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## Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition

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### CHAPTER

## 3 Lovesick *Gopi* or Woman's Best Friend?: The Mythic *Sakhi* and Ritual Friendships among Women in Benares

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### Abstract

This chapter explores a tradition undertaken by women living in Benares, Uttar Pradesh (North India), in which the *gopis* — the famous cowherdesses of Krishna mythology — becomes the model for ritually-based female friendships. The *gopis* are also referred to as the *sakhis* or “female friends”, and in ordinary speech, the term *sakhi* is used to refer commonly to a girl's or woman's female friend. The tradition involves a ritual process of “becoming” or “tying” *sakhi*, which entails pledging lifelong friendship. For many Benarsi women, the *sakhi* relationship represents a female–female union that imitates the marital bond, but may surpass blood or marital kinship bonds in terms of its professed meaningfulness in women's lives.

**Keywords:** *gopi*, *sakhi*, friendship, Benares, women, religious practice, Krishna, bonds

**Subject:** History of Judaism, Hinduism

**Collection:** Oxford Scholarship Online

Studies of Hindu women's social bonds in North India tend to focus on women's place in the domestic sphere and the relationships women share with natal and conjugal kin. By way of contrast, scholars have tended to relegate to the margins women's extra-domestic ties with other women, including friendships forged in both natal and affinal households. There are good reasons for this in many cases. Kirin Narayan, for example, has observed that in Kangra, North India, where she does her research, close female-female friendship tends to be confined largely to youth, especially adolescence; once women marry, family ties become the all-consuming focus of women's emotional energy. She notes that many women feel the intimacy friends share is not even accessible to married women (1986, 66).<sup>1</sup> Joyce B. Flueckiger, however, has recorded the existence in Chhatisgarh (middle India) of ritualized friendships among both unmarried girls and married women (Flueckiger 1996, 40; cf. Jay 1973). My own research among women living in the city of Benares in North India suggests that at least some Hindu women living in this part of North India also cultivate close, lifelong friendships with other women—friendships that are ritually sealed, highly valued, and self-consciously maintained, even after marriage.

My observations are based on research that I undertook in the city of Benares in 1995, 1997, and 1998. I did not set out to investigate women's friendships. My work during these years ↪ focused instead on women's

devotions to Krishna during the month of Kartik (October–November). Krishna is widely worshipped in contemporary India in his forms as both divine child and playful lover. He is said to have been raised in a community of cowherds, and stories about his youth emphasize his special relationship with the many cowherdesses, called *gopis*, of Vrindavan, the region where he grew up. In his child form, it is said that Krishna is irresistible to the *gopis*, who take great delight in his boyish charm. As he matures into adolescence, Krishna becomes an irresistible young man, and the cowherdesses fall deeply in love with him, eager to enjoy his erotic embrace. In this role, Krishna is the divine lover of women. One of the most famous images of Krishna situates him in the *rasa-lila*, the famous “circle dance,” where Krishna, surrounded by a circle of *gopis* in the forest, not only dances with them, but also multiplies himself many times over so that he can make love to each and every one of them. While early texts focus on Krishna's dalliance with all of the *gopis*, subsequent traditions pair Krishna especially with one consort, Radha, and portray Radha as the chief *gopi* and Krishna's primary partner in love. Krishna eventually leaves Vrindavan to take up residence in Dvaraka, where he leaves Radha and the cowherdesses behind, acquiring a vast number of wives and assuming the rulership of the Yadava clan.

During Kartik, many Benarsi Hindu women perform a collective daily *puja*, a form of ritual worship, in which they raise Krishna from infancy to adulthood, culminating in his marriage to the plant-goddess Tulsi toward the end of the month.<sup>2</sup> During this *puja*, women assume the devotional stance of the *gopis*. Just as the *gopis* are believed to have gathered around Krishna in a circle in the original circle dance, so Kartik *puja* participants gather in a circle around icons of Krishna and other deities; and just as the *gopis* of long ago adored Krishna with song and dance, *puja* participants worship him with song and devotional offerings. Popular Krishna traditions equate the *gopis* with the faithful female servants, known collectively as the *sakhis*, who accompany and serve the divine couple Radha-Krishna. *Sakhi* means “female friend,” and in Kartik *puja* circles, women are enjoined to refer to themselves and to each other only with this term.

In the course of discussing the meaning of the term *sakhi* with Kartik *puja* participants, I found that participants tended to define it first in terms of human friendship, bringing up the term's connection to Krishna mythology only at my prompting. When I probed further, I was told also of a ritual of becoming (*banana*) or tying (*bandhana*) *sakhi*, in which women exchange vows of lifelong friendship. Once I learned of the existence of this ritual, I began to ask informants about it explicitly. About twenty of the thirty-six women I formally interviewed in the course of my research confirmed its existence and described for me both the act of ritually becoming *sakhi* and the bond that is thereby established, including the meaning of the relationship and the obligations that it entails. Almost all of these women claimed the authority of experience, contending that they themselves had established ritually sealed *sakhi* relationships that they value and strive to maintain.

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I have never witnessed the ritual that women described to me. The reports tended to be consistent, however. Furthermore, Edward Jay recorded the existence of ritual friendships among women, including ritual *sakhi* relationships, in Chhatisgarh more than thirty years ago (Jay 1973), indicating that the tradition exists beyond the confines of Benares and has been around for a while. Several of my informants lamented that the practice of creating ritual friendships between female friends was a tradition in decline and that girls and younger women were not preserving the practice to the same degree as the previous generation. This may be true, although I did talk to some young women who had entered into ritual *sakhi* friendships. I suspect that in their conversations with me, informants tended to idealize the *sakhi* relationship and gloss over ways in which their own *sakhi* ties may deviate from the ideal, so one certainly ought to exercise caution regarding informants' reports about what has actually transpired in their own *sakhi* relationships.<sup>3</sup> What especially interests me in this context, however, is the way that ritual friendships performed among the women I interviewed seem to appropriate the mythic *sakhi* of Krishnaite sacred history as a model for extra-domestic human female-female social and emotional bonds that women choose for themselves.

Six informants explicitly described the *sakhi* bond among women as one that imitates or replicates divine models. All six invoked the relationship between Radha and her *sakhis*, or the relationships that Radha's *sakhis* shared with one another, as the root (*mul*) or role model (*adarsh*) for the *sakhi* bond. One woman, for example, proclaimed, "My relationship with my *sakhi* is like the relationship of Radha and her *sakhis*. And we hope that we will be together in the same way for our whole lives." Another invoked as a model the relationship shared by Radha and Krishna as well, noting, "The way Krishna used to love Radha and the kind of deep affection that the *sakhis* have for each other, similarly we also become *sakhi*."

This seeming collapse of an erotic, male-female relationship—that between Radha and Krishna—with the relationships of deep friendship attributed to Radha and her female friends adumbrates a larger issue surrounding *sakhi* relationships as they were described to me: the *sakhi* bond in many ways imitates or echoes some of the social and emotional aspects of the marital bond. Like marriage, the *sakhi* relationship is considered unique, deeply intimate, and entailing specific rules and obligations. I would argue that the *sakhi* bond that informants in Benares described to me deploys religious and marital imagery in ways that sacralize ongoing relationships among female friends, according them social and even religious legitimacy and establishing a socially valid place for them in women's lives. Although these relationships exist only at the margins of patriarchal social discourse, which defines women largely in terms of male-centered kinship relationships, they are reported to be of great importance to many of the women who enter into them.

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All but one of the women who spoke with me about the *sakhi* bond affirmed the existence of a ritual whereby the bond is sealed. The essential elements of this ritual practice include an exchange of gifts and food, the swearing of an oath, and the presence of a deity, who acts as a witness.<sup>4</sup> This is how one informant, Gita,<sup>5</sup> described the process of becoming *sakhi*:

You buy bangles, *bindi*, hair ribbons, clothes, and some ornaments—like earrings—to give. By giving these, this is tying *sakhi*. If the girls are unmarried, then they give each other these gifts and go to the Sakshi Vinayak temple and say, "Considering you as a witness, we will remain *sakhi*." And they take an oath that "we will remain friends with each other, participate in each other's auspicious and inauspicious functions, in birth and death, marriage, and so forth. And at the time of death, I will be with you."

The gifts exchanged most often include those like the ones Gita described: clothes, makeup, jewelry, *bindis* (the decorative dots that Indian women place on their foreheads), and *sindur*, a bright red or orange powder that married women place in the part of their hair. Two informants described the items exchanged as "stuff for marital auspiciousness" (*suhag ka saman*). Other women stressed the exchange of food, especially sweets and *pan*,<sup>6</sup> as crucial to the sealing of the bond. *Sakhis* not only feed one another, but they also self-consciously exchange with one another food polluted by their saliva. One elderly informant described the process as follows:

In the ritual of becoming *sakhi*, there are some *puja* things—sweets, yogurt, *pan*—and the *sakhis* feed each other these things. ... For example, if you and I were becoming *sakhi*, then I would feed you sweets, you would feed me sweets, and then you would bite off some *pan* and I would chew it; and I would bite off some *pan*, and you would chew it. And they say to each other, "Everyone may leave us, whether it is husband, or mother, or father, or brother, but we will never leave each other!"

The exchange of such polluted food signals both intimacy and lack of hierarchy, indicating that both parties are willing to accept the other's pollution into their bodies. Equality is an essential component of the *sakhi* relationship. Jay stresses the nature of ritual friendships as a means to transcending social difference; he notes that the ritual friendships he observed in Chhattisgarh never occurred within the same caste in the

same community, claiming that the very hallmark of ritual friendships is their ability to legitimize close personal relationships across caste.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the women I interviewed insisted that there should be no hierarchy between *sakhis*, even though one's *sakhi* may come from another caste, religion, or nationality. One informant, for example, proclaimed, "Sometimes we even make *sakhi* with a Harijan. ... we are never aware of caste after making *sakhi*." It is difficult to know to what extent such claims are true: none of the women I interviewed claimed to have a *Dalit* or Muslim *sakhi*, although one informant did claim that her *sakhi* is Christian. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of equality is very important in women's descriptions of their *sakhi* relationships. Other informants described the *sakhi* bond as one of choice based solely on strong mutual affection. As one put it, "*Sakhi* means that you should have true love [*saci priti*]."

Regarding the types of foods exchanged in the *sakhi* bonding ritual, Ved Prakash and Sylvia Vatuk have noted that sweets play an important role in all kinds of ritual activity and in cementing social ties between individuals and groups; they are associated with pleasure, celebration, and rejoicing (Vatuk and Vatuk 1979, 182). Bride and groom also exchange sweets and yogurt—which some informants mentioned explicitly as items exchanged in the *sakhi* bonding ritual—at the time of marriage (usually as yogurt mixed with brown sugar, *gur*), suggesting parallels between the *sakhi* relationship and the marriage relationship. Such parallels are also evident in naming conventions. About half the women who spoke with me about the *sakhi* bond insisted that one should never refer to one's *sakhi* by name, claiming that this is an essential rule (*niyam*) governing the relationship. One informant, Lilavati, drew an explicit parallel to the marriage relationship in this regard, noting, "The way we don't call our husband by his name, similarly, we don't call our *sakhi* by her name. We call her 's*akhi*' or 'mother of so-and-so.'" Whereas husband and wife are unequal partners, however, *sakhis* are not; hence one informant described the importance of using the term *sakhi* as reflecting the special closeness and feelings of equality that are characteristic of the relationship, signaled in the mutual feeding that takes place in the *sakhi* bonding ritual.

Like marriage, too, the *sakhi* relationship is also a bond that informants generally described as lifelong and unbreakable. In her research on this topic, Flueckiger notes that married women who enter into ritual friendships assume ritual obligations similar to those of kin (1996, 40).<sup>8</sup> This also seems to be the case among the women I interviewed. Here is how one informant, Hem Kumari, responded to my questions about her *sakhi* relationship:

My *sakhi* and I have always been friends. We were brought up together. When I was a child, we used to play together, run around the village, and bathe together in the village tank. ... We used to work in the fields together. So that's how our friendship started. Then when we got older, we decided we should become *sakhi*. I became *sakhi* with her on the day of Makkar Samkranti—women often make *sakhi* on that day. So that is how we became *sakhi*, and then we started giving each other gifts. When I got married, she gave me a gift; when she got married, I gave a gift to her. And since we are *sakhi*, if she is in trouble, I can help her, and if I am in trouble, she can come help me. Even though we are now married and living in our husbands' place, we send each other letters, and we keep in touch. My *sakhi*'s husband died. She has two daughters and one son; so I occasionally call her here. Whenever there is a marriage in my family she will come over here (to Benares) because she still lives in my (natal) village. And whenever I have a chance to go and visit her, I also go and visit her. Whatever we have to feed each other, we feed each other. This is what we do.

Hem Kumari's description points to the obligations that several informants described as intrinsic to the relationship: attending one another's important family functions, making an effort to spend time together even if one has moved away, exchanging gifts, feeding each other, and sharing resources. Of course, the ability to fulfill such obligations is contingent on the cooperation of parents, husbands, or in-laws. But when permission is granted, *sakhis* are obligated to maintain the tie through such specific behaviors.

Another characteristic of the relationship that informants stressed was complete honesty and trust, especially in keeping one another's secrets. One of my informants, Ramavati, noted:

When two *sakhis* sit down with one another, they will obviously talk about their sorrows and pleasures [*dukh-sukh*]. ... And whatever one *sakhi* tells the other, she must keep it secret. They must not tell one another's secrets to anyone else because the rules of the *sakhi* relationship are very strict. You must always keep to yourself all the things you hear from your *sakhi*.<sup>9</sup> There are lots of things about which *sakhis* only tell their *sakhis*. There are lots of things a woman cannot say to her husband but can say to her *sakhi*.

Narayan has also noted the importance among female friends of sharing secrets. She quotes one informant named Veena, who claims, "With a female friend [*saheli*] you can share those things that can't be shared with others, you can say things that you shouldn't say to our husband's sister [*nanad*] or to the sister [*bahen*] made there" (meaning, in the husband's village) (Narayan 1986, 66). Another of Narayan's informants, Kamal, is quoted on the same page: "Only a *saheli* can be counted on to keep secrets. A woman you know later might tell anyone."

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Among the women I interviewed, some also described the special bond of honesty and trust that exists between *sakhis* as surpassing that of a woman and her husband or kin. Lilavati, for example, noted, "When we become *sakhi*, then we will not hide anything from one another. ... you never lie to your *sakhi*. ♪ You may lie to your husband sometimes, but you never lie to your *sakhi*. This is how pure [*shuddh*] the relationship with the *sakhi* is." Another woman volunteered, "After the joining of *sakhis*, no one is as trustworthy as your *sakhi*, not even your brother, sister, anyone from the in-laws' house, like mother-in-law or father-in-law; no one is as trustworthy as your *sakhi*." Yet another informant explained, "In Hindi, there is a phrase: 'relatives are left, but one doesn't leave one's friends [*hit chut jate hain, lekin mitr nahin chute*].' Friends are always friends. Women have their *sakhis* like this; if you have made a *sakhi*, it is your duty [*dharma*] that you should never leave your *sakhi*."

Informants repeatedly stressed the need to keep up the *sakhi* relationship and refrain from violating the rules and obligations perceived to be intrinsic to it. Most agreed that this is difficult, and for this reason several informants cautioned against taking more than one or two *sakhis*. Seven of the women I interviewed urged that there should be only one *sakhi*, usually taken during childhood and maintained throughout one's lifetime. Four women allowed for two *sakhis*, one in the natal home and one in the home into which one marries. Others claimed there is no restriction on how many *sakhis* one may have, but one must maintain each and every *sakhi* relationship and fulfill all the obligations that are entailed in the relationship—and for that reason, it is important to limit the number of one's *sakhis*.

The existence of ritually bonded *sakhi* friendships among the women I interviewed raises two important issues I wish to stress here. First, the *sakhi* bond affirms Susan Sered's observation that even in religious traditions that accord institutional authority primarily to men, women may appropriate and reshape religious traditions in ways that are uniquely meaningful to them (Sered 1992, 1994). As noted, many women consider the bonds of friendship between human *sakhis* to be modeled on the intimacy enjoyed among Radha's *sakhis*, between Radha and her *sakhis*, or between Radha and Krishna. The *sakhi* relationship integrates aspects of Krishna mythology in ways that support and strengthen women's social bonds with one another rather than with deities or human males. The love between Krishna and the numerous *gopis/sakhis* is often interpreted as sexual and hence transgressive, transcending earthly, human morality. For many Benarsi women, however, the *sakhi* represents an earthly female-female bond characterized by ties of mutual trust and caring, and it may imitate or even surpass blood or marital kinship bonds in terms of its professed emotional valuation in women's lives.



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Second, the *sakhi* bond provides an alternative to predominant social constructions that locate women's important social ties solidly within the domestic sphere, especially within the conjugal home. Gloria Raheja has argued that Indian women's songs may question the discourse of patriliney, challenging its claim to exclusive authority and constructing alternative readings of kinship (Raheja and Gold 1994, 105). The *sakhi* bond offers another kind of alternative construction. It mimics the husband-wife bond in significant ways (ritually ↪ sealing the bond, not using each other's names, feeding one another, entailing lifelong obligation, and so forth). Yet it is a tie in which the two parties are equal, and both affection and obligation are understood to be mutual. It is also a relationship over which women have control. Generally, Hindu women living in this part of India do not freely choose their husbands; but they can, and do, choose their *sakhis*.

Susan Seymour notes that, in Indian contexts, love tends to be experienced as a “deep sense of emotional connectedness,” which she calls relational love. Seymour maintains that feelings of relational love may be extended to nonfamily members as well, including friends. With respect to her own experience among Indian women, she remarks that even married women expect and value feelings of love among friends. She writes that her friends Mita and Sita “frequently spoke to me of their affection for and friendship with me and their fear that I would one day go away and forget them. They wanted to build into our relationship some sense of *dharma*—some agreement that I would take the friendship seriously and, after leaving India, would continue to communicate with them” (Seymour 1999, 85). I had a similar experience when I was preparing to leave Benares in 1998 after spending many months over the course of four years conducting research among a group of women. I had grown very close to a few women, and it was hard for all of us to think about saying goodbye without knowing when I might be returning to the city. This is what I recorded in my journal during the final days of my stay:

I went to do some last follow-up interviews today with Krishna Devi and Kusumlata, who loaded me down with gifts of necklaces. I took pictures of Kusumlata's whole family and promised to bring them by on Friday. She wanted to tie *sakhi* with me. When I went there today, as she was giving me all the necklaces, she said, “This is for us to become *sakhi*.” She was saying that this was her way of tying *sakhi* with me, but I didn't have anything to give her. I felt so bad. As she put me on the Rickshaw, she said that “it is as if half my body is leaving and going to America.”

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As I look back on that moment, difficult for both Kusumlata and me, it now seems obvious that the image of friendship Kusumlata invoked in expressing her feelings about my departure—that it was like half of her body leaving for America—evokes the image of *jori*, meaning something like “united couple” or two persons joined together in a harmonious oneness, a single being embodying two persons. The ideal of the *jori* is captured in the image of Ardhanarishvara, Shiva in his form as half-male, half-female, god and goddess fused together in the same body. Sudhir Kakar contends that the “wished-for oneness of the divine couple” is especially important to Indian Hindu women and represents their idealized image of marriage (Kakar 1990, 83–84). ↪ Narayan observes, however, that in Kangra, North India, where she has conducted field research, the same term, *jori*, is used for the relationships between unmarried girlfriends and between bride and groom. Narayan contends that the shared use of this term might indicate that a husband is expected to psychologically replace a group of girlfriends (Narayan 1986, 68). While this may be true, it is also possible that the image of two beings sharing the same body points to an underlying conception common both to deep friendship and to marriage of an ideal, unbreakable, and transformative bond between persons, forged of intimacy and affection, that transcends mere social convention in its significance and claims to mutual obligation. This may be the longing that Seymour notes for “some sense of *dharma*” in female friendships. And the longing for a sense of *dharma* is precisely what is addressed in the *sakhi* relationship—through the deployment of religious and marital symbolism, ritualization, and the elaboration of rules and obligations entailed in forming and maintaining the bond.

## Notes

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1. Ursula Sharma, another researcher who has worked in Kangra and whom Narayan cites (Narayan 1986, 66–67), also concludes that married women's relationships with other women tend to revolve primarily around female kin living in the husband's household. Sharma also notes that the term for friend (*saheli*) “is not much used among rural women except to express the relationship among unmarried girls of the same village” (Sharma 1980, 185). Instead, the married women Sharma studied tend to use fictive kinship terms to describe all nonfamily women, including those with whom women share a close emotional relationship (1980, 185–190).
2. For more on women's performance of Kartik *puja*, see Pintchman 2003, 2005a, and 2005b.
3. Many thanks to Kirin Narayan for bringing to my attention the need to clarify this point.
4. Three informants insisted that the ritual must take place in front of a Tulsi plant, but other women cited other divine witnesses, including Satyanarayan, Ganesh, the Ganges, and Shiva. See Flueckiger 1996 and Jay 1973 for their descriptions of friendship-bonding rituals in Chhattisgarh.
5. I have changed the names of all informants to conceal their identities.
6. *Pan* is a mixture of betel nut, spices, and other additives rolled up in a betel leaf and chewed for enjoyment.
7. Jay notes (1973, 154), “Ceremonial friendships are a means of bridging the gap between castes when two individuals wish to establish a dyadic relationship other than the normal one characteristic of members of different castes.”
8. Jay (1973) describes ritual friendships of all sorts as essentially fictive kin relationships.
9. Literally, “you must always digest” all the things you hear from your *sakhi*.

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