

The Rig Vedic Slaying of Vrtra:

Menstruation Taboos in Mythology

by Janet Chawla

Due to my frustrations with the medical model of pregnancy and birth, I decided to document traditional Indian childbirth practices which seemed to me to be more congruent with my natural childbirth orientation. I worked with the Ankur-Action India women's health group to collect stories of women from all classes and religious backgrounds about their experiences with menstruation, pregnancy, birth and mothering.

From these interviews emerged two conceptual areas which seemed important. One was ritual pollution. Almost every woman spoke of a woman's body as being considered unclean or impure during the time of menstruation and postpartum. They spoke of being prohibited from going

to the Mandir, Masjid or Gurdwara, performing or participating in Pujas, not reading holy books, as well as the importance of bathing rituals after menstruation. One *basti* woman spoke of the blood of childbirth as *rook hua* (stagnant) and the placenta as *nau mahina ka narak kund* (nine month's hell vessel).

Second was the well worship ritual.¹ Many of the *basti* women mentioned a ritual worship of the well (or in the resettlement colonies the *nal*, or water tap) on *Chatti* after childbirth. As they spoke of the ritual, it was actually worshipping the water source, not simply a purification ritual.

Thus I encountered two seemingly contradictory ritual and belief systems. In Brahmanical Hinduism, a

woman's body and procreative capacity is defined as a source of ritual impurity. Water or bathing is understood to be purifying; washing away bodily pollution. On the other hand the worship of the water source, a woman-centered ritual involving singing and celebration, constructs both the well and water as sacred. Symbolically the well is analogous to the *yonis*. Just as the baby emerges from the watery womb—the source of life—so the well, in the traditional Indian setting, was the source of water, necessary for the continuing life of people, plants, animals.

I asked rather simple questions: Why are menstruation and the blood of childbirth considered ritually polluting? What were the origins of a

belief which so categorises women's body and the biological processes which bring new human life into the world? (I should acknowledge here that defining women's bodily processes as polluting and antithetical to religious practice is not unique to Hinduism. It is also a part of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition.) I got my first inkling of an answer when I discovered the myth of Indra slaying Vrtra.

In the Rig Veda Indra's slaying of Vrtra (or the Vrtras) is referred to over 100 times. Most Vedic scholars agree that this killing is the central dramatic event in India's oldest existing text.

Vrtra is depicted as the withholder of the waters, the demon of droughts, a snake or dragonlike figure who dwells in the rivers or celestial waters, or in a cavern in the earth. He lives in the caves with the cows. Indra kills Vrtra with his thunderbolt, thus releasing the waters, the cows, and wealth, prosperity, and progeny, the hymn singers reveal.

Keith notes that Vrtra ranks first among the enemies of the Vedic gods: "He [Vrtra] is a serpent with power over the lightening, mist, hail and thunder, when he wars with Indra; his mother is Danu, apparently the stream or the waters of heaven, but he bears that name himself as well a Danava, offspring of Danu. His abode is hidden in the waters, but is also on a summit or on lofty heights which suggest the waters of the air. He is by name the encompasser of the waters, rather than the holder back by congealing them: the cloud mountain is therefore said to be in his belly. He has 99 forts which Indra shatters as he slays him."²

Existing critical literature acknowledges the marginality of women in the text. J. Gonda acknowledges that: "Women are a rare subject; in the Rig Veda they are mainly mentioned in metaphors and, as a collectivism, in similes."³ Wendy

Doniger O'Flaherty categorically states "The Rig Veda is a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men; one of these concerns is women, who appear throughout the hymns as objects, though seldom as subjects."⁴

The text, however, speaks for itself on the general category of women: "Indra himself hath said, the mind of woman brooks not discipline, Her intellect hath little weight." (RV VIII 33.17). (Ironically this aphorism is put in the mouth of the heroic warrior known for neither his intellect nor his self-discipline.) "With women there can be no lasting friendship: hearts of hyenas are the hearts of women." (RV X95.15)

It is of interest that Vrtra, in fact all the demons of the Rig Veda, are known by matronymics rather than patronymics. As Keith notes, Vrtra is a Danava, son of Danu, and describing his death the Rig Veda links the two in imagery of cow and calf: "The vital energy of Vrtra's mother ebbed away, for Indra had hurled his deadly weapon at her. Above was the mother, below was the son; Danu lay down like a cow with her calf." (RV 1.32.9 O'Flaherty)

My hypothesis is that Vrtra is mythically and symbolically linked to pre-patriarchal, pre-Vedic social formations. By re-interpreting the slaying of the "son of the mother", we discover the mythic origin of the later Brahmanic pollution ideology which devalues the female bodily processes of menstruation and childbirth.

From Slums to Sacred Texts

The Dharam Shastras, the law givers' treatises on how to live a proper life, contain various proscriptions on what a menstruating woman should and should not do. In this text, Chapter 5 of the Vasishtha Dharmashastra, menstrual taboos, and woman's subordinate social position are related to the myth of

Indra's Vrtra slaying:

"1. A woman is not independent, the males are her masters. It has been declared in the Veda, 'A female who neither goes naked nor is temporarily unclean is paradise.'

2. Now they quote also the following verse; "Their fathers protect them in childhood, their husbands protect them in youth, and their sons protect them in age; a woman is never fit for independence."

3. The penance to be performed by a wife for being unfaithful to her husband has been declared in the section of secret penances.

4. For month by month the menstrual excretion takes away her sins.

5. A woman in her courses is impure during three days and nights.

6. During her period she shall not apply collyrium to her eyes, nor anoint her body, nor bathe in water; she shall sleep on the ground; she shall not sleep in the day-time, nor touch the fire, nor make a rope, nor clean her teeth, nor eat meat, nor look at the planets, nor drink out of a large vessel, or out of joined hands, or out of a copper vessel.

7. For it has been declared in the Veda, "When Indra had slain Vrtra, the three-headed son of Tvashtri, he was seized by Sin, and he considered himself to be tainted with exceedingly great guilt. All beings cried out against him saying to him 'O thou slayer of a learned Brahmana!' He ran to the women for protection and said to them, 'Take upon yourself the third part of this my guilt caused by the murder of a learned Brahmana.' They said 'Let us obtain offspring if our husband approach us during the proper season, at pleasure let us dwell with our husbands until our children are born.' He answered, 'So be it.' Then they took upon themselves the third part of his guilt. That guilt of Brahmana-murder appears every month as the menstrual flow.

Therefore let him not eat the food of a woman in her courses; for such a one has put on the shape of the guilt of Brahmana-murderer.

8. Those who recite the Veda proclaim the following rule: 'Collyrium and ointment must not be accepted from her; for that is the food of women. Therefore they feel a loathing for her while she is in that condition saying 'she shall not approach.'

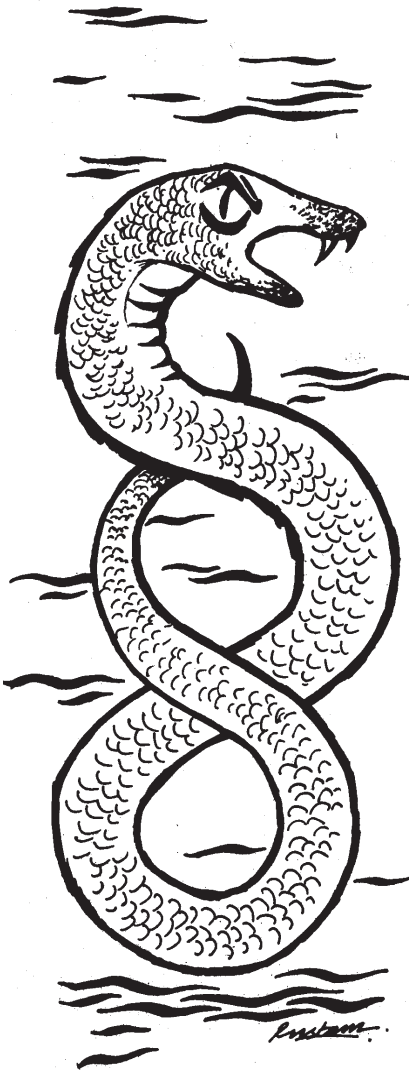
9. 'Those Brahmanas in whose houses menstruating women sit, those who keep no sacred fire, and those in whose family there is no Srotiya—all these are equal to Shudras.'"

In this text we find practices relating to the seclusion and restrictions of menstruating women explicitly linked to the mythic drama of Indra's slaying of Vrtra. This myth is found first in the Rig Veda and subsequently woven through various texts: Vedic, Puranic and Epic.

Myths are traditional stories which serve to unfold part of the world view of a people and/or explain a practice, belief or natural phenomena. Myth serves various functions in any given society. First, a metaphysical function; myth orients a person vis a vis the world, the cosmos, and society and imbues experience with meaning, often understood as religious or spiritual. Second, myth serves a social function of providing role models, prescribed or tabooed actions and dramatically revealing consequences of behavior. Third, myth provides a pedagogical tool; as the young hear the stories of their elders, they learn about themselves and the world and begin to understand their environment and the behavior expected from them in ways acceptable to their family and group.

Mircea Eliade, writing of the Vrtra myth, notes the Indian practice of astrologically determining the placement of a peg into the earth

before building a structure. The peg is to secure the head of the snake (thought to reside in the earth) and prevent it from shaking and destroying the building. "But the act of foundation at the same time repeats the cosmogonic act for to "secure" the snake's head, to drive the peg into it is to imitate the primordial gesture



of Soma (RV II,12,1) or of Indra when the latter "smote the Serpent in his lair" (VI, 17,9) when his thunderbolt "cut off its head" (I,52,10). The serpent symbolises chaos, the formless and nonmanifested. Indra comes upon Vrtra undivided (*aparvan*), unawakened (*abudhyam*), sleeping (*abudhyamanam*),

outstretched (*asayanam*). The hurling of the lightning and the decapitation are equivalent to the act of Creation, with passage from the nonmanifested to the manifested, from the formless to the formed."⁵

Eliade's notion of primal chaos is outdated and androcentric. The new physics is radically changing scientists' conception of order and chaos. Phenomena previously understood as chaotic now seem to display an underlying sense of order. It is masculine 'creation' which involves hurling of lightning (read sperm) and the decapitation is a rather anomalous symbol for creativity. What has previously been understood as "primal chaos" might now reveal itself as a matristic social and symbolic order. The creative order of the menstrual cycle and the rhythms of labour may involve stress and pain—but not the violence to the other depicted in the Indra-Vrtra slaying. What/whom is really being killed?

Eliade continues "Vrtra had confiscated the waters and was keeping them in the hollows of the mountains. This means either that Vrtra was the absolute master—in the same manner as Tiamat or any serpent divinity—of all chaos before the Creation; or that the great serpent, keeping the waters for himself alone, had left the whole world ravaged by drought."

But Sjojo and Mor interpret the pervasive serpent and dragon metaphor in a radically different fashion.

"The serpent of chaos is originally and always a woman's body. As the Great Mother of Chaos, of matter still unformed and undifferentiated, she holds the earth like an egg in the pure energy of her coils. She represents the 'time before the gods,' before the establishment of patriarchal hierarchies and distinctions. As the dragon of matter, the Undivided One

older than the individuation of forms, she also signified the common flesh and blood bond of the people. This is why the snake/dragon everywhere is identified with the indigenous ‘masters of the ground’—the matrifocal peasantry—who are invaded, conquered, plundered, co-opted by the ‘dragon-slayers’ of patriarchal history.... This [Indra-Vrtra] murder generates the ‘act of Creation,’ since in the Indo-European view the dark, serpentine Danu and Vrtra had ‘withheld the waters in the mountain hollows’ and so hindered the world from coming into being. The Indo-European patriarchal world, that is.⁷

The violence of the Vrtra murder is recapitulated in the ritual metaphor of the serpent having to be pegged for masculine ‘construction’ to take place. (That this metaphor is still operative in the folk mind is obvious from the worship of the Nag which took place after the recent Uttarkashi earthquake). We are arguing that another paradigm of order, not primal chaos, can be discerned in the text; one that is congruent with women’s procreative capacity, menstrual and lunar cycles and our hypothesised matrifocal social order. I am suggesting that what preceded Vedic ideology on the subcontinent was not the primal chaos of chthonic peoples, but a previously unrecognised, humanly constructed social order. And that the death and dismemberment of Vrtra can be viewed as a metaphor for the Indo-European exercise of power, symbolic and martial, over the pre-existing people and their culture.

The mythic Indra was, after all, a warrior par excellence; the Rig Veda is a martial document. Scholars have debated whether the warfare was literal, ritual, symbolic—between groups of men, men and demons, gods and demons. But Vedic study, both *desi* and foreign has neglected a crucial question which Uma

Chakravarty so eloquently poses: “Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi* ?” Dr Chakravarty, in her deconstruction of “The myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood as located in the Vedic period,” emphasises the foregrounding of “the Aryan woman (the progenitor of the upper-caste woman) as the only object of historical concern. It is no wonder then that the Vedic *dasi* (woman in servitude), captured and subjugated, and enslaved by the conquering Aryans, but who also represents one aspect of Indian womanhood, disappeared without leaving any trace of herself in nineteenth century history.”⁸ The Indo-Europeans infiltrated the subcontinent in different waves, c. 1500-1200 BC. The Aryan hymn singers of the Rig Veda lionised the exploits of Indra—his swigging of Soma, his rape of Ushas, his plundering of booty for his followers and also his killing of Vrtra. Sukumari Bhattacharyaji calls Indra a culture hero.⁹ As Chakravarty suggests, a focus on the *dasi* and the figure of Vrtra implicitly questions the legitimacy and sanctity of this heroic paradigm.

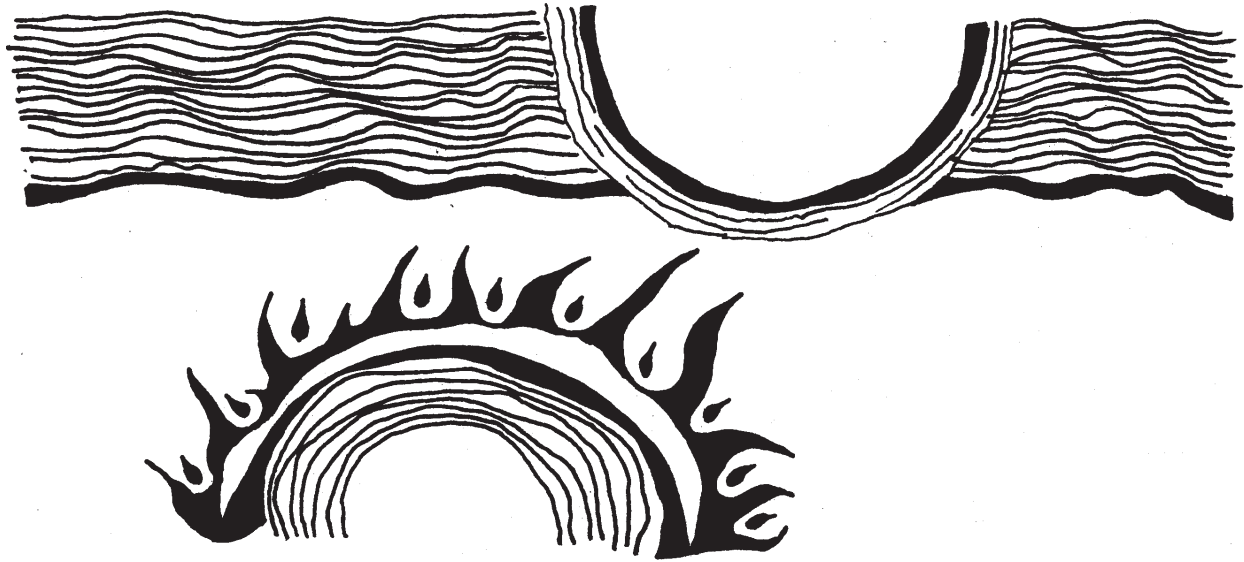
War has always been a different experience for men and for women. To quote Gerda Lerner, “Biological and cultural factors predisposed men to enslave women before they had learned how to enslave men. Physical terror and coercion, which were an essential ingredient in the process of turning free persons into slaves, took, for women, the form of rape. Women were subdued physically by rape; once impregnated, they might become psychologically attached to their masters.... Free sexual access to slaves marks them off from all other persons as much as their juridical classification as property... There is overwhelming historical evidence for the preponderance of the practice of killing or mutilating male prisoners and for the large-scale enslavement and

rape of the female prisoners.”¹⁰

Although Lerner is describing the enslavement of women in West Asia, a similar situation probably existed in India as well. R.S. Sharma writes of Vedic life: “Spoils of war and cattle formed the main forms of property. Cattle, horses, and women slaves were generally given as gifts.” “I am suggesting that the Rig Veda, however tentative an historical source, can be read as a mythic version of a lived past. Indra’s slaying of Vrtra, like his rape of Ushas, can be understood, not just as a phantasmagorical metaphor, but as the mythic rendering of real human experience; of the encounter between the patriarchal invaders and the extant social formation.

D.D. Kosambi writes of Indra’s rape of Ushas, an otherwise inexplicable event: “She is an ancient goddess in spite of her virginity and youth, which are preserved by her being born again and again. The only possible explanation lies in a clash of cults, that of the old mother-goddess being crushed on the river Beas by the new war-god of the patriarchal invaders, Indra. That she survives after being “killed” can only indicate progressive, comparatively peaceful, assimilation of her surviving pre-Aryan worshippers who still regarded her as mother of the sun, wife of the sun, daughter of heaven.”¹²

Bloodshed, rape, plunder are all masked in the Rig Veda as the heroism of the solar god, pushing back the frontiers of darkness and primal, chaotic disorder. Evidence of a Rig Vedic overlay on a pre-existing meaning system is provided by Dipak Bhattacharya in his chapter on the birth of Agni. In a section interestingly titled ‘The flow of *Rta* from the obscured mothers of Agni’, Bhattacharya grapples with the imagery of *Rta* and *rajas* (menstruation). Agni is said to be born



‘in the depth of the great’ and ‘in the *yoni* of this *rajas*’ and is referred to as ‘the embryo of the waters.’ The aqueous origin of Agni in the atmospheric region is a well recognised Vedic idea. Bhattacharya writes: “On the relation of the rains to the waters, it has to be noted that in a different context Pischel and Geldner recognise that the waters are imagined as females with their regular peculiarities, mainly periods. The highwaters of the rains are regarded as catamenia [menstruation] and their drying up as menopause. In the context of the birth of Agni the rains may symbolize not catamenia, but local [childbirth] discharge.”¹³

This symbolic nexus of the waters, *rajas* (also meaning atmospheric vapour) and *Rta* or cosmic order indicate an original mythic structure which sacralises menstrual and lunar rhythms and recognises these rhythms, embodied by women, as principles of clarity and order, as well as the source of life.

Perhaps to the indigenes, woman’s blood was awesome and numinous. Women bled monthly, in harmony with the moon, and yet did not die—rather miraculously produced new life. The

blood shed by them during menstruation and childbirth may have been ritualised as sacred. Indra’s slaying of Vrtra ended that. As the Dharma Shastras show, menstrual blood is loathsome—powerful, dangerous and threatening. It is now Indra who assumes the right to shed blood. The warrior is socially sanctioned to shed his enemy’s blood—that act is constructed as being heroic, dharmic, sacred, as is evident in Krishna’s advice to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. Two questions remain in this interpretation of the Vrtra figure. One, why in the Rig Veda is Vrtra grouped with the Dasas, and in the later texts, including the Dharm Shastras quoted above, his slaying is referred to as a Brahminicide, which would lead us to see him as a Brahmin? Second, why is Vrtra usually rendered in the neuter, rather than masculine gender? It seems to me that although the Rig Veda is the earlier document, actually the later texts contain more information about the aboriginal peoples. In the later Vedas, Puranas and Epics Vrtra is further personified, fleshed out, and conceptualised. The process of assimilation and absorption of pre-Indo European

material allowed for what we might call ‘Prakritisation’, that is, the transformation of the Aryan world view, which we find more starkly in the Rig Veda. Brahmins, as a priestly caste, did not yet exist in Rig Vedic times. The notion of Brahminicide describing Indra’s slaying of Vrtra is thus an anachronism. Perhaps the Brahmins, while formulating these later texts were appropriating some of the power and legitimacy of Vrtra (or proto-Brahminic forms) to themselves. Nevertheless the device of the “Brahminicide” shows that the later Brahmin priests in some way identified themselves with the Vrtra figure.

The Rig Vedic Vrtra is both a demon, *dasa*, and magician or priest. He exercises the power of *maya*, or illusion. The use of the neuter gender in referring to Vrtra and the Vrtras can be related to the literal meaning of *vrtra*, concealing-covering-hiding and defending-resisting-protecting. (The root *vr* conveys the idea of aiding or succouring, in a positive sense, sheltering.)¹⁴ Most interpreters have favoured a natural phenomenological understanding, as mentioned above. This level of meaning is certainly



present but not exclusive of a socio-symbolic as well as biological-symbolic (women's biology) reading. The neuter gender may have been used because the reference is finally to the indigenous people's system, a social and symbolic formation. Within the Vedic text this system is represented in the form of resistance, concealment—masking the beliefs and practices, ruses and manoeuvres, of a defensive indigenous population.

I feel that it is essential that feminist scholars and researchers involve themselves in the monumental task of revisioning the sacred texts from a woman-centered perspective. What we know, what informs the public discourse, the

media literature, from Amar Chitra Katha comics to Doordarshan's Ramayana and Mahabharata, from Sayana's commentaries on the Rig Veda to Kalidas' Kumara Sambhavan need to be investigated sensitively and critically for what many of them are — androcentric constructs produced in the male voice, rendering women more as symbols than as persons.

References

¹ H.A. Rose, ICS, *Rites and Ceremonies of Hindus and Muslims* [based on the Census Reports for the Punjab, 1882 and 1883] (New Delhi: Harnam Publications, 1983) corroborate the existence of this little documented practice. "In Rohtak, a month or so after the birth of a boy a rite called doghar puja is observed. Women visit the nearest well singing songs...the well is worshipped, rice and dubh grass being offered to it. In Ferozepur the mother goes, on the twenty-first day, to a well and there distributes boiled barley to the children, (p. 23)

² Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*

³ Jan Gonda, *A History of Indian Literature*, vol. 1., Vedic Literature (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975).

⁴ O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger, *The Rig Veda*. (London: Penguin Books, 1981) p245

⁵ Eliade, Mircea, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, Cosmos and History*, (London: Arkana, 1989) p 19

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Sjoon, Monica and Mor, Barbara, *The Great Cosmic Mother Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) p 250

⁸ Chakravarty, Uma in "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" from *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) p 28

⁹ Bhattacharji, Sukumari, *The Indian Theogony*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988) p 258

¹⁰ Lerner, Gerda, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) p 87

¹¹ Sharma, Ram Sharan, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, (Delhi, Macmillan India, 1983) p159

¹² Kosambi, Damodar Dharamanand, *Myth and Reality*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1983), p.64

¹³ Bhattacharya, Dipak, *Mythological and Ritual Symbolism, A Study with Reference to the Vedic and Tantric Agni*, (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pushtak Bhandar, 1984)

¹⁴ Lahiri, Ajoy Kumar, *Vedic Vrtra*, (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1984) pp 28,e71