Women's day in Nepal
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FESTIVALS

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Each year in Nepal, wives, mothers and daughters rejuvinate and purify themselves for the sake of their husbands and families

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Hinduism Todayhas received reports from Nepal that in 1999, members of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) attempted to discourage women from participating in the popular annual Teej festival and to create dissension among those who dared.

The long line of women dressed in a thousand shades of red, are waiting to get a glimpse of an ancient stone image of Siva and worship Him with the flowers and vermillion they carry in their hands. Having fasted the previous day and night, some of them faint from the heat and hunger as they wait in line, sometimes for three hours. They are of all ages, girls as young as five accompanying their mothers and sisters, grandmothers with their walking sticks, young mothers with babies at their breasts. They come to ask for a boon. If she is unmarried, that she may be granted a good husband. If she is already married, that he may have a long and productive life and never leave her.

It is the moonlit fortnight of Shravana (July/August) in Kathmandu, and this is Teej, a national holiday for women, during which they simultaneously feast and fast, do penance and dance all night in rituals that continue for three days. Ensconced in his Linga manifestation inside the temple of Pashupati, Siva becomes the object of devotion due to a popular myth. The story tells how He was the first "husband" to be granted to a "woman," Goddess Parvati, who performed penance and fasting to win Him. But this festival is not just about husbands and wives. It is also about mothers and daughters, and about the purification of women's bodies and souls.

These women, mainly from Brahmin and Chettri families, descend from all corners of Nepal to fill this most famous shrine in the middle of the city. Some of them have spent all night singing and dancing in the lush depths of the forest that surround the shrine. They are still singing and dancing at midday when I show up with my friend to see what has changed during the six years that I have spent in the States.

Colorful circles of women sit and watch as a dancer stands and flings herself around the middle, jerkily, almost as if she is unused to this motion, and yet at the same time there is a fluidity that signals that this has been done before, many times over. The other women sit and watch, entranced. They are dressed in saris of vermillion and carmine, brocaded and sequined with silk and glass pieces. Their faces are carefully made up, with a big red tika, the Hindu mark at the third eye on the forehead, and glass bangles and glass-bead necklaces that denote their married status. Crimson yarn with big colored sequins is braided into their hair. They sit and watch the

dancer, and in their watching they are as much participants of the dance as the dancer herself. I join the circle at the edge. The rough voices of the singers, the clapping and the chanting, the long note at the end that is held to breaking point all remind me of the Teej of my childhood.

I grew up in Kathmandu, within an orthodox brahmin family. Teej, in my memory, was always a time for abundance, where the women of the household got together and ate dar, the feast that precedes the fasting. Sitting in the kitchen with yogurt and sweets and fruits of all descriptions piled up in front of her, my grandmother distributed the food to all the women in the household. My mother and my aunts, who received gifts of clothes, tikas, bangles, hair ornaments and money from their own mothers, would then give all the unmarried girls gifts of money.

There is no specific age for a girl to start fasting; she can start as early or as late as she wants. I had, for the most part, resisted the gentle pressure from my mother, who said, "Oh, look at how even your little cousins have started fasting. And you, a big twelve-year-old!" A girl who started fasting early, who showed interest in clothes, make-up, jewelry was known to have rahar--desire. Desire was something that grew on a girl as she grew older, and for which the older women waited and watched. Desire, in this culture, does not allude to sex. Sex is forbidden outside a marriage, and a girl can get married only once in her lifetime, so the desire is directed into broader concerns--marriage, a good husband, children, a harmonious family and kinship ties that ultimately would form the potential for her to be realized as a complete woman. A woman outside this context could not exist. That is why there are almost no

unmarried women in this society.

A girl with no desires is a worrisome prospect, as I soon discovered. My older relatives were endlessly checking my clothing and my mindset to observe if I had acquired these desires yet, not realizing that rahar could take many different forms. My refusal to fast was seen as a stubborn shyness from which I would soon recover, as soon as I got a little older. And now here I was, twenty-four and still not having gone through a single fast, riding down in a little motor scooter through the traffic to witness the line of women at the temple.

The line is definitely longer, braiding its way up the long sidewalk and even snaking out onto the main road. A line of policemen stands by and makes sure that nobody can sneak in without waiting in queue. The police spotted my friend, who is blonde, and therefore a tourist not to be held to Nepali standards, so we were allowed to slip past the guards. The line snakes down for almost half a mile to the main shrine. Women, glittering in new chiffon and silk saris and red glass bangles, inch their way down the slope. They carry plates of offerings in their hands. The offerings of fruit, flower petals and grains have all been counted out so that there are exactly 108 of each.

The festival started with a sumptuous feast the previous day. Women get together and gorge themselves on the many delectable items that they have prepared over the last few days. For most of the women, this feast is a rare pleasure. Living in large extended families, they are accustomed to eating at the end of meals, after the men and children. Gifts of

new clothes and money sent by the older women to the younger ones also renew the kinship ties among the female members of the family. This network is often the only one that women can fall back on should their husbands die or leave them for another woman.

On the night of Teej, oil lamps are left burning all night to assure the well-being of the husbands. Some women float them on the river on little leaf-bowls. Although no one chooses to talk about it, a light going out is a bad omen. Women therefore take extra care to make sure that this lamp does not extinguish. In a culture where women are not allowed to inherit property or to remarry, a woman's status and economic security depend heavily upon her husband's. But a man also depends upon his wife. A wife who refuses to fast during Teej could be putting his life in serious jeopardy, at least socially.

Surprisingly, even women whose husbands have already died, who are usually left out of other festivities for fear that their unlucky presence might diminish the whole enterprise, must feast and fast for their dead spouses. This leaves me wondering if perhaps this fast is about something more than the long life of a husband?

The day of the fast, women dress up in their reddest sari--red being the auspicious colour of fertility--and go down to Pashupati and other local shrines. After a wait in the queue that might take three hours, they finally get to glimpse of the divine Siva Linga--a simple stone icon representing the Transcendent. Being blessed by Siva for another year, the women then go to purify themselves in the holy rivers.

The fast is traditionally broken the next morning by ritually bathing the husband's feet with water and sacred substances and then drinking that water. We get up before sunrise and head down to the river to see the ceremonies. Women are scrubbing different parts of their body three hundred and sixty times to get rid of all the sins of the last year. Each part of the body requires different earth and plants to be scrubbed with. The soles of the feet need earth that has been trodden on by an elephant. The forehead requires cowdung and earth from the roots of the tulasi, holy basil, plant. All these ingredients are carefully nurtured and collected by the women over the year, so that they can have them on this day.

As the sun rises, the women become visible, their wet clothes clinging to their legs, their unravelled hair tangled and wet as they emerge from the river like so many Venuses rising from the foam. The riverbank, as far as I can see, is filled with women of all shapes and sizes, the old and the young, the voluptuously fat and the malnourished. They are dressing and undressing, unravelling and tying up their hair. Some of the women do not take off their tikas and bangles, others are completely naked from the waist down. Groups of women are lined up at the muddy edges of a river, submerged to the waist, eyes closed, chewing on stalks of datyun grass with ecstatic looks. Demure and respectable wives of an hour ago are suddenly transformed into almost feral beings. The tika on the forehead is still firmly in place, the sarongs are still tucked modestly above the breasts, but there is something wild and unbridled in the glee with which the women sit and rub mud onto themselves. It is as if this rite of purification gives them the justification to unleash their womenly shakti, like the wild Goddesses of Hindu lore. The rising sun still has to dissolve the last of the mist. I stand there looking at the scene, feeling as if

I am in a space somewhere between now and an eternity ago.

After the women go through these three hours of rigorous cleansing, they come out purified, absolved of sins committed the past year. Still wet from the river, they sit in a semicircle, hands eagerly extended towards the priest as he sits and chants in the middle. This day, called Rishi Panchami, is also dedicated to remembering the thirteen rishis, or holy men, who started the lineage that all Hindus belong to. The women, sitting around the semicircle and going through another ritual, are making sure this time that the ancestors who started their lineage will be remembered.

Teej, being multi-faceted like all festivals in Nepal, has many interpretations. Is this a communal act of purification, a public release for women in a structured culture, a bonding festival for families, a renewal of the pacts of sisterhood, a ritual of insurance for women who depend upon their husband for their economic, social and spiritual well-being? It is all this and more. Are women lining up to save their husband's souls or to save their own, or is there even a distinction? The answer would surely be different for each woman that we asked.