

RAKHI PURNIMA: POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP BANDS

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(English Version)

Today, millions of Hindu, Jain and Sikh sisters will tie colourful Rakhi threads on the wrists of their own brothers, to ensure their protection, ie, raksha, does it not strike us that this quite different from when we have read in religion and history? Was it not just the other way round, ie, sisters of all types sought protection and that too, not from their real brothers ?

Actually, blood-related brothers and sisters came into this Raksha purnima festival rather late and the Hindu calendar has another date earmarked for them, ie, Bhratri Dwitiya or Bhai Phnota or Bhai Dooj. And, Rakhis were reserved throughout history for non-related or strategic brothers and sisters. The oldest story about Rakhi is that of Indra mentioned in the Bhavishya Purana. The gods had great difficulties with some special demons and Bali is one such character, who repeatedly disgraced and defeated Indra, sending him into exile. Poor Indra sought professional consultations from his Guru, Brihaspati, who suggested an auspicious date and time but his wife Sachi decided not to take chances and tied a divine protective thread around Indra-dev's wrist. This ensured his protection and final victory on Shravan Purnima day, which explains the date of the festival though sisters were yet to come into the picture.

The Bhagavata Purana and Vishnu Purana further inform us that Vishnu also had a conflict with the same Bali and managed to win all three worlds from this Daitya-raj. But this victory appears hollow, because Bali could compel Vishnu to leave his own home and occupy Bali's palace. Though Vishnu moved his residence, Ma Lakshmi was upset and went to Bali and made him her brother by firmly tying a Rakhi. Then, she got her new brother to revoke his condition and get her husband back home. We do not see any real sister in action and the same is prevalent in the Mahabharata. When Draupadi tore her sari's aanchol to bandage a wounded Krishna, he was so moved that he promised to repay "every thread" to his adopted sister. Kunti, however, tied a Rakhi around her own grandson, Abhimanyu, before the deadly war began.

There is an interesting tale that when Raja Puru was to face Alexander, his wife approached the Greek emperor and tied a Rakhi on his wrist, after which she got her new "brother" to promise that he would not harm her husband. It sounds wild but the story is rather well established, maybe because religion needed at least one historical character in the lore around Rakhi. There is another strong tradition around Rani Karnavati the widowed ruler of Chittor that gives 1535 as the exact year when she pleaded with her Rakhi-brother Humayun to save her kingdom against the invasion by the Sultan of Gujarat. She lost, as Humayun could not send troops in time and the whole story is doubted by historians. This story is set in the ballads of seventeenth century Rajputana and all it proves is that local rulers had learnt to distinguish between the "good Muslim" and the bad one by then. Rakhi was thus quite a legitimate instrument for invoking unpredictable political partnerships, much before "fronts" and "alliances" came on the scene.

The full moon of the month of Shravan has traditionally been celebrated in western India as Nariyeli Purnima, when coconuts are gifted to the waters to please Varun and this is at the confluence of rivers or at some other special spot or even cast into the sea. In north India, it is however, called Kajri Purnima when farmers sow wheat and barley, after seeking the blessings of mother earth. A century ago, William Crooke cites this date for "the Barley Feast or Jawara in Upper India and Bhujariya in the Central Provinces". He observed that "grains of barley are sown in a pot of manure and when the yellowish green stalks appear, women clean them and distribute to men folk". The insistence of women could also be an oblique reference to their procreative powers that need to be transferred to crops. Let us also not forget that for countless centuries, the only real universal clock we had was the moon and its different phases was a reminder to all to perform specific activities.

The hills have their own version and we find that Kumaonis celebrate it as Jano-Punya and the word janeu stands for the sacred thread. Fairs are held in different parts and the one at Devidhura Bagwal is the most important. The Nepalese also call it Janeu Purnima and tie sacred threads on their relations. They love a special food called Kwati, which is a gruel of the shoots of seven different grains, obviously commemorating sowing time. The Nepalese utilise Rakhi to invoke Shiva at Pashupatinath, Gosainkunda, Kumbheswhwar and other temples. In Jammu, Raksha Bandhan is the day for flying kites, like we have on Biswakarma Puja, about a fortnight later.

Dravidian civilisation appears to taken this date very seriously, as Shravan Purnima is observed as an important religious occasion. Southern Brahmans need to change their holy thread, upavita, on this day and it is said that some other Brahmans also do likewise. Raksha Bandhan is celebrated as Vish Tarak, the destroyer of venom and this is very fascinating, as Naga Panchami is worshipped just a few days before, to propitiate the goddess of snakes. Manasa is thus worshipped not only in Bengal but in southern states, under different names, as also in other parts of India. More interesting is the fact the fact that sisters pray to the goddess to protect their brothers. It is in the height of the rainy season and water has filled up the homes of snakes, who abound in the wet fields and water bodies, looking for their prey. Just the right time to be wary of snakes and to caution all, isn't it ?

The point is: when did real, not adopted, brothers enter Raksha Bandhan? One cannot be too sure and there is every likelihood that the custom of real sisters praying for their brothers during this part of the rainy season entered the Raksha festival through this door. Sisters soon replaced the wives, widows and master strategists of the earlier stories With urbanisation and the consequent separation of blood relatives to different places meant that society had to devise newer methods of getting them together.

How can we end without mentioning Kabiguru, who distributed Rakhis among Muslims and Hindus in 1905, as his unique poetic protest against Banga-Bhanga? Rabi Thakur took it to new heights through his Rakhi Mahotsav as a festival of universal brotherhood. Oh God, here we go again: losing the real brother and sister !