

“It Should Last a Hundred Thousand Years”

Rali Worship and Brother Sister Bond in Kangra

○ Brigitte Luchesi

Rali is said to be a local form of the pan-Indian Sanskrit goddess Parvati who is worshipped in many parts of India. The details of her worship, however, vary and the particular form of worship described here seems restricted to that performed by girls and young women in the Kangra District of Himachal Pradesh in North India, though somewhat similar religious rituals surrounding the very important brother-sister bond are ubiquitous in the entire sub-continent.

A close scrutiny of the Rali rites reveals two important facts. Firstly, it shows a marked emphasis on the brother-sister bond. Women in Kangra seem to have used the rite to formulate and express their view of this relationship and in doing so, they have invented special forms of ritual behaviour and procedure, which are not to be found in the *puranas* and other similar religious texts. Secondly, the female viewpoint with regard to the brother-sister relationship is not concealed, rather, it is openly expressed. It takes clearly visible and audible forms that are communicated to the relevant male relatives - the brothers and cousin brothers of the concerned girls and women.

Rali Rites and Rituals

In Kangra many young unmarried girls worship the goddess Rali once a year starting on the eve



of the solar month of *Chaitra* (about mid-March) and continuing for a whole month. Rali worship is carried out by groups of girls ranging from small six- or seven-year-olds to teenagers and even by newly married brides, but the core consists of girls between the ages of 14 and 16. All those who vow to observe the rites for the full month bury a cowrie shell in a chosen place in one of the houses. Starting the next morning, they gather at this temporary shrine daily to perform all the acts of a domestic *puja* which married women are supposed to

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perform. They come on an empty stomach, collect the flowers needed for the worship, paint ritual designs in the courtyard, on the threshold and in front of the shrine, and finally perform the *puja* itself. The ritual sequences are complemented by auspicious songs, meant specially for the occasion and sung to the accompaniment of drums and dance. These songs have been passed on from one generation to the next, from elder sisters and older married women to the younger ones. Shortly before sunset, the girls meet again for the evening worship, followed by another worship programme for the goddess in which elder women of the house and brothers may join in.

In these ceremonies the goddess Rali is represented by a clay image. Along with her image, two others are made- that of Shankar, which is the local name of the great god Shiva, and one of Bastu, Rali's brother. The daily *pujas* are performed for all three of them. During the first fortnight, very simple, small images, made by the girls themselves, are used. After fourteen days, they are supplemented by larger and more elaborate images, made by or under the guidance of women or elder girls who are known for their craftsmanship and ritual knowledge.

At the beginning of the next solar month, the images of Rali and Shankar are married with full-scale rites by a genuine Brahmin family

priest. The marriage takes place in the bride's home, that is, in the house where the *puja* shrine has been kept during the previous month. As is done in the wedding of a human couple, a wedding canopy is erected and all the prescribed ceremonies are conducted, for instance the anointment of the couple with turmeric paste, the series of ritual baths, the oil ceremony in which the bride's relatives and friends apply oil to her scalp, the appropriate dressing of the couple, and finally the circumambulation of the holy fire which finalises the marriage. The girls divide into two groups, the groom's side and the bride's, and apportion kin roles among themselves. The role of Rali's mother is taken over by the girl in whose house the wedding takes place. Others act as Rali's father, the bridegroom's mother, father and so on. The only kin role not taken over by a girl is that of Rali's mother's brother (*mama*), which is assigned to one of the real brothers of the girls. The wedding festivities end with a meal for the participants and the guests who are invited for the festive occasion.

One or two days later, the "newlyweds" and brother Bastu are taken in a palanquin to a nearby river where they are submerged. Here, too, real brothers and cousins take part. They carry the palanquin and wade into the water where they do the actual immersion. The watching girls and women sing and cry, thus bidding a moving farewell to the gods. The goddess departs and the Rali worship is complete. Next year, she will return, provided the girls gather for *puja* again. Then, Rali's home will be the house of another girl. Normally, the yearly *puja* sequences are repeated until all the girls have once acted as Rali's mother.



Interpreting Rali Worship

A century ago, R.C. Temple reported that Rali worship "is *en vogue* all over the district" (1882: 297). Rali *puja* is believed to be a good and auspicious act with positive effects on all directly and indirectly involved, with the most auspicious blessings expected for the main participants. The worship is supposed to help the girls gain a good husband. In a society where the ultimate destiny of a woman is still seen in her role as a wife and mother, the thoughts and anxieties of unmarried girls and their families concentrate on finding the girl a fitting partner.

Secondly, the elder women view Rali worship as a form of "education" in the sense of informal instruction through examples or instant correction. For example, in the process of modelling the images, the

girls learn from the experienced womenfolk about the type of earth to be used, how it should be prepared and fortified. They learn how the figure is built and which holy substances should be added to make it fit for worship. On the wedding day, it is the family priest who guides the girls and corrects them if necessary as they carry out the marriage ceremony. "Education" therefore primarily means working towards enabling the girls to perform religious rituals correctly on their own. It is a form of sacred instruction in Victor Turner's sense (1969:93), which aims at knowing and rehearsing the basic rituals a grown-up woman in Kangra should know and perform for the benefit of her family.

However, such "education" also extends beyond the religious realm. The preparations for Rali's wedding

and the performance of her wedding are also meant to make the girls aware of what their own futures hold - their own marriage and departure from their parents' house. It should be noted here that girls as a rule are married outside their native village and in most cases, the brides move into their husband's parental house. The prospect of one's own wedding is undoubtedly exciting for most girls, at the same time it also provokes anxieties. The tears the girls shed when parting from Rali can also be seen as tears which arise at the thought of one's own departure from home. Moving to the in-laws' house means a more or less complete uprooting to a young married woman. She will be spatially separated from her family of origin, neighbours and childhood friends and transferred to completely new surroundings. She will have to live as a subordinated daughter-in-law and sister-in-law among unknown people who often consider themselves higher in status than her parental family. She will find herself at the beginning of a slow and often uncertain incorporation into a new family, into new responsibilities and new tasks as a wife and mother. For some brides, who held privileged position as young *devis* in their father's house, and have been treated with love, care and indulgence, this change in status is severe. The example is set by the goddess herself who, at the end of the worship period, is married to her consort Shankar. What seems at first sight merely a charming and playful enactment of the goddess' marriage, is actually backed by the full authority of tradition. The girls follow this example and are led by it towards a new state of life. They learn about their roles and duties as wives by "playing out" certain actions and emotions and by observing the performance of others.

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Bastu, the Brother

One of the most striking features of Rali worship is the presence of the brother of the goddess. He too, is represented as an image and is worshipped. But unlike the two other gods, he has no Sanskritic counterpart in the *puranas* and other written pan-Indian sources, nor are there any references to him in local mythologies. But Bastu, nevertheless is indispensable because of the significant role played by a brother during and after the marriage of his sister. He is the one who accompanies her to the house of her conjugal family. According to local understanding, he is the only male member of her parental family who can do so without the risk of forfeiting the family honour. That is why it is he who fetches her for visits

home, especially during the first years of her marriage. He thus acts as an intermediary between the two families and more importantly acts as the bearer of constant presents. The flow of gifts from the side of the bridegivers to that of the bridgetakers that is so characteristic of a Kangra marriage, does not stop after the wedding, but continues for a long time. At certain auspicious times, married women receive gifts for themselves and the members of their conjugal families from their family of origin. The brother as the bearer of these plays a significant mediating role. The contribution of a woman's brother on the occasion of the rites of passage of her children is also of great importance. To the sons and daughters of his sister, he is the maternal uncle (*mama*) who contributes substantial material gifts and renders important ritual services. He is, for instance, the one who provides the wedding crown for his nephew and binds his wedding turban. In the case of a girl, he is the one who picks her up and puts her into the palanquin which will bring her to her in-laws' house.



Kirin Narayan

Kangra women singing songs while cooking for a feast

The social and ritual duties of a brother express the fact that an alliance between two groups is established by marriage. Similarly significant is the role played by Bastu in Rali worship. Flanked by Shankar, her spouse, on one side, and Bastu, her brother, on the other, the female goddess takes the central position. But without the figure of Bastu, the decisive linking function of a woman would not be made visible.

Even during the Rali rites, the role of brothers is not confined to merely being passive observers and listeners. Instead, they are made active participants in some of the sequences. On the day of the image-making for instance, there is a short ceremony in which a brother hands over the clay for the images to his sister. She responds by applying a red mark on his forehead and feeding him sweets whereupon he thanks her by touching her feet. During the wedding ceremonies, the brother brings the water required for the ritual baths of the bride and groom. He is also present at one of the central ceremonies where all the relatives apply oil to the bride's hair-parting and bless her. On the last day, he places the images in the palanquin. During the final rites, he carries the palanquin and finally immerses the images in the stream.

The active involvement of brothers in these rites is encouraged to remind the boys and young men that soon the time will come when their sisters will leave their common home, a separation that is necessary and unavoidable. At the same time, they are made to understand that despite this separation the expression of mutual affection and concern need not cease. The precondition is that brothers continue to love their sisters and fulfill their brotherly duties, thereby



making the brother-sister bond as durable as their sisters wish. By including the boys in the ceremonies and ascribing the role of the *mama* to them, women take a step beyond merely voicing their wishes. While jointly acting as the mother and mother's brother of Rali, a sister and brother playfully anticipate a time when the next generation yet unborn, will have grown up, be ready to marry and have children of their own. They are made aware that their relationship is expected to last up to the marriage of the sister's children - and hopefully even longer.

The Brother-Sister Bond

But it is not only the social role or the culturally expected brotherly

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behaviour that women refer to when they talk about the importance of a brother. They also emphasise the emotional bond between sisters and brothers which is characterised by special intimacy and affection. They are born of the same mother, but in contrast to a pair of brothers who may live on in the same household, a brother and sister are destined for separation. But it is hoped that this separation, brought about by the marriage of the sister, does not affect the intimate bond between them. On several occasions mothers and older women directly or indirectly refer to the close relationship between brother and sister, particularly in the special Rali songs mentioning the actions of Bastu. In these songs Bastu appears as the ideal brother, the giver of desired gifts, a supporter and rescuer in time of need, a concerned emissary of the parental group and a constant companion.

For example, in a song sung by girls every Monday as they go from house to house collecting donations for Rali's marriage, Bastu is depicted as the one who brings special ornaments from a far-off place:

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*Go, Brother Bastu, to Delhi town
when you come back from Delhi
bring colorful patterned bangles.*

The notion of a helping and rescuing brother is expressed in a song which the girls sing during the immersion of the images:

*Into the river deep inside, deep
inside*

Sister Rali fell.

*Come, Brother Bastu, dive
and rescue Sister Rali.*

In many homes this song is not only sung on the last day but daily, while little baskets filled with flowers for *puja* are floated in water. The first verse naming Rali and Bastu is repeated several times, but their names are substituted with those of the participating girls and of their brothers. The girls identify with Rali and project the role of Bastu onto their own brothers.

Another song sung daily before worship goes like this:

*Oh, Tahal tree, having begun
blossoming,*

All girlfriends are far away.

Sister Rali is far away.

*Go, Brother Bastu, to your sister,
the one with whom you played in
your mother's lap,
to the one born of the same mother
(amber jaiya).*

Bastu is sent to see Rali who, like all her female childhood companions, is married and lives in a far-off place. But she is not

forgotten, as the visits of her brother demonstrate

The lines the girls intone during morning and evening worship express the paramount importance of a lasting relationship with the brother. While sprinkling water onto the images, they sing:

*One drop for Rali,
the second drop for Shankar,
the third drop for Bastu.
A hundred thousand years,
hundred thousand times ten
million years
the brother-sister pair should
last.*

The remarkable astronomical number apart, it should be remembered that this wish is voiced on the occasion of a worship aiming explicitly at gaining a good husband. It seems legitimate to conclude that the positive future of the girl is thought to depend not only on the choice of a good partner but also on the enduring relationship with the brother. The notion of a happy adult life in the view of Kangra women (as well as among many other women throughout the subcontinent) includes both - a harmonious life with their husband and his relatives and a lasting relationship with the family of origin, kept up by the brother.

The Link Between Homes

At a point in life when young girls get ready to be married but details of the future still remain uncertain and often frightening, the prospect of brotherly support is comforting. In the figure of Bastu,

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These expectations, however, do not remain implicit and silent. They are brought to the knowledge of the male relatives and the foremost means of doing this is through the image of the goddess' brother itself. Even without words, it demonstrates the importance of a brother to a sister. The visible sign is supplemented by the songs which can be heard in the house and the fields for a full month. The message is clearly audible and can't be missed: the sister, i.e. the girl born to the same mother, is going to leave the house soon and forever. A total and painful separation can be prevented only if the brothers follow the example of Bastu.

Thus in the course of Rali worship, girls express and make known certain expectations they have towards their brothers. As these features are not to be found in comparable forms of the goddess worship in other parts of India, it seems justifiable to attribute them to the inventiveness of Kangra women.

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