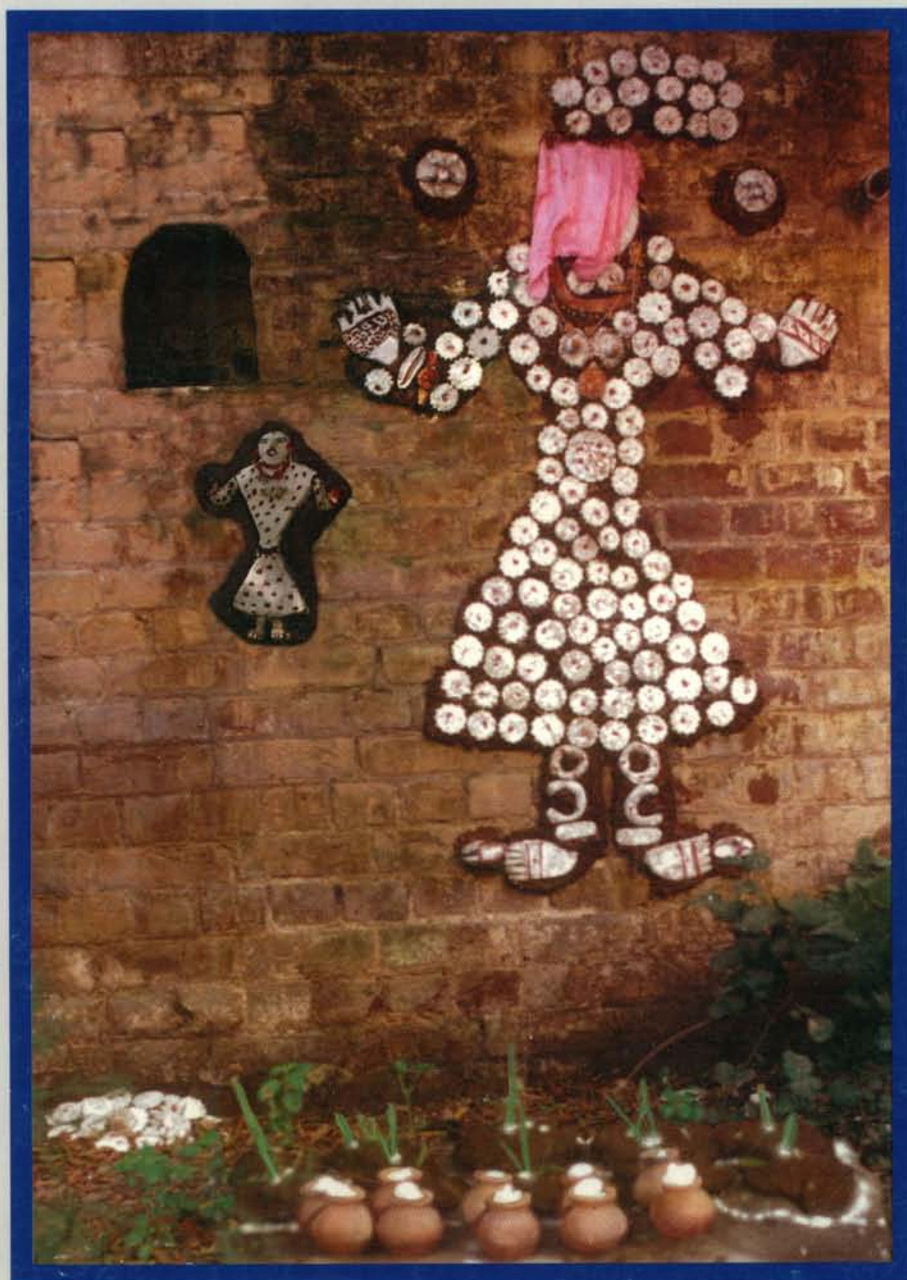
Hindu Festivals in a North Indian Village



Stanley A. Freed **Ruth S. Freed**

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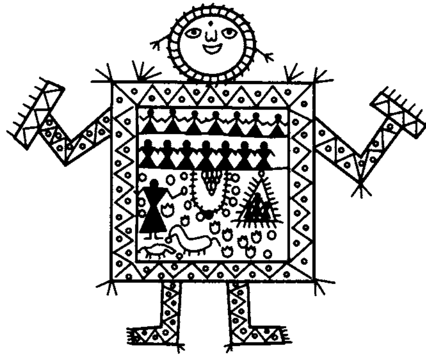

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Anthropological Papers of
The American Museum of Natural History
Number 81, 336 pages, 86 figures, 8 tables
Issued November 5, 1998

ABSTRACT

This monograph is the tenth of a series devoted to the description and analysis of life in Shanti Nagar, a village in the Union Territory of Delhi. Our research is based on holistic fieldwork carried out in 1957–59 and 1977–78. Previous monographs, all published in the *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, have dealt with social organization, economics and technology, rites of passage, fertility and sterilization, sickness and health, enculturation and education, politics and elections, ghosts in the context of a woman's psychomedical case history, and a functional and historical analysis of ghost beliefs based on case studies.

The present monograph is the pendant of *Rites of Passage*. Such rites take place when a person passes through a change of status. Rites of passage can occur at any time. In contrast, the festivals described here are set by the calendar and often concern society as a whole. They are basically rites of intensification, for they honor and propitiate the deities, celebrate great events in Hindu mythology, reinforce basic interpersonal relationships, and give people opportunities to enhance their merit by performing pious acts. They reaffirm the attachment of individuals to the basic beliefs, uniqueness, and unity of a society.

The description of each festival is placed in ethnographic context. The analysis is supplemented by reference to Indian history and to Hindu mythology, astronomy, and astrology. Differential participation in festivals by caste, sect, age, and gender is described. The study covers a period of two decades. Although the festivals were overwhelmingly stable from the 1950s to the 1970s, differences between the observances of festivals during the period are noted. Comparisons are made with practices in other villages and cities.

COVER ILLUSTRATION

An altar for the festival of Dassehra is on the ground in front of a representation of the goddess Sanjhi that is plastered on the wall. The altar and the figure have no connection, but their juxtaposition recalls that the festivals of Dassehra and Sanjhi are celebrated simultaneously. A tree branch that partially obscured the small figure to the left of Shanji has been removed from the photograph. The empty area was repaired with part of a similar photograph taken from a different angle.

TITLE PAGE ILLUSTRATION

Mural of Hoi Mata, Brahman's house, 1977; see fig. 21.

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ISSN 0065-9452
ISBN 0-295-97707-8-X

Anthropological Paper no. 81 is distributed by the University of Washington Press
P.O. Box 50096
Seattle, WA 98145

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avatar of Vishnu), as described in the Bhagavata Purana, saying, "Each *Purana* vies with another in humbuggery" (Saraswati, 1956: 489). Although he believed in the efficacy of prayer when coupled with Vedic mantras and the fire ceremony, he disapproved of fasting and the repetition of mystic syllables, including the various names of deities (Saraswati, 1956: 46, 469–567, 853–857).

The Sanatanis, on the other hand, conceive of a spirit world inhabited by many spirit forces and a number of deities. They believe that intrusive spirits, such as ghosts, can cause disease. Intrusive spirits can be exorcised by bhagats who know the appropriate rituals. Sanatanis accept the domination of Brahmans over prayer and ritual, the giving of charity to Brahmans, fasting and the repetition of mantras and Sanskritic words to propitiate the deities, and the efficacy of the fire ceremony (*havan*) as a potent protection from malevolent forces. In Shanti Nagar, the disinclination of Samajis, mainly Jats, to give gifts to Brahmans is phrased in terms of "equality" between the castes.

Members of the Jat caste are the principal followers of the Arya Samaj in Shanti Nagar. The single family of the Merchant caste (1950s) also adhered to the Arya Samaj. Most Brahmans follow Sanatan Dharma, as do the Potter, Barber, Leatherworker, and Sweeper castes. The other castes may follow either doctrine but tend to favor Sanatan Dharma, for most of them look to Brahmans for the performance of their life cycle ceremonies and other religions activities. Although generally the Jats are Samajis and the Brahmans are Sanatanis, these identifications have exceptions. Some Jats hold beliefs that characterize the Sanatanis, and a few Brahman men profess to be Samajis but have retained Brahmanical caste customs. The Arya Samaj is anti-Brahmanical, but the Jats were in some measure against the Brahmans before the introduction of the Arya Samaj (Temple, 1883–1887, 1: 134).

Shanti Nagar, a Sketch

In 1958, Shanti Nagar was located in the Union Territory of Delhi about 11 mi (18 km) northwest by road from the city limits of Delhi, a distance that has decreased slightly since that time because of the gradual spread of the city. Several villages are situated between Delhi and Shanti Nagar. Travel between Shanti Nagar and Delhi was relatively easy in 1958. Except for about 1 mi (1.6 km) the road to Delhi was paved. A bus made four round trips daily; during the rainy season, the bus traveled only to the end of the paved road and passengers had to complete the journey on foot through flooded fields. By 1977, the paved road had been extended to Shanti Nagar, and bus service was more convenient.

The village is west of the Grand Trunk Road. The habitation site and about half the agricultural land are on land (called *bangar*) high enough above the Yamuna River to avoid flooding during the monsoon season. Flooding is a serious problem for the *khadar* (riverine) zone east of the Grand Trunk Road and also for some village land, classified as *khadar*, that lies east of the principal north-south road that passes through the village (fig. 1). The area designated *bani* in figure 1 is relatively poor land overgrown with shrubs and trees. All village shrines are in the *bangar* area. Part of the village land is irrigated by the Delhi Branch of the Western Yamuna Canal. In

the 1950s, Persian wheels mounted on masonry wells provided a small amount of additional irrigation. In the 1970s, private tubewell irrigation was probably of greater importance than canal irrigation, and Persian wheels were no longer used.

The climate of the Shanti Nagar region has four seasons. Three are sharply marked: a dry hot season from March to June, the monsoon from July to September, and a dry, cold winter from December to February. The fourth season, October and November, is less distinctive than the other three. The Indian Meteorological Department calls it the "[S]eason of the Retreating South-West Monsoon" (Mamoria, 1980: 42). The fading monsoon in September is followed by a brief hot spell. About 74% of the annual rainfall comes during the monsoon months, and if the premonsoon rains of late June are taken into account, the figure increases to about 80% (Gazetteer Unit, Delhi Adm., 1976: 33; Maheshwari, 1976: 3).

The climate influences ceremonial life. Because weddings involve considerable travel, none takes place during the monsoon season when travel is difficult. During this period, the gods are said to be sleeping. An annual festival just before the monsoon season marks the day when the gods go to sleep; another festival takes place in the first fortnight of November, when they awake.

Shanti Nagar conforms to a type of village, common in northern India, often described as nucleated. The houses are crowded together, sometimes sharing one or more walls with adjacent houses. The compact habitation site still has a little undivided common land at its edges, especially to the east where the school and the cremation grounds are located. Beyond this tract lie the cultivated fields. The shared

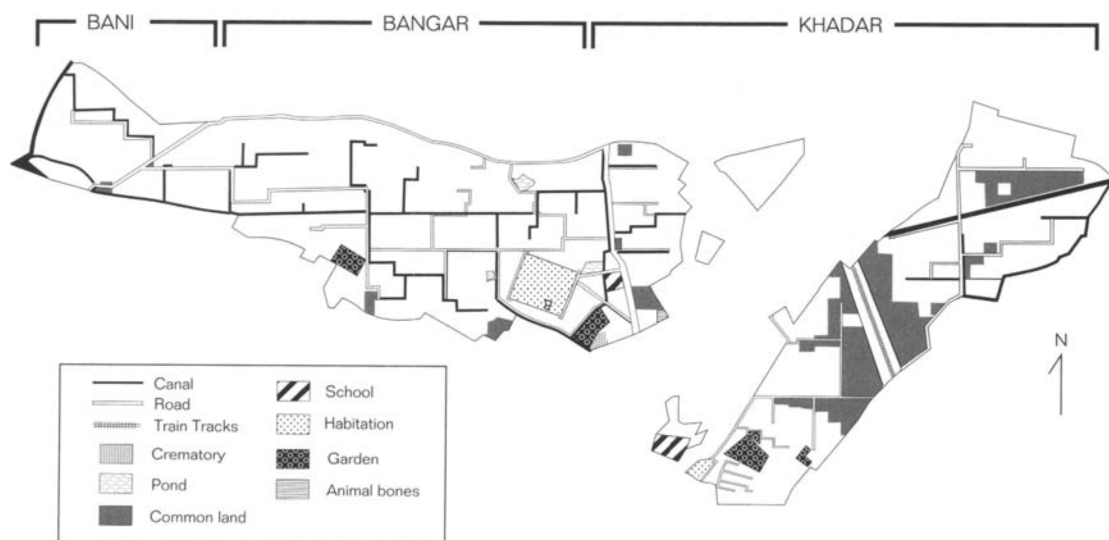


FIG. 1. Map of Shanti Nagar. Adapted and simplified from the cadastral map as revised after land consolidation in the 1970s. The area of the village is 1037 acres (420 ha), which is the average of the slightly different figures from the 1950s and the 1970s. See text for definitions of *bangar*, *bani*, and *khadar*.

architecture and geographic arrangements of nucleated villages are matched by similarities of culture patterns concerning domains such as caste, family life, ceremony, and economy. The population of Shanti Nagar had increased by 66% in the 20 years between our two studies and was crowding the village. Of the 799 villagers in 1958–59, 392 were females and 407 were males; of 1324 persons in 1977–78, 629 were females and 695 were males (S. Freed and R. Freed, 1985: 238–239, tables 1 and 2). As the population of Shanti Nagar has grown, the habitation site has been expanded at the expense of the common land (figs. 2, 3).

Caste plays a role in ceremonial life. Castes are named endogamous social groups in which membership is acquired by birth. The castes of a village form a hierarchy based on social esteem and precedence. A caste has a combination of attributes, prominent among them a traditional occupation. However, many members of a caste do not follow the traditional occupation. Representatives of 13 castes lived in Shanti Nagar in the 1950s; there were 14 castes in the 1970s (table 1). Some festivals

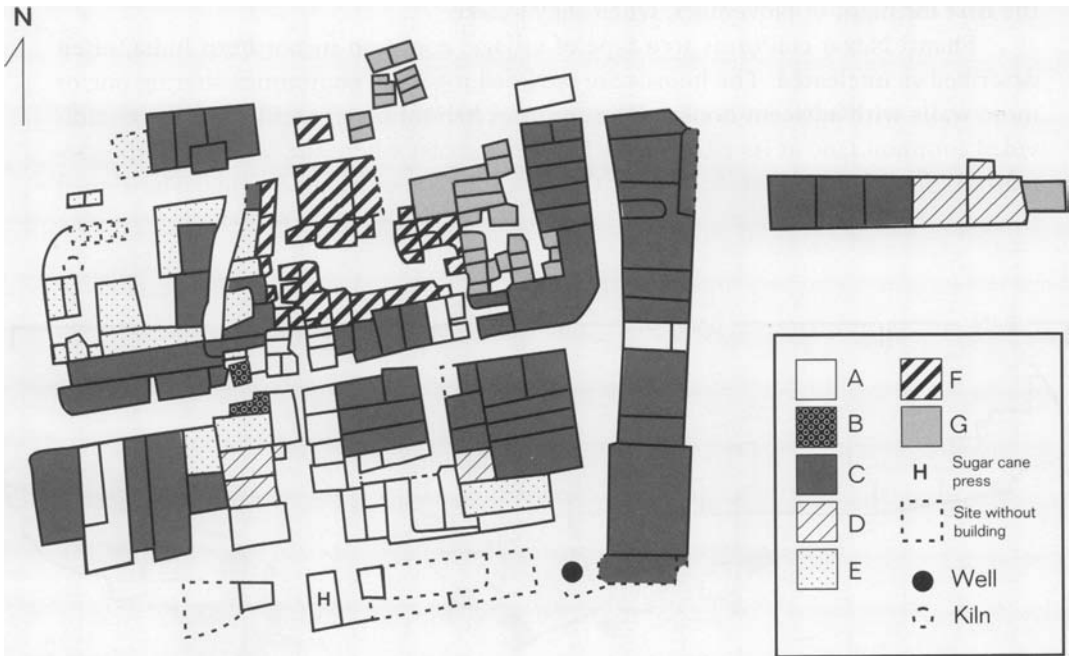


FIG. 2. Sketch map of Shanti Nagar, 1958–59. Shaded areas indicate privately owned lots with a building that covers all or part of the site. A broken line represents a site claimed as private property but without a building. It may be enclosed by a wall or unenclosed. Unshaded areas are lanes available to everyone and courtyards used principally by members of families whose houses surround them. The different shaded areas denote the location of caste blocs as follows: A, Brahman Priest; B, Baniya Merchant; C, Bairagi Mendicant Priest and Jat Farmer; D, Jhinvar Watercarrier, Lohar Blacksmith, and Mali Gardener; E, Gola Potter, Mahar Potter, and Nai Barber; F, Chamar Leatherworker; and G, Chuhra Sweeper. A caste bloc is a caste or group of castes that occupies a particular rank in the caste hierarchy (S. Freed and R. Freed, 1976: 100–101). The Chhipi Dyer was a tenant and owned no house site. Therefore, that family is not represented on the map.

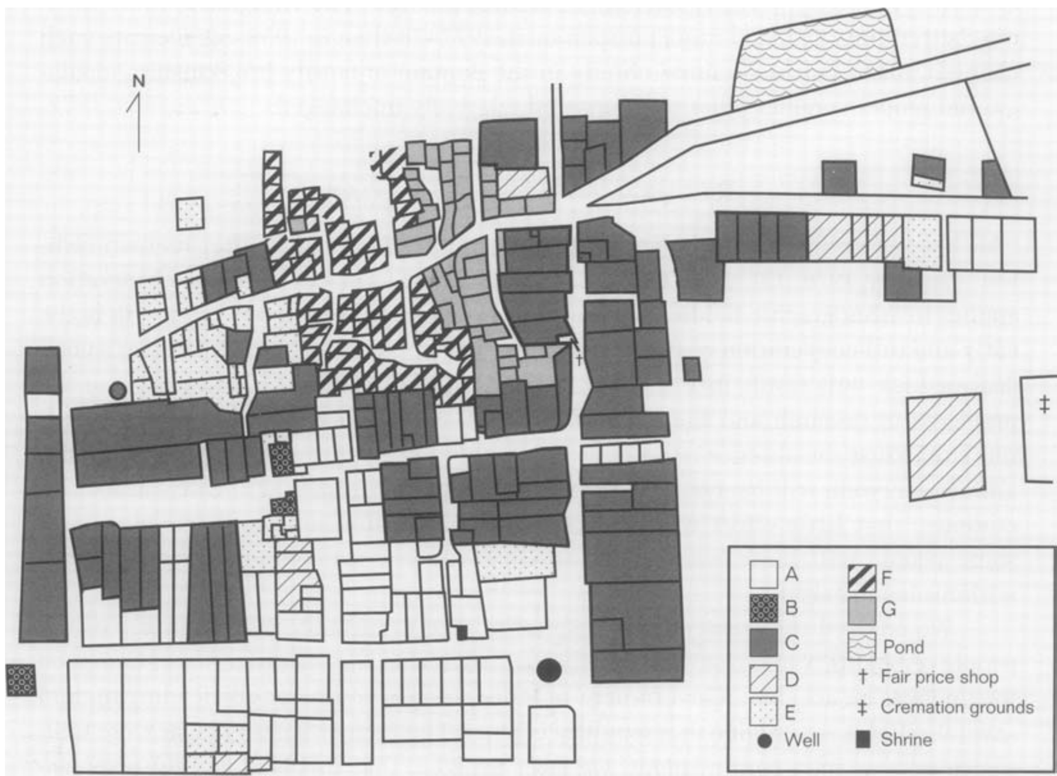


FIG. 3. Sketch map of Shanti Nagar, 1977–78. The code is the same as in figure 2. A family of Khati Carpenters, which arrived in Shanti Nagar after our departure in 1959, owned no house site. Like the Chhipi Dyer family, it is not represented on the map.

are of greater interest to some castes than to others. For example, Sakat is celebrated chiefly by Brahman women, but not all of them observe the day. In some festivals, members of one caste fulfill a ceremonial role for people of other castes. For example, Brahman women traditionally tell the story of Hoi for women of other castes.

In the interval between our two periods of research in Shanti Nagar in the 1950s and 1970s, a number of social and economic trends had become more firmly established or newly introduced: the educational level rose dramatically; health services improved; there was a substantial increase in salaried urban occupations; a few women worked for salaries outside the home; the technological level of agriculture was considerably improved by the introduction of tractors and tubewells; the villagers were deeply involved in markets outside Shanti Nagar, owing to the construction of an immense vegetable market just north of Delhi within easy reach of the farmers of Shanti Nagar; electricity was introduced; radios were commonplace; there were a few television sets and automobiles; and newspapers were delivered daily. The village had a somewhat different appearance: it had been expanded to accommodate the increased population, and houses made of dried chunks of mud, common in 1958,

had almost entirely been replaced by structures of brick. The village was more modern, better informed, and more prosperous in 1977–78 than in 1958–59. Despite such changes, many cultural values, chiefly in the domain of family life, kinship, ideology, and proper conduct (dharma), persisted relatively unchanged.

RETURN TO SHANTI NAGAR

"All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion" (Tolstoy, 1978: 13). With appropriate adjustments, Tolstoy's famous observation applies to ethnographic fieldwork. The constant element in "happy" fieldwork is the early and full cooperation of the host society. Full cooperation and, of course, a good deal of luck will result in a successful study no matter how troublesome are the problems of research and the trials of day-to-day living. Cooperation means much more than just the absence of hostility or the tolerance of the outsider. It means that almost everyone will be available for an interview, that people will call you for ceremonies, that little effort will be made to conceal information, and that at least some people will sense what might interest you and will volunteer information without being asked.

We enjoyed the cooperation, hospitality, and eventually the friendship of the people of Shanti Nagar from the day that we arrived in the village in 1958. Our good fortune was no accident. Government of India officials contacted the leading men in several villages to find one that would accept us. The men of Shanti Nagar were willing to take us in, a commitment, we later realized, that involved certain responsibilities on their part. We noticed that the villagers acted is if it were a matter of village honor that we be properly treated. We were protected from exploitation and overcharging, and nothing of value was ever stolen from us. When we attended ceremonies, especially those out of the village, the people of Shanti Nagar made sure that we were well treated and tried to prevent us from doing anything gauche. We found at times that some people quietly and intelligently worked behind our backs to assist us.

That our entry into Shanti Nagar was under the auspices of the government and at the invitation of the leading men of the village greatly eased our way. We did not have to go through a difficult period of penetrating a wall of indifference, suspicion, and hostility. The villagers selected us before they had even seen us. When we arrived on the first day, villagers swarmed to greet us and offered us warm milk, the token of village hospitality. But even under favorable circumstances, village life is no bed of roses, and research adds special problems to those of daily living. We have previously described in great detail our adjustment to Shanti Nagar and the conduct of our fieldwork in 1958–59 (S. Freed and R. Freed, 1976: 17–28). We shall not repeat that account, even though almost all of it is pertinent to our work in the 1970s. Rather, we shall describe the second research period in 1977–78, emphasizing how it differed from the 1950s.

We returned to Shanti Nagar in 1977, twenty years after the beginning of our first sojourn in India. We expected the second trip to be less difficult than the first one, and in some ways it was. We were better financed the second time, which was

a great blessing. Our affiliation with the University of Delhi had been arranged before our arrival. The worry of finding a village for fieldwork was no factor, for we could return to Shanti Nagar and live in the same quarters as in the 1950s. Friends in Delhi found translators and assistants for us. We had a cook who saved us no end of time and energy. At maximum strength, our staff consisted of four translator-assistants (one woman and three men), a cook, sweeper (outside and latrine), cleaning woman (inside), and watercarrier.

In the 1950s, we could do almost all the interviewing ourselves. The village was of a convenient size for a husband-wife team, and we were not pressed for time. We lived in Shanti Nagar for 13 months. We then moved to Delhi to interview people from Shanti Nagar who had moved there and to read systematically over our fieldnotes—looking for gaps, weaknesses, and ambiguities. However, we continued to maintain our village residence and made frequent trips there chiefly to attend ceremonies and to gather information on subjects that were not clear in our notes. While we were living in Delhi, one of our young research assistants, Satish Saberwal, who went on to a long distinguished career of research and university teaching, remained in Shanti Nagar to finish some surveys.

The village population was 66% larger in the 1970s than in the 1950s, and our time was shorter, 30 weeks as compared to 17 months in the 1950s. Thus, in the 1970s, we had to make greater use of assistants working independently. We did this with confidence, because we could daily check their data against information that we ourselves were collecting. Moreover, we could compare their interviews with our data from the 1950s. For example, the census of a family from the 1970s could be compared to the census of the same family from the 1950s. Mistakes and dubious information were quickly spotted and corrected.

TABLE 1.

SHANTI NAGAR POPULATION BY CASTE IN 1958–59 AND 1977–78

CASTE	1958–1959	1977–1978
Bairagi Mendicant	27	48
Baniya Merchant	6	13
Brahman Priest	187	319
Chamar Leatherworker	98	188
Chhipi Dyer	5	7
Chuhra Sweeper	96	140
Gola Potter	58	125
Jat Farmer	260	385
Jhinvar Watercarrier	13	21
Khati Carpenter	0	3
Lohar Blacksmith	11	23
Mahar Potter	3	1
Mali Gardener	10	7
Nai Barber	25	44
Total	799	1324

The first day back in the village was exhausting. Many people came to see us from the moment we arrived, and we had to unpack and organize while trying to greet and talk to old friends. Within the first hour or so, two conversations impressed us, for they never would have happened early in our first field trip. Out of a clear blue sky, one visitor enumerated the murders that had taken place in the village since we departed in 1959. Another visitor, without being asked, recounted the history of his family since last we saw him.

These conversations illustrate something about fieldwork that is important. In the course of fieldwork, not only does the investigator learn how to study his hosts, but they in turn learn how to be studied. This reciprocity is the fundamental aspect of "rapport," about which so much has been written. Rapport is not just acceptance or even friendship. It is cooperation in a joint enterprise. We reached a high water-mark in this regard late in our first field trip when one of our best informants, a well-educated village man, remarked at the end of an excellent interview, "I never realized that you wanted to go into things so deeply." Wax makes the point somewhat differently:

> The great feat in most field expeditions, as in life, is to find the areas in which a mutual or reciprocal trust may be developed. That these areas will be new or odd to both hosts and fieldworker is very likely. But it is in these areas of mutual trust and, sometimes, affection, that the finest fieldwork can be done . . . [Wax, 1971: 372–373].

Toward evening of the first day, we managed to take a walk in the fields to have a little rest from all the commotion. We were visibly tired, and at the invitation of a farmer, we sat down beside his tubewell. We were talking of nothing in particular, when unexpectedly he said, "When you were here last, there were many trees in the fields. Now they have all been cut down." Later we realized that many other villagers recalled events and conditions during our first trip. We were surprised at how well they remembered us and the village of twenty years earlier. They picked up the thread of our joint lives almost as if there had been no intermission.

In the course of this conversation, the tubewell owner made a comment that revealed another aspect of our relationship with the villagers. They never stopped evaluating us. We were bemoaning our failure to pay more attention to some feature of village life, perhaps ecology in accord with the decline in the number of trees, and the farmer said, "You did the best you could under the circumstances." Fieldworkers have a tendency to dwell on their oversights, the more so since they may be thousands of miles from their hosts when the gap in their information is discovered, and corrective measures may be difficult. The farmer's comment advised us to use a little common sense.

Another bit of sage advice came from a sophisticated village man early in our first field trip. Observing our ineffectual efforts to do something or other, he said, "Don't try to be perfect villagers after just two weeks." One point of not trying to be perfect villagers is that the villagers were interested in typical Americans and not in Americans trying to be Indians. They wanted to see, and hear, something different and exotic, not an imitation of themselves. One of the jackets that we sometimes

wore during the cold weather was warm but shabby. The villagers did not like it and made remarks. They wanted "their" Americans to be prestigious, which meant, among other matters, dressing properly. They were pleased when a high official in the Delhi government visited us one day to see how we were managing. It was conceivable that the village could derive some benefit from our presence.

Of course, we adjusted to village life in many ways, especially in trying to avoid giving offense; for example, our diet was strictly vegetarian. In matters of diet, cleanliness, and respectful behavior, villagers did expect us to meet village standards, always cutting us some slack for our errors due to ignorance, for our need for more comfort and privacy than are common in village life, and for the demands of our research. They allowed us liberties that they themselves would hesitate to take. The men of our team routinely attended women's ceremonies and were welcome. In case of need, the women could be present during meetings that were strictly the province of village men. Although we were somewhat vaguely "high caste," we enjoyed free relations with people of the lower castes. In fact, in 1958 a high-caste village man cleverly arranged an event that made us "people of the whole village" (S. Freed and R. Freed, 1976: 20–21).

Adults did not find us quite the curiosity in the 1970s that they did in the 1950s. People still came regularly to see us, often more visitors than we could manage, but they were no longer interested in watching us eat, for example. Modern communications had made the world smaller, people were better educated and more sophisticated, and many Westerners passed through Delhi. Moreover, the features of Western life that were of greatest interest to villagers, certainly to young men, had changed markedly. In the 1950s, the principal topics of conversation when villagers asked about the United States were the treatment of cows, which are sacred to Hindus, the eating of beef, and the care of old people. In the 1970s, people rarely mentioned those topics. Instead they wanted to talk about marriage and courtship, in other words, illicit premarital sexual activity, smoking, and drinking. Young men mentioned the Westerners whom they had seen in Connaught Place (Delhi). Hippies, both American and European, infested the place and in all probability created an unfortunate impression. Young village men told us that 50% of American women drink and smoke. A conservative couple such as the authors would not generate the same interest for young men as did the young Westerners in Delhi.

As in the first trip, children were a significant nuisance, often following us about, mobbing us, and sometimes making enough commotion so that interviews were impossible and householders were annoyed. There was a slight but noticeable decline of manners among children and adolescents. It was a general feature of Indian life, even rural life, but it also affected us from time to time. There were several teenagers in the village who were nothing but trouble. After one brief unpleasant episode, we wrote in our notes, "There simply is no question that children and teenagers cannot be controlled nearly so much as formerly. Adults other than family members can do relatively little, and authority even in the family is weaker than formerly." This scenario was to be played out at Holi when unruly teenaged boys prematurely lit the Holi bonfire, an event described later.

Some developments were most welcome. The extension of a paved road

between Delhi and the village made transportation much easier. The village had electricity in the 1970s, which was lacking in the 1950s. We no longer had to deal with kerosene lanterns, had a refrigerator, and could use our electric typewriter. Our bedroom had ceiling fans. Heat can be almost unbearable in North India, and ceiling fans offer some relief. They also keep mosquitoes away. Although we had metal nets installed in our windows, mosquitoes could still enter, including the dangerous Anopheles mosquito, the female of which carries malaria. After an effective governmental campaign using powerful insecticides had almost eliminated malaria in the Delhi region in the early 1960s, it had come roaring back by 1965. Anopheles mosquitoes had developed resistance to insecticides. Increased irrigation from tubewells and canals resulted in more standing water in the fields as potential breeding sites for mosquitoes. From 1974 to 1978, malaria was present in epidemic proportions.

We thought that we suffered less illness during the second trip. Only after we returned to New York and had a chance to read through our notes did we realize the toll that illness had taken, not only on us but also on our assistants. A serious bout of hepatitis and intestinal maladies troubled us during the first trip, but during the second trip, we were able to avoid hepatitis, and intestinal troubles were considerably reduced. Instead, respiratory illness was the major problem. The villagers themselves expected colds and fever in the winter. In the densely populated village and crowded Delhi, there was no escaping them. Our assistants were not spared. All of them were repeatedly sick and sometimes out of action for up to a week. In addition, one assistant was bitten by a dog and missed several days. By mid-January, we noted that health had become a serious problem, not that any of the illnesses (aside from an episode of severe food poisoning) was particularly dangerous but that the work routine was upset. In fact, it became rare to have all our assistants available in the village at one time.

Most people of the older generation of the 1950s had died by 1977. The day after our arrival, we were walking along the main lane when an elderly woman asked us into her house to greet a once important elderly man whom we had known in the 1950s. He was dying, but he stirred himself to smile and welcome us. Later the same day, we chanced on another elderly man resting on a cot. Although feeble, he sat up to greet us. Some of our best informants were among the missing, especially our landlord's late mother. We saw her every day during our first visit. She was always great company and full of reliable information about the village. Another of our best informants, a man who visited almost daily, was also no longer available, although still alive. He lived on a farm at some distance from Shanti Nagar. We were sure that he would return home for a visit to see us, but he never did. Most likely, a family tragedy kept him away from Shanti Nagar. We greatly missed all these people.

The change of generations takes place gradually, and a permanent resident adjusts to the normal slow attrition. We were absent for 20 years and then suddenly were back in a familiar village that lacked many familiar faces. We should have expected it and braced ourselves emotionally, but we were caught off guard and experienced a bit of a shock. It took us a while to shake off the feeling.

potentially tense relationships that a woman enters at marriage: namely, with her husband, mother-in-law, husband's sister, and husband's brother's wife. The tale related on Sakat is delightful and engaging, but in comparison with the stories associated with Karva Chauth, Hoi, and the fast for Santoshi Mata, it is sparse, both in character and plot. Aside from the deity, there are only two personages, the *jethani* and the *devrani*. A husband makes a brief appearance at the end of one version. But the roles of mother-in-law, and husband's sisters and brothers, which are usually present, are all absent. As for plot, there is no treachery, broken taboos, exile, or usurpation of roles. The dramatic device is the repetition of the same event but with different outcomes. This contrast illustrates the moral theme of the story: the common Indian maxim that one should act with no thought of reward. Selfless service is rewarded with new riches or with painful losses restored. Actions based on greed lead to unhappiness.

The purpose of Sakat Chauth, the welfare of children, is a minor theme in the myth, which is dominated by the relationship of sisters-in-law. However, the younger sister-in-law endures her suffering at the hands of her elder sister-in-law for the welfare of her children. She lives by the rule of selfless service, first for her family and again when Sakat Mata pays a visit. She and her children are rewarded accordingly.

Sili Sat

Sili Sat (Cold Seventh) is observed on Chaitra *badi* 7. The festival is also known as Basora (Stale Bread Festival), Shitala ki Saptami (Shitala's Seventh), and Mata Rani (Mother Queen). It is strictly a woman's festival, observed chiefly by married woman for the welfare of their children. The festival occurs just one week after Holi and marks the end of the cool weather and the onslaught of the hot season when cooked food is no longer kept overnight. At this season in times past, the dreaded smallpox began to rage through the countryside, subsiding only when the monsoon had well begun. In 1980 the World Health Organization declared that smallpox had been eradicated from the world. Sili Sat has been named after Shitala, the smallpox goddess, who is also called Chechak Mata in Shanti Nagar. Children were especially vulnerable to the ravages of smallpox, for adults, once having had the disease, were immune for life. One of our informants, a teacher of Sanskrit, explained:

> The day is called Sili Sat because it is observed on the seventh day; and Shitala [The Cool One] became Sili [cold] in village language, so now we eat cold food cooked the day previously. The seventh day when Sili comes is for the worship of the seven goddesses [of disease].

Shitala is a complex goddess. In Hindi-speaking northern India, she combines the attributes of two goddesses, the smallpox goddess and Shashthi, a Bengali goddess who is the protector of children. In Gujarat, Shitala entirely loses her connection with smallpox and becomes instead the source of good fortune, husbands, and sons. Shashthi is a variant form of sixth *(chhathi)*, hence her epithet, Mother Sixth (Williams, 1883: 229; Bhattacharyya, 1953: 200). She is a deity of classical derivation, the wife of Karttikeya, also called Skanda, the God of War. Shashthi is associated

with Shiva worship and appears to be both a malevolent as well as a benevolent deity who can injure or aid newborn infants and their mothers. Tetanus and puerperal fever, both diseases related to childbirth and common in India, occur during the first six days after birth and are blamed on the will of this mother goddess.

A birth rite known as Chhathi (Sixth) is celebrated in Shanti Nagar the sixth day after birth. The mother's midwife, traditionally a Sweeper, or a senior woman of the mother's household, draws the figure of Bemata, Krishna's midwife, on a wall. Holding her infant, the mother faces the drawing, executed in cow dung, and worships. In other parts of India, Sixth, or Mother Sixth, is associated with Shashthi. Thus, a similar rite can be celebrated by devotees of either Krishna or Shiva. In fact, Bemata and Shashthi, the latter as an aspect of the smallpox goddess, have points in common. The connection of a Sweeper midwife and Bemata on Sixth is echoed by the role of Sweeper women with Shitala on Sili Sat (R. Freed and S. Freed, 1980: 372–376).

In Shanti Nagar, where her function is limited chiefly to protecting children from smallpox, Shitala is one of seven goddesses, known as the Seven Sisters, who together control the epidemic pustular diseases, such as typhoid and measles. These diseases are conceived of as mother goddesses; thus smallpox is Shitala Mata, typhoid is Kanti Mata (or Moti Jhara [Pearly Inflammation] or Moti Mata [Pearl Mother]), and so on. A Brahman woman explained, "We worship the matas so that children will not have the matas [diseases]." In Shanti Nagar, the general protective function of Shitala is partly assumed by the other disease goddesses, and, beyond them, by deities, both male and female, who are guardians of the village. These other deities are the Crossroads Mother Goddess, the Panch Pir, who are five Muslim saints, and Bhumiya, a godling who is the founding male ancestor of the village, all of whom are worshipped on Sili Sat. Such merging, extending, and blurring of attributes, functions, and identities is common in village Hinduism, but it seems to characterize Shitala and Sili Sat more than most deities and festivals (R. Freed and S. Freed, 1979: 306–309; Henry, 1988: 80–81; Imperial Record Department, 1914: 74–75; Mukerji, 1916: 49–50; Wadley, 1980).

Wadley (1980: 35) identified "coolness" as Shitala's most compelling attribute, the one which links her various "personalities." In Shanti Nagar, this characteristic also links Shitala with the other goddesses of disease, for all of them are propitiated by devotees who consume only cold leftover food on Sili Sat and make offerings of cold food and water. The common custom of worshipping a deity with a lighted lamp is rarely practiced on Sili Sat. We observed no lamps at all in the ceremonies of 1958 and 1959, and only one group of worshippers used lamps in 1978. The theme of coolness is underlined by the ritual practiced by families, mostly Jats, who claim not to worship the mother goddess or, at least, who avoid participating in the procession of women that circles the village to worship at various shrines. However, the women of these families make an offering inside their houses at the place where they store pots of cool water. Crooke (1968, 1: 130) wrote:

> In her form as household goddess, Sîtalâ is often known as Thandî, or "the cool one," and her habitation is in the house behind the water-pots,

in the cold, damp place where the water drips. Here she is worshipped by the house-mother, but only cold food or cold water is offered to her.

Rose (1919: 351) also noted that women water Shitala's shrine to *cool* her (his emphasis), but that they also worship her with lamps.

The date of the festival of Shitala worship varies throughout northern India, ranging over a period of five months from Chaitra (March–April) to Shrawan (July–August) (Wadley, 1980: table 1). Mukerji (1916: 49) commented, "By many, every moonless Saptami (seventh day of the moon), from the dark fortnight of *Chaitra* to the corresponding fortnight of *Srawan*, is observed as a day sacred to Sitala [which] shows that there is a whole season of five months which is sacred to Sitala. . . ."

In the Hindi-speaking region, Chaitra *badi* 8 is the usual date of the festival. In Delhi, the festival is commonly observed on Chaitra *badi* 7. The four studies of Delhi villages made under the auspices of the 1961 census that mention the festival give its date as the seventh, as does Lewis (1958: 200). Without mentioning a specific locality, Mukerji (1916: 49) also dated the festival on Chaitra *badi* 7. Shitala's festival in some localities may fall outside the five-month smallpox epidemic period. Probably with Bengal in mind, the Imperial Record Department (1914: 74) described the festival of Shitala worship, which they name Citala Sasthi Puja (Shitala Sasthi Worship), as taking place on Magh (January–February) *sudi* 6. (See also Wadley, 1980: 45.)

No single villager gave us a complete list of the Seven Sisters of disease. Usually, an informant would name three or four, sometimes identifying a specific disease with the wrong mother goddess, for example, Kanti Mata (typhoid) might be confused with Shitala (smallpox). We have added an eighth goddess, Chaurahewali Mata (Crossroads Mother). While not one of the Seven Sisters, she was worshipped on Sili Sat for the general welfare of children.

The Seven Sisters are

1. Shitala Mata, also known as Chechak Mata (Pox Mother) or Mata Rani, the goddess of smallpox.
2. Kalka (ki) Mata, also named Masani Mata, goddess of the cremation grounds (*masan*). Kalka in Delhi is the site of a shrine to the goddess. Only Chamar Leatherworkers regularly worshipped Kalka for the welfare of both children and other members of the caste. Inclusion of this mother goddess as one of the Seven Sisters in Shanti Nagar is based on her general protective function, especially as concerns children. Lewis (1958: 238), drawing on sources other than his own fieldwork, also listed Masani Mata as one of the Seven Sisters. No one in Shanti Nagar identified her with a specific disease. However, Rose (1919: 352–353) said that "Masán is a disease that causes emaciation or atrophy in children, and she is propitiated to avert it. . . . The origin of the name Masáni is not known, but probably it is connected with the disease of *masán* to which children are very liable."[21] Masani Mata is also identified with smallpox.
3. Khamera Mata, the goddess of measles. The difference between measles (rubeola) and German measles (rubella) was not recognized.

4. Khasra Mata, the goddess of itches, scabies, eczema, and similar maladies of the skin. These diseases were usually regarded as minor ailments, but children in particular were frequently afflicted with them. The term also refers to measles. Chicken pox usually fell within the realm of this goddess as a minor affliction, but it sometimes was considered to be in the domain of the Crossroads Mother Goddess.
5. Marsal Mata, the goddess of mumps.
6. Phul ki Mata (The Flower Mother), the goddess of boils and other similar large skin eruptions. This goddess is clearly distinguished from Khasra Mata, for the meaning of *phul*, flower or blossom, in this context is an eruption on the skin.
7. Kanti Mata or Moti Mata or Moti Jhara, the goddess of typhoid. During the second week of fever, a distinctive rash of small rose-colored spots appears on the trunk. It is this rash that is the diagnostic symptom of Kanti Mata in Shanti Nagar. Villagers say that the blisters shine like beads, hence Moti Mata. Rose (1919: 352) noted that the shrines for Kanti Mata ". . . are often to the north of the village, because the disease is supposed to have come from the hills." In Shanti Nagar, the shrine is north of the village.
8. Chaurahewali Mata, Crossroads Mother Goddess. She is propitiated for the welfare of children. She might be worshipped for any illness, if there is no other goddess to propitiate.

The names of the Seven Sisters apparently vary considerably. Ibbetson listed the Seven Sisters, aspects of Devi, as Sítala, Masáni, Basanti (Yellow Goddess), Máhá Máí (Great Mother), Polamde (possibly, She Who Makes the Body Soft), Lamkariá (She Who Hastens), and Agwáni (Leader) (Crooke, 1968, 1: 128; Rose, 1919: 350). Only two names on this list are matched by the goddesses of Shanti Nagar (Shitala and Masani). However, Rose expanded and qualified the basic list. Thus, Chaurahewali Mata appeared as Chauganwa Mata (She of the Four Villages) or Chaurasta Mata (She of the Four Ways). Rose also listed Kanti Mata as the goddess of typhoid, not mentioning the disease by name but remarking the characteristic pustular eruption.

Bubonic plague and cholera are two epidemic diseases that once took frightful tolls and still break out from time to time. Kanti Mata may be worshipped in times of plague, although there is a separate plague goddess, Phúlan Devi, ". . . whose half-completed shrine . . . attests her ill-will or inability to stay the disease" (Rose, 1919: 352). Marí Mái is the cholera goddess. According to Rose (1919: 356), she is in some areas propitiated by animal sacrifice (the *panch-balá* ritual) and, formerly, by the *sat-balá*, ". . . now out of date, as it consisted in the immolation of a pair of human beings, a woman as well as a man, to make up the mystic seven [*sat*]." Neither Phúlan Devi nor Marí Mái is worshipped, or probably even known, in Shanti Nagar.

The following description concerns basically the festivals of 1958 and 1959, enlarged and qualified by our observations of the festival of 1978. Differences between the observances of the 1950s and those of 1978 are not to be taken as indications of significant change. Variation is characteristic of village festivals that are enacted without written guidelines. In all three years, the women of some families worshipped at all the village shrines, others at selected shrines, still others wor-

shipped at home, and some families did nothing. The names of the deities and which goddess was worshipped at which shrine varied remarkably. The more women we questioned, the more the variation seemed to expand. The women were not in the least bothered by the inconstant character of the festival.

Variation among castes was not particularly noteworthy, with two exceptions. The single Gardener family claimed to have the seven goddesses of disease in its garden and worshipped them there instead of at the village shrines. There is a close connection between the Gardener (Mali) caste and the Seven Sisters of Disease, as is evident in several of the songs collected by Henry. A song that paraphrases the explanation of the Gardener of Shanti Nagar is the following:

> Oh, Mali, Mother is spinning around in the swing in your garden.
> All seven sisters at once are spinning around in the swing in your garden. . . .
> With Ganges water in the vessel, the Mali washes her feet,
> Oh Mali, in your garden. [Henry, 1988: 85]

The second exception concerned the Jats who are followers of the Arya Samaj. Although a few Jat women worshipped at the village shrines on Sili Sat, most of them worshipped at home. Arya Samaj beliefs had modified village Hinduism, a development that affected Sili Sat but was by no means limited to that festival.

On the eve of Sili Sat, women cleaned their stoves and brought fresh water from the well. They prepared the festive foods that would be used as offerings the next day. Women did not cook from the evening of the sixth day until the evening of Sili Sat. Formerly, they did not cook until the morning of the day after Sili Sat. They also purchased one rupee's worth of *batasha*s (white sugar candy) for later distribution as *prasad*, especially to children.

Early the next morning about 6:00 or 6:30 A.M., groups of women, dressed up for the occasion, prepared to parade to the shrines of the goddesses, the Panch Pir, and Bhumiya. The women and children who participated in the procession and the worship did not bathe beforehand. While women waited for their group to form, some of them threw food to expectant dogs, who gulped it down. Kolenda (1982: 235) said that an offering can be transmitted to Shitala through the medium of a black dog. As the women passed through the village, some of them distributed *batasha*s for blessings received during the year: a new bride in the household, a desired pregnancy, the birth of sons, and a son's having found a job. A Brahman man, who would not be permitted to join the procession of women, also distributed *batasha*s because a sick calf had recovered.

The women formed separate groups. The majority of participants in each group represented one caste, but often a few women from other castes, especially small castes, were included. For example, some Barber or Blacksmith women would join a large group of Brahman women who were their neighbors and friends. At least one woman from each family carried a large brass tray holding a dish of turmeric, a small pitcher of water, green gram, perhaps gur (brown sugar), a few coins, and the festive food, chiefly balls of sweet wheat porridge (*daliya*, made with coarse wheat flour, gur, and milk) sprinkled with wheat flour, and kneaded balls of wheat flour, the latter believed to offer protection against large hard boils. On the way to the first

shrine, some women plucked wild flowers to use as offerings. Strings of dung cakes were another common offering. They were said to have been left over from Holi, when many such strings were offered to the Holi bonfire. Women sang on the way to the shrines, reciting aspects of the ritual that would follow and praising the goddess, as in the following song:

> Mother, the Gardener [Mali] has made this garden,
> and the Gardener's wife waters the plants in the garden.
> My mother-queen [Mata Rani] is enjoying a peaceful sleep.
> Oh mother, dig a pond on the way.
> Mother, make a shop on the way.
> Make a storekeeper sit in the shop.
> They will bring coconut sweetmeats from this shop for you.

The song touches on the relationship of the Malis and the mother goddesses and offers praise to the creative power of Shitala (Mata Rani), who can generate a shop and shopkeeper. Offering sweetmeats to the goddess and digging a pond, a service to the goddess, are part of the ritual of Sili Sat.

The women first stopped at a shrine west of the village, a pile of earth and bricks about four feet high. In other ceremonies, women said that the mound was for the Panch Pir. When we asked the women whom we accompanied to the shrine what goddesses they were worshipping, several said that they did not know. Others said that the goddess was Gurgaonwali Mata (Mother Goddess of Gurgaon), some said Kanti Mata (Typhoid), and others said Moti Mata (Pearl Mother or Typhoid). Several informants, both women and men, said that the focus of worship was the Four Directions. Some women identified the directions as the abode of goddesses. A learned Brahman from another village explained the Four Directions as places of pilgrimage associated with a deity or where a deity resides. In the north is Badrinath, a place sacred to Vishnu and also a title of Vishnu (Lord of Badri). Jagannath (Lord of the World) resides in the east. He is a form of Vishnu, or Krishna. Puri, Orissa, is the great seat of his worship. In the south is Rameshwar (Lord of Rama), one of the twelve great Lingams set up by Ram. Dwarka, Krishna's capital in Gujarat (West India), is one of the seven sacred cities (Dowson, 1891: 39, 101, 129, 263).

In 1978, some women explained the directions not as the abode of deities specific to each direction but rather as the direction in which their natal villages (or the villages of their mother-in-law or daughters-in-law or some ancestor) were located. One woman clarified matters by pointing out that the deities being worshipped were the mother goddesses of these other villages. Hence, the directional goddesses are not the same for everyone. They are the mother goddesses located in specific villages related to the worshipper.

It is of interest that no one claimed to be worshipping Shitala or the Seven Sisters. The principal shrine at the spot, the 4-foot mound, is best thought of as a shrine where several deities can be propitiated, as circumstances require. The view is supported by the fact that lamps were lit on this shrine when the Panch Pir were worshipped in a ceremony on another day (fig. 45), but very few were used on Sili Sat, for Shitala is the Cool One.[22] One informant uniquely simplified matters by claim-

ing that the Panch Pir were the Seven Sisters or at least five goddesses (*panch* = five). Another informant ducked the question about names by identifying the deity as "the one who accepts porridge, the one you worship when pox breaks out." Another possibility concerning the main shrine is that on Sili Sat it represented the Seven Sisters and that the Panch Pir were worshipped separately at a nearby spot. In 1978, the shrine was said to be for Moti Mata. No one then spoke of the Four Directions as a set of goddesses.

At the shrine of the Seven Sisters (or the Panch Pir), the women offered water, flowers, food, a small coin, strings of dung cakes, *batashas*, and a yellow headcloth in some cases, and made tilaks with turmeric at the places of worship and on children (figs. 36, 37). The women removed their shoes when making the offerings. Sweeper women took the headcloths, and dogs ate the food. After the Panch Pir, the women made offerings in an area near the shrine, first to the Goddess of the North, then to the Goddess of the South, and finally, to the Goddess of the West. We did not observe any offerings made to the Goddess of the East. In a few cases, the food offerings were arranged in seven neat piles, probably representing the seven Mother Goddesses of Disease. Dogs quickly devoured the offerings of food. Then the women returned to the Goddess of the North and gestured with their hands, as if they were pressing her legs, a mark of respect. The women next went to a nearby pond, which

FIG. 36. Sili Sat, 1978. Women place their offerings on the shrine: strings of dung cakes, flowers, and the yellow cloth one woman holds in her left hand. The woman in the background has an *indi* on her head, a ring made of fiber cord that women wear when carrying burdens. (See S. Freed and R. Freed, 1978: fig. 66.)

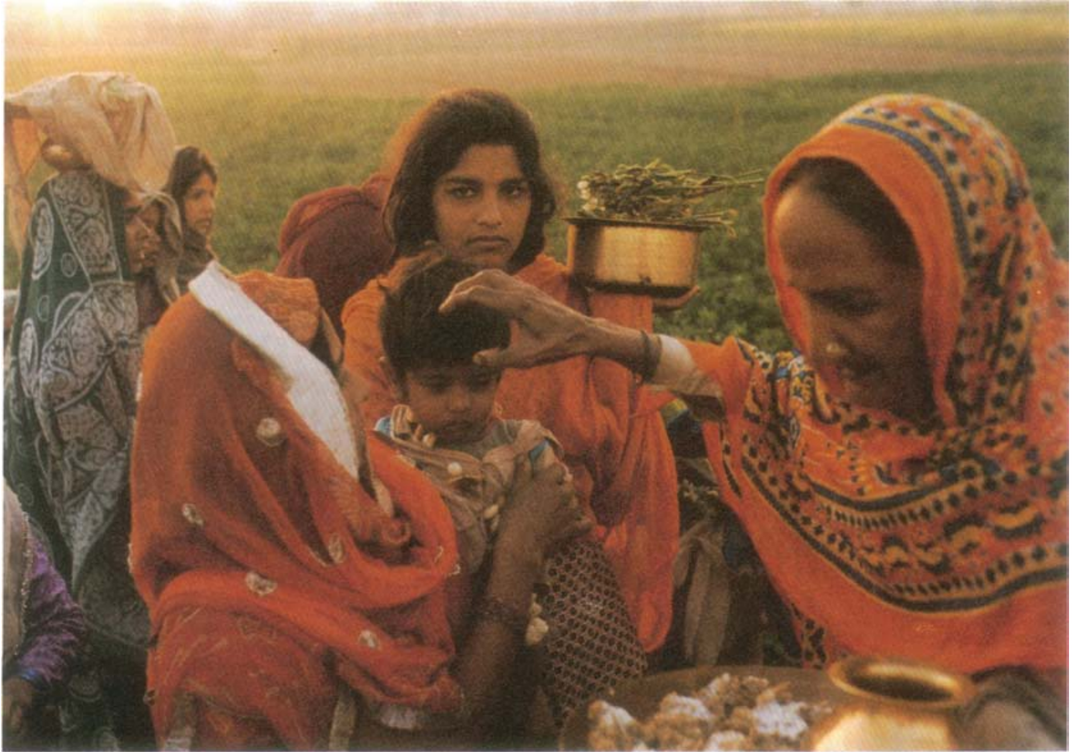


FIG. 37. Sili Sat, 1978. A woman blesses a child with a tilak of turmeric on its forehead. The Brahman woman behind the child was unmarried and need not cover her head.

they called the goddess's pond, and removed lumps of clay to clean it. In 1978, there were two ponds, a small one with a little water and a much larger pond. Women took handfuls of mud from the small pond and threw them, one by one, into the larger pond, while naming each family member and some deities.

Groups of women kept arriving, one after another. The worship was similar for each group. All the women went to three goddesses: north, south, and west. Young women frequently pressed the legs of older women. A surprising observation was that Potter wives touched the feet of Sweeper women, both young and old, and the Sweepers replied with blessings. Because the Sweepers rank lowest in the local caste hierarchy, one would not expect that a higher-ranking caste would make such a gesture. This gesture of respect was recognition of the supernatural power that adheres to Sweeper women on Sili Sat. Kolenda (1982: 232) regarded Sweeper women as mediums of Shitala: "On Mondays, mothers (especially of sons) give flour, oil, and salt to their family's Sweeper woman in order to protect the children from pox. The food . . . is fed symbolically to the goddess."

After worshipping the Panch Pir and the goddesses of the four directions, the women proceeded to the Bhumiya shrine. They poured water on the shrine, offered food, and made marks with turmeric on the front of the shrine near its top. The shrine is relatively large and substantial, made of bricks and mortar (figs. 38–39).

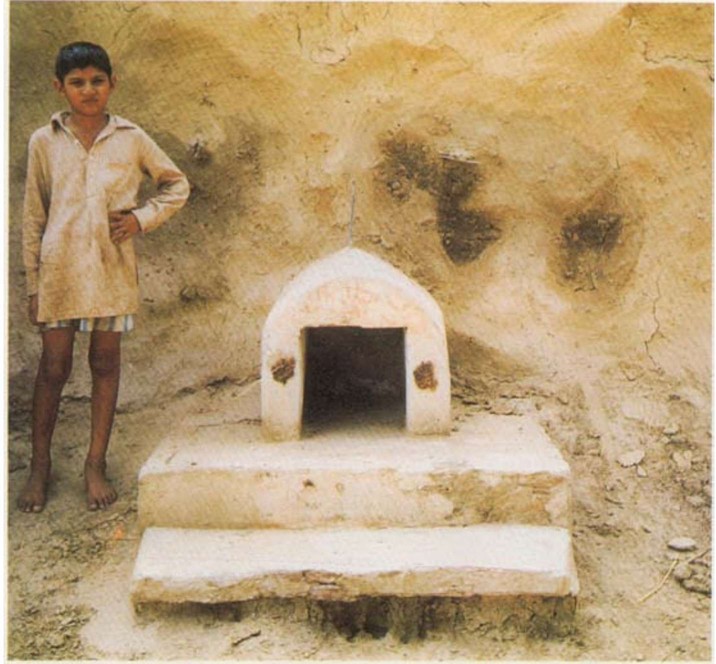


FIG. 38. Bhumiya shrine, 1958.

Bhumiya is worshipped at marriages or the mating of cows and buffaloes. Although Bhumiya is a male godling, his protective and procreative functions make him an appropriate deity to propitiate on Sili Sat.

The final stop was at the crossroads at the edge of the village where roads point in the four cardinal directions, two roads leading out of the village. This was the site of a simple shrine to the Crossroads Mother Goddess, consisting of just a brick and some sherds. However, the crossroads itself was the shrine, not the brick. The women offered water and food anywhere in the area, generally by the side of a road. The food was quickly devoured by pigs as well as by dogs, for the crossroads is adjacent to the Sweeper quarter (fig. 40). The Sweepers are the only caste that raises pigs.

Most of the activity at the crossroads involved the Sweepers, both men and women. They received whatever food was left after all the shrines had been worshipped. In addition, Sweeper women received gifts from their patrons (jajmans), usually a cloth. A Sweeper woman said that a woman gave a headcloth (*orhna*) to her Sweeper only if she had made a vow to give one to a mother goddess. The Sweeper woman would thus appear to be the surrogate of the goddess.

At the crossroads, Sweeper women released, or passed, a cock over the heads of children as a protective ritual. In Shanti Nagar, this ritual is practiced only on Sili Sat. We did not see the ritual in 1958, although we were at the crossroads. The Sweeper woman who worked for us explained that we missed the ritual because we were with a group of Brahman women but that the Leatherworkers had the ritual performed. She mentioned a Leatherworker woman who had requested the ritual for her children. We visited the Leatherworker woman, who said, "After worshipping

FIG. 39. *(left)* Bhumiya shrine, 1978.

FIG. 40. *(below)* Sili Sat, 1978. Pigs devour the offerings of food that women have left for the Crossroads Mother Goddess.

the goddesses, I asked [so-and-so's wife] to release a cock over my children's heads. I asked her to do it because she works for my family. I gave her a few annas and some grain—one gives what one can. She released the cock over the heads of all the Leatherworker children, and their parents gave her a little money. These other Leatherworkers asked her because she owns a cock." We did not see the ritual in 1959 either, but again we were with a group of Brahman women.

In 1978, we saw this ritual. The Sweeper who worked for us, the same woman as in 1958, was at the crossroads with her cock. She held it over the heads of children but did not release it (fig. 41). She touched the heads of many Brahman women with the cock and also touched it to our heads. She received food and a headcloth (figs. 42–43). After the cock ritual, women put tilaks on their kin and friends, pressed the legs of old women, and distributed *batasha*s and gur as *prasad*. The women then returned to their homes. A group of women took about one hour to complete the circumambulation of the shrines.

The ritual of the cock appears to be unrelated to the rest of the rituals of Sili Sat. The dominant activity of the festival is to make offerings to the mother goddesses for the protection of children. The cock ritual is not an offering but a ritual of transference. It may partly represent the transfer of ritual pollution from participants to the cock. Although the participants in the circumambulation of the mother-goddess shrines dressed up, they did not bathe beforehand. Thus, they were not as free from pollution as they might have been. This pollution was transferred to the cock.

However, the cock ritual is probably more strongly connected to the concept of an intrusive spirit force as the cause of illness (R. Freed and S. Freed, 1979: 305–306). It may be that a ceremony where participants are brought into close association with potentially dangerous supernatural beings requires a prophylactic ritual at its conclusion. If a participant harbors any spirit capable of causing illness, it is transferred to the cock.

The cock ritual is ancient and widespread in the world. Schauss wrote that on Yom Kippur, Orthodox Jews circle a fowl above the head nine times as a ritual of expiation of sin. The ritual, known as *Kaporos*, was practiced among the Jews of Babylonia in the 10th century (Schauss, 1938: 150, 164). The *New York Post* (October 10, 1997, p. 12) published a picture of the Jewish ritual with the caption, "An orthodox Jew swings a rooster over his friends' heads in a ceremony in which their sins are ritually transferred to the bird, which is eaten before the Yom Kippur fast."

Before entering their houses, women splashed water on both sides of the doorway and applied marks of turmeric. Sweeper women were seen going from door to door collecting gifts, probably from their patrons, especially Jats, who had not gone to the crossroads where Sweepers customarily receive gifts. Kanti Mata is located just to the north of the crossroads, and we asked a Brahman woman why this goddess was not worshipped. She replied that Kanti Mata is worshipped all year long, but the other goddesses are worshipped only on Sili Sat.

We saw only a few Jat women at the mother goddess shrines. Although the great majority of Jat women, in accord with Arya-Samaj doctrine, did not participate in the public worship of the goddesses, they worshipped privately. One Jat woman offered porridge, cotton seeds, yogurt, and gram at the place in her house where the

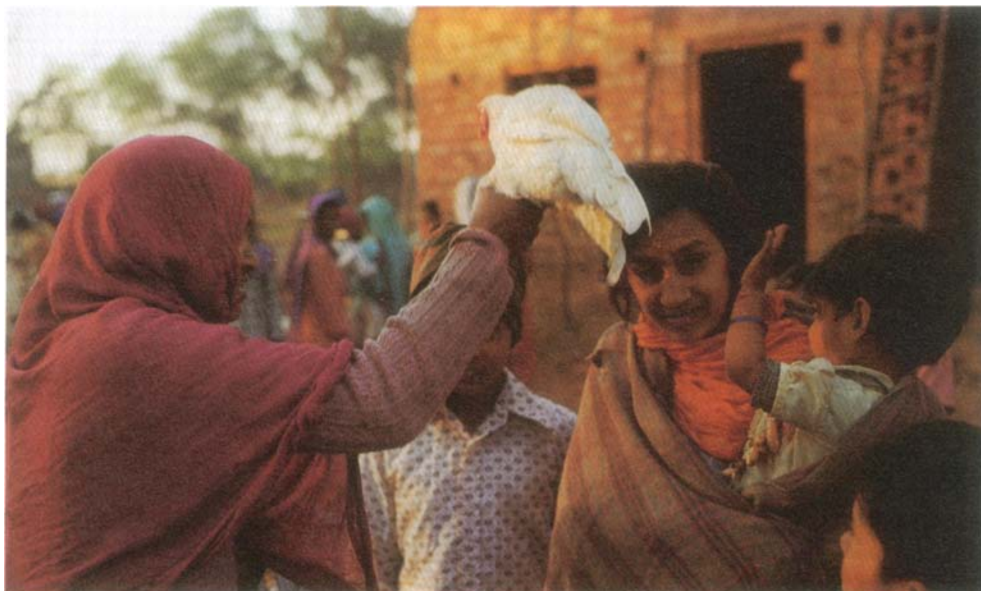
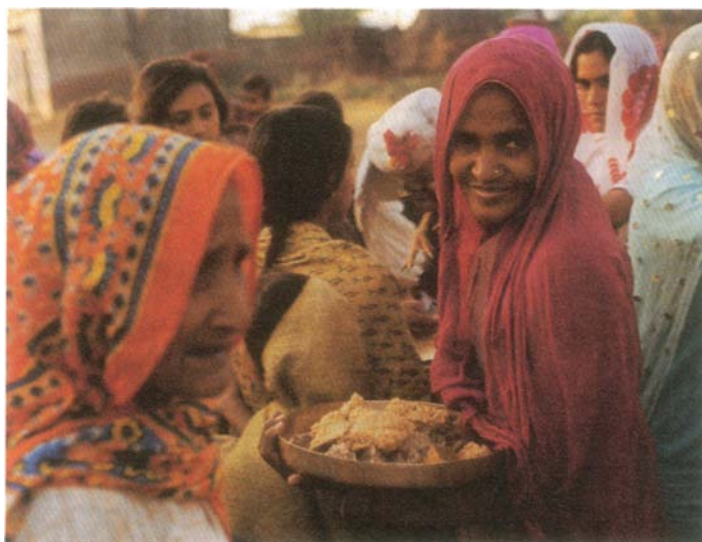


FIG. 41. *(above)* Sili Sat, 1978. A Sweeper woman circles a rooster over the heads of a mother and her child near the shrine of the Crossroads Mother Goddess.

FIG. 42. *(right)* Sili Sat, 1978. The Sweeper woman of figure 41 with her rooster over her right shoulder holds a tray of food that she was given by her jajmans. She also received a yellow cloth.



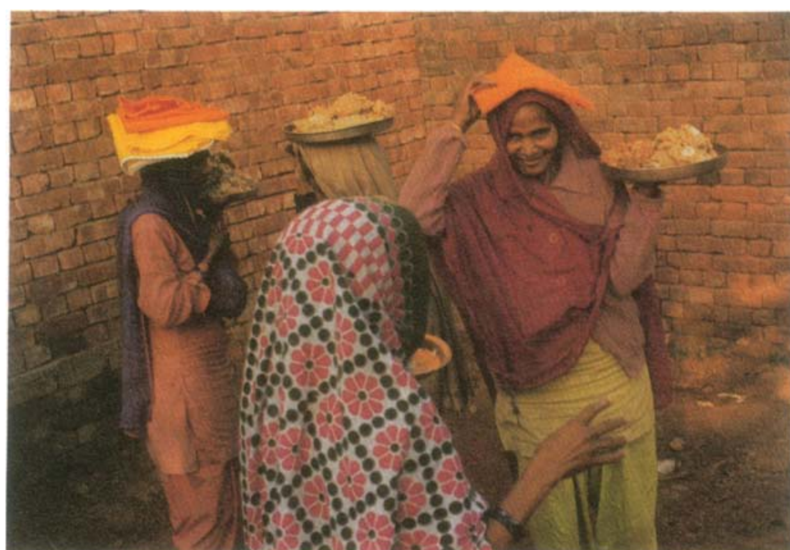


FIG. 43. Sweeper women leave the Crossroads Mother shrine with trays of food and yellow headcloths received from their jajmans.

cool water was stored, the abode of Shitala. She then moved the offerings to the door of the women's quarters, possibly as an invitation to Shitala to leave the premises, thus ushering smallpox out of the house. Then she splashed water on the wall and drew a swastika on it with turmeric. She said that the offering was for the welfare of her children. Another Jat woman followed a somewhat simpler routine. She simply drew a swastika, a good luck symbol, over the ledge where the pots of cool water were kept. Then the women of the family folded their hands in worship. There was no mention of an offering of food. Yet another Jat woman worshipped with a tilak on the ledge where the water was kept, offered food to dogs, and gave rice and *lassi* (a cool yogurt beverage) to the family's Sweeper.

Another Jat woman said that she had given food to dogs but otherwise did not worship as did the rest of the village. No matter where the offerings were made, they were eaten by dogs and, at Chaurahewali Mata, by pigs. It would be appropriate to distinguish between food deliberately fed to dogs, which then serve as mediums of the mother goddess, and food left at shrines. In the latter case, dogs scavenge at shrines on any occasion. For example, offerings left for the Panch Pir, who are male deities, are scavenged by dogs.

A fourth Jat woman described a more elaborate ritual. She plastered a small area with cow dung, offered porridge and yogurt, made a mark with turmeric, and then gave part of the offering to the family's cow and the rest to the dog.

Some Jat women may try to balance Arya-Samaj doctrine and the traditional ritual of Sili Sat. A 56-year-old Jat woman combined a ritual at home with offerings to the Crossroads Mother and to Kanti Mother at their village shrines. For Sili Sat, she said, "I usually cook on the sixth day and we have cold food on the seventh. I put seven piles of porridge, for the seven mothers, in a clean place inside the house. I put a turmeric tilak on all the mothers and then give the food to the dogs. This is Aryaness [*Arya panna*], for we don't worship the *mata*s."

Despite this household ritual, she also worshipped the Crossroads Mother Goddess. She said:

> On Sili Sat, I went to the Crossroads Mother Goddess. I had vowed to offer a headcloth for the birth of a grandson [who was less than five months old on Sili Sat]. So I offered the headcloth [to the family Sweeper whom she had summoned to the crossroads] and distributed two seers of gur and some *batasha*s, five to a child. Only the Brahmans and Bairagis go [on the circumambulation]. They go and worship Kanti Mother when any child has typhoid. If any child from my house has typhoid, then I will also go and offer sweetmeats at [the shrine of] Kanti Mata.

We saw this woman and also the child's mother at the shrine of the Crossroads Mother distributing *prasad*. Although this woman's account seems confusing, for she worships mother goddesses while denying such worship, it actually illustrates a basic tenet of village life, especially concerning sickness. Any or all remedies and rituals may be used if there is any chance of their being effective. In this case, not only had she taken a vow to encourage the birth of a son, but in addition, she worshipped the goddess because the baby had caught malaria. Thus, there were two reason for

making offerings at the Crossroads Mother. The role of the Sweeper woman as a surrogate for Shitala is clear in this account.

Consistency is not to be expected from Jat women concerning goddess worship. Another Jat woman told us that she did not worship the goddesses. Then we asked what she did on Sili Sat. She said that she cooked rice and porridge and made an offering to a goddess.

The circumambulation of the shrines in 1978 added two stops that were passed by in 1958 and 1959, namely, the crossroads at the southwest corner of the village and the main village well (fig. 83). The first stop in 1978, as in the 1950s, was the main shrine, called Moti Mata in 1978. Instead of worshipping the goddesses of the Four Directions in the field near the shrine, the women worshipped Gurgaonwali Mata, called Kanti Mata by some of the women. They then proceeded to the southwest crossroads where they made an offering to Chaurahewali Mata. Some villagers called the Crossroads Mother Goddess the strongest of the goddesses. She protected villagers from outsiders who came with evil intentions. Other villagers said that Kanti Mata was the strongest. Next, they went to the Bhumiya shrine, as they had done in the 1950s. Then they made an offering to Gurgaonwali Mata at the village well, which was located at a crossroads. Finally, they went to the main crossroads to worship Chaurahewali Mata, as in the 1950s.

Although the women cheerfully welcomed our company and that of our male assistants during the rituals, they did not permit the presence of village men, because Sili Sat is a women's festival. In 1978 when the women whom we accompanied arrived at the first shrine, the one for Moti Mata, they saw some young men watching them. They sang a song asking the men to leave, and they did without any fuss.

Despite some individual variation in ritual practice and the influence of the Arya Samaj on the Jats, the basic characteristics of Sili Sat are clear. It is a festival where women propitiate the goddess in her several manifestations to protect children from disease, principally the contagious pustular diseases. Women also make vows for various blessings, which often concern fertility. The themes of welfare, protection, and fertility occur in many festivals. The unique feature of Sili Sat is the use of cold, stale bread (*basi* means stale, hence the name of Basora for the festival). The choice of sweet wheat porridge as the principal offering is another noteworthy feature, as are the offerings made in the home where the cool water is stored. Underhill noted yet another unusual particular of the worship of Shitala: "She will accept the prayers and offerings of widows, if mothers, on behalf of their children" (Underhill, 1991: 105).

The role of dogs in the festival bears some discussion. Dogs generally consume the offerings of food left at shrines, not only on Sili Sat but also on other festivals and rituals. However, in all festivals but Sili Sat the participation of dogs is incidental; people do not deliberately offer food to dogs as a religious act, in the way that food is given to cows. However, people deliberately feed dogs on Sili Sat. This behavior is especially noticeable in the worship practiced at home by many Jat women, where the feeding of dogs often assumes a prominent place in what is usually a quick, simple ritual.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to go beyond Kolenda's interpretation that a black dog is the intermediary between a devotee and Shitala except that the connection of dogs and Shitala requires some explanation. A tenuous connection can be established between Shitala and Yama, God of Death. In Tamil country, the smallpox goddess is known as Mariyammai, "Mother Death" (Basham, 1954: 316). If a link between Shitala and a deity representing death can be admitted, then her connection with dogs is clear. Yama is accompanied by two fierce four-eyed dogs ". . . who wander about among men as his messengers, for the purpose of summoning men to the presence of their master . . ." (Garrett, 1990: 746). Thus, feeding dogs could be a way of appeasing both the God of Death and Mother Death.

Marriott (1955: 193) found no evident Sanskritic rationale for Sili Sat in the 1950s. Hence the festival was unambiguously part of the little tradition. Many festivals of the little tradition involve the worship of a local saint. As such, they have relatively little historical depth and are unknown beyond a limited region. There has not been enough time for Sanskritization, and in any case, such deities are of little interest to scholars in the centers of Hindu learning. On the other hand, Shitala is worshipped throughout India. This wide distribution suggests antiquity, as does the nature of the deity. Goddess worship is ancient, most likely pre-Vedic. It would therefore be remarkable if Sili Sat had escaped Sanskritization.

In fact, evidence of Sanskritization is accumulating. In the late 19th century, Crooke identified tendencies in that direction. Because in some places Shitala is identified with Kali, the wife of Shiva, Crooke (1968, 1: 129) commented that "Sitalâ is on the way to promotion to the higher heaven. . . . This has obviously passed through the mill of Brahmanism." Recent support for Crooke's observation comes from songs sung in a north Indian village during a mother goddess festival. The names of Shitala, Kali, Durga, and Mother are used interchangeably (Henry, 1988: 89):

> Riding a lion Shitala comes roaring, villagers.
> You don't know Mother, villagers. . . .
> Riding a lion Kali comes roaring, villagers. . . .
> Riding a lion [her traditional vehicle] Durga comes roaring, villagers.

The currently high level of literacy in the countryside will narrow the distance between Shitala and compatible elements of Sanskritic tradition. Wadley (1980: 34) commented that "the shift from orally transmitted tales to popular printed literature is especially crucial, tied as it is to processes of Sanskritization and standardization." This process is only slightly manifest in the Hindi-speaking region, for, as Wadley noted, ". . . only recently has a literary tradition begun to develop around [Shitala]."

Weekly Festivals

Many villagers regularly worship a specific deity on a given day of the week. Such weekly observances can be termed festivals, for their dates are set by the calendar. To be sure, they lack the more spectacular features of other festivals, such as a village wide display of lamps, parades of women circling the village, bonfires, and the

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The 3000-year-old Hindu tradition is a masterpiece of human thought. It has given rise to an ethical system of unsurpassed sophistication, has produced epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, that are on par with the epic literature of the West, and, as perhaps its crown jewel, has given the Bhagavad Gita to the world. One can learn a great deal about classical Hinduism by studying its sacred literature, but to understand modern Hinduism, one must go to the ordinary people in the villages.

Festivals are the most visible feature of village Hinduism. All common ritual practices are on display. The relationship of festivals to family life, the agricultural year, and to the everyday concerns of village people are clearly seen in offerings to deities, gifts exchanged between relatives, songs, drama, and storytelling. Festivals are the best point of entry into the study of Hinduism in ethnographic context.

In *Hindu Festivals in a North Indian Village* the authors describe each festival, tracing its relationship to other important village institutions, such as caste, kinship, and seasonal agricultural activities. Their analysis goes beyond the festivals as practiced in Shanti Nagar to include comparisons with practices in other villages and references to Indian and Hindu history, mythology, astronomy, and astrology. They note differential participation in festivals by caste, sect, age, and gender. The study covers a period of two decades. Although the festivals continued almost unchanged during this time, the authors point out the few discernible differences.

Hinduism, an ancient religion, still strongly influences life in modern India. It is the source of personal morality. Hindu festivals play an integrative role at the family, caste, village, and national levels. Religious parades and communal worship at several festivals emphasize village unity. Pilgrimages at festival times expand village unity to encompass a larger region. Many festivals strengthen the villagers' bond with the great literary Hindu tradition which they all share.

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ISBN 0-295-97707-8