CHAPTER IX

FEMALE RITES AND CEREMONIES (II)
I. Agnipurnima-VRATA

The full moon day of the month of Magh is called Agnipurnima (the fiery full moon). On this day, village women perform Agnipurnimar-vrata. A miniature pond is dug in the yard and ritual drawings are painted around it. At night, when the image of the moon is reflected on the water of this pond, some cakes are thrown into it and a branch of the jujube tree is planted there. Then the votary comes out of the house and stands at a junction where three roads have met. There a fire is lit, and the votary takes a handful of jujube fruit (local name boroi, Sanskrit badarika), bites each of these and throws it into the fire one after another. Every time she would mention the name of a near relative and recite a charm to the effect that the foes of this or that relative be killed.

It is not known why the naming of this particular full moon day is associated with Agni or fire. The real significance of the first portion of the ceremony also appears obscure. In a chilly winter night, people have a craving for heat and maybe, the moon, as a nocturnal replica of the sun, is invoked on the occasion and propitiated with offerings to ensure the supply of heat and thereby enable the votaries to overcome the cold of the
atmosphere. The ceremony might also have some association with vegetation, as suggested by the planting of the branch of a jujube tree. But in all probability, the ceremony had a more direct bearing on the material life of the votaries in the remote past, which has been lost with the passage of time.

The second part of the ceremony is more direct in nature. To inflict injury on a foe with the help of magical rites is a widely diffused practice prevalent in different parts of the world. A common modus operandi is often traceable in almost all such malevolent practices. Normally, an image made of a material object is used as a substitute for the intended enemy. It is believed that by hurting such a substitute, a similar damage can be inflicted upon its human prototype. So, in Morocco magical images made of paper are used for the purpose. If the magician wishes that his enemy should suffer from a headache, he will pierce the head of the image with a nail. Later, the image will be put in an oven. In some parts of Europe, a wax image is made and it will be put in front of a fire to melt completely with a desire to annihilate the enemy. The Palaungs of Burma use crude

12. J.G. Fraser, The Aftermath, p. 3
13. Ibid., p. 8
clay figures for a similar purpose. The name is often scratched on it if the performer is literate, otherwise he simply whispers over the figure the name of the enemy. Incantations are said over the figure and splinters of bamboo are stuck into it to ensure the desired effect.14

The rite performed at the tri-junction on the occasion of Agnipurnimar vrata bears a strong resemblance with the practices mentioned above. So, it can be envisaged that this part of the ceremony is performed in order to cause damage to the foes of the near relatives of the votary with the help of homeopathic magic. In Cachar, incidentally, not an image, but a fruit is used to represent the victim. We find a close parallel in Italy, where a fruit is used for a similar purpose.15 In the southern part of that country, a lemon is sometimes named after an enemy and needles or splinters of wood are stuck into it with the idea of harming the person that it represents. Cachar women use a jujube fruit in lieu of a lemon and thrust on it their own teeth instead of nails; otherwise, the Italian rite offers a striking similarity with its counterpart in Cachar. This similarity, existing between two rites observed in two quite different parts of the world and performed almost in the same manner to

14. Ibid.
15. J.G. Fraser, The Aftermath, p. 8
attain a similar objective, substantiates the truth of Frazer's memorable observation that these kind of similarities are "the effect of similar causes acting alike on the similar constitution of the human mind in different countries and under different skies."\(^\text{16}\)

II. **Achambiter-vrata**

In local dialect, the word *achambit* means 'sudden' or 'abrupt'. There is some element of suddenness in Achambiter-vrata, and thus the rite is so designated.

If a married woman does not have a child after the lapse of a reasonable period of time, she is advised by the elderly female inmates of the household to perform this rite. There is no fixed date for the vrata. Any day, at noon, after taking bath, the votary visits the house of an unknown villager of a neighbouring village completely unannounced. She carries a plaintain leaf in her hand and sits in the yard without uttering a single word. From her action and appearance, the women-folk of the unknown household identify her as a votary performing Achambiter vrata. Voluntarily, they would act their part in the rite. The votary is supplied with a full

\(^\text{16}\) J.G. Fraser, *Golden Bough*, p. 508
meal on the plaintain leaf and she will take the meal sitting in the courtyard. The host women-folk will make queries and try their utmost to make the votary talk but it is obligatory on her part to keep mum, otherwise the vrata becomes futile. When the meal is finished, she leaves for her own house, without divulging her identity.

Achambiter vrata is obviously a magical rite performed by a childless mother to beget offspring. The meal taken in an unknown house is supposed to contain some magical power to bestow fertility upon the votary. The logic that operates behind this belief is somewhat obscure and it appears that somewhere a link is missing hampering our effort to reconstruct the causal relation between the rite and its objective. It may be the remnant of a primitive practice some vital features of which have been dropped or re-modelled for reasons unknown to us.

III. Masik-Vrata

A series of five vratas are undertaken by the peasant women of Cachar during the span of five months from Agrahayana to Chaitra. On each full moon day of these months, this vrata is observed. It is called Masik (monthly) vrata perhaps for its monthly observance.
The vrata is observed in a simple fashion. No deity is invoked and no priest is required. Five women, married or widow, assemble to perform the rite. In the morning, they take bath and solemnly prepare the ritual meal. It is a modest meal, consisting of rice and only one other item, i.e., shak, a preparation made of edible leaves of a plant or a creeper. They partake of this meal at lunch time sitting together, without uttering a single word and without leaving whatsoever in the plate. For five different months, five different kinds of leaves are used to prepare this ritual shak.

Village elders when asked as to the significance of this rite, explain that the rite is observed by the women-fold with a view to infusing some sense of austerity in the minds of their male counterparts. This view appears plausible in the light of the other relevant facts. In the local agricultural cycle, Agrahayan is the month of harvest and then follows a period of respite when local peasantry does not have anything significant to do. This respite continues till the month of Chaitra. Generally in Baishakh, with the advent of early monsoon, they again take up the plough to prepare the soil for aush and then some months of hectic activities follow. There might have been an ancient custom that during these idle
months, peasant women used to practise some kind of austerity presumably for the sake of economy as well as to put a check on their male counterparts who are prone to become extravagant after the harvest. This practice of austerity might have assumed a ritual form in course of time, and in lieu of all the thirty days of the month, only one day, i.e., purnima day, might have been selected to represent the whole month.

IV  **Sidol Katar Vrata**

Sidol Katar Vrata is observed in the month of Chaitra, though no specific date or day is fixed for the purpose. There is a recent trend to sanskritise the name as Siddh-eswari (the deity who fulfils one's desire) vrata, but this name is rarely used.

Sidol is a kind of dry fish prepared under a special system of processing. Only one distinct kind of small fish, locally known as puti, is regarded suitable for preparing this variety of dry fish. The Sanskrit name of the fish is anhar and it is available in abundance in this locality. The production method of sidol is elaborate and somewhat complicated and only expert manufacturers are entrusted with this responsibility. Heaps of puti fish are gathered in a field and at first an oily substance is
extracted from these fish with which some big jars are filled in. Later, large quantities of fish are stocked in the jars to make them full. Then the mouth of these jars are sealed with plantain leaves and earth and at last all these jars are placed in deep pits dug on the ground for the purpose. The pits are again covered with earth and the jars containing the fish are kept there for four to five months. At the end of this specific period, the jars are brought out, and the inner contents, the processed fish, are known as Sidol.

This specially prepared dry fish, though a delicacy to the local people, bears an obnoxious odour, which is sufficient to act as an emetic for a person who is not a native of this region or who is not accustomed to it. That such an object should have a ceremonial use in a Hindu ritual appears strange, but in fact, the taking of this object forms the very essential part of this vrata. The functional part of the vrata is very simple. The woman who desires to observe the vrata would cook some items of food which includes necessarily a preparation of sidol, and would prepare her plate of meal with all these objects, especially placing the sidol in the middle. Before taking her meal she narrates a story, keeping the plate in front of her, that describes how two poor children are blessed by fortune after taking sidol in a ritual manner.
This variety of dry fish is too crude an object to be associated with any of the Brahmanical divinities, and lending a Sanskrit name to the vrata is simply an attempt to glorify a ritual which somehow managed its entry amongst the females of even the caste-Hindu families. Originally the rite was perhaps intended to celebrate the first part-taking of sidol. Puti fish is caught on a large scale in the month of Aswin and Kartika and it takes three or four months to process these fish. By Chaitra, the process is completed and the dry fish is ready for consumption. So ceremonial partaking of sidol takes place in this month and it takes the form of a rite because it marks the successful completion of an endeavour which is strenuous and enduring. Till this day, the paraphernalia related with the preparation of sidol is performed almost with a spirit of religious sacramentalism which perhaps is a remnant of the attitude with which the fish-eating people of early times regarded this primitive method of preserving fish.