Raksha Bandhan-The Family Festival
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On the full-moon day in Sravana, July-August, Hindu women and men around the world gather together to bond brother

M.P. Mohanty, Delhi

On at least one day a year, brothers have to show their love for their sisters-and be nice! On this day, sisters, too, tell their brothers how they really feel-deep down. It is a joyous day when families gather in love to strengthen their bonds with each other. It's called raksha bandhan and comes in mid-August. It has become one of the most popular festival days for Hindus around the world.

Raksha means "protection," and bandhan means "to tie, or bind." Thus raksha bandhan is the 'bond of protection.' The heart of the festival is when sisters tie a rakhi, a specially made bracelet, on the right wrist of their brothers. This simple act symbolizes their wish for the welfare of her brother and the brother's commitment to always stand by and protect her. Sisters who have left their family to live with their husbands return on this day to be with their family. If she cannot come, she sends the rakhi by post or through a friend. If they do not have a brother, women can tie rakhi to a male, brotherly friend. He, then, becomes like a brother and assumes the brotherly responsibilities of protection. Women may also tie rakhi to close friends and neighbors.

Also known simply as 'rakhi,' raksha bandhan is a festival of love and inspiration observed in its own way by each family. Rising and bathing early in the morning-often chanting special mantras which have become associated with 'rakhi'-and donning their best clothing, the family may visit the local temple or perform a special puja in the home. The sacred thread may be changed. Some may fast until the afternoon, when all feast at a special meal. In Bombay, the festival is held on the beach, where coconuts are offered to Varuna, the God of Water. In

Eastern India, particularly Orissa, the festival is observed in temples. In the evening, jhoola, or swing fairs, are held to mark the end of the festival. Rakhis are even tied to cows and special rice cakes are offered to them.

A typical rakhi consists of a few simple strands of colored cotton, silk, or even gold thread. Recently, markets have become flooded with many styles of 'designer' rakhis, some with flashy decorations. But, no matter how simple or ornate the rakhi may be, what's important is the heartfelt love it represents.

The 'bond of protection' takes place simply, yet sincerely. The men wear a cloth on the head and face east. The sister, sometimes reciting a mantra, applies a pottu to her brother and ties on the rakhi, blessed with sacred rice and flowers. Then she puts a sweet-cake in his mouth, and he offers her a sweet cake, gifts, and usually some money.

There are many legends on the festival's origin. It is said that after her rescue from Ravana, Sita tied a rakhi on the wrist of Lakshmana to invoke his protection from future dangers. Goddess Lakshmi is said to have tied rakhi to the demon Bali in order to rescue Vishnu. And Savitri is said to have saved her marriage by tying rakhi to an unscrupulous suitor-king who wanted her affection-instead, he became her protection. Yet, no one is concerned about how or why raksha bandhan began. They simply love it, as a brother loves his sister.

Personal Accounts from New Dehli

Anush Rode: "One should not forget tradition. I love and remember tradition. When sisters get married, they leave their parent's place. We do not meet our sisters very often then, so during this occasion we get to see each other. It is a day of happiness. I have to part with my whole month's pocket money, but, really, I never think of that. I feel great!"

Shubhra Rode: "I wish my brother long life and success. I'm happy that at least on this day he will not fight with me. I start a month in advance. I ask my parents to get new dresses for me. It is a holiday for our school. Mummy prepares delicious

dishes. Everybody comes home. It's real fun. I tie rakhi to all my cousins."

Rimpy Dhillon: "I feel happy tying rakhi-only designed rakhis! I like that my brother gives me money."

Gagan Deep Singh Dhillon: "I keep the rakhis for many days, many months. I don't like just one, I like four of them." [A Sikh family]

Miss Kriti Damodaran (photo with her brother, Nitin, on page one): "At home, mummy prepares special dishes. It is really exciting."

Lalit Khiani: "Rakhi strengthens the relationship between brothers and sisters. It is his duty to protect her at the hour of need-a lifetime promise to save her. It is a sacred feeling."

Tamanna Khiani: "I wish everyday would be rakhi day. Every now and then Lalit fights with me. But on rakhi he does not."

Miss Supraa Mediratta: "I take an early morning bath and do not eat anything. This gives me a sacred feeling. I put a tilaka on my brother's forehead, offer cakes and sweets and, of course, good wishes. I touch his feet. You become humble. While tying rakhi, I chant mantras. My grandmother taught this to me."

Message of Togetherness

By Swami Maheshwarananda, Slovakia

On August 21, Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda celebrated raksha bandhan in Vep, Hungary, with thousands of devotees from Europe, Australia, Japan and the US. Here is his message of peace for this special day.

"Women and girls choose a 'brother' on raksha bandhan day to protect and help them. This person can be the woman's brother or another man to whom she has feelings of brotherly love. (There should never have been any intimate relationship between them.) If the chosen man gives his agreement, then the woman ties a string around the chosen brother's wrist. This is a symbolic sign of a life-long relationship which is not built on passion or worldly love, but on Sanatana Dharma, true spiritual love.

To celebrate this day, the brother gives a gift or invites her out for dinner. From now on, he should stand by her side at any time as a brotherly friend and helper to protect her. She also promises him to be there for him when he needs advice, help or sympathy. If they live in different places, they should stay in contact with each other. They should, at least on raksha bandhan day, write each other a letter, in which the 'sister' sends a new rakhi to strengthen the relationship. Just as in any large family, a sister can have many brothers and a brother can have many sisters. On each raksha bandhan day, additional brothers can be chosen-a brother can accept the bands from many sisters.

This tradition should make us conscious once again that all people belong to one family-we should love, help and care for each other. We should be here for each other. With the blessings of the Almighty Lord, it will be our first step and contribution towards a better, peaceful, divine world, leading us towards harmony and togetherness amongst all human beings."