, let alone eating there, because of the restrictions of her purdah. For discussions of purdah in South Asia see SHARMA 1980 and JACOBSON 1977.

9. In an unpublished paper, “Women and the Wheel: Contested Realities of Work,” I challenge previously held assumptions about potter women working on the wheel. It is said women “never” work on the wheel.

10. My thanks to Susan Wadley, who in conversation deepened my understanding of this particular act of resistance.

11. See also WADLEY 1994b.

12. For a discussion of mainly male overeating and indulgence see VATUK and VATUK 1979. WADLEY 1981 discusses a story of female indulgence.

13. This point has been discussed by WADLEY 1994a.

14. See RAMANUJAN 1989 for more on the context-sensitive nature of South Asian life.

15. Indeed, during the course of my fifteen months in this village I had heard several stories from "Grandmother's" daughters-in-law of how much and how well she would eat, and how much she and her husband enjoyed sex. One could also make a case that this woman's actions, and those of her husband, were resisting the norms of self-control for women and higher castes. This woman was now reported to be 110 years old, sometimes 130. (I suppose she was in her 80s or 90s, still a feat of longevity by Indian village standards.) Her diet was always cited as a reason for her longevity. WADLEY 1994, TRAWICK 1990, and BENNETT 1983 have all discussed that, in general, sexual appetites between spouses must not be visible to others. Indeed the stories about this woman were either accompanied by the anger of her daughters-in-law, contempt, or an assurance by the teller that she had never behaved like that with her husband.

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