

## BHAI DOOJ: PRAYING FOR BROTHERS

*Jawhar Sircar*

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(English Version)

It is amazing that India is the only country in the world that has special celebrations like Bhratri Dwitiya and Raksha Bandhan for siblings to shower their affections on each other. Popularly known as Bhaiya Dhuj in north India, it is Bhai Phota in Bengal and in Maharashtra, Gujarat and the Konkan, it is celebrated as Bhai Beej or Bhau Beej. In Nepal, this Bhai Tika is almost as important as Dussehra or Dashami and it is also called Yama Dwitiya in the South. While Kali Puja and Bhai Phota are two distinct religious events in Bengal separated by just two days, in most parts of India this festival is part of the five-day long Deepawali festival. For centuries, sisters have prayed for the safety of their brothers by performing a small aarti ceremony and applying a prominent phota or tika on the forehead of their brothers, as a talisman against any misfortune.

We are told that Krishna's sister Subhadra was so delighted to see him unharmed after his battle with the evil demon Narakasur that she applied a sacred tilak on his forehead. This is supposed to have inspired Bhai Phota but frankly, this tilak would have been more useful before Krishna's fight. Let us admit that there are not many references to Bhai Phota in sacred literature, while Rakhi Bandhan is mentioned profusely in Bhavishya Purana, Bhagawat Purana and Vishnu Purana. It is clear that Bhai Phota has been essentially a folk ritual that has been upheld by the people themselves. Besides, the Shastras do not usually get into religious practices where the purohit has no role nor is there any scope for dakshina.

The more important story is that of Yama, the god of death, meeting his sister Yamuna on this day. Going through independent non-religious literature, we come across an interesting account given to the Asiatic Society by the famous orientalist, Horace Hayman Wilson, exactly two hundred years ago. He mentioned that sisters believed “that by this means the lives of their brothers will be lengthened and Yama, the regent of death, will have no power over them”. Wilson quotes the favourite lines of sisters who said then, as they do even now "On my brother’s brow I have made the mark/ And thus I have bolted the door of Yama!" He does not miss the most interesting part about sisters “feasting brothers with every kind of delicacy they can afford and the brothers give them gifts of cloth and money”. A century ago, we find another comment by British commentator, Muriel Marion Underhill, where she said that “the chief feature of this festival is to celebrate Yama’s dining with his sister Yamuna....and since Yama shut his house this day while visiting his sister, no one dying today will have to go to Yama’s abode.” She records the ritual of gifts and of the grand meal but she also states that “some worship Yama at noon, making offerings to his image, and those who have the opportunity bathe in the river Yamuna”.

Since Yama and Yamuna were so important we may consult Sukumari Bhattacharji's famous work, "Indian Theogony". She says that "in the early times, Yama was conceived chiefly as a twin, with Yami as his female counterpart. As he grew complex in stature, taking on malevolent traits, his partner became a malignant goddess, Nirrti, taking over the dark non-Aryan earth-goddess’s functions" and became associated with evil spirits. Professor Bhattacharya traces how this Yami of the Taittiriya Brahmana became the river Yamuna in the Puranas i.e the river of dark water or Kalindi. The early Aryans of the Sapta-Sindhu region came across the Malwa plateau but crossing the Yamuna invited several concerns.

Hence, the dark stories of the Yamuna and the mysterious challenges that lay across this river. But once they overcame the Yamuna and the Ganga, they established their real "Arya-varta" in this Ganga-Yamuna doab itself.

Raksha Bandhan arose most likely from Nag Panchami which is very close to its date at the height of the rainy season, when sisters prayed hard for the protection of brothers against snake bites. But the fear of snakes was far less in late autumn or early winter and this could not be the reason for the second festival for sisters. With the change of seasons, however, several diseases invariably broke out which could be a provocation for sisters to pray for warding off death and Yama, before modern medicine forced Yama to defer his plans of action. Let us also recall that this is the last of the several rituals during the Ashwin-Kartik that reminds us of bhoots, prets, dakinis, yoginis, Yama and so on. It all starts with Pitri Paksha and goes on through Durga Puja, Kali Puja and Bhai Phota, right up to the Akash Pradeeps of Kartik. Incidentally, a few days after Diwali, sisters in south India light lamps once again during Karthikai Deepam to pray for their brothers.

Americans have now started a Sisters's Day and also a Brothers Day in August but these are hardly comparable to our ancient tradition. Another attempt has been made through a new "Brothers and Sisters Day" in May, but it appears to be one more occasion for the billion dollar card industry to make profits. But why does India remain unique in this celebration? Bhai Phota started as a charm against disease and death but its continued celebration could perhaps be explained by the ancient Indian tradition of marrying off daughters quite far away. This was done after carefully comparing "jati-gotra" and which was said to ensure that the genetic pool was not weakened through close in-breeding. But if sisters lived at great distances, there had to be mandatory festivals that brought the siblings together, otherwise the strength of India, her family system, would not survive. And for lazy

brothers, what could be a better incentive than a sumptuous meal, given with so much love and care ?