



# The Sacred Groves

Frederique Apffel-Marglin

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*Though every woman in the world goes through menstruation, the experience differs substantially in different cultures. This article describes how the West treats menstruation as a private affair, something to be shamefully hidden. The author contrasts this with attitude of certain rural communities in Orissa which have traditionally celebrated menstruation as a sacred activity—a manifestation of the earth's generation and regeneration.*

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*"The depiction of modern consciousness leads to the conclusion that women's lives are especially degraded, fragmented, and impoverished,"* **Emily Martin**



I have chosen to focus on menstruation because it is a process central to the generation and regeneration of the lived world of villagers in coastal Orissa, where I have been doing fieldwork since 1975. The expression "lived world" is meant to avoid falling into a language which presupposes a nature/culture dualism. In my lived world, menstruation is lived and understood very differently from the manner of the Orissan villagers. In my world menstruation is related to reproduction, rather than to generation or regeneration. It is a process understood scientifically and categorised as biology. Scientific knowledge concerning menstruation has profoundly affected the manner in which menstruation is lived, understood, and spoken about by many women. Although many women consciously or unconsciously resist or reject the scientific understanding of menstruation, that understanding is dominant in my lived world. It is the one taught to all girls and young women in high schools, and in biology classes in colleges. The scientific

understanding of menstruation is the one that determines what is "normal" and what is pathological. That understanding of menstruation, of reproduction, and of bodily processes in general as "biological" is also the prism through which anthropology understands and relates to the menstrual practices and the acts that generate and regenerate the lived world of people such as the villagers living in Orissan.

I will examine the category of "biology" as well as its relationship to the self, to nature, and to culture in my world. Such a critical, deconstructive endeavour is meant to decolonise the dominant knowledge system in my world. To do so, I will start with texts and narratives about menstruation in my lived world. This procedure is intended to make me conscious of the prism through which I perceive, understand and relate to the narratives and practices of Orissan villagers concerning menstruation. This new consciousness should lead me not only to a new understanding of menstruation as lived and practiced by Orissan villagers but more relevantly to a new way of relating to these. In this new mode of relating, their lived world and my lived world begin to interpenetrate and enter into dialogue. In this new mode of relating, I begin to

transform my own lived world, my own sense of self, my own ways of relating to others and to "nature", and my own way of generating and regenerating my own lived world.

## **A Private Affair**

The thing that comes into sharpest focus about menstruation in my lived world, with even the most superficial encounter with menstrual practices in Orissa, is that it is an intensely private one. In the west the idea of a large public event to celebrate menses is simply unthinkable. Female bodily processes, especially menstruation, are experienced as an intensely private matter. A brief perusal at advertisements for menstrual pads and tampons makes this abundantly obvious; they all promise to eliminate or disguise any outward signs that you are menstruating. They are all designed to reassure one that the product will enable one to act as if one were not menstruating. In the public realm there is an insistent need to deny the existence of menstruation. Most women would be acutely embarrassed by physical signs of menstrual blood in public. In the public sphere where women and men, work it is unmentionable, or, to use anthropological terminology, taboo.

Care of the body and emotions belong to a personal realm, to be

at-ended to in the private or domestic sphere. This extends to generation and regeneration. In modern society sexuality, reproduction, rest and recuperation belong to the private sphere and they are all associated with the body, with biology, with nature.

Menstruation is, in my world, biology; it is taught in schools under the rubric of female anatomy and physiology. Menses happen on their own. They can be modified and controlled by drugs and many women use the pill to regulate, predict and control their menses. This control or modification usually comes from products developed by scientists, not through the lived experience of women. As biological phenomena, menses just happen, automatically, just because we are alive. This way of seeing these processes deprives them of meaning and creativity. Simone de Beauvoir captures this succinctly in the following quote from *The Second Sex* (1961:58-59):

“On the biological level a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; but this creation results only in repeating the same Life in more individuals. But man assures the repetition of life while transcending life through Existence [i.e. goal-oriented, meaningful action]; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value. In the animal, the freedom and variety of male activities are vain because no project is involved. Except for his services to the species, what he does is immaterial. Whereas in serving the species, the human male also remodels the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future.”

In my world, generation and regeneration are seen by most as vain activities, mere repetition, lacking any specifically human worth. Generation and regeneration being biological

processes do not separate us from animals who blindly repeat life; these processes are devoid of creativity and rationality. The human male, who is perceived to be relatively freer from these processes than women, can be truly heroic, transforming the shape of the earth and shaping the future. The dualism between nature and culture is here baldly stated; biology is nature and generation and regeneration is mere repetition, it lacks all transcendence and is rendered valueless by the existence of human projects and of transcendence. To be truly human, creative, rational, is not to be “enslaved” by our biology. Such a view is the one fostered by de Beauvoir. This view does not question

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the category of biology nor the dualism of nature and culture. Knowledge of generative and regenerative processes are classified under the category of biology. In her book, Emily Martin (1987) has quoted extensively from several medical text-books describing menstruation. She has pointed out the

metaphors and the belittling language used. Comparing descriptions of menstruation with those of the male reproductive processes and those of the stomach she wittily reveals the sexism in the descriptions of menstruation.

### **Erasing the Experience**

The particularly stringent taboo on menstruation making itself known in the public sphere, the sphere of the market, of commodified relationships, is indubitably related to the fact that menstruation is a bodily process that cannot be controlled. Hence the acute shame of it showing in the public domain, hence also the proliferation of a bewildering array of products euphemistically referred to as “feminine hygiene”. A quick perusal of napkins and tampons on the shelf yielded such names as Stayfree and Freedom, pithily capturing the desire to erase as much as possible the experience of menstruation, an event experienced as a curtailment of freedom of action.

The body can send us signals such as different kinds of pains or pleasures. In interpreting these signals the owner of the body has no privileged position. The owner of the body has only a privileged position to describe those sensations, not to understand their meaning. Privileged access to knowledge of the body belongs to those who systematically probe the body to yield its secrets. Those are anatomists, physiologists,



molecular biologists, and other scientists. The body, like nature, is an unthinking, unknowing, object of study. The owner of the body is not better placed to know her or his body since the agency that makes this knowledge is outside the body. In fact, the owner of the body is, if any-thing, at a disadvantage, since knowledge of the body requires invasion of the body, dissection, and such procedures are not best performed on one's own body. The body is nature, and like nature its innermost secrets must be probed and torture used, if necessary, to wrench nature's secrets from her, as Bacon urged.

### **Alienated From Own Bodies**

Let me illustrate what I am trying to say with a text from a book used for teaching eighth grade girls about their bodies in Junior High School in Amherst, Massachusetts. The book is written by Ruth Bell (with others), who is a member of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective that wrote the much acclaimed *Our Bod-ies, Our Selves*:

*Your Menstrual Cycle.* Medical people count your menstrual cycle from *the first day your period comes*. This is called Day 1. They talk in terms of a 28-day cycle, just for sim-PLICITY. We will, too, to help you understand what goes on. Very few women in fact have a 28-day cycle. Look at the cycle at Day 5—that is, five days after your period begins. At this point the pituitary gland near your brain sends a signal to several of the thousands of eggs in your ovaries. Some eggs begin to ripen, but usually only one egg will mature. Meanwhile the ovary sends out the hormone estrogen, and signals your uterine lining to become thicker with blood and tissue.

About Day 14 the ripened egg breaks out of its follicle and rises to the surface of your ovary. This is called ovulation (ah-vue-lay-shun). You may feel a cramp or twinge when you ovulate. The egg is then swept into the fallopian

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tube. Meanwhile the ruptured follicle produces the hormone progesterone and causes the uterine lining to continue its buildup. If the egg has not been fertilized (if you have not conceived), it breaks apart and disintegrates. Then the estrogen and progesterone signals to your uterus to get weaker. By day 24 they have stopped. The uterine lining starts to break off and come out of your cervix and vagina as menstruation begins... What comes out of your vagina is usually called "blood" because the blood in it makes it red, but it's really a mixture of tissue, mucus and blood. So when a clump of it comes out all at once we may call it a clot but it is not a blood clot. You do lose some blood during your period, but not as much as it looks like."

In spite of its simplified language and direct address style, this description of menstruation follows faithfully the medical textbook descriptions quoted by Martin. As it is menstruation is understood in terms of a purpose that has failed, so that if conception does *not* occur, things "disintegrate", "break apart" and get "weaker". As Martin points out, a very similar process in the stomach is described in terms of "regeneration" rather than "disintegration".

The other aspect of this description, also pointed out by Martin, is that it is spoken of in terms of a communication system organised hierarchically: from the pituitary gland signals are sent to the eggs and from the ovary to the estrogen hormone and from there

down to the end point, the uterine lining: "The basic images chosen here, an information transmitting-system with a hierarchical structure, have an obvious relation to the dominant form of organization in our society." (Martin 1987:41)

I want to focus on the word "really" in the following: "What comes out of your vagina is usually called "blood" because the blood in it makes it red, but it's *really* a mixture of tissue, mucus, and blood." (emphasis added) The vernacular understanding is relegated to the status of untrue knowledge. Truth is single and cognitive authority lodged only with the scientists. Lived or vernacular knowledge is delegitimised. Lived experience and vernacular knowledge do not deliver to us the "real", that is, the monopoly of the certified knowledge makers. This message has, of course, already been delivered by a description of menstruation which is totally foreign to the lived experience of women. It is a kind of knowledge that can be acquired only through the probing and examining of the body as an *object* of inquiry, an object placed outside of the consciousness investigating it. The road to "true" knowledge is single and it specifically eliminates lived experience as a source. Eighth graders reading this account of menstruation are placed outside their own bodies and must experience their bodies as a strange, alien entity.

Following sections of Bell's book address girls' feelings about menstruation; headings such as "Not feeling ready", "Being ready" and "Feelings about menstruation" have



several quotes from menarcheal aged girls about their feelings. The message conveyed is that feelings about the body are not sources of knowledge about the body; the latter is inaccessible to these girls and is produced by specialists.

The next section, entitled "Brief History and Attitudes Towards Men-struation" delegitimises and belittles another source of knowledge about menstruation, that is, other cultures and times, adding to the message the ideology of progress. The manner in which this is done bears quoting since it reiterates the message that truth is single and the exclusive property of scientists:

"In primitive cultures women were sent away from the settlement on those days. They weren't supposed to touch or go near certain objects for fear the objects would be ruined. To this day, in certain religions and cultures men aren't supposed to have sex with their menstruating wives.

Those taboos around menstruation were based *not on fact but on fear*. Women's blood was a special kind of blood. It didn't come from sickness or injury. It was related to a woman's ability to give birth, and that ability was and still is a power tharonly women have. You can imagine that before much was known about periods and childbirth, some people thought these events were caused by magic. Primitive men may have been jealous of that "magical" power. Both women and men may have made up stories about it and been afraid of it.

Now we know that menstruation and childbirth are not caused by magic. We know there is really nothing to be scared of. But the same kinds of attitudes persist." (Emphasis added; Bell *al.*, p.32)

Here all the cultures which do not have practices based on the scientific knowledge of menstruation are lumped



**The hill of Harachandi with the temple in the sacred grove**

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*In the West... privileged access to knowledge of the body belongs to those who systematically probe the body to yield its secrets... The body like nature, is an unthinking, unknowing, object of study.*

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in the one loaded category of "primitive". Those benighted people, not having true knowledge, are ruled by fear, make up stories, frighten them-selves with them, and believe in the "magical" power of menstruation. The last sentence ensures that if any reader harbours similar notions, he/she should know that they are utter nonsense, fit only for superstitious and ignorant primitives. The lesson is relentless: the embodied self has no privileged access to knowledge about its body; feelings have nothing to do with knowledge of the body; only one kind of knowledge can deliver the Truth; other cultures with different systems of knowledge than the Western scientific one are dismissed as ignorant and primitive. Primitives and atavistic modems only have menstrual taboos. In sum, there is no

other avenues to truth but the scientific one.

However, as Martin's *The Woman in the Body* shows, the ideal of objectivity is not attained, nor is it attainable. The supposedly disembodied, unsituated, uncontextualised rationality, radically outside not only of the body but of any particular lived world, is in fact very much embodied in a middle class, white, male body, situ-ated in late industrial capitalism. It has also shown how this knowledge has penetrated deeply into vernacular lived experience and produced a modern consciousness in which "women's lives are especially degraded, fragmented, and impoverished."

My brief deconstructive exercise is meant to make me aware of the colonising or imperialistic nature of our dominant system of knowledge; colonising not only toward non-Western systems of knowledge but towards alternative modes of being in the world, and knowing the world—especially for women—in my own lived world. This awareness leads me to approach other lived worlds not in the spirit of the social scientist who, through analysis of the data, produces unbiased knowledge of the other, but

in the spirit of one searching for some alternatives for myself and others in my own lived world.

### Menses Festival in Orissa

Let me now turn to the practices, knowledge and sayings about men-struation among villagers in coastal Orissa. I first visited the sacred grove of goddess Harachandi on the occa-sion of the festival of the menses in 1987. Later, in 1990, I spent most of the four-day festival in one village. Let me start with what Sisulata, a woman in her 40s, who is a mother of two, told me:

“Tomorrow starts the four day festival of the menses of the Goddess, Raja Parba. I am glad you have come to celebrate with us in our village. This festival is almost like our menstruation; we do not bleed but we follow the same rules as during our menses since we are of the same kind as Her. She is a woman and we are all women. We are *amsha* (parts) of her. This festival reminds us of our menarche festival when everyone keeps us happy ...” I asked her to tell me about her first menarche festival. This is how Sisulata described it.

“I was 13 when I saw my first blood. I was afraid. I came and told my father, mother and paternal grand-mother who were all sitting together. My paternal grandmother said “shshsh, don’t speak of this like that. This is women’s things,” and she took me aside and told me that I would have to sit and not be seen by any man for four days because it would harm them.

Then my mother took me to the back of our house where the manure pile is and made me stand on it for about an hour. Then she took me to the house and gave me a bath, pouring

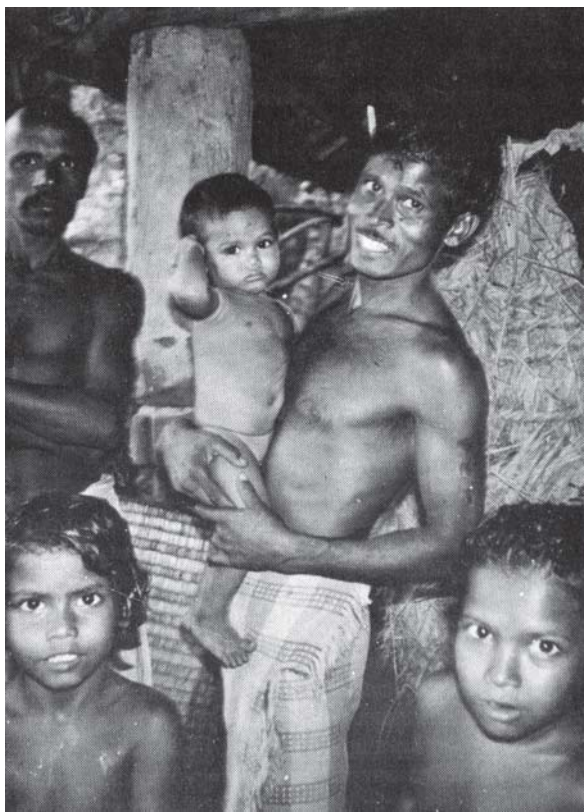
water over me. She and the other women didn’t touch me; I was polluted. They called the washerwoman and she took all my clothes and they gave me a new sari. That sari was later given to the washerwoman. Then for the four days that I lay on the mat inside I did not bathe, comb and oil my loose hair, or decorate myself at all.

Then my parents brought nine kinds of *navasasya* (seeds) rice, black gram, *mugha* (another lentil), horse gram, sesame, mustard, wild rice, wheat and bean. They also brought five pitchers with water in them, covered with mango leaves topped by a coconut (*purna khumba*). They spread a mat and on that a red cloth for me to lie on. At the four corners they placed four pitchers and the fifth midway between two of the others. Then they spread the seeds all around the mat.

My mother told me “come here and sit on the mat”. She taught me how to wear the napkin and said: “Don’t be afraid, it is not bad; you’ll bleed four days and it will happen every month. You must not work, not cook, not cut any vegetables. You will rest and eat separately.” I stayed in that room with the windows closed so that no man would see me and the sun would not fall on me. I only went out in the night to relieve myself. My girlfriends came and brought me food: fruits, flattened rice, puffed rice; only raw and dry food, no boiled food. I ate no fish, meat, eggs, onions, garlic, and no salt or turmeric. This means I ate no cooked rice or curry because these must always have salt and turmeric. I could chat with my friends. Everyday I was given a new sari. All these four saris were later. I given to the washerwoman. On the fifth

day, before dawn, seven married women came to take me to the pond and we all bathed. They poured water over me, rubbed my body with oil and turmeric, blew the conch shell and did *hulahuli* (women’s trill, an auspicious sound). The barber’s wife cut my nails and painted auspicious designs with *alata* (red dye) on my test. They combed, oiled and braided my hair. They dressed me with all new garments and I wore my mother’s gold ornaments. We all came back to the house in a procession and I was so happy to be out and to be able to touch everybody! I was also happy because everyone brought me presents and fussed about me.

My parents had sent the news out to all our relatives and neighbours and they came to our house that day with presents for me. That day I had to feed sweets to seven small children. I stayed decorated the whole



*A man and his young daughter in Dekudi watching the women and girls bathing in a pond on the 1st day of Raja*

day and people kept coming and giving me clothes, oil, turmeric, combs, lots of things for me. I got so many saris, blouse pieces, bangles, *sindur* (red powder for the dot on the forehead)! These were my first saris, before menarche I wore only frocks. At one point in the day my mother prepared offerings for the temple; on a winnowing tray she placed a lamp, incense, a bit of food, some coins, and I carried it to the temple and offered these to Siva. Then I ate con-secrated food. In the evening my mother had cooked a grand feast for all the guests.

I remember that feast so vividly, when everybody kept me happy. Now, this festival of the Goddess' menses reminds us of our menarche festival when everyone kept us happy. Now we also keep ourselves happy; we do no work; we don't cook, we don't cut any vegetables or grind any grain; we sing and play with our women friends; we balhe and decorate ourselves and our relatives send us presents. At this festival we get the "menses basket" (*raja bhard*) from our parents' house. Usually one of our brothers comes and brings this for us. They send us gar-ments, decorations, *sindur*, *alata*, things for us to wear."

In the following conversation I asked Sisulata to clarify for me what being untouchable during the four days of menstruation meant.

Sisulata explained: "This blood that comes out, if you or we touch it we become c/!«a (untouchable). The blood from a wound is not untouchable, it is not *mara* (polluted). The blood of menses is not from a wound, not from the lips of a wound. That blood comes by itself. When Satidusi (Goddess Sasthi) takes care of the child, she leaves the blood in the womb. Other-wise when the day and time comes the blood comes by itself. If you touch her during these days you become polluted.



**Dibilata decorating one of her daughters for Raja**

"Is the blood of menses maila (dirty)?" I asked her.

"No, it is not dirty! Dirty blood is something that comes whenever the body is sick. We don't like seeing it. The blood of menses is given by

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*My parents had sent the news out to all our relatives and neighbours and they came to our house that day with presents for me. I stayed decorated the whole day and people kept coming and giving me ...saris, blouse pieces, bangles, sindur ...These were my first saris, before menarche I wore only frocks.*

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Satidusi. She stays in the belly and makes it ready; she leaves that blood in the belly where it remains for ten [lunar] months and from that the child comes... Satidusi stays in the belly and arranges it, everything is done by her. Who else can do this?"

### **Woman as Fertility Goddess**

Goddess Harachandi has her temple on top of a woode hill situated

far from any village, at the edge of rice fields and the wild lands along the sea. The festival lasts four days and the sacred grove on the hill is for that duration densely populated with long tents set up by the men of some 60 villages in a radius of about 20 Km around the temple. One man per household from all these villages comes to spend the festival in the shade of the ancient trees. Women come and visit the temple but they return the sameday to their villages where they celebrate with all the girls and women. Men and women are separated during these four days and the village resounds with the laughter of young girls and women swinging on swings specially hung for the occasion. Everyone told me — men and women — that this was a festival of women even though the men also observe it. It is also a festival of the earth and of agriculture. During these four days it is not only women who stop working but the men do too. No ploughs and bullocks are seen in the fields. All work ceases. Humans and the earth are given rest, just like women must rest during their menses.. This is what Bhikari Parida, a man from another village, told me about the Goddess, women and the earth :



“Women are *prakriti, srusti sakti* (the creative en-ergy) and we *arepurusa* (the male principle) and we come here to worship the *adisakti* (greater energy), *ma* (the Mother). We come here now because She is at her periods which is good for each and everyone. This means that She is ready, that She will give forth. She will give us good crops and cause many things in nature to grow. Women are reflections of the Mother and of the *pruthibi* (earth). The Mother, the earth and women are me same thing in different forms. During the four days of Raja, me earth, the Mother, is bleeding ... We think that women are bleeding too, not really but

symbolically and that the Mother bleeds through them. During the men-ses of the earth women do not work; they play and sing with their friends. The sole reason is for them to rest, just like during their monthly periods when they do not work and must not be disturbed, they should not be touched, they are then untouchable. When the Goddess is bleeding we also stop all work in the fields, and not only we farmers but all other men, black-smiths, carpenters, potters, washermen, barbers, etc... It is incumbent upon us that we should please the Goddess and women at I his lime. Young women [i.e., pre-menopausal] celebrate Raja because they are the centre of creation and we want to make them happy and please them.”

In order to situate this festival in the agricultural calendar let me start with what Sisulata told me about the manure pile on which she stood at her menarche:

“Women are *prakriti, srusti sakti* and we are *purusa* and we come here to worship the *adisakti, me*. We come here now because She is at her periods which is good for each and everyone.

“The manure pile has cow dung (the cow shed is attached to the house on the street side) ashes, house rubbish and straw. We build it up throughout the year and in the month



Sisulata in her Kitchen in front of a painting she has drawn

of  *jyestha* (May-June) we take it to the fields and spread it there; not only in  *jyestha* but also in  *baisakh* (April-May). In the paddy fields it will become fertiliser and that will increase the harvest.”

*Jyestha* and  *Baisakh* are the hottest and driest months of the year. The festival takes place at the articulation between the hot and dry season and the rainy season, toward the end of  *Jyestha*. These seasonal articulations are called 7/M, the word also meaning “menses”. During the hot season the land is prepared with manure and ploughing. Nothing grows then, the land is fallow. The beginning of the rains is the time to sow; seeds will germinate when the very hot earth has been cooled down with the first rains and softened, earth is then just right, not too hot nor too cold but just  *usum* (lukewarm). The festival of the menses of the Earth Goddess is situated at the end of the hot, dry and fallow season and the beginning of the rainy and fertile season.

The monsoon rains bring life to the land, fertilise the land which by resting during the hot and fallow period has regenerated itself. There is a rhythm of the seasons; a time of fallow, a time of rain and planting and a time of reaping. During the hot and dry season, the earth and the clouds are separated. This separation is not experienced as an absence, a lack, but a time of rest; a time for the earth to replenish its forces. Women are the earth and the rain clouds are the virile Indra, king of the gods. After the bath on the fourth day of menses, husband and wife unite in an act called  *ritu samgamana*

and the husband recites a Sanskrit verse that ends with: “I am the sky, thou ail the earth” (Kane 1974:202). The worn en, like the earth, are fixed; they stay in a room during their menses, they stay in the village during the

festival. The men come and go like monsoon clouds. The separation of men and women during menses harmonises with the cosmic rhythm. Violation of this harmony threatens the continuity of life.

More specifically, during the bleeding time women not only must rest and do no work but are enjoined to sit separately, away from where the life of the home is taking place; they are not to bathe, comb or bind their hair, cut their nails; they are not to cut, grind or make a paste of any vegetable or any plant. These practices identify women at their menses with the sacred grove of the goddess. The sacred grove of the goddess is situated away from villages and fields; it is separated from the daily activity of people. No tree or plant can be cut there; no cultivation must take place in the grove. As the work of Hildebeitel on the Sanskrit Mahabharata has shown (1980,1981) women's hair and garments are as the forests on the earth. Women are not only untouchable but they are at that time in an untouched, wild state. Uncombed, un bathed, unbound, uncut, and they themselves must not cut or grind vegetable plants. Their embodied selves are in the same state as the untouched, uncultivated sacred grove and they act towards the world in the same way it is enjoined to act toward the sacred grove: no cultivation, no cutting. As biologist Madhav Gadgil (1991) has shown, the sacred groves of India are the last places where the primal, original forest cover remains today. He points out that with the drastic genetic impoverishment brought about by monoculture and the green revolution, regeneration of indigenous gene plasm can take place thanks to the sacred groves. Today these groves shelter the healing herbs and plants used in ayurvedic medicine. The plants can only be found in virgin forests.



**Women performing sandhya arati at a neighbourhood shrine**

When I asked men and women what would happen if women's menses were violated, they invariably responded by giving me the example of what happened to the villain of the Mahabharata when he violated queen Draupadi's menses. He was killed in the ensuing great battle, but more terribly his whole lineage was extinguished. This meant no continuity of life. All these calamities were

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*“Goddess Harachandi manifests herself as a woman whose image is enshrined in her temple, in the grove itself... We feel that the Mother bleeds through women.”*

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captured in one word: *ilosha*. When I asked what would happen if anyone cut the trees in the sacred grove, the same word was used: *dosha*. calamities. That is disease, famine, barrenness, etc ... The menses are women's sacred groves.

Goddess Harachandi manifests herself anthropomorphically as a woman whose image is enshrined in

her temple on top of the hill as well as aniconically in the grove itself. When Bhikari Parida says “we feel that the Mother bleeds through them (women)” or when Sisulata says “we are the same kind as her. She is a woman and we are women. We are parts (*ansa*) of Her” these are not statements of simi-larity, or metaphors, or statements of a symbolic relationship. These statements declare a state of affairs. It is clearly not the case that these statements betray a confusion between the literal and the symbolic. Bhikari Parida says, just before the sentence quoted, that “We think they (women) are at their periods, not really but *sanketika* (symbolically).” Most women do not bleed during the Raja Festival; what they do, as Sisulata tells us, is as follows: “We follow all these rules of menstruation as we are of the same kind as Her.” The rules of menstruation such as keeping themselves separate, not bathing, not combing the hair, not cutting or grinding any plants, not doing any work (which includes no sexual relations with husbands), etc... as pointed out above place women in an uncultivated, wild state. Just as the choreography between men and



women of separation followed by union harmonises with (the cosmic rhythms of the seasons, the actions and observances of women at their menses articulate with the spatial rhythms of cultivated fields and virgin lands. The rules of menstruation when looked through the lens of “taboos” make us focus on “beliefs” such as that the touch of a menstruating women will make men sicken. Seen that way the “belief is a mental phenomenon. Seen in terms of Observances or rules that harmonise women and men to the rhythms of the seasons and the spatial rhythms of the land, violating these rhythms is breaking the harmony or the articulation of the human realm with the non-human realm; it is real, it is not a mental phenomenon. One is either in synchrony with the movements of the seasons or one is not.

The activity of bleeding and of observing the rules of menstruation — the two being of a piece — fit, adapt, harmonise humans to the ordered cosmos. The fitting, adapting, harmonising are human activities and practices such as bleeding periodically, resting, keeping men and women separate, doing certain things and not doing other things. All these human activities will ensure order and the generation and regeneration of life; in other words, the continuity of life.

The Latin *ritus* all have a common etymology, harking back to *ritu*. Symbolic action is based on meanings

*On the Goddess being pleased depends generation and regeneration... If she is angry, famine, disease, floods, droughts, all manner of calamities befall... The goddess embodies the reality that women and the earth are one.*

given to things and/or actions by the human mind. These symbols, these signifiers, are arbitrary, that is, based on convention. The world, by contrast, is real, not arbitrary or convention bound; meaning is imposed upon it and one can, and for effective mastery of nature, indeed must, be able to distinguish these two



**Men camping at the festival site**

aspects of reality. The modern meaning of ritual betrays its ancient forbearer, the Sanskrit *ritu*, and makes it difficult to approach the contemporary Oriya meaning of *ritu* and of the menstrual observances of Oriya villagers, men and women. For Oriya women, the act of bleeding and the actions by which

they keep the *rules* of menstruation are of the same kind. *Ritu* as period of time is also a rule; the French *regle*, meaning menses, conflates these two senses of rule and measure (of time). *Regle* means both a “ruler” (in the sense of a measuring rod) and a “rule”.

*Ritu* as the articulating activity of the sun in its yearly movement and as the articulating activities of women in their periodic bleeding *and* of men and women in their menstrual observances is an activity which is hidden or perverted when a separation is made between nature and culture, self and body, the literal and the symbolic. With these separations, generation and re-generation become biology which, as de Beauvoir says, is mere repetition of life. Generation and regeneration themselves lose nobility, worth, the

status of human projects. They become biological phenomena and objects of inquiry. Women submit passively to menstruation, which they cannot control. For women to become agents in their own right, they must follow men and engage in symbolic activity, in projects.

At menarche, the young Sisulata first understood the regenerating activity of

menstrual bleeding when her mother placed her on the manure pile. Her blood, along with manure, will regenerate the fertility of the fields. This happens close to the time of the festival of the Goddess’s menses, when the manure is spread over the fields. She learns that women are the centre

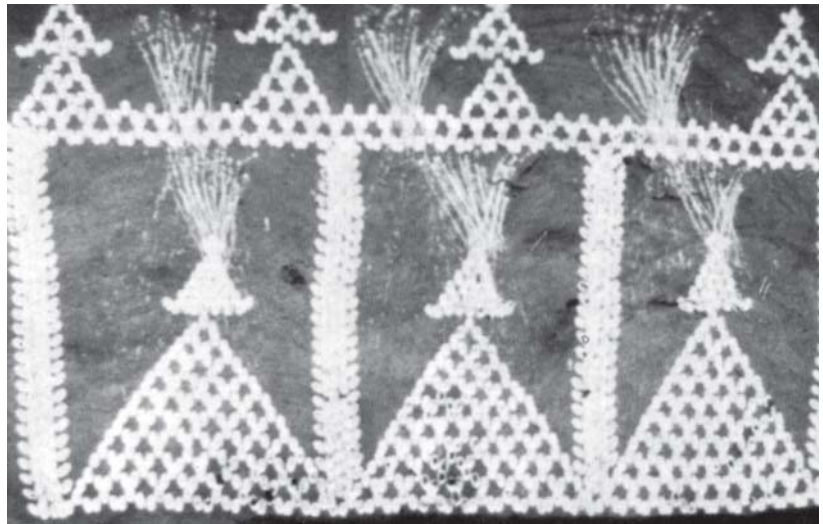
of creation by being placed in the centre of a space created by the nine types of seeds and the five pitchers. The nine seeds play a role on many other ritual occasions. Vandana Shiva (1991), in her investigation of seeds in traditional agriculture, reports that farmers make a point of growing these nine seeds, and was told that they stand for the nine planets. The nine kinds of seeds are at once symbols of the planets as well as being a diversity of food grains, all staples in the diet. The circle of seeds is at once the culti-vating activity of humans, and the cosmos, particularly in its aspect of the passage of time.

The pitchers are the most common symbols of auspiciousness, usually placed on each side of an entrance or portal (Apffel Marglin, 1985). The number five here refers to the five elements that make up the world. Red is the auspicious color par excellence as well as the colour of blood. The girl is placed at the centre of the world, for the coming of her menses has placed her there. As Bhikari Parida says “the young women...are the centre of creation.” She is secluded from men and from the sun, like in a chrysalis, transforming in solitude and darkness, her generating power gathering strength within her. She is in a dormant state and eats only a restricted diet to counterbalance the enormous amount of heat and power that her new blood is generating.

Her coming out is a joyous affirmation of her new state. Relatives participate in this by sharing food and bringing gifts. Such gifts will continue after the girl is married and become part of a dense network of prestations which ultimately regenerate the community. The menses basket given to the married daughter/sister at Raja Parba is one instance of the continuation of these gifts.

### **Menses as Regeneration**

At menarche, the girl is placed at the centre of creation. There as woman



**Women's wall decoration with rice flower**

she will remain; her activities of bleeding, conceiving, gestating, observing the rules of menstruation, processing the grain from the fields, cooking, feeding, keeping the accounts and the wealth of the household, seeing to the prestations among kin and a myriad other activities generate and regenerate their lived world. As

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*These practices identify women at their menses with the sacred grove of the goddess... No tree or plant can be cut there; no cultivation must take place in the grove*

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Carana Palai, a male villager put it: “Our women are our Laxmi (Goddess, con-sort of Vishnu). They are the Goddess of the house; when they are happy then we get everything. If we make them sad, then suffering is the result.”

As many men and women told me, the Goddess has created the world and all that lives. On the Goddess being pleased depends the generation and regeneration of the lived world. If she

is angry, famine, disease, floods, droughts, all manner of calamities will befall humankind; the world then degenerates. The women are portions of the goddess and men say that on them depend their lives and the continuation of their line. The goddess should not be understood as a symbol of the earth and/or of women. This manner of approaching the goddess reduplicates the dualism between consciousness, the mind on one side and the really real, the world on the other side. The goddess is an image in which elements of consciousness and elements of the world coalesce. It is an image which allows the interpenetration between subjective consciousness and the world.

The goddess embodies the reality that women and the earth are one at the same time as it makes visible that generating and regenerating the world is a human, a natural and a divine activity in which consciousness and the world interpenetrate. Calling this a “fertility” religion misses the point altogether since for us it is “mere” nature worship. Phrasing it and ap-proaching it in that way preserves *the* dualism between biology/nature and culture and the fragmentation,

degradation and impoverishment of the lives of women and also men.

## Conclusion

I have only focused on menstruation in this paper so as to focus the argument. The generating and regenerating of the lived world encompasses infinitely more than what I have been able to touch upon here. In fact all activities of men and women generate and regenerate their lived world. The separation between a domestic sphere and a public sphere is here not *the* modern separation in which the private/domestic is supported by and supports the public domain. The domestic sphere is not a dependent sphere of the body, the emotions, and non-commoditised relationships; rather it is the sphere of women and the center of creation.

In modern societies, the domestic sphere is one in which the *re-production* of people can be seen as the production of mere perishables (see Sherry Ortner, 1974). Reproduction there is mere repetition of life, devoid of consciousness. Life that is not mere repetition is found in the public sphere dominated by men and masculinised women. This dualism between biology, the body, nature on the one hand and consciousness, mind, rationality on the other eventually threatens the continuity of life. Life is improved, lengthened, managed, optimised, etc...all of it resulting in what Foucault, Donzelot and others have called "bio-power", the ultimate value in modern society; individual health, longevity, etcetra, in a social, moral, and aesthetic vacuum.

The non-modern form of generating and regenerating the lived world encompasses all social/cultural activities, engaging all the human faculties: bodily activity, cognition, ethical, aesthetic, spiritual. Modern consciousness having particularly degraded, fragmented, and



Young girls singing Raja songs on a swing

impoverished women, they have less to lose than modern men and may become the vehicles for a new consciousness.

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