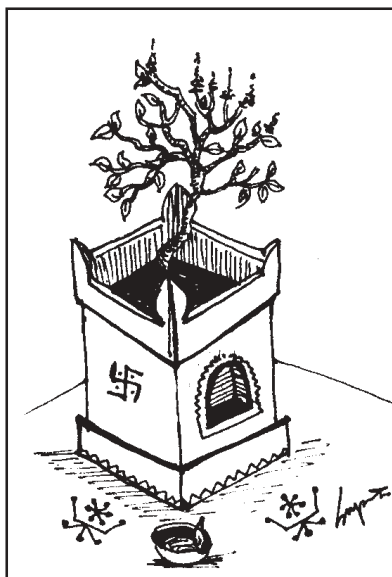


# Sprouting and Uprooting of Saili

## The Story of the Sacred Tulsi in Kangra

Kirin Narayan



THE Goddess comes in many forms," said Brinda Devi, a reflective, middle-aged woman, when I asked about the sacred basil plant growing in her courtyard. "This is one of the forms of the Goddess that we worship." She made this observation during the lunar month of Kartik (October/November), when the plant was wrapped in a gauzy, spangled red cloth, all dressed up as an auspicious Goddess and bride. In Brinda Devi's home, as in the homes of all the upper-caste Kangra villagers I visited, the sacred basil plant held the place of honor on a raised stone stand in the centre of the courtyard. Called *ocymum sanctum linn*, by botanists, this plant with small purple blossoms is known as *tulsi* in Sanskrit, and as *saili* in the Kangri dialect.

While Brinda Devi and other upper-caste women in Kangra worshipped Saili as a Goddess, they also spoke of her lovingly, as a little daughter. "*Saili kuri hai*; Saili is a girl," I was repeatedly told. During a year's fieldwork on women's oral traditions in Kangra in 1990-1991, I learned that Saili was not just the centre of upper caste courtyards, but also a focal point for women's ritual

action, folktales, myths, and songs. As I explored the rich profusion of texts and traditions around Saili further, I learned that women's accounts tended to differ from men's. In this essay, I present a few versions of Saili's or Tulsi's identity to make two points: (1) that women's oral traditions are a space for creative reflection on the conditions of women's lives,<sup>1</sup> and (2) that in exploring Hindu traditions, it is important to think of multiple, perhaps even contradictory versions, rather than a single correct and authoritative one.<sup>2</sup>

### The Song of the Plant-Girl

Kangra lies at the base of the towering Dhauladhar range of the Western Himalayas, and given the cold weather, Saili is usually an annual plant. Seeded in the courtyard on an auspicious day in the month of Chaitra (March/April), she is honored with a lamp at her base in the month of Bhadon (August/September), and married in Kartik (October/November). With the advancing cold, she then withers, and is uprooted the month of Magh (January/February). Through the months that she is green and flourishing, women of Brahman, high-ranking Rajput, Soodor Mahajan trader castes tend to her daily care. Each morning, after worship of house-hold deities arrayed in an alcove indoors, women come outdoors to water and honor the plant.

If Saili is seen as a girl, the same logic that applies to the lives of most Indian daughters holds for her too: she must be married. It is during the time of her wedding that she receives

the most extensive ritual attention. This wedding to Thakur (Vishnu) takes place over five days leading up to the full moon in the month of Kartik (October/November). These days are known in Kangra as Panch Bhikham (the Five Days of Fasting), or Panch Bhisham (the Five Days of Bhishma—though nobody could tell me for sure what Saili's connection to Bhishma was).

During Panch Bhikham, women dress up their household's Saili as a bride, swaddling her leaves in red cloth. A crawling baby Krishna is brought out from the household shrine indoors to serve as her groom, Thakur. He is clothed in yellow with a tinsel groom's crown, and nestled against the base of the plant. Women also decorate the stone stand with red stick-figure drawings (*likhnu*) depicting the familiar sight of a bride and a groom carried in two palanquins, and surrounded by dowry. In recent years, Saili's dowry items are shown to include not just the massive traditional trunks (*pattaru*) but also sofa sets, tables, bicycles, and television sets. In Sood trader families where there are extra calendars to spare, the drawings may be supplemented by bright pasted cutouts of gods from calendars.

Some exceptionally observant women bring Saili and Thakur in-doors under a wedding canopy (*vedi*) for Panch Bhikham, and keep five oil lamps continually burning beside. Households with such lighted lamps become the place for groups of women to gather in the evenings, to tell folktales about other women who did

the same ritual, and to sing wedding songs. In particular, they sing what is known as “the song of Saili.” I first heard this song in October 1990, and later came to hear it again and again in different variations. I present the words that I first taped below. Readers will have to imagine the hypnotic beauty of women’s joined, flowing voices singing in a lamp-lit space.

*O ai malin*

The female gardener came,

*o aya mali*

the male gardener came.

*hath kadari*

With a spade in hand,

*sire parakhari*

a basket on the head,

*yamuna kinare*

On the banks of the Yamuna river,

*kitti kiyari*

they prepared a seed bed.

*chaitra mahine*

In the spring month of Chaitra

*saili je bai*

Saili was sown.

*vaisakh mahine*

In the month of Baisakh,

*saili je lungi*

Saili sprouted.

*jeth mahine*

In the summer month of Jyesth

*pattaru do pattaru*

a leaf or two.

*harh mahine*

In the month of Asharh

*chhotiya laraja*

little side shoots.

*son mahine*

In the monsoon month of Shravan,

*dale par dale*

branches forked from branches.

*bhadon mahine*

In the month of Bhadrapad,

*minjara je paya*

buds were forming.

*asu mahine*

In the month of Ashwin,

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*phirade ravaru*

proposals circulate.

Brinda Devi, who often looked over my transcriptions, was kind enough to give me a detailed exegesis of this song. She explained that an auspicious day for planting Saili is chosen in the spring month of Chaitra. The seeds are sown by a male Brahman or an unmarried girl (who in Kangra are called *dei*, Goddess). She pointed out that the changes described for each lunar month matched the trajectory of the plant’s actual growth. By the end of the monsoon in September, the plant is tall and flowering. “She had come of age,” Brinda Devi commented about this part of the song. “She grew up, and she needed to be married.” At this point, Saili’s mother confers with her budding daughter about a potential divine groom.

*hun meriya sailiya*

Now, my Saili,

*kaun bareu*

who will be your groom?

*hun meriya sailiya*

Now my Saili,

*thakur bareu*

Thakur will be your groom.

*thakure na diya mae*

Don’t give me to Thakur, Mother,

*sailie sauka*

Don’t make Saili a co-wife.

Thakur is rejected since he’s already married. Saili’s mother goes on to suggest god after god, only to find that her daughter doesn’t want any one of them because he already has a wife (or wives).

*hun meriya sailiya*

Now, my Saili,

*kaun bareu*

who will be your groom?

*hun meriya sailiya*

Now my Saili,

*brahma bareu*

Brahma will be your groom.

*brahme na diya mae*

Don’t give me to Brahma, Mother,

*gayatri e sauka*

Gayatri will be a co-wife.

[repeated in no fixed order with Vishnu; Lakshmi as co-wife Sadashiyji; Parvati [or Gaura] Ramchandra; Sita Krishna; Radha [or Rukman] Suraj (the sun); Rasma (rays) Chandrama (the moon); Rohini (a constellation) Ganesh; Ridhi-Sidhi]

There are no single eligibles in the universe of the song: polygamy is the only possibility. So, after all the deities are found to be paired, Saili is forced to reconsider, returning to the groom she had originally rejected.

*hun meriya sailiya*

Now, my Saili,

*kaun bareu*

who will be your groom?

*hun meriya sailiya*

Now my Saili,

*thakur bareu*

Thakur will be your groom.

*hathi phiri sailiya*

Stand back, turn around, Saili

*thakur bareu*

Thakur will be your groom.

*ghiri phiri sailiya*

Fall back, turn around, Saili

*thakur bareu*

Thakur will be your groom.

The song goes on to describe a gala wedding attended by many of the same married Gods in different capacities. They are joined by a galaxy of twinkling stars, and opposing factions from the Mahabharata epic who, for this event, drum together.

*kattik mahine*

In the month of Karttik

*byahje rachaya*

the wedding was planned.

*sailiya ta thakure da*

Saili and Thakur’s

byahje karaya

wedding was held.

*chandra suraj*

The Moon and the Sun

*mukute jadaya*

were set in their crowns.

*brahma ta vishnu*

Brahma and Vishnu

*ved parhaya*

chanted the Vedas.  
*nav lakh tara*  
 Ninety-thousand stars  
*janeti je ay a*  
 came in the groom's party.  
*kaurava pandava*  
 The Kauravas and Pandavas  
*dol bajaya*  
 played the drums.  
*sailiya ta thakure da*  
 Saili and Thakur's  
*byah je karaya*  
 wedding was celebrated.

Some women, like Brinda Devi, do not include an overview of wedding rites in the song. Others who I taped the same song from listed these local rites, step by step.

*hun meriya sailiya*  
 Now my Saili  
*samute je le ai*  
 is brought to be bathed.  
*hun meriya sailiya*  
 Now my Saili  
*sandhi je lagiya*  
 has oil put on her head.  
*hun meriya sailiya*  
 Now, my Saili  
*lagaan je lave*  
 is given to the groom.  
*hun meriya sailiya*  
 Now my Saili  
*vedi je lagiya*  
 circles the sacred fire.  
*hun meriya sailiya*  
 Now my Saili  
*sirgundiyo e*  
 has her hair braided red.  
*hun meri bitti*  
 Now my little daughter  
*byohi vidai e*  
 is married; we part.

Once the mother has said fare-well, Saili is taken in a palanquin to her husband's house. In Kangra, there is usually a feast (*dham*) at the groom's house to celebrate the acquiring of a bride. For Saili, this feast was prepared by her furious co-wife.

*lei rani sailiya*  
 Queen Saili was taken  
*doli je pai*  
 and bundled into a palanquin.  
*lei rani sailiya*  
 Queen Saili was taken  
*sauriyande jai*  
 off to her husband's home.  
*sailiya die saukan*  
 Saili's co-wife  
*dham rachai*  
 planned the feast.  
*sou man jair*  
 One hundred maunds of poison  
*dham ralaya*  
 were mixed into the food.  
*lei rani saili*  
 Queen Saili was taken  
*khana je baithi*  
 to sit and to eat.  
*pahela garae saili*  
 With the first bite, Saili's  
*tiramiri pai*  
 mouth burned.  
*due garae saili*  
 With the second bite, Saili  
*gai kamalai* '   
 wilted.  
*trie garae saili*  
 With the third bite, Saili

*gaie samai*  
 Saili passed away.  
*samadhie sailie*  
 As Saili passed away  
*shop je dite*  
 her co-wife cursed:  
*saili tu hoi jay a*  
 "Saili, you will now be  
*hun lakaru*  
 a piece of wood.  
*thakur tu ho jaya*  
 Thakur, you will now be  
*hun patthar*  
 a stone."

The co-wife is unnamed here, and often women identified her as Rukmani. According to Brinda Devi, though, "She was another Saili. It was this Saili that gave the curse to the bride that she become a stick, and that Thakur become a stone. Like Vishnu, Thakur had the form of a man. But then he became a Saligram stone." The *shalagrarn* is a form of ammonite, a river stone representing Vishnu. Though most upper caste households keep such a stone in the indoor shrine, married women are not supposed to touch it. Brinda Devi went on to quote a line from a devotional *bhajan* honoring Saili: "Saligram's chief Queen, Queen of all the Gods" (*Saligrame di patarani/sabna devateyon di rani*).

"If there was no curse (*shrap*)" Brinda Devi's sister observed, "Saili would never dry up. She would always be green." Yet, having withered due to the co-wife's curse — and also because of intense winter cold — Saili must be dispensed with. A woman would be cremated, but as a Goddess who has temporarily taken comes into the safe hands of the bathing ascetics who honor her by lifting her onto their heads. Saili then finds her resting place atop holy men, much as a leaf from the plant is placed on Vishnu in worship.



**Worshipping Tulsi**

The final verses of this song resemble the ending convention from Sanskrit *stotra* compositions, in which the “fruits of listening” (*phalashruti*) are extolled.

*kanya gave*

If an unmarried girl sings this,  
*changa bar pave*  
she’ll get a fine groom.

*suhagan gave*

If a married woman sings this,  
*putra khilave*  
she’ll feed sons.

*vidhava gave*

If a widow sings this,  
*vaikunthe jo jave*  
she’ll go to heaven.

*sunadiyo gunadiyo*

To listen to this and hear this  
*ganga da nauna*  
is to bathe in the Ganga.

*gande bajandeyo*

To sing this and play this  
*yamuna da nauna*  
is to bathe in the Yamuna.

Worshipping Saili, then, women are cultivating the culturally appropriate aim for each stage of their lives: acquiring a groom for the unmarried, giving birth to sons for the married, and finally, as an old woman devoting themselves to religious pursuits with an eye towards death. Merely listening to this song is lauded as equivalent to a purifying bath in a sacred river. The song comes full circle back to the Yamuna river — associated with Krishna, a form of Vishnu — beside which the original seedbed had been planted.

This song was by far the most popular account of Saili among up-per-caste Kangra women. Women who did not sing it themselves often knew about it, or could sing along. Yet across castes and villages, texts were never exactly the same. Words could be different, and new passages could be

inserted, such as the step-by step description of Saili’s wedding along the lines of local rites. Some-times, passages could be left out, as I learned when Sulakshana Devi, a Brahman woman vehemently denied the validity of the sequence about the co-wife and poison. Sulakshana Devi had earlier wanted me to erase ob-scene songs taped at a wedding, announcing that “these days, our men even go to America, and if they hear these songs what will become of our honor?” Now she appeared to be once again concerned about what strangers might think if they heard this violent part of Saili’s song. She kept repeating “not correct! (*thik nahiri*)” as her sister-in-law, undeterred, sang her way through the poisoned feast. Only when they got to the box being made did she once again join in.

While there are divergences on what is right within this song, there

are also important ritual elements — such as the necessary presence of five pebbles that some women say is Saili’s brother Chutki Manaka — which are not described in this text. Also, there are divergences within the larger body of folklore explaining how Saili came to be both a plant and a goddess.

Visiting a Rajput household in December, 1990, I sat with several other women balancing on a rope cot in the bright winter sun. I had just transcribed Saili’s song for the first time, and I asked a woman who was known as being “very knowledgable” if she would mind checking over what I had done. Jnanu Devi was a Rajput woman in her 50s, with an energetic, amused quality. I read aloud what I had written down as she hummed along, nodding her head. Then I asked a point that had been troubling me: “Why had the co-wife put poison in the wedding feast?” “There’s a story.” announced Jnanu Devi. In an expressive voice, she proceeded to tell a quite different version in Pahari.<sup>3</sup>

In this version, Saili or Tulsī (Jnanu Devi used the names inter-changeably) was a Chamar, or un-touchable Cobbler’s daughter. A Brahman boy brought shoes to her father for mending, and was struck by her beauty. He wanted to marry her. Saili was so innocent that she didn’t understand the difference between Brahmans and Chamars, and she too wanted to marry him despite disapproval on all sides. In anger and pain, her father cursed her to become a stone, saying that only Krishna would marry her. As this was the era of Sat Yuga, what people said came true. Saili became a stone at a riverbank until Krishna came wandering through in the company of Arjuna. Though Krishna warned





that he could not take her home with him since he was already married to Rukmani, Saili put a wedding garland around Krishna's neck.

When Panch Bhikham came, Rukmani was distraught with the amount of housework that she had to do in feeding a hundred and one Brahmans each day. Krishna asked Saili to come and sell curds, and planted the idea in Rukmani's head that she could use household help. Rukmani invited Saili to come live with them. Then, Krishna caused Rukmani to sleep late and she awoke in a panic about the unprepared feast. Saili though, had everything in the kitchen under control. Enormously relieved, Rukmani granted Saili a boon: that through Panch Bhisham, she could accompany Krishna to the river for his bath.

Krishna and Saili set off, and Rukmani continued with preparations

for the Brahmans at home. A crow kept tasting and spoiling the wheat Rukmani was sunning. Rukmani shooed it off, calling it a black Untouchable Chandala. The crow retorted that it was Rukmani who was the black untouchable since all the merits of this auspicious time were being usurped by Saili, off sporting with Krishna at the Yamuna river.

Rukmani rushed down to the river to see what was going on. Though Krishna noticed her coming, and tried to pretend that Saili was only removing a thorn from his foot, Rukmani was not convinced. She seethed with anger. The next day, she hid Krishna's water-pot and garments. Saili looked around for these things to carry to the river, but couldn't find them anywhere in the house. Krishna was waiting outside for her. He grew impatient and



**Kangra women : Building houses for Tulsi**

shouted out, demanding, "What, did you sprout in there?!" Again, because it was Satyug, Saili immediately sprouted and became a plant. Krishna went in to see what happened, and he promptly became a stone, as Jnanu Devi said, "inside her."

When Jnanu Devi finished, she linked the story back to my original question by stating, "Then Rukmani fed 100 maunds of poison to her co-wife. After this, Krishna was called Thakur." She quoted a line from the song: "Now my Saili, Thakur will be your groom." I didn't quite see the connection, since no wedding was mentioned in her story, and it seemed that Saili was already dead. Neither did Kaku, an eight year old boy who had been listening in. "Where did she put it?" he demanded, "Who did she feed?" Jnanu Devi laughed, shaking her head, "What were you listening to? This is like the proverb, 'All night you read the Ramayana and in the morning you ask, 'Who is Sita's husband?'" The women sitting around Jnanu Devi all tittered. None of them seemed to see the song account of Saili as plant-girl-wood and the narrative of Saili/Tulsi as

untouchable-stone-girl-plant as inconsistent: rather, the two versions appeared to coexist without contradiction.

Jnanu Devi said she had learned this story from her sister, but I never encountered this version again, from a woman of any caste. When I asked other upper-caste women about this story, they were horrified. "Saili a Chamar? Impossible!" they said. One woman expressed the opinion that if low caste households should ever cultivate Saili this would be a sign of terrible Kalyug. However, Jnanu Devi's assertion that caste was not an issue to innocent Saili reminded me of another strand of women's discourse in Kangra, in which women rhetorically grouped themselves, across caste, as being part of a "brotherhood of women" (*janascm di biradari*) joined together by similar life suffering. I also found it interesting in Jnanu Devi's retelling that she was sympathetic to the different women's perspectives: Saili as vulnerable girl and Rukmani as overworked, betrayed housewife.

This song and story are similar in that Saili or Tulsi is subject to

another wife's jealousy and so be-comes a plant. But in men's versions, clearly derived from the Puranas, Tulsi's transformation stems from two men competing for her attentions.

### Tulsi Supplants Saili

I heard this third account in two oral variants, both of which emphasized the Sanskritic name Tulsi over the local name Saili. The first account was from an authoritative old Brahman I knew as "Panditji." In June 1991, I visited his family high in the Sivalik hills facing the Dhauladhar peaks. Amid a lush backdrop of cricket call, the occasional barking dog, and the faint sound of television from a neighboring house, we were discussing ritual matters. I now reproduce the portion of our conversation featuring Saili.

*Kirin:* So — when Panch Bhikham is celebrated, they say that Saili is the co-wife of Rukmani?

*Panditji:* (switching from Hindi to Pahari, to address Bhabho, his sister-in-law) Tell her about Saili's wedding.

*Bhabho:* Saili is Rukmani's co-wife, she's Radhika. She became Radha. (Her brother-in-law is shaking his head with a smile, and she falters). Rukman was Krishna's woman, wasn't she? So then Tulsi is Radha, isn't she?

*Kirin:* So who is Tulsi?

*Panditji:* Tulsi is one...

*Bhabho (nodding to me):* He'll know the story.

*Panditji (in Sanskritised Hindi):* There was an anti-God (*rakshas*) called Jarasandh. She was his wife. And Jarasandh was so powerful that he had kept all the Gods in bondage. [*Bhabho:* Yes, he bound them all up]. When he used to go to battle the gods, then his wife put a mark (*tilak*) on his forehead.



And he used to bring the gods back, bound up. So all the gods were kept captive by him. So then a petition was made to Lord Vishnu to do something about this. So Lord Vishnu took the form of Jarasandh, and he went there and went into the house. Through the power of his deception, he seduced Tulsi.

"When this happened, then mark of Tulsi's that was on Jarasandh's head that fell off. Jarasandh died then and there. Jarasandh's death occurred on account of destroying the chastity (*tapasya*) of the wife. Tulsi gave a curse: where you are worshipped, my leaf will be put on your head first. Only then you will

be worshipped. This (*laughing*) is why Tulsi is worshipped on those days. [Switching back to Pahari to tell his sister-in-law] None of this stuff about Radha-Rudha! *This* is how it was."

While the two previous accounts of Saili that I presented were told by women in the company of women with no grown men present, this story from Panditji shows up the tension between his version and that of women. Bhabho obviously knew women's versions featuring the rivalry of wives, but in this context, she deferred to the authority of a male elder.

Another Brahman, an ancient, wizened old temple priest told a similar version in 1994, when along with a friend, I visited the Gauri Shankar temple where he presided. A *tulsi* plant was growing in the courtyard. Standing in the sun-lit courtyard, the old man told us how Tulsi was the devoted wife of a *rakshas* called Jalandhar. Because of her chaste power, her husband could not be defeated by any gods. Vishnu brought Tulsi a false corpse of her husband cut into three pieces, saying that if she touched it, it would become whole. On account of touching a man other than her husband, her virtue was destroyed, and her actual husband fell in battle. Then she cursed Vishnu to become a *salagram* stone. In turn, he gave her the boon that his worship would never be complete without her presence.

"What about the wedding?" I asked. "Isn't she married to Vishnu each year?"

Standing beside the plant clothed in red, with women's paintings of the bride and groom at the base, the old priest emphatically asserted, "No, there's nothing like a

wedding between Tulsi and Vishnu. This decoration? Oh this decoration is just to honor her.”

Various Puranas (Padma, Skanda, Siva, Brahmavaivarta) record variants of the same story told by these two men. Though these Puranic variants set up a basic triangle between Tulsi (who may also be called Vrinda), Vishnu and her husband, they vary in how the interactions play out. There are further divergences regarding the name of her anti-god husband, who may be Shankhachuda or Jalandhar. For Kangra the identity of Jalandhar is significant since in ancient times, the larger area of which Kangra is part was known by this name. No-body I spoke in the 1990s brought up this parallel, but I found the following in an old book on the history of the area:<sup>4</sup>

“The invincibility of Jalandhar was derived from the spotless purity of his wife, Vrinda [Tulsi], which was overcome by the fraud of Vishnu impersonating her husband. The titan was then conquered by Siva who cut off his head, but the head quickly rejoined the trunk, and repeatedly regained its wonted place.... To prevent this continuous resuscitation, Siva buried the giant underground and so vast was his size that his body covered a circuit of 48 kms, or about

64 miles.... The story which I heard in 1846, when I first visited the Kangra Valley, placed the head only of the Titan to the north of the Bias Beas], with his mouth at Jwalamukhi [a Kangra Goddess shrine], while his body covered the whole extent of country lying between the Bias and the Satluj; his back being immediately beneath the district of Jalandhar and his feet at Multan.”

According to the *Kangra District Gazetteer*, the name “Kangra” derives from the ear (*kan*) of the toppled titan as he lies under the area’s folding ridges and vales.

### Who is Tulsi’s Husband?

Recently looking through old computer files, I came across a story I had recorded in 1990, shortly after my arrival in Kangra. I had been visiting a Chamar household one afternoon, and happened to ask which deity was worshipped in their court-yard. No one wanted to take the deity’s name. (Later, I learned that high caste people called him ‘The Chamar Devata’ and spoke with awe of the powers of this deity). The daughters of the family, visiting from their in-law’s homes, said they didn’t know the name, their mother muttered a name which she immediately withdrew, and their neighbor, Bidhi Chand, an educated and articulate man in his 30s, began to tell a story in Hindi. At first, he demurred before my tape-recorder, which I turned off. But then the young women turned it on again, playfully insisting that he speak into it. This is how I happen to have recorded this version. Looking at it now after several years of thinking about Saili, I wonder if there might be a connection.

The story begins with the deity becoming immensely powerful, and Krishna wondering, “How do I defeat him?” This is where the tape switches on:

*Bidhi Chand* : He had become powerful, and Krishna thought, ‘Til be smaller and he’ll be so big.’ So Krishna went to his wife, and to trick her he said, ‘Til marry you, I’ll do this and that. Tell me his secret. Tell me how I can topple him.’ For he was absolutely never defeated in war.

“This is how it is with women. Women are like this, if someone calls them they just go to him in a flash [*laughing, as the young women glare*]. He said, “His head is up in the sky. And these, his feet [*slap-ping an ankle*] are in the underworld. So how can he be toppled? What is the solution to this situation?” So she said, ‘Send fairies (*partyan*) up, who will bite at his head. And from down below, send white ants. When the white ants bite from below and the fairies from above, he’ll become agitated.’

“If something is pulled out from under a person, they fall. If you’re attacked from above, if you have a support below, how will you fall?”

“So when they began to fight then he... the one we acknowledge.. he understood. The ground trembled under his feet. He understood that there was some plot. So after a while he said, “Today I won’t fight.” He stopped. Krishna said, “Fine, we won’t fight. It’s my victory, and your defeat right here.” So then he said, ‘Where I go, there you shouldn’t come, and where you go, there I won’t come.’”

In this story, a truce is called between the unnamed deity and Krishna, so justifying the separation of spaces between where this deity is worshipped and where Krishna is. The story appears to be an etiological (explanatory) myth for practices of “untouchable” segregation. Viewing this story in light of Tulsi’s tale, it is interesting to see that the husband here does not lose, but rather draws a boundary. Told from the perspective of a man of a caste whose women were often preyed upon by upper-caste land-lords, there is a painful poignancy to the wife’s colliding with Vishnu.



Although not explicitly related to Tulsi, this version is a reminder of how the perspective of her tricked and humiliated husband is rarely presented. It is tempting to speculate whether the “buried” deity Jalandhar might not represent an autochthonous religion supplanted by Brahmanic Vaishnavism in this area. At this point, though, I simply do not have adequate data to verify such connections.

### Saili As Self

Having ventured away from versions specific to upper caste women to emphasize that these exist in dynamic interplay with other extant versions, I now return to the women’s perspectives. What does the plant known as Tulsi or Saili mean to women who cultivate her?

Women make the explicit link between Saili’s annual uprooting and the way a girl in Kangra is uprooted from her natal home to be given away to in-laws from a distant village. A Brahman primary school teacher, Kanta Pandit explained about Saili: “She’s married the way girls are married. The reason is that she dries up in the winter months. So people say, ‘Saili, your days are over, you must be uprooted.’ So just as after a wedding our girls are sent to their in-law’s homes, similarly .. she’s up-rooted. Then she’s cast into the water.”

The reason for her uprooting is her withering. Sulakshana Devi, a relative of Kanta Pandit’s, explained,

“Once she has dried up we don’t look at her in the courtyard. It’s like having a corpse around.” This



would seem to parallel how, after women’s marriages, their claim to care from the patrilineage tends to be customarily lessened, even if it is not outright severed. Uprooting is always done by a man, much as in a girl’s wedding, it is her father who gives her away, her mother’s brother who carries her to the palanquin, and her brother who escorts her to her husband’s home. As Brinda Devi said, “A good day is chosen for uprooting: by day of the week, or by the astrological conjunctions chosen by a Pandit. We do this in the same

way that we only send a girl to her in-law’s house on an auspicious day.” Brinda Devi went on to add that just as daughters of a house are fed *khichri* of black *manh* dal

and rice, with ghee, so Saili is wrapped up with rice, lentils, and some money before being tied up with a red thread (*dori*) and immersed in the river.

When I asked Kanta Pandit whether Saili withered because girls might wither in their in-laws home, she stated — as though I was taking the metaphor too literally — “Girls are a different matter. The reason is that after a girl’s marriage one’s duty towards her is complete, she is sent away. Then again, a seedbed is made, and she is sent away again. This is the reason.”

Saili, then, is seeded again after she’s sent away, much as a patrilineage continues to marry off daughters and

yet produces more.

Simultaneously, at the receiving end of the in-laws, she is also depicted as replaceable. A husband like Thakur can procure more than one wife, much as Kangra men may marry again, while one marriage is all an upper-caste woman is usually allotted in her life.

In other ritual contexts involving living plants, the focus is on the well-being of men. For example, during several festivals celebrated in the month before Saili’s wedding, women plant rows of coriander seeds (*bin/ dhanya*) for their husbands on Karva Chauth, for husbands and sons on Bar Laj, and for brothers on Bhai Bij. I was told that this planting was to ensure that the lives of these men would be as “green and full” (*hara-bhara*) as the coriander. Further,



during Holi, I found that some castes of Brahman women scratch the ground to uncover clusters of shoots of the dandoch tuber: they anoint and water these shoots so that the patrilineage will also multiply. Women made an explicit metaphorical connection between coriander and tuber plants, and the lives of male relatives.

Whose well-being is being furthered by the worship of Saili? The household, for one, since she as Vishnu's consort is also a form of Lakshmi, Goddess of Good Fortune. Yet also, the individual women who worship Saili made such claims as "She brings peace to the mind," or "She fulfils your wishes." Some women went so far as to say that even if you did no other ritual through an entire year, worshipping Saili through Panch Bhisham was enough. In likening Saili to a girl not unlike themselves, it seems to me that women are also enhancing the "greenness and fullness" of their own lives by staking out a domain for self-representation: an arena to depict their own lives and concerns.

### Multiple Versions

Yet, as is clear from this essay, the women's versions are not the only ones. Women's versions only tended to be brought out in gender-segregated contexts when women gathered for ritual or conversation. In the brief conversation I reproduced between Panditji and his sister-in-law, it was clear that when these women's versions come into direct confrontation with the Brahmanical male version, they tend to be overridden.

It is now well-established that much of the conglomerate of diverse practices and beliefs we have come to think of as "Hinduism" involves male versions, and that too, upper-caste male ones which have

been written down in Sanskrit or other major languages. Doing library re-search for this article, I usually found broad generalities along the lines of "The *tu/si* plant is worshipped by Hindus." But it is clear that such sweeping statements can conceal as much as they reveal. Instead of generalities, it is more important to think of Hindu belief in terms of *specificities*: particular versions, particular acting subjects, particular conditions of production. This helps make us aware of power relations that frame the making of meanings. We become aware that rather than one Hindu tradition, there are multiple traditions emerging within the planes of gender, caste, class, literacy, and other social differences.

It is also widely recognised that in Hindu mythology, there tends to be no single "correct" version that will explain others, or reduce them to an underlying master system. Rather, multiplicity is inherent to Indian traditions, both Hindu and non-Hindu, both literate and oral. No one has written more penetratingly of such multiplicity than the late A.K. Ramanujan who advised that Indian traditions may be "indissolubly plural and often conflicting" with texts often acting in dynamic inter-playas "contexts, pretexts and subtexts" to other texts.<sup>5</sup> As growing literacy and mass-media exposes women and lower castes to authoritative, Sanskrit versions of Hindu mythology, it is important that their own prior versions not be forgotten. For this, the active work of listening, respecting, transmitting, and even recording is required. For example, intriguing mention of Tulsi by folklorists in different regions of India - where she is known also as Haripriya, Vishnupriya, Vrinda, Brundabati, and Brinda Devi - suggests that this plant grows amid a lush profusion of other local women's traditions.<sup>6</sup> To appreciate the "greenness and

fullness" of Hinduism in all its living diversity, it is vital that we acknowledge and honor the multiplicity apparent in the oral traditions of regional languages, that Saili and her village sisters maintain their place beside Tulsi goddess. □

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Joyce Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), Kirin Narayan, in collaboration with Urmila Devi Sood, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Gloria Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> While the concept of diversity in the Hindu tradition is old, the pioneering work of the late A.K. Ramanujan gives us new ways to think about it, especially in his "Where Windows are Mirrors: Toward an Anthology of Reflections" *History of Religions* 28 (1989):187-216. Another important collection is Paula Richman, ed. *Many Ramayanas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). I am especially indebted to V. Narayana Rao for his insights on multiplicity in Indian folklore, and for his generous reading of this article.
- <sup>3</sup> This story is reproduced in its entirety in Kirin Narayan, "How a Girl Became a Sacred Plant" in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 487-94.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Hutchinson and J. Ph. Vogel, *A History of the Panjab Hill States* (Lahore: Government Printing Press, 1931).
- <sup>5</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, "Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections" *History of Religions* 28 (1989) 187-216
- <sup>6</sup> See the contributions in Sankar Sen Gupta, *Tree Symbol Worship in India* (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1965).

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