

**THE HOMELESS GODDESS:
COSMOLOGY, SICKNESS AND WOMEN'S IDENTITY
IN RAJASTHAN**

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For a brother

My field notes from research in the mid-1980s on ethnomedicine in Rajasthan, north India, contain a plethora of references to various forms of the goddess Mātājī (*mātā*, 'mother'; *-jī*, respectful form) and the activities and ideas associated with her. But the composite form of the goddess known as Sātobahin (literally 'Seven Sisters': *sāt*, 'seven'; *bahin*, 'sister') came to hold a particular fascination for me and seems an appropriate topic for a contribution to this Memorial Issue. In Rajasthani characterizations, the band of deities known as 'Seven Sisters' are always on the move.¹ The Sisters flow like wind into the houses, funnelling seven-strong through each gateway, across the courtyard, along the eaves, past the cleaning place and over the doorstep, on to the shelf of cool stored water. Then they move silently on and away, ruffling the leaves of the village trees as they pass beneath, only to return again and again to these special places.

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1. The name Satobahin was always employed in my hearing as if referring to a single, composite being, and no one I asked could give individual names for any of the sisters or explain whether Satobahin was indeed a group of seven individual deities. In accordance with this inherent ambiguity I employ the singular in reference to Satobahin and the plural when using the closest English translation, Seven Sisters.

The following analysis unpacks this freeform characterization of one element of local cosmology through an exploration of the socio-cultural context of Rajasthani village life. Much of Andrew Duff-Cooper's published work is devoted to considerations of cosmology in relation to aspects of Balinese life. In an essay on duality he noted that Vidhi, the supreme being for Balinese on Lombok, 'is both a duality and a unity' (Duff-Cooper 1985: 16). Much the same could be said of the goddess in Hindu Indian cosmology as she has been analysed by scholars of Indian religion and society. The understanding of 'aspect', to which Andrew drew attention in an essay in these pages on the aesthetics of rice-growing (Duff-Cooper 1989), is also especially relevant to Indian conceptions of the goddess. My consideration of an aspect of one Rajasthani Hindu 'form of life' (as Andrew would have it) arises not from the selection of an etically defined body of social facts, such as for instance 'religion' or 'ethnomedicine', but emerges from a locally salient configuration of ideas and practices. In local Rajasthani cosmology, there is a switching or oscillation between two 'aspects' of the goddess that are, at a pan-Indian level, understood as one unified manifestation. In turn this unified form is, in pan-Indian cosmology, one aspect of a further dualism in manifestations of the goddess.

Female Deities and Women's Life Cycles

There is no space here for a detailed consideration of previous academic work on Hindu female deities or on the position of women in Hindu society. In brief, all the innumerable local or village goddesses are regarded as forms of Devī or Mahāmāyā, *the Great Goddess* (see Fuller 1992: 44). Particular attention has been given to the opposed duality between her unmarried and married forms; characteristically the former are malevolent and destructive goddesses while the latter are benevolent and protective. Local 'mother' (*mātā*) goddesses such as Śītalā Mātā and Mariyamman usually fall into the former category. This duality has been interpreted as expressing Hindu ideological conceptions of female sexuality as vitally powerful and potentially dangerous but controllable through subordination to males. The dualism seen in manifestations of the goddess also replicates a pervasive contrast in Hinduism between the ascetic and the erotic, represented respectively in the unmarried (and necessarily virgin) and the married forms of the deity. In the social realm similarly, anthropologists have contrasted the purity, power (*śakti*) and auspiciousness of virgin daughters with the subordination and relative impurity of wives. Some have seen the dangerous aspect of the goddess as expressing the potential threat to the patriline of affinal women's putatively indiscriminate sexuality—the dark side of their reproductive ability to perpetuate the lineage (Bennett 1983).

In Rajasthan, a different set of contrasts between two aspects of the goddess becomes apparent. These contrasts are related to the characteristic circumstances of women's lives within the patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system of northern India. Through examining local characterizations of the composite goddess Sātobahin and her counterpart Mātājī in their social context, a shift in perspective is gained in which the usual focus on both women and goddesses as *either* unmarried (daughters) *or* married (wives), is replaced by a female-centred, more empirically appropriate recognition of women's dual identities as *both* sisters (and daughters) *and* mothers (and wives).

As members of their natal lineage, Hindu daughters in north India enjoy high status in their natal homes (*pīhar*). They are necessarily temporary residents, though, since upon marriage they move to join their husband's household in a different location (marriages within the same village are very rare). Yet on the birth of a child to her brother and sister-in-law, a sister must return to her *pīhar* to ritually legitimize the child's entry into her own natal lineage at a Brahmanical ceremony, when a new child is first exposed to the sun and is given a name. Women play an essential ritual role for their brothers, both by overseeing this incorporation of their children into the lineage and by providing spiritual protection (affirmed in annual festivals). Thus, as sisters, women should retain links with their natal families and care spiritually for their brothers, just as the latter should provide materially for them (see Jamous 1992).

Rajasthani girls are usually married very young. Child marriage is illegal but most families outside the highest castes continue to marry their daughters in childhood, from as young as two years upwards. Marriage of girls is imperative; in individual cases of disability that create problems of marriageability two sisters may be married to the same man. The first proper visit to the husband's household (*sasurāl*) usually occurs soon after the girl's first menstruation, and the shift in residence from *pīhar* to *sasurāl* is accompanied by a radical shift in demeanour. In their *sasurāl* women must veil their faces completely in the presence of their husbands, or any man equal or senior in age to their husband, and remain silent or speak inaudibly. Children soon learn to act as interpreters when the women of their household need to communicate with men to whom they may not speak directly, a category that includes those with the most power over the conditions of their everyday lives. The company women keep is no longer that of their village sisters, real or fictive, but of female affines. After marriage women return to their natal homes, at first for quite long periods between the first few short visits to their husbands' homes.

Married sisters are, then, also wives with relatively low status in their marital homes, where they are viewed as incomers of doubtful loyalty. They have no rights over the children they bear; in cases of divorce, the children remain in their father's household. At the same time, wives are necessary vehicles for the perpetuation of their affinal lineage, they are responsible for the welfare of its young children, and they control the domestic space and domestic work. They become completely incorporated only in old age after bearing and raising children

(especially sons), by which time they may have ceased almost entirely to make periodic trips to their natal village.

In Rajasthan many pan-Hindu and local forms of the 'mother goddess', generically 'Mātājī', are a focus of worship by mothers. The protection of specific village goddesses in particular is sought by women for the well-being of their children. Although the individuality of each 'mātā' is emphasized, they are none the less recognized to have a unitary quality, in that all forms of the goddess are held ultimately to be aspects of one great female divinity. Indeed one village goddess was known as Mahāmāyā, an epithet for the 'great goddess' (Mahādevī) of orthodox Hinduism (cf. Coburn 1982: 154–5).²

Unlike the village goddesses and other local deities, the Seven Sisters are not called upon to fulfil requests (such as relief from illness) expressed as contingent vows (*bolārā*) by devotees. In certain contexts they are regarded as a form of Mātājī, at which time their protection is invoked for general future well-being, but in their specific aspect as Sātobahin they are worshipped only when they cause harm. This composite aspect of the goddess has a particular relationship to domestic and village space, and propitiation of the Seven Sisters may be taken as simultaneously an expression and a placation of the tension between the dual identities of women as mothers and wives and as daughters and sisters.

The Seven Sisters are remembered and propitiated in certain ritual contexts and at all marriages; brides-to-be are given a silver amulet depicting the seven goddesses and their brother, which is said, however, to ensure the protection of Mātājī (rather than Sātobahin) over the bride. This is the only form in which Sātobahin is iconographically represented. Before painting her child's hands with henna for a festival, one mother put seven spots of henna near the doorway on the outer wall of the room in which they were sitting (the reason for the location and form of this precaution will become clear below). This, she told me, was for Mātājī, so that nothing bad could come in and affect her son; she is, the mother said, seven sisters (*sāt bahin*), therefore she puts seven spots. Thus, Sātobahin is often identified with (the generic) Mātājī; a major point of this essay is precisely that she both is, and is not, one and the same deity.

Space and Site in Local Cosmology

The Seven Sisters' ambiguous position in comparison with other deities is symbolically expressed in their association with spatially marginal places within the inhabited village area (*bastī*) and in their lack of a physical 'residence'. The

2. These numerous village goddesses may perhaps be compared with local Catholic cults of the Virgin Mary that represent her in different aspects and individually attract long-term allegiance by devotees, although she is acknowledged as ultimately 'one'.

Rajsthani village (*gāmv*) is a territory physically and conceptually demarcated by the shrines of the village deities (*grāmdevatā*), usually simple stones under trees in the village fields and on the margins of the main residential area. These deities protect the territorial borders or frontier of the village as a sacred spatial unit. The grazing and waste ground (*kāmkad*) and uncultivated land (*jamgal*) beyond the fields and outside the village boundaries is dangerous, literally ‘no man’s land’ where one might encounter malevolent ghosts and dangerous spirits, especially at midday or midnight when the deities become momentarily inactive. Within the residential area, on the other hand, are the temples and numerous shrines of benevolent deities, who protect residents and do not manifest themselves except when invoked by their priests and devotees.

Inside the village, domestic space is associated with forms of the mother goddess. All offerings to Mātājī are placed on the shelf where pots of drinking water are kept (the *parindā*), a place of exceptional purity located in the inner courtyard of the house. The goddess therefore has a permanent shrine within every home at which a lamp or incense is lit for her on all religious festivals. Offerings to Sātobahin of boiled grain and jaggery are also placed in the *parindā*. But uniquely among all the village deities, from the lowliest ‘village protector’ (*kṣetrapāl*) to Laxminath in his temple, and in contrast with Mātājī *qua* Mātājī, Sātobahin has no permanent home. Like the malevolent ghosts who remain outside the village boundaries she has no established residence and may afflict those who accidentally come into contact with her, though unlike ghosts she enters inhabited space.

As suggested in my initial description, Sātobahin is envisaged as a band of goddesses who ‘roam’ (*ghūmbā*) or ‘play’ (*khelba*) on a circuit (*pherā*, *chakkar*) at dawn, dusk (literally ‘the times when the temple gong sounds’) and midday (*dopahar*, literally ‘second quarter’, which encompasses the early part of the afternoon as well as the moment of twelve noon). During their tour the Seven Sisters visit certain places: the *parindā*, where the drinking-water pots are kept; the *uthyānā*, where pots and plates are cleaned; the *chailānā*, the outer edge of the sloping roof or thatch where it extends from its supports; the *maidā*, the door lintels; and the *gariyālā*, the notional threshold of the house just inside the outer gateway.³ They also come under the *bar* (banyan, *Ficus bengalensis*) and *pipal* (sacred fig, *Ficus religiosa*) trees. This movement of the goddesses on their circuit is sometimes referred to as ‘Mātājī’s arrow’ (*Mātājī kā bān*). One informant compared it to a wind that rushes by; you cannot see it, but it comes past.

The places visited by Sātobahin are *kuthām* or *kuthāmv*, ‘bad’, ‘wrong’ or ‘forbidden’ places. Most are clearly liminal, being on the threshold between inside and outside or between natural and domestic space (the *maidā*, *gariyālā*, *chailānā* and the trees, which are part of nature but are two of the only three species grown

3. Most Rajsthani houses in this region have a separate gatehouse with a sitting platform, beyond which lies an open courtyard separating the gatehouse from the rooms and kitchen of the house itself.

within the village residential cluster). There are associations with purity and the sacred; fig and banyan trees being considered sacred, the *parindā* being a place that is kept particularly pure and is the site of Mātājī's shrine, and the *uṭhyānā* being the place where purity is restored by cleaning. Moreover, the house, and the *parindā* and *uṭhyānā* in particular, is the province of women, in contrast to the gatehouse and beyond, which is the domain of men. The daily visitation of Sātobahin into these inner areas (*mainai*, inside, is used to refer to the inner parts of the house as opposed to *banai*, outside) points to conceptual associations between women, the divine feminine and domestic space.

If a child is playing or sleeping in or beneath one of the 'forbidden' places when Sātobahin visits, this accidental encounter with the goddesses may result in sudden illness—diarrhoea, vomiting and fever, convulsions or paralysis. Sickness due to contact with Sātobahin is known as *pharāo* (from *pherā*, circuit) or (if diarrhoea and vomiting), *beḷā*.⁴ Sickness is most likely to result if a child approaches one of the wrong places at the dangerous time with milk or sweet substances in its mouth.

Treating sickness that results from contact with Sātobahin centres on propitiation and remembrance of Mātājī and is undertaken exclusively by the women of the household, usually on two successive days. At dusk a lighted clay lamp is placed in the *parindā* and sometimes also at the *uṭhyānā* and *chailānā*. The women sing songs to Mātājī, make an offering of boiled grain (*gugri*) and/or unrefined cane sugar (*gur*) to her and then distribute this offering to seven unmarried girls, ideally from seven different houses. The sick child is treated with *dhūṇi*, a type of cleansing by fumigation (glowing coals are added to specified ingredients so that they smoulder), at midday and again at dusk. In one case I witnessed, older women told the child's mother to sit on the edge of the verandah opening on to the courtyard—under the edge of the roof—before holding her child over the smoke; she then applied the *dhūṇi* to her own breasts.⁵ These procedures were said by the mother to be for '*bāl Mātājī*' (*bāl* is an alternative term for *śaktī*, power or energy). The child's sickness had been attributed to the mother going to sleep with her child at midday with her head on the door-frame (under the lintel) of a room.

Some of the items used in *dhūṇi* (such as oil, turmeric and margosa) are common ingredients in many rituals, but others are employed exclusively in this form of healing and have interesting symbolic associations. They include a small piece of *ghaṭṭi kī jharnā*, the cloth kept in the centre of the household grindstone

4. A child sleeping in an unusual position, with a hand twisted or face distorted, in such a place when the goddesses visit will suffer paralysis and be left permanently with this distortion. It became evident that cases of polio were attributed to contact with Satobahin; polio is endemic in the region.

5. In an additional ritual, a small grindstone was then passed over the sick child twenty-one times by two senior women of the household and the child's hand was touched to the grindstone before fumigation was repeated.

for sweeping out the flour, a piece of *gārī kā vāl*, the rope-like plant greased with ghee and wrapped around the iron axle-pin of a cartwheel to stop it wearing into the wooden axle, and in some accounts a broom bristle and an eyelash of the child's mother. All except the last are paradigmatic symbols of affinal women's domestic duties—women do not perform the laborious task of grinding flour in their natal homes nor, usually, do they sweep up. The significance of *gārī kā vāl* is less self-evident, but I would hazard that it symbolizes a smooth passage from *pīhar*, natal home, to *sasurāl*, conjugal home (see below).

Sātobahin/Mātājī

The Seven Sisters seem to resemble the composite group of goddesses described in the *Mahabharata* as the *Matrkās*, 'mothers', represented in Hindu textual tradition as a band of seven or more malevolent goddesses whose members are individually insignificant and who are attracted to, but direct their dangerous natures primarily against, young children (Kinsley 1986: 151–60).⁶ Like the 'mothers', the Seven Sisters are a composite group of individually insignificant deities who are iconographically depicted as seven female figures on the silver amulets worn by brides or, as I saw outside a temple to Mātājī in western Rajasthan, in relief on stone tablets. Both types of depiction are usually accompanied by a male figure referred to locally as their 'brother' and identified in western Rajasthan, although not in my fieldwork region, as Bhairu. Bhairu is one manifestation of Shiva and is an important regional deity; his identification as the goddesses' brother concords with the theological concept of the seven goddesses as *śaktis*, energies or powers that are personifications of the creative power of the divine and the active female counterpart of Shiva.

Sātobahin is known to everyone, but only affinal women concern themselves with her. Female informants from a wide range of castes gave detailed, uniform accounts of the Seven Sisters' characteristics and attributes. They categorically distinguished between Sātobahin, even though she is often referred to simply as 'Mātājī', and Sīl Mātā (Hindi, Śītalā Mātā, literally 'Cool Mother') the goddess of pox diseases. It is specifically the Sātobahin aspect of Mātājī who visits forbidden places and is dangerous to children. The case of Sīl Mātā offers a useful contrast with Sātobahin/Mātājī. She is held to bring smallpox, chickenpox

6. Kinsley speculates that the Matrkas in the *Mahabharata* represent the many village goddesses who are not found in the Vedic pantheon and are indigenes of a non-Brahmanic religious universe. They are depicted as dangerous and are associated with peripheral geographical places (Kinsley 1986: 155). This conclusion is tempting, but in Rajasthan the seven sisters are worshipped as a group along with other village goddesses who can be both malevolent and protective.

and measles, which are regarded as manifestations of the goddess within the human body; but she also brings relief to her victims, and worship of *Sīl Mātā* is a necessary part of the treatment for these diseases. *Sīl Mātā* thus incorporates both benevolent and malevolent aspects of the goddess.

In contrast, the local representation of *Sātobahin/Mātājī* is characterized by a splitting of these aspects. The Seven Sisters are the purely malevolent aspect, while the destructive consequences of their appearance (children's sickness) are ameliorated by propitiation of the benevolent aspect, *Mātājī*. In her threatening form she is represented as sisters, in her protective aspect, as a mother. She is associated in her ritual offerings with unmarried girls. The offerings made to *Sātobahin/Mātājī* are unusual in that rather than consisting in the fried, pure, 'cooling' and expensive offerings made to other goddesses, they consist in raw or boiled, 'heating' and ordinary foodstuffs. Women emphasized that her offerings should not be given to boys. At the time, I viewed this statement as a rare instance of preference towards girls; in retrospect, it seems more likely to be the product of a view that boys should not be contaminated by such offerings. One interpretation holds that the enduring ritual importance of the married sister for her father's and brother's lineage lies in her role of removing inauspiciousness from it (Raheja 1988). It is possible to see the distribution of *Sātobahin* offerings to unmarried girls as a precursor of this role; girls are, after all, often described as temporary residents of their natal homes who must inevitably leave. They would thus be suitable recipients for substances that are imbued with the inauspiciousness of illness, which must be passed on to transfer the illness from the sufferer (see Lambert 1992).

Discussion

The dual form of the mother goddess in the domestic sphere, and the conflict inherent in it, mirrors the irresolvable dualism of women's lives, which is managed through the spatial segregation of their identities as sisters and daughters (in their *pīhar*) and as mothers and wives (in their *sasurāl*). The difference between this formulation of the relationship between local cosmology and social structure and that emphasized in analyses of orthodox, pan-Indian Hinduism is that the benevolent and malevolent aspects of the goddess are associated not with her marital status but with her enshrined, motherly form and her mobile, sisterly form respectively. Both *Mātājī* and *Sātobahin* seem to be independent in that neither is clearly represented as married; indeed, if the benevolence of female deities is contingent on male control, we should expect the 'Seven Sisters' rather than the 'mother' aspect to have this role, since iconographically at least, only the former is accompanied by a 'brother' deity. Yet it is the *Sātobahin* aspect of the goddess that is liminal, mobile and dangerous.

At the level of pan-Indian, orthodox Hindu mythology the Great Goddess oscillates between married and unmarried forms. From this perspective village goddesses seem to be manifestations of the latter type; although they are called 'mothers' they are not married and are generally viewed as destructive. At the local or popular level, this aspect in turn has two aspects: the enshrined, benign and protecting Mātājī and the homeless, malevolent Sātobahin. The Mātājī and Sātobahin aspects are themselves inherently unstable. With respect to her attributes and actions, Sātobahin is described as an independent, distinctive band of deities and never as Mātājī; when children are afflicted, however, worship and remembrance of 'Mātājī' is recommended, and sickness from contact with Sātobahin is sometimes described as 'Mātājī's blame' (*Mātājī kā doṣ*). The instability of these forms, at once distinctive and merged together, is reflected in the symbolism of transitoriness in the Sātobahin aspect.

Sātobahin and Mātājī as aspects of one goddess denote a split in valencies that are yet simultaneously identified as a unity, just as real women's simultaneous identities as mothers (with allegiance to their husband's and children's lineage), and sisters (with ritual and affective ties to their natal lineage) are segregated. The view that the independent goddesses' threatening character represents the powerful dangers of uncontained female sexuality undoubtedly has a place, but this view assumes a permanent transformation of this state through marriage. Actual women cannot be both married and unmarried—but like Sātobahin/Mātājī they can be, and usually are, both sisters and mothers. These identities are, like the goddess's aspects, separated in space.

The 'homelessness' of Sātobahin, in contrast to Mātājī's permanent residence in the home, is salient in this context. The symbol of true incorporation is, for all Rajasthani beings, a place of permanent residence. Thus, the transformation of the unsatisfied spirits of the recently deceased, who trouble their living relatives, into incorporated ancestors, who look after their family's welfare, is accomplished through a ritual the purpose of which is to 'establish' or 'put into place'—literally, 'to seat' (*biṭhāno*)—the ancestor. This entails providing and establishing it in a shrine within the family's house or fields or, more often, in a silver iconic representation that is installed ('seated') around the neck of a relative selected by the spirit.

The dual aspect of the goddess in the domestic sphere offers a powerful ideological message to women. The Seven Sisters are destructive to affinal women—they harm their children, who are women's primary means of incorporation into their husband's household and lineage. Women's first allegiance should be to their identity as wives and mothers within their conjugal household, with which their filial allegiance conflicts. In the early years of marriage, during the period of childbearing, perhaps the most personally valued aspect of most women's lives is their tie to their natal home. Women seek visits there whenever possible and remember with longing the freedom, security and affection of their lives there. In the form of the migrant Sātobahin, this valued aspect of women's self-identity is represented as threatening to their permanent security and well-being. Treatment

of their children when afflicted by the Seven Sisters employs items that are quintessentially associated with wifely domestic roles. The children, who alone can 'stabilize' and permanently incorporate them in their new home and lineage, are threatened by an unstable, permanently unincorporated band of childless goddesses. The imagery of Sātobahin seems poignantly to evoke the situation of Rajasthani women; their place of birth and childhood cannot be a permanent home, while in their marital residence they remain, for much of their lives, outsiders who periodically leave and return. In this irreconcilable segregation of identities a circling sisterhood seems an apposite image.

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