

Patterns of Mother-Son Behavior in the Hindu Family as Depicted in the Bhojpuri Folksongs of India

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RÉSUMÉ

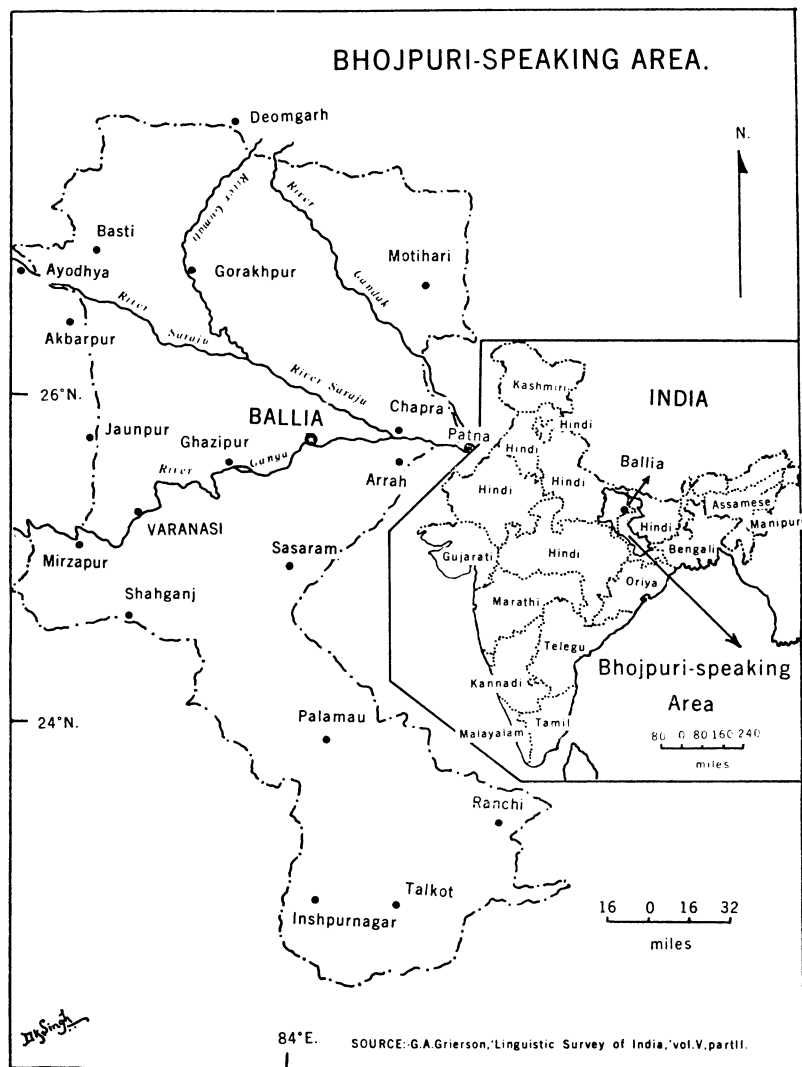
Dans la famille hindoue, la mère et son fils entretiennent des relations d'affection profonde. Ces sentiments sont décrits d'après certains chants folkloriques du pays.

The son has a very affectionate tie with his mother and maintains the highest veneration for her.¹ Demonstrating the importance of the mother in the life of her son, the *Mahabharata* (Meyer 1930:199) says:

If one has a mother, one is sheltered, but unsheltered if one has not. He does not grieve, age does not weigh on him, even though fortune betray him, who comes back home to his house and can say "Mother!" ... he is old, he is unhappy, the world is an empty desert for him, if he is parted from his mother. There is no shadow like the mother, there is no refuge like the mother ... there is no beloved like the mother.

She is the principal cause of the union of the five elements which join to bring about the son's birth as a human being (Prabhu 1954:257). "Above ten fathers or even the whole earth in worth stands the mother; there is no *guru* (teacher) like the mother" (Meyer 1930:199). According to a saying: "After the father's death, his son become a prince. After the mother's death, the son becomes an orphan."

¹ Bhojpuri is a dialect of Hindi spoken in Eastern U.P. and Western Behar, India. The author has collected five hundred folksongs from this area in 1961. The present study is based upon the author's collection of Bhojpuri songs.



A son, to a woman, is the most priceless possession on the earth. To her he is a "little baby" (FC 13),² "a toy," "the delight giver," "the eyeballs" and "the heart" (Upadhyaya 1960: 260). He is the "social redeemer" and the "main subsistence of her life". Ross (1962: 146-147) notes three distinct reasons for the close mother-son relationship: first, the birth of a son improves a woman's position in her husband's family more than any other single factor; second, she is not his main disciplinarian; third, he does not leave his maternal household after marriage. The folksongs of Bhojpuri from India speak of the paramount position of sons in the socio-religious life of Indian women. Barren women are treated as useless objects, and are disrespected and despised by the society. They lose even the love of their husbands. Only the birth of a son entitles a woman to enjoy her rights and privileges; otherwise she may be denied these all through her life. The Hindu family puts so high a premium on a male child that a mother knows that she must have at least one son. She becomes integrated into the family and her opinion is taken seriously only after she has given birth to a son. The respect given to a woman in the family increases with the number of sons which she is able to bear. Though she may be ugly, quarrelsome, mischievous, and disobedient to her elders, if she is the mother of several sons no one dares say anything to or against her.

Barrenness is an unquestioned blot on a woman's forehead, and to be sonless is a sin. The folksongs talk about women who have carved out "wooden sons," celebrated their birth ceremonies, invited their brothers, and played with these wooden toys as if they were live children. Their cravings for a son have caused certain women to lose their mental equilibrium. It is impossible to say how many village doctors and unscrupulous fakirs have often exploited such women both monetarily and sexually. Even highly chaste women have, at least mentally, longed to make love with someone — irrespective of caste — so that they might be able to beget a male baby. The thirst for a son is even stronger than the thirst for the divine nectar. Barren women have been reduced to a lowly position in the family, or have even been cast aside and required to spend their days in their parental or affinal

² The author's Field Collection Notebook is cited as FC.

homes like widows. They may regain their high position only after giving birth to a son. In one of the folksongs, a mother expresses surprise at her in-laws' change of attitude: "See, my mother-in-law and husband's sisters who never looked at me and always scolded me; today they speak to me because I have given birth to a male baby." Another song (Bachmann 1942:151) tells the same story:

Oh my little son, God's image of good omen.
Through thee my house becomes complete.
O my little son, gift of God,
Thou are Amrita (release) to me.

A woman's emotional attachment to her son is so intense that very often she loses considerable interest in her husband. She may have experienced, or heard, that "a husband loves his wife only when she has a son." Thus after the birth of a male child, the wife is so confident of her position vis-a-vis her husband that he no longer remains her focal point. This negligent attitude toward him may be a sort of retaliatory measure. She knows, now, that she is a "mother." She has a "son"; therefore, neither her husband nor any other member of his family can do her any harm. Her social position is completely secure; she need not bother any more about her husband, nor for that matter, anyone else. One of the Bhojpuri songs mentions a woman who awaits the arrival of her husband from a distant land. When she finds that he is not coming back, she says: "I do not care whether you come or not. I will console myself with my son" (FC 427: 21). According to a proverb: "More exacting than the neck-husband (one who ties the wedding string or *tali* around the wife's neck) is the belly-husband (the eldest son; i.e., the husband who has emerged from one's own self)" (Ross 1962:146). Similarly, Urquhart (1926:83) says that love for her son was the ruling passion of a Bengali woman. It surpassed her devotion to her husband which, although raised to the level of a religious cult, had not the spontaneous quality of sheer devotion seen in the mother-son relationship.

The birth of a male child is the most important event in the life of a woman, and his upbringing is her greatest concern. One of the songs says: "O my son, for nine months I have kept you in my womb, and have served you with meticulous efforts" (FC 136:7-8). According to a popular saying mother should rear

and protect their children "like the eggs of the Bharddul bird".³ Sons who are born in the advanced age of their parents receive even more attention and affection from them, and are likely to be spoiled (FC 97:8-10). Practically speaking, a baby belongs to the whole joint family and every member takes a great interest in him, but as a saying goes, "There is no devotion toward him, if there is no mother." The son is her primary responsibility and duty, and he occupies her time to such an extent that she may even stop massaging her mother-in-law's feet, preparing food for the household, and taking interest in family rituals and her own husband. The little baby is her only "world," and when he is in her lap a woman may tend to grow negligent toward everything around her. Invariably, there is a loving grand-mother or aunt in the family who likes to take care of the baby; however, the mother is likely to distrust them, not because of their lack of experience in baby-rearing, but because she may not be sure of their love for her baby. Often such circumstances lead to violent feuds between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. The young mother may deny her mother-in-law the privilege of caring for the babies, especially if she happens to dislike her bitterly. A woman may even revenge her old grudges by not allowing her husband's mother to touch or speak to the baby, even though the grandmother may love the child intensely.

Mothers tend to stick to their sons like leeches. If they do not see their sons around them every moment they become restless. They are familiar with the dictum, "Son and horse are to go out into the world," yet they want to have them around them twenty-four hours of the day, and if possible, for the rest of their lives. "They always like to keep them under their skirt," old people observe. If a son happens to be away playing at the gate a mother is sure to feel that some evil spirit is overpowering him or that an ill-omen is befalling him (FC 25:6). It is a great delight to a mother to see her son crawling in the courtyard under vigilant protection. She likes to do everything for him by herself: waking him up in the morning, washing his teeth, and serving him food (FC 320). She becomes so absorbed in him that any separation may cause her great agony. One of the Bhojpuri

³ The *bharddul* is a legendary bird said to be very attached to its offspring.

folksongs illustrates this situation very aptly (FC 11:5-8). At Rama's departure to the forest, his mother, Queen Kausilya, desperately asks him: "Tell me, O Raghubar, now in whose service am I going to devote myself and console my heart?" After his departure, Kausilya grows so sad that she asks her maidservant to put a "stony bandage" on her eyes so that she can not see Awodhya until Rama returns. She orders her subjects not to give birth to babies, not to sing birth songs, the city bitches not to bark and watchmen not to keep vigil over the city. With tears in her eyes, a mother who is reluctant to see her son go will bless him in the following words: "Wherever you go, be happy and cheerful. May god protect you." However, she will always be thinking that her son can hardly be well protected without her. Kausilya (FC 320) says:

Rama does not like good cooked food.

How will he cook coarse food by himself...

Then she sets out to look for Rama with delicious food in her hands (Upadhyaya 1960:260). Commenting upon this emotional possessiveness of Hindu mothers, Mrs. Das (1932:110) says:

Thus the Hindu mother ... renders services to him which forever warp his sense of proportion and frustrates his earliest attempts at a normal expansion ... His instinctive infantile rebellion against her excessive demands or excessive showering of love upon him, against her exclusive emotional possessiveness — this wholesome rebellion is suppressed even long before he reaches adolescence. It becomes sublimated into its opposite — intense mother-goddess worship...

Out of this emotional attachment, Mandelbaum (1949:107) comments:

There is a tendency ... for a boy to be isolated and insulated by his mother even within the close confines of the women's quarters... he frequently hears his mother in verbal skirmish with the older women as his defender and protector.

To a mother her boy is never at fault, even though she knows he sometimes is. This peculiar attitude of the mother has caused hundreds of quarrels within the Hindu joint family structure and has brought about a tremendous number of separations among the male members of the joint family. When a boy is caught red-handed by his father or any other member of the household and is about to be penalized, his mother may rush to help and protect

him. Beseeching his elders, she may say, "Please do not chastise him. He does not know what is wrong or right. He is innocent." In the face of the determined attitude of the punishing authority, she often creates a scene by crying, beating her head, and quarreling. She may even eventually stop eating, and thus virtually go on a complete strike. One of the folksongs describes how a woman, pulling her hair, begs Sitala to pardon her son "this time" only for having defiled the honor of the disease goddess (FC 374). A woman may boast to her neighbor, "I have never touched my son, even with a straw." Traditionally, a mother is not an instrument of punishment, it is the father who disciplines the boy. Although mothers may occasionally spank their boys when they are naughty, it does not have much effect on them (FC 123:6-7).

A famous dictum says: "The beating of a mother and the scolding of a father are equal." After his mother has given him a good thrashing, a boy may burst into laughter or become angry with her and retaliate by prolonged crying; or he may continue to do the same thing for which he had been beaten. In any case, his mother's beating is not likely to bring any lasting results.

In the folksongs, the handling of the mother-son relationship most often portrays the mother as a younger bride and the son as a baby. Nevertheless, other social situations exist. As a son grows up a considerable change in his attitude and behavior takes place, but such a change in a mother's behavior is not found. The following saying characterizes the change of attitude in the son: "The mother's heart is like a cow's heart; the son's heart is like a butcher's heart." The mother is often offended as she sees her son paying more and more attention to his wife and less toward her, but she is likely to take it stoically by saying, "He is young, he does not understand things." Mothers suppress their ego, bear indignities, and suffer physical and mental torture at the hands of their sons and daughter-in-law, but even then they do not like to loosen the bond of affection for their offspring; instead they attempt to keep a strong grip on them. Bhojpuri song tells of a mother who urges her arrogant child to return home: "O baby, I am the darling of my father, the beloved of five brothers and dear to my husband, even then I will go out into

the forest to look for you. Please come home. Without you home and courtyard appears deserted to me" (FC 25). Women show a tremendous power of forgiveness toward their sons. Praising their devotion and forbearance, people say, "A mother is after all a mother." However, some mothers do raise an uproar and force their sons to rectify their misconduct.

The duties and responsibilities of a mother do not end after her son reaches manhood, but last as long as she is alive. The songs describe how the mother, despite having little authority in the joint family, goes to the chamber of her sleeping husband and wakes him to say that their son has reached the age when he should be given a sacred thread or be married. She is the one who looks into the face of her son in an attempt to detect any hidden worries, and who seeks to help him out. His physical well-being is her chief concern. As a saying puts it: "The mother looks after the well-being of the boy and the wife looks after the money." A young man finds a soothing and compassionate audience in his mother, and tells her all the sorrows of his life, even if he has to make up a few. Hearing the complaint of how little a dowry he has received from his bride's family, a mother is quick to comfort her son with: "Do not bother, O Son, I will remarry you where you will get more dowry (FC 187:9-10). When it comes to helping and defending their own sons, women completely lose their sense of social and ethical values, and at times, may become very mean. The emotional attachment between a mother and son remains so intense that even in her eighties, when her sons may be in their sixties, a mother prides herself on looking after their physical well-being, advising them on minor problems, and superintending the household affairs in whatever manner she can. As an example of this attitude, Ross (1962: 149) quotes an informant as saying:

Although he (her son) has a job he is just like a baby. I cannot leave him for a single minute. He wants me every second for everything, even to help him dress.

My son rules a district but he is still very humble before me (p. 147).

The folksongs give the impression of sons being respectful (FC 445:12, 9:2-3), dependent, and timid toward their mothers. These attitudes are due to excessive maternal love (FC 91:32)

and the social tradition, which requires a man to treat his mother as a goddess. A man might develop his personality independently of his mother and might not have an intense emotional attachment to her if she were not so over-possessive and demanding. As the saying goes, "A son's heart is like a butcher's heart." In fact, a boy has several relatives to take care of him and once he is old enough to marry he does not need his mother much. But it is the mother who, in almost all cases, sticks to him and forces him to be dependent upon her. The social pressure is such that he has no choice but to reciprocate his mother's attention and be bound to her apron strings. "Even if a man feels a little independent, he feels guilty to feel it. He feels contented but not happy, in being dependent, and uncomfortable in independence." Traditionally, "The son who can manage everything himself and does not require anyone's help or advice is called 'rough man' or even a vagabond" (Ross 1962:149). Commenting upon the ambivalent situation arising out of this tie, Mandelbaum (1949:106) cites Mrs. Das:

... exaggerated worship of the mother on the part of Indians leads to an ambivalent attitude on the part of men toward women. There is frustration in marriage because men seek in the wife a mother instead of a mate, and men therefore attempt to free themselves from all desire of the body.

The son's sense of duty and respect for his mother is reflected in the following saying from Bengal: "Shall I prefer my wife to my mother? O, wicked thought! A man may forsake his wife without sin; but for a man to forsake his mother is the greatest of all sins" (Urquhart 1926:82). A woman may boastfully say: "My son likes me more than his wife." Men even torture and humiliate their wives just to appease their mother-goddess and earn the title of "Matribhakt" (one who is devoted to one own mother) or "Sojhiya Beta" (a gentle son). After returning from his marriage ceremony, a son proudly says in one Bhojpuri folksong: "O mother, my wife will be your slave" (Upadhyaya 1960:261). In another folksong a groom tells his wife: "Whatever my mother does against you, O Gaura, you must not ever say anything against her" (FC 136:13). This reverence toward the mother and the fear of social repercussion should such reverence not be shown, at times reaches a point when sons witness, however reluctantly, scenes of physical and mental torture of

their wives by their mothers, and still keep silent (FC 424). A folksong depicts the wretched condition of a woman whose husband has gone to a distant region: "O, my cruel mother-in-law wants to kill my baby. I have to wear ornaments made of base metal, and torn and soiled clothes. I go to collect refuse. Mother-in-law has thrown me out of the home..." (FC 424). The song continues and finally tells of the young man's return home. When he hears of his mother's cruelty he sadly says: "O mother, if I had known that you would behave like this, I would not have gone to that distant country" (FC 424:33-34). He does not reproach her in any other way. Confirming this fact, Majumdar (1962:212) writes, "A youth stands in greater awe of his mother than his father, and even if his mother does not treat his wife properly he does not intervene, except in cases of extreme ill-treatment" Men would like to show their resentment of such cruel actions, but they hardly wish to boldly interfere with their mothers for fear of being labelled a "slave of their wives". "The duty of reverence to the mother goes so far" writes Bachmann (1942: 25) "that a son may in no circumstances desert his mother, even if the latter, through improper conduct, is ostracized and excluded from all social life." For, whatever wrong she may commit, she still remains his mother to him.

Sons often gravitate emotionally toward their mothers and are so dependent upon them that, even at an advanced age, they lean on them for help and advice (FC 424:5-6, 13:2-3, 15:10). From childhood onward, domineering mothers overshadow their sons' personalities to the extent that the men may become completely incapable of doing anything without her consultation. Speaking of Indian princes, Sleeman (1915:256) remarks, "The state of mental imbecility to which a youth of naturally average powers of mind... is in India often reduced by a haughty and ambitious mother... (is such that) they are often utterly unable to act, think, or speak for themselves." Such men are so emotionally shattered at their mothers' death that it takes them years to compose themselves again. Forster (1953:41) says of a maharaj (king): "To his mother... he was devoted. Years after her death he still mourned her, and one day he lamented to us, while tying a turban, that he no longer took pleasure in tying it, now that the beloved voice which could praise his skill had

gone." Ross (1962:148) quotes one of her informants as saying: "Tears well up in my eyes when I think of my mother. Nothing interested me for six months after her death."

The decline of a woman's power and authority and her change of attitude is clearly seen soon after her husband's death: "A mother's love accounts for her desire to monopolize her son's affections, particularly after her husband dies, for her subordinate position as a widow will make her lean even more heavily on him" (Ross 1952:148). "It [the death of his father] is terrible for the son, for he may be 'bound to his mother's apron strings'. She may always be telling him that he must look up to her, and take care of her; so he feels guilty if he ever goes against her wishes, and won't take his wife's side against her" (Ross 1962: 148). If he neglects her even slightly, she may say sarcastically: "My lord is dead. Now, who cares for me?" She may occasionally complain publicly about the behavior of her son and daughter-in-law. Widowed mothers easily gain the support and sympathy of the community. The village people are often likely to accuse the son, even if the mother happens to be at fault. It is true that a woman has to forego a considerable amount of her domestic power after her husband's demise; however, a good son usually takes every precaution not to let her feel the absence of her consort and, above all, the loss of her former authority.

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