

SPEAKING OF DISSENT, SPEAKING OF CONSENT: RITUAL AND RESISTANCE AMONG HIGH-CASTE HINDU WOMEN IN KATHMANDU¹

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Introduction

After centuries of cultural and geographical isolation, Nepal is currently undergoing rapid social change. The impact on Nepal of radical worldwide changes in transportation, information and global cultural flows of people and things (Appadurai 1990) has accelerated with the transition from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy that began in 1990. These changes are transforming the conservative Hindu traditions which previously regulated society. In urban centers, women are among the first to experience new modes of gender, morality, and power resulting from these influences.

Despite these changes many high-caste Hindu, or Brahmin and Chhetri² women in Kathmandu appear to lead traditional lives. They still smear red powder (*sindur*) in their hair parting to signify that they are married as their foremothers have done for generations. They wear the confining and expensive saris which demonstrate their adherence to Hindu models of decorum and modesty. They wear traditional colored glass beads (*pote*) and delicately tinkling bangles (*churaa*) to notify others in the household of their quiet presence and of their dedication to their husbands. Brahmin and Chhetri women also embed forms of resistance in their religious activities to protest against these traditional Hindu gender models. The increasing cross-cultural literature on women and resistance demonstrates that this is not an isolated incident; similar phenomenon are occurring on a worldwide basis. For example, Bedouin women use their poetry as forms of resistance to express personal feeling that violate their moral code (Abu-Lughod 1986); female Malaysian factory workers become possessed by spirits on the shop floors of factories in response to the pressures of industrialization (Ong 1987); Somalian women become possessed by spirits to protest against male dominance (Lewis 1971); and Oriental women in Jerusalem resist the fences erected by authorities which prevent them from lighting candles on the holy

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ancestral tombs by throwing unlit candles through holes in the fences (Sered 1990).

In this paper, I discuss how high-caste women appear to conform to Hindu ideals through their participation in the various religious activities, but in their daily worship, weddings, fasting, and funerals they are able to express their resistance, demonstrate dissatisfactions, and in essence, not conform. As third world urban elite women, it is often assumed that these women do not possess "culture" and that culture is only truly found in villages or among the lower castes or classes. My research among middle and upper class Brahmin and Chhetri women in Kathmandu helps to address this lacunae and to challenge additional assumptions, such as the association of third world women with unchanging tradition even in the context of cultural change (Chatterjee 1989; Murphy and Murphy 1985), that tradition is static (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Lepowsky 1991), and the essentialization of third world women (Mohanty et al. 1991). Women's resistance in ritual is not the only framework which addresses these issues-nor is it the only framework within which women express dissents – but it is among the most powerful and provocative for illuminating these issues.

In Kathmandu, the amalgamation of old and new gender models is most clearly seen in high-caste women's religious lives. Women go to their lovers on the way to visit a temple. Women refuse to fast for their husbands when they feel mistreated. New brides resist the dominant Hindu symbolism embedded in their own weddings. And women use their parent's funeral rites as a form of resistance against traditional gender models and as a site for cultural critique. To understand the importance of these forms of resistance for high-caste women, I do not merely examine the specifics that prompt them to resist. I also recognize that women's resistances are diagnostic and reflective of the power relations in which these women are embedded (Abu-Lughod 1990; MacLeod 1992). In this paper, I attend to the issues of the audience for these resistances and to women's own motivations for resistance (Mahoney and Yngvesson 1992) by examining the personal and social contexts of these acts as constructed in ongoing relationships. I also explore the multiple discourses on resistance and social change by bringing to light the voices of other high-caste women, those who believe that these forms of resistance are detrimental to women's lives. As it has been described in other cultures, it is women who sometimes hold to tradition to enhance their social standing in the face of change (Grima 1992; MacLeod 1992), and adherence to tradition can itself be a type of resistance (Lepowsky 1991). This is especially true when newer models represent a reduction of traditional holds on power without providing new alternatives.

As Nepal's capital, Kathmandu incorporates both old traditions and new values. Ancient brass pagoda roofed temples are visited by people in cars with cellular phones; the virgin goddess Kumari, whom even the King worships, has access to Star TV; pilgrims come from all over South Asia to worship at the holy Hindu temple of Pashupatinath and gamble in the local casino; and the Buddhist shrine of Boudhanath is transfer into the site for a Bernardo Bertolucci film with thousands of extras swarming beneath its holy eyes. People come from all over the world to Nepal, including expert mountain climbers tackling Sagarmatha, the highest peak in the world, or Kailash, the abode of the deities; students come to learn Buddhism from resident Rimpoches; hikers to trek in the lovely valleys of the Himalayas; development workers, and researcher like myself. Often the old and the new compete with each other for prominence with traditional ways being thrown aside for the thrill and glamour of what is foreign, new, and deemed more desirable. Sometimes the old is held to tenaciously, even violently, and the rise in public assaults against women ("eve-teasing"), the public cutting of the long hair of young men by the police, and the increasing number of bride burning related to dowry attests to this.

In some ways, I am also representative of many of these competing discourses. I came to Nepal as a young unmarried American university student to do my Ph.D. field research, met American a resident American diplomat working in Kathmandu, and married him here. My social standing helps my rapport with women in many ways; as wife of a diplomat, I am seen as representative of traditional gender models, but I am also associated with the newer models as a career woman with no children, who has her own independent interests, her own salary, freedom, and mobility. In various guises, I move in and out of these different worlds, being able to appeal to women's sensitivities across domains. As a married woman, I have access to information which was previously hidden from me as a single woman. As a foreigner, it is also recognized that I have access to a world beyond Kathmadu in a way many women in Kathmandu do not. High-caste women here also move between cultures and our discussions which often move from Nepali into English and back into Nepali demonstrate this.

Gender Models and Hindu Ritual

Traditional high- caste hindu ideals for women are described by Bennett (1976, 1981, 1983), Gray (1982, 1989, 1991), and Kondos (1989, 1991) in their research among villagers in the Kathmandu Valley. These ideals dictate that Hindu women must be shy, patient, good, sequestered, devoted, faithful, restrained, and as the oft quoted book of *Manu* states, women must always be protected by a man, be it her father, husband or son. There are choices any

high-caste woman must make in her daily life regarding these ideals; choices between obedience and defiance, duty and self-indulgence, harmony and contentiousness, the good of the joint family and the good of oneself, between purity and pollution, between strict observance of *dharma* and laxness, between sexual restraint and indulgence, and between being faithful wife and an unfaithful one (Bennett 1983:313). These models demarcate the range of possible behaviors for a woman, attributing a specific morality to both her and her behavior. In a cyclic fashion, this morality in turn relates back to a woman's *dharma* or duty. As Bennett writes, high-caste Hindus,

tend to speak of *dharma* in terms of action, as something one *does* (or at least should do), rather than something one believes in. In Nepali usage the word *dharma* encompasses the performance on specified rites and ceremonies, and obedience to ritual prescriptions appropriate to one's place in the social structure, as well as general ethical behavior covering individual actions of compassion, honesty, etc.... *Dharma* is *duty*, compelling because it is conceived to be grounded in the nature of reality (1983:34-35; original emphasis).

Household relations are the most important feature in defining high-caste women's lives. It is the main site within which a woman's *dharma* and her resistance to this *dharma* are expressed. For these women *dharma* is the link between gender models, religion, household relations, and the wider social world. Women say that even if they do not have a strong faith, it is their *dharma* to perform rituals and religious activities for the benefit of the whole household.

Kondos delineates the different structural restraints within high-caste Hindu Nepalese households and the various legal and social consequences of these structures for women (1989). There are six different ways high-caste women can "manoeuvre around and between the rules" that constrain and subjugate them according to Kondos. These include chicanery, suicide, returning to their parent's home (*maiti*), elopement, divorce or separation, and becoming economically independent (1989:182-184). Except perhaps for chicanery, these are drastic measures that require a woman to leave her husband's home and as a result suffer harsh social and cultural consequences. But what about the high-caste woman who wants to remain within her home and still somehow maneuver around these restraints? Religion is one forum in which a woman can resist these restraints and still remain within the bounds of cultural acceptance. Performing rituals is an important activity and women often have leeway within the structure of rituals, which they may not have in other realms of life, to use ritual for their own purposes.

Women's resistance within ritual arises not only in response to the constraints *dharma* imposes, but also as a result of the dissonance created with the introduction of other newer gender models. It has been documented in many cultures that exposure to media images and western goods influences emulation of these new ideas and attitudes (i.e., Appadurai 1990). This is also true among high-caste women in Kathmandu. Women do want to embrace some of the new models to which these images speak. They do not necessarily want to be the women on the American soap opera "The Bold and the Beautiful," which is daily watched in Kathmandu on STAR TV but they do admire the representations of relative freedom, independence, and women's relationships with men on this show. High-caste women want both the old and the new, and the impact of these newer models on traditional gender ideals should not be underestimated. It is precisely at the confluence of the older gender models with the newer ones that women's forms of resistance emerge.

Definitions of Resistance

Although in this paper I focus on resistance within ritual, resistance in Kathmandu also exists in other forms, such as public demonstrations or in the publication of radical periodicals. I do not presuppose any easy definitions of resistance. As Abu-Lughod suggests, we tend to over-romanticize resistance (1990), to view these acts and their implications through our own cultural lens. As a result, in academic writings, the concept is often not defined, not defined consistently across works, and sometimes defined so exclusively that almost nothing qualifies as resistance.

At one extreme of this confusion are the debates about definitions of resistance during the Nazi era. Participants at a symposium on the Nazi resistance movements were troubled by the wide range of activities and attitudes termed resistance in this context; they wanted to distinguish resistance from other concepts such as "nonconformity," "intentional challenge," "protest," or "refusal." They wanted to define something as resistance only if it made a public impact and posed a "basic challenge to the regime." As a result, the participants decided that there was "an astonishing variety of types of 'nonconformist behavior' in Germany between 1933 and 1945 but little full-scale 'resistance' (Craig 1992:39-41)." Unfortunately, I believe that this approach reifies the definition of resistance and does not validate or acknowledge the cultural circumstances under which people act.

Other writers envision resistance as an individual response to particular situations either momentarily or over the course of a life (i.e., Abu-Lughod 1990; Okely 1991). In between these extremes are those who see resistance as an interplay between the public and private, the overt and covert, the

personal and the social. Scott conceives of resistance as divided into public and hidden transcripts whose analysis helps us to understand relations between the powerless and the powerful (1990); Comaroff sees resistance as an interplay between subordinate and dominant powers where the subordinate both "acquiesce yet protest, reproduce yet seek to transform their predicament" (1985:1); and Radner and Lanser argue that more private displays of resistance by women can be implicitly and explicitly "coded" as a means to protect women from retaliation, because the scope for women's resistance is often limited by the cultural contexts (1993).

In order not to detract from or undervalue the difficulty of carrying out such activities, I define resistance broadly using the term to mean that which withstands the actions or effects of others, or a force (be it physical or the force of will) that opposes another. As a result of my research, and because of shifting social contexts (historically, culturally, and geographically), I have found that self-definitions of resistance are the most important to consider. Whether organized or personal, unaware or aware, high-caste women in Kathmandu imbue their acts with meaning and intentionality. This includes what others might term protest, defiance, and nonconformity. Resistance can be large or small, organized or spontaneous. It may have a small or large audience of both observers and participants. It can be well thought through, or the performer may have a small or large audience of both observers and participants. It can be well thought through, or the performer may be unaware of the wider social implications of her actions. In order to understand high-caste women's definitions of resistance and their understandings of the effects of their actions, I begin here with a discussion of Nepali words for different types of resistance and then continue with examples of women's resistances taken from my own research.

In Nepali, the range of words to describe different types of resistance also includes protest, defiance, and nonconformity. People speak of *satyagraha*, *shaan dekhaaunu*, *Pratikaar*, *birodh*, and *pratirodh*. The stories I tell below on high-caste women's religious resistances demonstrate the range of activities which can be defined as resistance and the limits of each type in transforming a woman's situation.

Satyagraha is passive resistance of the type Gandhi favored in British India. It can be a large organized hunger strike, such as those supporting labor reforms. *Satyagraha* also applies to situations when a woman refuses to eat, drink, or even talk for extended periods as a means of exerting pressure on others within her household when she has no other alternatives available to her. For a woman this is a very personal form of resistance and not usually related to situations beyond her own household.

When a woman wants to demonstrate her superiority over her husband and refuses to fulfill her wifely duties to him by not cooking his meals, caring for his children or attending to the other duties ascribed by her household situation, she is considered to be *shaan dekhaaune* or to be showing her pride. This occurs when she feels that she is not accorded the proper ranking within her household based on age and gender hierarchies. A woman may be *shaan dekhaaune* when she feels that she has married beneath her social standing in reference to her family background, which is sometimes signified by a large dowry (*daijo*). The audience for a *shaan dekhaaune* woman can include both her husband's household and her *maiti*. When a woman refuses to cook, for example, this will be known not only in her husband's household but also in her relatives' houses too. *Shaan dekhaaune* has a negative connotation; women tell me they know of other *shaan dekhaaune* women, usually unrelated to them, but most claim they themselves have never knowingly engaged in these types of activities.

Pratikaar is defiance. Some of the smaller acts of resistance a woman might engage in, such as going to have tea with friends instead of going to a temple or even more serious acts such as refusing to fast for one's husband, are considered *pratikaar*. For women, these acts are generally more socially conscious than *satyaagraha* or *shaan dekhaaune*, and are based on action—while *satyaagraha* and *shann dekhaaune* are ultimately based on the lack of action. *Pratikaar* has an audience which extends beyond the household and can include friends, neighbours, and those in unrelated households.

Opposition, resistance, or hostility is termed *birodh*. *Birodh* is stronger than *pratikaar* and is usually applied to types of resistance that are somewhat public and self aware. Those who perform *birodh* have some hope of the possibility of transforming society even if only on a small scale. Anju,³ whose partial life story I provide later, defines her own resistance against her in-laws and parents in terms of *Birodh* when she chose her own husband. Anju was aware of what she was doing, and her goal in this *birodh* was to bring about changes so her life would hopefully not be constrained or defined by traditional gender models.

Pratirodh is an opposition or resistance that usually involves a number of people united for a common cause such as that seen during the movement to restore democracy where thousand of people took to the streets, or when two thousand women marched in Kathmandu in December, 1992, to demand women's rights and protest against the recent wave of sexual assaults (Sowerwine 1993). *Pratirodh* is meant to bring radical change and requires organization and participation by others.

Besides these large scale political protests, most of the forms of resistance I have witnessed in Kathmandu are embedded within women's religious

activities and are used to protest against their personal life situations. High-caste women gain latitude and are able to resist constraints in their lives by manipulating ritual structures to their own advantages. Many women have lives which are physically restricted in accordance with ideals of modesty, seclusion and women's honor. They are not normally allowed to go outside their houses or compounds without good reason. One way to meet friends, which is often only rarely allowed, is to have the good reason of visiting a temple to get *darshan* (to see and be seen by the deity) on the day of the week associated with that deity or to do a special ritual. Of course, these trips are very rarely made by women alone, and the trip is more socially acceptable if a woman has the appropriate companions—which means other women—providing the guise for socializing with friends which would not normally be permitted. The women do worship once they reach the temple, but the stronger motivation for many of these outings is wanting to be with friends.

Maya

Maya is an outgoing and lively middle class woman. Because she works outside her home she enjoys more relative freedom to go out alone than many other high-caste women. As Kondos notes, becoming economically independent is one way a high-caste woman may maneuver around some of the constraints in her life (1989:184). Maya's activities are still carefully watched by her in-laws though, and often they place phone calls to determine if Maya is where she should be. In spite of this, on Mondays on the way to the holy Hindu temple of Pashupatinath, Maya often stops to have tea with friends. On Tuesday evenings, on the way home from visiting any of the numerous temples in Kathmandu, she visits her lover, being careful to bring home a blessing from the elephant headed god *Ganesh* to prove her Pilgrimage. On some Saturdays, she hires a taxi, picks up her lover and drives out to Dashain *Kali*, an important sacrificial spot for this powerful goddess, to make offerings and to make love in the surrounding jungle. These are very covert forms of resisting, what some would term *Pratikaar*. Maya is doing things in direct opposition to what her family, and Hindu tradition, have deemed appropriate for her, but her audience is very limited: her lover, herself, and me.

In terms of motivation, Maya, believes that there is no other way to change her life or to change her circumstance, especially since she is a widow. If her in-laws discovered her desire for more freedom, freedom to have a boyfriend, to possibly remarry, to start life again, there would be serious consequences including beating and perhaps even her "accidental" death. According to Hindu ideals, a widow must never remarry. Previously, these ideals were assured through the threat and practice of *sati*, where a woman is

said to sit upon her husband's funeral pyre with his dead body cradled in her lap. Her spirit then ascends with his to the heavens upon their cremation. *Sati* is no longer practiced in Kathmandu; the last legal one occurred in 1920 or so (G. Rana n.d; Slusser 1982:232), although it is rumored that there were *satis* in Nepal's Terai region and in the Kathmandu valley recently. The belief that a woman's fidelity belongs to and is controlled by only one man, her husband, throughout her lifetime is still an important ideal. And the widespread belief that a woman becomes a goddess if she performs *sati* is attested to by the popularity of the 1987 *Sati* of Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan, India (Bumiller 1990; Datta 1988; Harlan 1991; Narasimhan 1992).⁴ Maya's behavior as a widow reflects heavily on her in-laws' honor. As a widow, they must carefully control her and her sexuality to maintain their social standing, and many families are still willing to go to great lengths to do so. As such, knowing the threat of violence exists, Maya chooses to resist in her own private but meaningful ways.

Kumari

Kumari, has been married to Krishna for many years. Kumari lives a very traditional life despite the fact that she, like Maya, also works outside the home. Their marriage is typical of many in Kathmandu in that it was arranged and they live in Krishna's house in a joint family. In keeping with the Hindu cultural ideals of masculinity, her husband's prerogatives include acting in many ways like the god Krishna. Kumari told me to use the name Krishna for her husband in my telling of this story to highlight the parallels between her husband's behavior and that of Krishna, the playful god of love. Krishna, the man, has had many girlfriends throughout their marriage, coming and going as he pleases, and spending the money Kumari earns without consulting her.

Throughout her life, Kumari has observed Tij and Rishi Panchami,⁵ two day long festivals for women which occur each year in the fall. On these days, in Kathmandu, women fast, bathe, and do special rituals at home at Pashupati, and at the confluence of holy rivers to ensure the long life and prosperity of their husbands and to purify themselves of the sins they may have accrued due to menstrual pollution over the past year. As a young women, Kumari, like many unmarried women, also went to Pashupati on Tij and celebrated Rishi Panchami in hopes of accruing enough merit so the deities would bring her a good husband.

Now that she is married, Kumari fasts for Krishna on special ritual days, such as Tij, or celebrates certain rituals for his benefit. When she does, Krishna often buys Kumari jewels, sari, gold, or other gifts to express his pleasure at her religious devotedness to his well-being. Last year, however,

while walking home from Pashupati on Tij, Kumari told me that one year she and Krishna had a large argument about his girlfriend, and in response she refused to fast for him on Tij. Despite Kumari's own religious devotedness, when faced with the mistreatment she felt she was suffering from Krishna, she decided to make a stand against him. Krishna became very angry and in reaction to Kumari's refusal to fast, he gave one of Kumari's saris to his mistress. For a man to give a woman a piece of clothing is a symbol of intimacy, and a woman will not usually accept clothing from a man with whom she is not intimate. In addition, saris are very expensive, usually costing more than a month's salary and good ones are often brought from abroad. By giving one of Kumari's saris to his girlfriend, and through her acceptance of the gift, Krishna was not only depriving Kumari of something valuable, which he himself might have even originally given her, but also signifying his intimacy with his mistress to his wife.

The next year Kumari again refused to fast for Krishna because his bad behavior continued. Kumari chose to not fast rather than the other options of silently protesting or silently enduring. As such, she widened the audience for her complaints by bringing Krishna's unacceptable behavior to the attention of others in her household using an accepted and important ritual. In this manner, Kumari was able to gain support from her in-laws because Krishna was not living up to his responsibilities as a husband, father, and son. Krishna's mother supported Kumari in her refusal to fast and later on with Kumari confronted the girlfriend to get the disputed sari returned. In telling me this story, Kumari's emphasis was on how she stood up to Krishna's behavior by using his own (and her own) religious beliefs and desires against him. By couching her resistance to Krishna's treatment of her in terms of the Tij festival and in terms of her *dharma* as a woman who should perform Tij fasts, Kumari was able to successfully make her point about his behavior without going outside the bounds of acceptable behavior and without transgressing high-caste Hindu gender ideals.

Parvati

Another example of women's resistance in ritual involves a marriage I attended. At Hindu weddings there are a series of games which the bride and groom play with each other under the wedding canopy (*Jagge*), including a dice game (*pase*), and one in which the bridal couple compete to see who can be the first to feed the other curd off a brass plate (*Mahura khuaune*), not unlike the traditional cake feeding and smashing in some western wedding traditions. Many women say that the winner of these games will determine the sex of the couple's first child—if the groom wins their child will be a girl, if the bride wins then the child will be a boy. In addition, women say that

these games are about relations of power and dominance; if the bride wins, she will be the more powerful in her new relationship with her husband and be able to dominate him easily; if the groom wins then the opposite is supposed to be true. These games are also said to help familiarize the bridal couple who traditionally would probably not have met before the marriage ceremony began.

There is some contradiction here. If the bride wins then their first born child will be a boy, the social, cultural, and often personal ideal. Another ideal is also in place though: new brides are supposed to be shy and docile. The groom would lose some amount of honor in front of the wedding guests and his family if his new shy and docile wife were to play competitively and win these games. In addition weddings are frequently traumatic events for the bride; women often they tell me that they remember very little of their own weddings and because they wept so much they had to be led around through the different rituals. I have also seen grooms try to lose in such a manner that reduce the appearance of the bride's competitiveness. This is a fine line though. So, even though the couple may desire a first born son, because of the potential trauma of the event, what can direct a bride's behavior at her wedding is the ideal of the shy and reticent bride while the other potential power struggle between the wife and husband gets played down.

This bride though, who at her own request I call Parvati, competed heartily with her groom in these wedding games. Parvati had what is termed an "arranged" marriage because the parents approved of the match and paid for the wedding, even though she and her husband had actually chosen and dated each other for some years.⁶ Parvati married into a high-caste elite family which had previously been quite powerful, and their wedding was an elaborate affair. She wanted to demonstrate, as she told me, not just to her new in-laws but to the guests as well, that she was not going to be submissive to her new husband. Initially when it became evident that Parvati was trying to win these wedding games, the guests were laughing along with what they interpreted to be her Joking. The issue of the couple getting to know each other was moot. The guests also assumed that the issue of the sex of their not-yet-conceived children was unimportant. What was still unsettled for everyone were the power relations after the marriage. This was also evident during the *mahura Khuaune* which turned into a small throwing match with the curd ending up all over the faces of the wedding couple. This is all very much within the realm of acceptable behavior at weddings; sometimes if the bride and groom have known each other, they make jokes during the wedding and the guests laugh and tease them in return.

Parvati intensified this theme of resisting to her submissive position in another portion of the ceremony, when the couple is finally officially married

and the bride and groom must switch seats (*thau sarne*). Initially the bride sits on the groom's right-hand side signifying her higher status as an unmarried virgin. Once married though, the bride is considered to be of lower status than the groom and must move to the groom's left hand side.⁷ When the time came for them to switch seats, Parvati refused to budge from her cushion. Indeed, initially the groom rose and asked her politely to move. She wouldn't. The guests began to laugh along with the bride. Then the groom tried to gently move Parvati to the other cushion by taking her arm as if to help her up. She still refused to be moved from her position of authority and the guests laughed louder and began to make comments about what they thought was the bride's joking. Finally, the groom tried to forcibly move Parvati by picking her up, but she made herself as heavy as possible and it took the groom several attempts before he finally dragged her to the other cushion. By this time, the crowd's laughter was mixed with disgruntled comments. Combined with the look upon the groom's face, I was led to believe that Parvati had carried her "joking" too far. By couching her desires within the marriage ceremony and by stretching the boundaries of acceptable behavior, Parvati was able to make an important statement to her own family and to her in-laws about her desire for a more equal standing with her husband.

Indira

Another Chhetri woman, Indira Rana, is a high level government official whose life and work are centered on her efforts to bring about social change beneficial to Nepalese women. At her mother's funeral (*kaaj-kriyaa*), Indira made a very public, pointed, and courageous statement about her role as a daughter and her position as a woman in Nepalese society. At Indira's wish, I have not disguised her identity because as she says, the story is true, and because the amount of publicity this incident received in the local press (i.e., *Asmitaa* 1992; Pandey 1992; *Suruchi* 1992) which would make anonymity difficult. Indira is an exceptional woman by any standards. She has never married despite strong social pressures to do so and has led a very independent and public life. Indira is a lawyer, feminist, member of the Nepal Law Reform Commission, and current Secretary of His Majesty's Government of Nepal's (HMG/N) Judicial Council, the first woman to ever hold this position and the highest ranking woman in government. In 1965, Indira was the first woman to join HMG/N as a lawyer and has been with HMG/N in various capacities ever since.

Indira's mother died in November, 1992. As Indira has supported, cared for, and lived with her mother throughout her life, she took the virtually unprecedented responsibility of performing the necessary thirteen day funeral

rituals and duties (*kaaj-kriyaa*). Traditionally, a son is essential for Hindus, as I stated above, not just to support the parents in their old age, but also to perform the *kaaj-kriyaa*.⁸ In addition, a man's performance of these rites is closely linked to his inheritance of the family property. The man who does these rites is usually the main inheritor and people tell me of the confusion which often results when someone other than a son performs the *kaaj-kriyaa* (see *Asmitaa* 1992; Bennett 1983:95). Women rarely take part in the *Kaaj-kriyaa* except as bystanders. They are not even allowed to go with the funeral procession which takes the body from the house to the cremation ground (*ghats*); as women tell me, they must say good bye to the deceased from the doorway of their house.

Yet, when her own mother died, Indira took it upon herself to shave her head, wear the white unstitched clothes of mourning, perform the purification ceremonies, walk barefoot the long distance from her own house to the *ghats* at the temple of Pashupatinath. She even lit her mother's pyre; Indira tells me that this was the most difficult and emotionally trying task of all. One is required to put a flaming torch to the face of the deceased until it catches fire and only then is the rest of the pyre lit. It was an act of strong will for Indira to put the flame to the face of her mother who, as she told me, looked real even in her death, The stench was overwhelming and Indira was glad that fasting beforehand is required because otherwise it would be very easy to become nauseous. Indira sat with her mother's body there on the riverbank in her thin white clothing until there was nothing but ashes left of her mother. The ashes were swept into the Bagmati river where they would eventually meet and mingle with the holy Ganges river in India. In doing these rituals, Indira tells me she was demonstrating both her commitment to the well-being of her mother's departed soul and to the social statement she was making about the role of daughters in Hindu Nepalese society.

As an unmarried woman over thirty-five years old, Indira is entitled like her brother to an equal portion of her parents' property (Bennett and Singh 1979:29). Indira has a strengthened claim to this property, she believes, because she cared for her mother for all these years without the assistance of her brothers (even though they could afford to), for and built the house on the piece of property which was to be her mother's and took care of her mother there. Instead, Indira says, her eldest brother is trying to cheat her out of the piece of property which is legally hers, as he cheated their mother out of hers. In describing this to me, Indira makes the explicit link between her care of her mother, her ability to perform the *kaaj-kriyaa*, and her rights to the property, especially when her brothers have been negligent. "Why should they [her brother] get the property," she asked, "when they have not fulfilled their duties to their parents?" Indira insisted on performing the *kaau-kriyaa*

to show people that a daughter is perfectly capable of doing these rituals and as such should also then inherit equally as a son. As local newspapers reported, Indira's performance of her mother's *kaaj-krijaa* was one which resisted traditional gender ideals (Asmitta 1992; Pandey 1992; Suruchi 1992) while conforming to traditional ritual requirements.

This is not the first time that Indira has been vocal about women's position in Nepalese society. As a member of the Nepal Law Reform Commission, she is working to bring about radical social change for women in the legal reform of women's property right. Indira has worked very hard to convince the other Commission members that women should inherit property from their parents as a man does. Her efforts included completing a survey, writing reports, and lobbying with other social activists (Thompson n.d.). Indira is also trying to unify the various factionalized women's groups to pressure the government to make progress on women's rights before International Women's Day in March, 1993 (I. Rana 1992). Unfortunately, she has been faced with overwhelming opposition in terms of both traditionalism and fatalism in trying to make these constitutional changes. What Indira hopes is that even if her own life is not transformed by these resistances, that her defiance, or *birodh*, may have repercussions in wider social spheres.

I saw confirmation of this in March, 1993, with the publication of a small article on the back page of *The Rising Nepal*, the government English language daily. As the article states,

Parents with only daughters need not worry about their own last rites although sons are considered essential for this in our traditional society.

The three unmarried daughters of Colonel Tej Pratap Karki, who died the other day have undertaken the last rites for their father [sic].

The late col. Karki has six daughters, three of them married.

The three sister performing the last rites according to the priest's suggestion are Ambu Bhawani, Indevi and Yamuna Karki.

Last rites of parents by daughters have been performed before in Nepalese society prior to this also (*The Rising Nepal* 1993:8).

When I asked Indira about this article, she smiled broadly, telling me she had seen the article and that what she had done has indeed made some small difference in improving women's rights in Nepal

Questioning the Implications

As a result, I am led to ask, What are the implications of these forms of resistance for wider social contexts? There is not necessarily a relationship between these forms of religious resistance and the consequent lives of these

particular women. Because a woman **doesn't** fast for her husband at Tij doesn't mean that as a result he will **feel compelled** to treat her better, as we saw when Krishna gave his mistress **one of Kumari's** saris and continued to see his mistress even after the mistress **was confronted** by Kumari and her mother-in-law. In the same way, a **bride's** resistance to standard interpretations of wedding symbolism **does not** mean she will not have difficulties with issues of domination, power, and traditional household relations after marriage. Nor will a **woman necessarily** be assured her share of the ancestral property because she **performs the necessary kaaj-kriyaa** for her parents.

There are also multiple interpretations of these acts even within the same cultural context. For example, some **people believe** Indira Rana's motives were "Socially minded" and meant to **help women**. Others claim that Indira is greedy, that she performed her mother's **kaaj-kriyaa** just to get a piece of her brother's property. And still others **believe that** Indira's motivations were correct, but that these forms of **resistance** are more detrimental than beneficial. The life story of Anju, a **Brahmin** teacher, sheds light on this last perspective.

Anju

As Anju tells me, her life has been **filled with** resistance in many forms. She is thirty-five years old and her resistances **began with** her choice of marriage partners and continue even now **with her insistence** upon providing high-quality education for both daughter **and son despite** the high school fees that consume most of her salary. After **eleven years** of hardship and resistance in her joint family (*birodh* as she term it), **Anju feels** she has made the wrong decision. She believes she should **have adjusted to the** Hindu gender ideals set down for her—the ideals of conformity, modesty and obedience—the very ideals which ensure the harmony **of the extended** family. Anju now despairs that her resistance have brought **dissonance within** her family and even now threaten to break it apart. Some **might argue** that Anju's *birodh* has been effective, that she has pushed the **boundaries** of acceptability and is on the verge of radically changing the **structure** of her life. But from Anju's perspective, which I believe is the **most important**, she is unable to reconcile the pain of the present consequences **of her past** behaviors.

Anju called me on the phone one **day after** reading a copy of a short article I had written on this women's resistances in ritual (Thompson 1992b). She said she wanted to give me her **opinions of the issues** I had raised and asked if we could meet. In this initial meeting, **Anju recollected** her resistances and provided me with her current interpretations. She began by providing me with a proverb spoken by the mother **at the very** moment when her daughter,

the bride, is parted from her forever. The mother says to the groom, as he helps the bride into the vehicle which will take her to her new home (be it a car, carriage, bus, plane, or palanquin), "*Paale punya maare paap*," or "[It is] holy to care [for her], a sin to kill [her]." This made a powerful impression on Anju at her own wedding and I have seen the effect of this proved on other new brides. When Anju's mother uttered this to Anju's new husband, Anju felt the power and reinforcement of centuries of Hindu tradition. She cried even more with the weight of Kilos of red wedding silk, gold jewelry, and the heavy green glass *pote* upon her shoulders. A woman's *dharma* is so tied up with her husband's that the husband accrues both the merit and the sin from his wife's existence; her behavior and life do not apply towards her own rebirth.

Anju says that this statement is so firmly in women's minds, both daughters and mothers, that they don't revolt against what they are suffering. The models are so strong that women often don't even have a marker against which to define their own pain. Anju is afraid that I will perceive high-caste women to be unhappy. She tells me in defense, "Our upbringing teaches us not to be unhappy; we do not even know to revolt or rebel." Anju did revolt though. I describe here some of what Anju has chosen to tell me about her wedding arrangements and the other forms of resistance she exhibited within her extended family. Anju's story will stray a bit from my original concern of women's resistance within ritual, but the issues she raises in the telling of life story shed light on the multiple frameworks within which resistance can be both experienced and interpreted.

Anju tells me that she showed traits of being both "bold and revolting" in school. When she joined college she wanted to study medicine "like the boys." This was quite rare for a woman that time. Since her family did not have enough money though, she ended up going to a less expensive all girls college in Kathmandu where she received her B.A. in the Arts, with a specialty in English. She thought she might want to go on and study for her M.A., but instead she began to teach at a local school. Anju did not really want to go into teaching, but in the back of her mind was the idea that if she taught then she would have time for children when she married. Having a family was of central importance of Anju, even though she did not realize it at the time.

It was also time to get married. Anju's parents were looking around for a husband for her. A couple of good proposals came from well respected families with decent sons, but Anju's parents felt as if Anju was too good for any of the prospects. Anju realized she would never get married at this rate. A matchmaker who knew both families approached Anju's parents with another proposal. The matchmaker spoke to Anju's mother who said she would look

into the matter. But, because the boy was from a slightly lower caste than Anju, her parents felt that he was inappropriate. Her parents were delaying though, they did not reject the boy out-and-out, but they also continued to look further. Anju became angry at this. Anju thought she should choose a husband for herself, especially since she was the one who had to spend the rest of her life with him, not her parents. This is somewhat remarkable; at this time most women were still consenting to arranged marriages, and often the bride and groom never even saw each other until the wedding night. As one woman said, "Before, if the boy had a crooked mouth, the girl just had to manage with him somehow."

When Anju had first heard this man's name from her parents, she thought he sounded interesting. She decided to take matters into her own hands; she began to look into this boy's background by asking her friends at school about him. Anju knew she would have difficulty living in large family because she says she was shy and reserved. When she found out that Ravi was an only son and had a career in the Army she felt he was the one.

Six months had lapsed with all the talk between the families, and so Ravi too knew a lot about her. Anju knew she had to do something for herself at this point to get things underway since so much time had already gone. She took a very bold move: she called his office. They made arrangements to meet at a restaurant and Anju did not sleep a night worrying about whether she had done the right thing. Anju's family did not like this boy at all so they had not even arranged a meeting. Anju went with two of her friends to the restaurant. Since she had seen the picture which he had sent, and he had seen hers, Ravi recognized her immediately. He rose graciously and came to receive them. Her friends left the restaurant and Anju and Ravi began to talk. Anju says they made idle conversation, but it was also deadly serious. It is not as if she was going to see him and decide only then to marry him. She had actually already made up her mind to marry him which is why she took the initiative to meet him. Ravi told her he had made up his mind to marry her and was just waiting for her to decide on him.

After their meeting, Ravi would call her house regularly to talk with her. Anju's parents knew what was happening but pretended not to know until a concerned friend finally told them their daughter was meeting a man. Anju's parents had never before asked, and when they finally did Anju said yes, she was meeting a man and she had decided to marry him. She did not know though that in her family's enquires about Ravi they had disapproved of him not just for reasons of caste. Although he had a good career, his family house was a ruin and ramshackle, really falling apart. They were worried about Anju's ability to cope with a drastic change in living standards.

Her mother asked, "you have already decided to marry him?" Anju said yes. Her mother said, "but the house is so dilapidated that the stairs are bad and you could fall and break your back." Anju replied that it was her own back and her mother shouldn't worry. Ravi's family did have land and money, but they did not care about the house. Anju's mother realized that she had made up her mind and so they arranged to meet Ravi's parents. Because she is strong headed, no matter what would have happened, Anju says she would have married Ravi anyway. Her wedding arrangements and assignments with Ravi had become a site for the expression of her own personality and her resistance to what she felt were her family's more traditional ideals.

The families then went through with the various ceremonies and her family gave her "all that was due her as a bride." When Anju went to Ravi's house to live after the wedding, everything was different from what she had been used to. The house was very "primitive." Anju now had to cook on an "antique" mud oven (*chulo*) while at her mother's they were using gas; a Brahmin was required to cook all the meals for her in-laws in accordance with Hindu traditions of pollution and purity; the *chulo* had to be mopped with fresh cow dung and red mud every day; she had to squat on a small wooden platform (*pirka*) on the floor of the kitchen to eat her meals instead of sitting on a chair or bench. According to Anju, it was the early 1980s, and her in-laws did not even have "a simple thing like a refrigerator."

Anju began to make reforms in the house. She found other jobs for two of the unneeded servants, she bought a gas stove, and they pooled their money and bought a small refrigerator so she did not have to get up early every morning to prepare lunch to take to school—which can take up to two hours. After three or four months, there was a big downpour while her own parents were visiting and part of the house crashed down. Her parents were of course very concerned and Anju went red with embarrassment. She confronted her in-laws and told them they needed to build a new house and so a house was made.

Until this time Anju had no real problems living with her in-laws in a joint family because they listened to her and took her suggestions. Anju was trusted enough to find a husband for Ravi's oldest sister and got her married off properly. After Anju's two children were born, a girl and a boy, everything changed. Anju had to quit her job, stay at home, and watch as bit by bit all the family land was sold off to support the family. She has become possessive about this land because she feels that she has to provide for her children's education. Her father-in-law has little concern for his inherited land, and since Ravi had a very strict upbringing he wouldn't even make inquiries into what his father was doing. At this time, according to Anju, her revolt within her in-laws home began.

Anju was under a lot of pressure watching the land dwindle, seeing how her sister-in-laws manipulated their parents, and not having Ravi on her side. She took another teaching job when her youngest was a year old. And it was at this time that Anju says she learned to speak out more. She realized how she was being bullied by her in-laws; some of it was very subtle and it was done in such a way so that other did not see it. Anju was manipulated into doing things she did not want to do, often small things, sometimes large. When she menstruated, her mother-in-law forced her to sleep on a mattress at Ravi's feet while he slept in a bed. Ravi would not even touch her for four days. She stayed home for these four days every month even if there were important social events to attend. She had to go barefoot into the concrete floored kitchen even in the coldest of winter. Her in-laws would pretend to be ill so she would have to stay home and care for them and not go to visit her *maiti* on festival days. Ravi supported his family in all this and Anju wonders how this could have been a "love" marriage. She felt very trapped and alone.

Anju says that she had always thought her mother-in-law to be docile. Her own cousins thought Anju's mother-in-law should be more accommodating and Anju always defended her. Recently, Anju has realized how much power her mother-in-law has had in the house. When there was tension between Ravi and Anju, it was because her mother-in-law was putting pressure on Ravi and he did not have the courage to say anything to her. Anju does not take this lightly. Now she revolts, she makes scenes, she fights, her "black hair is turning grey from trying to cope." and as a result, the tensions in the house are increasing. When she confronted them about selling off all of the land, her father-in-law asked her what right did she have to say this? Anju replied that her children will need this land later for their education and so it should not be sold. She also insists on sending her children to an expensive school, a school that no one else in the family could afford to keep the children in if she were unable to pay the fees somehow. Ravi makes less money than her and he worries about this. Anju says she does not want his money and tells him that he has no right to hers; she feels she has the right to use the money as she pleases. If she cannot give her children anything else, then at least she has given them a good education. Her in-laws have stopped talking to her.

Ravi married Anju against his parents' wishes as well, but he felt that he would be able to remodel Anju to fit in—to become meek, mild, to be at the beck and call of his sisters—to prove his parents wrong. Anju says, perhaps if she had been sixteen years old when they married it would have worked. Anju told Ravi that if that is the kind of woman he wanted, then he should have married a village girl. She would shout at him that he wanted a doormat, not a wife. Now Anju understands how her parents felt about how

Ravi might not have been a good match for her. Anju believes if she had not come to this understanding, she would have left Ravi and his family long ago.

Anju's father-in-law is still alive. Her mother-in-law is in the hospital, and her mother-in-law is saying that it is Anju's temper which has made her so ill. The family is smaller now, with her sisters-in-law married off. Anju has more work to do and must take the responsibility of many people which is very difficult. She feels that if she had been meek and submissive, then she would not have had these problems. Her in-laws would have been happy too. As Anju says, perhaps it is not good to be aggressive or to assertive; if a woman internalizes the meek attitude prescribed by Hindu texts and traditions, then this is the way to ensure that the home is safe and secure. According to Anju, *dharma* gives importance to the whole family unit rather than the individual. In the great epics, as she says, the women are always in the background. The woman may not be happy, but in the long run the family is intact. If Anju had broken away from her in-laws because of the expression of individual needs, she would have brought greater unhappiness to her husbands, her *maiti*, her in-laws, everyone.

In recollecting, Anju cannot say if the Hindu way is right, or if my western ways (as she perceives them) are. Anju tries to adopt the good things from the west and retain the values from her own culture. In her various descriptions of herself (as shy and modest, as strong headed and stubborn) the tensions between the choices Anju must make between Hindu gender ideals and individual self interests become evident. It is also important to note that Anju's self-perceptions change not only over time also situationally demonstrate how difficult these choices are. Anju is aware of how different her life is from her mother's and how her daughter's life may be very different from hers. As she says, twenty years from now, what is good for her may not be so good for her children.

Conclusions

From Anju's story it is easy to see that social change can be multiply experienced and differently expressed. In Nepal's newly democratic environment, through these act of resistance, Parvati, Indira and even Anju identify themselves with modern gender models within traditional situations. When the resistance occurs within ritual, these high-caste women are resisting dominant symbols and at the same time they complying with other cultural forces and social pressures. Sometimes the audience and motivation for resisting are personal and not meant to affect anything or anyone beyond the individual woman's life or household, as we with Maya's clandestine trips and Kumari's refusals. On the other hand, sometimes acts of resistance

are meant for wider audiences such as when they are displayed at weddings and funerals. Both weddings and funerals can be precarious affairs, being in many ways the embodiment of cultural ideals and the arenas where relations of power are expressed (through wealth and hierarchy displays, and elaboration of the rituals). As such, they become strong statements for those both within and outside the family.

In my research, I have found that these larger more public displays of resistance were not as prevalent prior to the political changes in Nepal although women played a very important role in bringing about these changes (Yami 1990). As a result, the idea of the ability of individuals to affect their own life situations whether on a large or small scale, or in private or public, is beginning to be affirmed. Neither Parvati nor Indira would ever have gotten away with such public resistances before democracy, especially since they both belong to elite families. But after democracy and with the reduction of the power of these elites, they were able to make these declarations in a less constraining environment. High-caste Hindu women actively construct their relationships with others in reference to existing power relations and social structures. These women use forms of resistance which reflect interpersonal relations within families, and between women and men—the very same power relationships established by Hindu traditions—which are beginning to be questioned and challenged as a result of the recent social changes.

Notes

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conversations, my work would not be what it is. What errors remain are, of course, my own.

2. According to Nepalese Hindu tradition, Brahmins are the priestly caste, and Chhetris, as the Warrior caste, are slightly below them in the hierarchy. These are the two highest castes in Nepal and together they are often referred to as Parbatiya because of their common ethnic origins. For discussions of caste relations in Nepal, see Acharya and Bennett (1983), Bista (1987), doherty (1974), Fisher (1978), Fürer-Haimendorf (1960, 1966, 1971), Kondos (1982) and Levine (1987).
3. I have changed the names and disguised the identities of these women in order to protect their anonymity. In most cases, I am using names which my informants themselves asked me to use.
4. For other discussions of the ideology and practice of *sati* throughout South Asia see Harlan (1992), Mani (1989). G. Rana (n.d.) and Sharma et al. (1988).
5. Early discussion of Tij and Rishi Panchami include Anderson (1971), Bennett (1976, 1983), and Bouillier (1982). For recent work which criticizes the high-caste bias of this earlier work see Ahearn (1991), Skinner (1991), and Skinner et al. (in press.)
6. For a discussion of the changing categories of marriage in Kathmandu, see Thompson (1992a).
7. See Bennett (1983) for a detailed description and symbolic analysis of this phenomenon.
8. See Bennett (1983:92-107) for an ideal depiction of the high-caste Hindu funeral rituals.

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