Nidān: International Journal for Indian Studies
Volume 9, Issue 2. December 2024, pp. 35-48

Research Article

The Puzzle of Basil Brides and Canine Grooms: On the Material Assemblage of Hindu Folk Rituals, and the Agency of Non-humans

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This paper begins by looking at the tradition of *tulsi vivaha* (the wedding for a Basil plant), to ask what happens in rituals where basil plants are cast as brides. The analysis then widens out to compare *tulsi vivaha* to other types of Hindu folk weddings in which the bride or groom is non-human: a canine or a tree or a fruit or a frog. In each of these cases, the human participants are deploying the ritual idiom of human weddings for what must be entirely different purposes. I argue that the theoretical categories of assemblage and materiality have the capacity to open up new avenues for analysing these kinds of rituals, to better capture the deep and complex humanness of the people who stage them and to invite into the picture the non-human beings being married.

ritual, agency, Hinduism, folk, tradition

Introduction

This paper starts by asking: What is happening in a ritual that cannot be what it purports to be? Across South Asia and the Hindu diaspora, we find a range of traditions in which people stage wedding rituals in ways that feature surprising participants. In these assorted folk traditions, people perform the familiar gestures of a Hindu wedding—they set up bamboo canopies, they ornament brides in red saris and *sindhur* (vermillion), they drape grooms in garlands—but they direct those ritual gestures toward a bride or a groom who is not a person. Instead, these rituals feature a plant, a tree, a fruit, a statue, or an animal in the ritual role of a bride or groom. Basil brides can be joined to fossil grooms; *bel*-fruit (wood apple) grooms can be married to child-brides; divorced or astrologically blighted humans can be linked to trees or dogs. These are all brides and grooms that cannot (for a variety of reasons) reasonably get married, in a conventional human sense, and so the gestures of the ritual are not doing what they normally do when the participants are humans. If a wedding, on its face, purports to create a marriage, these assorted folk-rituals are manifestly doing something else.

When Hindus conduct a folk wedding-ritual for a non-human bride or groom (whether a basil plant or a *bel* fruit or a frog), they must in some sense be treating that bride or groom *as if* they were a person, in a ritual that acts *as if* it were creating a marriage. This 'as-if' stance was entirely lost on the people who first documented these folk-weddings: India's British colonisers took *tulsi*-weddings and other related phenomena quite literally (and ungenerously). They assumed that if Hindus held rituals for non-human brides and grooms, it must mean that they were incapable of accurately discerning reality. Perhaps Hindus simply could not recognise distinctions between humans and non-humans—or between suitable marriage-partners and unsuitable marriage-partners. When James Frazer wrote in a derisive throwaway comment in *The Golden Bough* (1922: 9) that "the custom of physically marrying men and women to trees

is still practised in India and other parts of the East," he seems to have thought that infantile non-Europeans were simply unable to tell the difference between marrying a tree and marrying a person. But one cannot responsibly start from such an ungenerous premise. There are not and never have been any humans, at any point in time or space, who would be unable to ascertain that there are meaningful differences between a banana tree and a human bride. All humans can see that plants and animals are not identical to people. If some Hindus perform folk-weddings for non-human participants, it cannot be that they are making a mistake.

Yet it does not necessarily follow either that the people who stage folk weddings for non-human participants share a sharp, binary distinction between human and animal, or living and non-living. It can be the case the ritual participants both know the difference between people and plants—and see the weddings they stage as meaningful, real, and substantive rather than symbolic. It seems likely that Hindu folk-weddings are somehow both less-than and much more-than a human-to-human wedding. Non-human brides and grooms enter into temporary situations that are something other than a lasting human kinship bond, and in so doing, they would seem to reach outward into many other registers of meaning.

In order to try to capture the ranges of available meaning in rituals such as a basil wedding, and the complex ways that humans and non-humans co-create those meanings in these rituals, it will be useful to look at them through the analytic lens of assemblage theory. An assemblage, in Jane Bennett's framing, is an accumulation of "lively and vibrant matter" (Bennett 2010: 1)—a coming-together of living and non-living, human and non-human, in messy and mutually creative ways. The lively, vibrant matter of an assemblage is not always cooperative, though; instead it often carries a certain "material recalcitrance" (ibid) that can push back against the aims and intentions of the involved humans. A basil bride might not be able to walk or talk, but she can still participate in complicated ways in the ritual of her wedding. Like all objects in rituals, she "do[es] not function simply as passive repositor[y] of cultural meanings; instead, [she] may actively shape meaning, human activity, and social relations" (Pintchman & Dempsey 2015: 4-5). As we examine a range of examples in the pages to follow, from basil weddings to *bel*-fruit weddings to dog-weddings, we will look for the ways that the human participants are doing thoughtful, deeply human work, and we will discover some ways that their non-humans collaborators participate in a messy, shared process of collective meaning-making.

Basil Brides

The first example we will consider, to understand Hindu folk-weddings featuring non-human brides and grooms, is the tradition of *tulsi vivaha*: the wedding for a basil plant. This wedding joins the goddess Tulsi (in the body of her namesake basil plant) to her divine groom, Krishna/ Vishnu, and it is performed by Hindu devotees from Gujarat to Odisha, and from Karnataka to Nepal. The ritual is typically staged annually in the autumn toward the end of the holy month of Kartik, most commonly on the twelfth day of the bright half or *shukla paksha* (which is to say, about a week after the celebration of the Chhath Puja, and about two weeks after Diwali). Tulsi weddings can sometimes be staged on a grand scale, e.g. Walters (2022: 96-97) describes a community-wide *tulsi vivaha* tradition in Saurashtra that involves invitations and processions between two full-scale temples. More often, however, *tulsi* weddings are celebrated at home as domestic rituals. As an annual observance, the *tulsi vivaha* serves both as a routinised reminder of the love between Hindu gods and goddesses, and as a starting-point for the main auspicious wedding season for human beings.

To celebrate *tulsi vivaha*, the ritual's organisers (normally the members of a household) will set up a wedding between a potted sacred-basil (*tulsi*) plant as the bride and a small metal

statue or a *shaligram* as the groom.[1] The bride is identified as the goddess Tulsi, while the groom is variously identified as Krishna or Vishnu.[2] Unlike her groom, Tulsi is not a deity who enjoys a robust mythology or an elaborate independent ritual life outside of this particular ritual; while her plant-form is often cultivated in domestic or temple spaces, and plays an important role in *ayurveda* medicines*,* this annual wedding is Tulsi's main opportunity to take centre stage. A family celebrating *tulsi vivaha* will generally begin by assembling a wedding-space in a courtyard or common room of their home. The space might be created around where the household's potted *tulsi* basil plant already grows, or the family might carry the 'bride' in her pot into the space. The women of the house might adorn the floor with *rangoli* and hang a cloth canopy to form a wedding *mandap* (pavilion)*.* Then the family will begin to prepare the bride for her wedding: just as they might fuss over a human bride, the participants in the *tulsi vivaha* will lovingly dress and decorate the basil plant, daubing her pot with vermillion (Walters 2022: 96):

> The bride, Tulsi, is clothed in a sari and draped with flower garlands and other ornaments (depending on the status and resources of the family). In some cases, a human face made from paper, wood, or metal may be attached to the crown of the tulsi plant so as to better facilitate decorating with *tikkas, bindi*, and earrings. [Care is taken] so that the weight of numerous decorations and miniature clothing does not accidentally damage a smaller or more fragile tulsi…

The groom, too, is prepared. He might be wrapped in a *dhoti* (a long loincloth), adorned with a turban, or draped with a garland around his neck, and he is often ritually bathed before meeting his bride (ibid). A basil wedding is accorded all the major features of a local or family iteration of a Hindu human wedding. The bride and groom might be offered gifts of clothing and jewellery; their wedding-site might be decorated with *rangoli* designs; the human participants might sing the traditional songs they learned from human weddings (Pintchman 2005: 130). There might be banana leaves, sugar cane, and flowers (playing the part of ordinary wedding-plants rather than participants); there may be *diyo*s (earthen lamps), incense, and bhajans (devotional music). Different *vivaha*s might end up being more or less elaborated, depending variously upon the affluence and enthusiasm (or not) of the hosting family; some households might devote only a handful of participants and hours to the divine wedding, while others might end up staging major events.

In most parts of South Asia, the annual ritual of *tulsi vivaha* is a standalone observance, complete in itself. In Varanasi, however, as Tracy Pintchman (2005) documents, the wedding of the basil-bride is woven into a broader ritual cycle that occupies the entire month of Kartik, during which time women gather every morning for several consecutive weeks of devotional rituals for Krishna. Each morning groups of women meet on the banks of the Ganges to sing songs, tell stories, and make temporary clay figurines that help dramatise Krishna's life. They begin with Krishna as a baby: waking him in the morning and feeding and bathing him. Then later, they celebrate his coming-of-age in a ceremony that invests him with his sacred thread. Once Krishna has been narrated into adulthood, the women begin to prepare to marry him off. They divide into groups of mothers and aunties to negotiate the match, and they jokingly argue

[1] A *shaligram* is an ammonite fossil from the Himalayas, commonly worshipped as an abstract self-emergent form of a deity (most commonly a god, but sometimes a goddess).

[2] Both the concrete form and the identity of the groom can vary (whether regionally, or between households, or even between observers explaining the same ritual), with easy slippage between Krishna and Vishnu because the former is an avatar of the latter. The bride is always identified as Tulsi, however, and she is always present as a living plant.

with one another over the dowry (Pintchman 2005: 136). Then on the day appointed for the wedding itself (ibid: 136-137):

> [t]he bride, a potted Tulsi plant with abundant foliage, is brought to the circle, dressed in a red cloth that functions as her wedding sari, and adorned with tinsel, small mirrors, and other decorations. The groom, represented here by a brass image, is also brought to the *puja* circle, massaged with mustard oil and turmeric, bathed in Ganges water, and dressed in finery. Participants place sweets and gifts before the bride and groom and display dowry offerings, including saris, pots and pans, and jewelry. They also engage in a raucous round of verbally abusive and often sexually crude songs (*gali*) as they would at a human marriage.
>
> … [A] pundit comes to the *puja* circle only long enough to perform his part and collect the dowry items as *dana*, while participants recite the seven marriage vows on behalf of the couple while circling a yellow cloth above their heads, symbolically marking the couple's circumambulation around the wedding fire. Then participants sprinkle *sindur* on the bride's 'head' to mark her new married status, throw puffed rice at the newlywed couple, and offer them yogurt sweetened with brown sugar, a mixture traditionally eaten by bride and groom.

Pintchman further notes that at the end of the main wedding, "in both 1997 and 1998, a food fight broke out" between the ritual participants she was observing: "women started chasing each other… laughing boisterously and clearly enjoying themselves a great deal" (ibid: 137). This silly and rambunctious ending to the ritual suggests that just because *tulsi vivaha* is a meaningful ritual, it does not have to be a solemn or even dignified occasion. The playfulness that Pintchman (2005) describes in her analysis is potentially an important part of *tulsi vivaha.* While Walters's (2022) describes the tradition in much more solemn terms, the basil-wedding that I myself attended during my fieldwork was quite whimsical and fun. Perhaps there is some intrinsic silliness to staging a wedding for a plant? Certainly it offers an opportunity for fun-serious ritual play.

In fall of 2009, I was living with a Hindu family just outside Kathmandu, Nepal. The family matriarch, Susmita (pseudonymised), had tasked me that morning to make small-scale flower-garlands: she handed me a needle and thread, and told me to pick enough marigolds from the garden to make two small flower necklaces or *mala*s and a medium-length straight garland string. Once I had finished, I joined Susmita near her home-shrine (a one-room stand-alone brick structure where she performed elaborate daily pujas to a range of deities). The household's *tulsi*-plant, in her everyday, ordinary terracotta pot, had been pulled into a place of prominence near the temple. Susmita had laid out a range of ritual implements (wicks and oil-lamps, water pots, dishes of fruit), and she was in the process of lovingly washing her metal Krishna-statue, which we would use for the groom. Once Susmita had rubbed Krishna dry with the edge of her shawl, we began decorating the outside of Tulsi's pot with daubs of moistened vermillion powder. We found some long sticks and pushed them into the dirt in the pot, to create a frame over which we could drape a red mesh wedding canopy and my marigold garland. Susmita began carefully winding a strip of red cloth around the spindly Tulsi as her wedding sari. But Tulsi was not exactly looking her best. The previously robust basil plant had shrivelled in the week or two leading up to her wedding, and had dropped almost all of her leaves.[3] As we paused to behold the bride, Susmita's sister-in-law arrived for the wedding.

[3] Perhaps this is a problem of trying to perform *tulsi vivaha* in the foothills of the Himalayas? In lower-altitude India, the weather remains warm and damp overnight up until the early winter. But in Kathmandu, by the time the month of Kartik arrives, overnight temperatures have begun to drop

Taking one look at Tulsi, she declared, "*Ia, devi ta sukhisakhyo*!"—loosely, "Gosh, the Goddess has completely dried up already, huh!?" The three of us dissolved into helpless laughter.

After we had laughed about how disastrously shrivelled our poor goddess was, we still went ahead with the *vivaha*. We still, with playful solemnity (or perhaps solemn playfulness) presented the bride to her groom. We lit a *diyo*, we arranged some fruit, we sang a short song. We celebrated the surprising ways that divine power can express itself in the world, and I was able to see the striking Hindu truth that gods' and goddesses' divine 'lives' are deeply like and entwined with human lives—while still being elusively Other. I was also able to see that within the context of this particular *tulsi vivaha*, the materiality of the plant herself mattered. The plant had not obeyed the calendar date or the desires of the human ritual planners. She had followed her own rhythms: she had gone dormant in response to the weather, rather than making herself available for humans to manipulate her purely as they wished. In Jane Bennett's framing, Tulsi was not "ensouled," but she was still "lively" (Bennett 2010: xvii). She may not have been an agent in the proceedings, but (in the phrasing Bennett adopts from Bruno Latour) she was still an actant: as with other components in an assemblage, a basil bride "has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (ibid viii). Tulsi had the capacity to offer a divine presence—or not. She could 'play along', or she could reveal the artifice and the play of the ritual to the ritual's human actors.

Trees, Leaves, and Fruits

While Tulsi is the most widespread plant-bride in vernacular Hinduism, she is certainly not the only plant-bodied being to take part in a folk-wedding. In fact, there are several different examples of Hindu traditions where rituals are staged around plant-forms—whether leaves, trees, or fruits—that embody brides or grooms. In many of these cases, the plant-bodied bride or groom is actually a temporary form for a god or goddess entering into the world, in a form through which humans can engage with them, think with them, and be impacted by them.

Besides Tulsi, there is another plant-bride to be found in Bengal, encountered in the annual folk-tradition of building a 'banana-wife' or *kala bou*.[4] The 'banana-wife' is assembled on the seventh day of Navaratri,[5] by collecting a set of sacred leaves,[6] and tying them around the base of a young banana tree (which has had its root-ball bundled up so that it can be easily carried around). Once assembled, a *kala bou* is understood to represent goddess Durga herself. While in other parts of Hindu South Asia, Durga is honoured at Navaratri as a warrior fighting off the buffalo-demon Mahisha, in the Bengali *kala bou* she is also honoured as a shy bride and a beloved out-married daughter returning for a short visit to her affectionate natal home (Nicholas 2013: 43, 73). In her form as a banana-bride, Durga is often bathed in the Ganges river (in a ritual called *kala bou snan*),[7] and then wrapped in a cloth sari. Her leafy 'forehead' is decorated with red *sindur* powder to mark her as a wife, and she is carefully

significantly and *tulsi* plants are frequently starting to go dormant. Photos of *tulsi vivaha* in India consistently feature lush, full bushes; in more mountainous Nepal the bride is often spindly and sparse.

[4] My thanks to Calynn Dowler for first drawing my attention to this parallel.

[5] The "Nine Nights" - also commonly celebrated as the "Ten Days" (Dussehra, Dasai).

[6] The *navapatrika*, or sacred nine leaves, that comprise the banana bride are a clear cognate to other regional Navaratri traditions. In Nepal, for example, people will gather five, seven, or nine leaves and place them at their home-altars in a bundle called *phulpati*. But the *phulpati* bundle is never directly anthropomorphised as Durga: it is not bathed, or considered to be a bride.

[7] See for example, for a very basic overview, "Kola Bou Puja 2020 Date, Rituals, Significance: Know More About Ceremonial Bathing of the Kala Bou, aka Banana Bride and her Transformation into a Goddess on Saptami During Durga Puja," (2020): https://ca.style.yahoo.com/kola-bou-puja-2020-date-094959208.html (accessed 23.05.2024).

placed next to the deity Ganesh, who is identified as her husband. While this ritual is not a folk-wedding per se (since the couple is apparently already married, and the wife is returning home to visit her family for the festival), the loving treatment of the banana tree offers an intriguing ritual that is parallel to *tulsi vivaha*: once again we find a plant-bodied goddess-bride ritually united with her statue-bodied god-husband, lovingly invoked by human devotees who want to lavish her with the intimate gestures of familial affection. Like Tulsi, *kala bou* gives human participants a way to think about divine lives and let those divine lives inhabit their human homes. But not all plant-partners are gods, and not all divine plant-partners ritually marry other gods. Indeed, not all folk-weddings featuring plant-bodied brides and grooms are primarily focused on the presences of divine beings. In fact, in some important examples, plant-bodied brides and grooms marry people—and the core purpose of these weddings are to frame and solve fundamentally human problems.

In the Kathmandu Valley, for example, among the ethnic Newar people there is an important lifecycle ritual in which a young girl marries a fruit. This 'mock-marriage' is called *ihi*, and is enacted through a wedding ceremony between the *bel* fruit (a wood apple) and a prepubescent girl—or more usually, it is conducted as a mass wedding between dozens of tiny brides and their even tinier grooms. The girls are most commonly aged five, seven, or nine (i.e., many years distant from their probable human wedding), yet they are dressed up as if they were adult women: clothed in all red, decked out in jewellery, and often heavily made up. Unlike the weddings of adult Newar women (which follow ritual patterns that are highly local and idiosyncratically Newar), the *ihi* ritual tends to follow the idioms of Sanskritic pan-Indian Hindu weddings, and include the *kanya-dan* and a Vedic fire-altar.[8] *Ihi* marks the little girls' first step into religious adulthood. During the two-day ritual, each bride sanctified by being variously anointed with water, milk, and *sindur* powder, are offered by her parents to god, who is in the form of her tiny fruit-groom.[9] Families snap photos as the tiny brides sit on a cloth on the ground with their even tinier *bel* fruit grooms (variously identified as the embodiments of Vishnu Narayana, Shiva, or Kubera/ Jambhala [Gellner 1991: 112]), and at the conclusion of the second day all the families celebrate with a large communal feast.

What is particularly interesting about the *ihi* ritual is that it is designed as a creative ritual solution to a thorny human social problem. In the patriarchal kinship structures of South Asia, women are deeply vulnerable to the possibility of widowhood. Most communities (especially high-caste communities) only allow women to marry once. While married to a living husband, a woman is auspicious and socially valued as a wife; if her husband predeceases her, however, she is left an inauspicious widow, blocked from remarrying and blocked from participation in some religious activities. Widowhood is a precarious state, a structurally vulnerable status where women might find themselves adrift from both their marital families and their birth families, made to feel burdensome or left to fend for themselves. Especially in earlier generations, when women married very young, a pre-teen widow in South Asia might suddenly find herself facing an entire adult life of struggle (Bennett 1983). But the ritual of *ihi* serves as somewhat of a 'vaccination' against this fate. Newar communities do not stigmatise women who lose their husbands as sharply as most other South Asian Hindu communities do. While there are some constraints on widows participating in religious auspicious or 'good-luck' rituals (Gellner 1992: 127), Newar families do not let widows drift away economically or socially in the

[8] Ritual fires in particular are familiar parts of high-caste Hindu weddings in most of the subcontinent, but they had *not* traditionally featured in most Newar weddings. This means that *ihi* is (perhaps counterintuitively) using wedding-idioms drawn from other communities' traditions, rather than miniaturising the adult versions of Newar weddings. (Gellner 1991:112)

[9] Some accounts of *ihi* insist that the *bel*-fruit is actually present not as the groom but as a witness to the wedding, and that the girl is instead marrying a bronze statue. (See for e.g. "Ihi Ceremony" (n.d.): https://www.bhaktapur.com/ihi-ceremony-the-mocking-marriage/, accessed 23.05.2024).

ways that Nepal's dominant ethnic groups tend to do (Galvin 2005; Bennett 1983). Nor do Newars place such intense restrictions on widows wanting to remarry. While middle-aged or elderly widows tend to be lightly discouraged from remarrying, young widows do not face the lifetime of precarity in Newar communities that might befall women from other Hindu ethnic groups (Gellner 1992: 204). After all, a woman who has lost her human husband is not truly a widow, so long as her family performed *ihi* for her. Because Newari girls are married off to god (in the form of a *bel* fruit) before they are ever married to a human groom, they are at least partially immunised against being widowed—because, after all, god never dies. *Ihi* thus plays with the ritual idioms of marriage—it is fun, and whimsical, and silly—but it also does deeply serious work, trying to address a profound human problem. When women's life-outcomes can be so deeply determined by the quality of the man she marries (and his longevity), it is perhaps blackly humorous for families to give their daughter the one groom who cannot let her down: a *bel* fruit. The tradition of *ihi* is in fact, though, only one example of a rich ritual repertoire in Hindu South Asia, in which marrying a plant has offered a solution to the manifold problems that can arise from trying to marry another person. There are actually a number of examples from several regions of India, in which human beings are ritually married to plants—but most of these Hindu plant/ human weddings involve not *bel* fruits, but full trees.

The tradition of staging a wedding that binds a person to a tree has a long and storied history in India. According to one early British source, it was reasonably common for people to marry trees if they were in the uncomfortable position of seeking an irregular marriage (Edwards 1922: 82-83):

> In the Punjab, for example, a Hindu cannot be legally married a third time. So, if he wishes to take a third wife, he is solemnly married first to a *babul* (*Acacia Arabica*) or to the *akh* plant (*Asclepia gigantea)*, so that the wife he subsequently marries is counted as his fourth, and the evil consequences of marrying a third time are thus avoided. The same practice is followed by Brahmans in Madras, who believe that a third marriage is very inauspicious, and that the bride will become a widow.
>
> Among various classes of Uriyas in Ganjam a bachelor who wishes to marry a widow, or a widower wishing to remarry, is obliged first to go through the ceremony of marrying a *sahada* tree (*Streblus asper*), which is afterwards cut down.
>
> In the Bombay Presidency it is a common custom for a man who has lost two wives to marry a *rui* (*Calotropis gigantea*) before he tempts fortune with a third helpmate; or again, a man whose poverty prevents his marrying a bride in the usual way, is similarly married to a *rui* and then to a widow; and as the re-marriage of a widow is, according to orthodox Hindu ideas, one of the most calamitous and undesirable transactions, the wedding of the pauper bridegroom has to be performed at dead of night under an old mango tree.

Alternatively, tree marriage could offer a solution for a crisis of astrological-charts (ibid 83):

> Very often, too, a Hindu bride is discovered by the priests to have been born under inauspicious planets, which may prove harmful to her spouse; and this danger is averted by marrying her first to a tree and afterwards to the bridegroom. Similarly in Oudh, if the ruling stars of the youth form a more powerful combination than those of his affianced bride, the difficulty is surmounted by solemnizing a marriage between the girl and a *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*).

These different examples point to tree-marriage primarily as a strategy that was in place to circumvent the pressures of a relatively rigid and patriarchal kinship structure: a human bride

or groom could undertake to marry a plant-partner as a way to offload the problems of remarriage, or widow-marriage, or astrological conflicts onto the tree. Nor is this a tradition of India's deep past, simply shed in more modern times. Indeed, in 2007, mega-star Bollywood actor Aishwarya Rai was widely rumoured to have been ritually married to a tree, on the advice of an astrologer, as part of her preparation to wed fellow film star Abhishek Bachchan. Aishwarya Rai and her in-laws, the Bachchans justifiably expressed annoyance at the media-fascination with her tree-marriage story (and in fact publicly ridiculed the very idea of marrying a tree), especially because the narrative spread to take on the form of an exotic and titillating story, rather than as an acknowledgement of what is a current and normal, cosmopolitan practice. In fact, I happen to know a cosmopolitan family in Nepal who, just a few years prior to Aishwarya Rai's wedding, had had to incorporate an extra ritual step into the marriage ceremony of their daughter. This family had, as usual, taken the astrological charts of their daughter and her prospective husband to a professional astrologer for consultation prior to their wedding, before an assessment of their cosmic compatibility. Sometimes if a Hindu astrologer identifies a mismatch in charts between prospective marital partners, an additional puja is recommended, or the wearing of a particular type of coloured-stone, or jewellery is advised. But in this case, the daughter of the family had become engaged to an American man, and his *chinha* (astrological traits) were judged to carry heavy negative influences. It was recommended that prior to the main wedding, the prospective bride could marry a statue of a deity (to protect her from the negative impacts of her human groom), or that her fiancé could marry a *tulsi* plant. Rather than explain to their American future-son-in-law that he should marry a basil-plant, the family arranged a small private *puja* a few days before the wedding, in which they married their daughter first to a *shaligram*.

So far, then, we have seen two different kinds of folk weddings. Sometimes, the materials of the ritual are assembled to enact a divine presence: Tulsi is called into the family's midst through a basil plant to share her joyful union to her divine groom, Durga is invoked in a leaf-wrapped banana tree to take on a role in the family as a beloved out-married daughter. Each of these practices, through the materiality of the ritual, allows human participants to richly feel the immediate presence of their deities. But in other cases, people undertake to marry plants in order to solve their very human problems: *bel* fruits or trees step in as grooms and brides to creatively ameliorate the dangers of patriarchal kinship structures. In these human/ plant weddings, the plant is not designed to be the person's long-term spouse, or even to joyfully bring a sacred presence into their community. Instead, these plant-brides and -grooms serve primarily as a meditation on the messy difficulties of personhood. Essentially, the plant is designated to 'catch' the problems of human/ human marriages, and the logic of the ritual grants the plant agency. In the context of a folk-wedding, a plant is empowered to fix some of the vulnerability and unpredictability of human lives.

Frogs and Dogs

Up until this point, we have been considering folk weddings in which non-human participants are quite pliable: when people stage rituals with plants and fruits, leaves and trees, they can move and manipulate these 'brides' and 'grooms' as they wish. But there is another subset of Hindu folk-weddings which we should consider: rituals in which the non-human bride or groom is not a plant, but rather a non-human animal. This set of rituals opens up an interesting new space, because such rituals assemble participants that are far more capable of unpredictable

behaviours—far more likely to make their own decisions in ways that shift and shape the assemblage they have been drawn into.[10]

Sometimes, the animal participants in such rituals are small enough to stay relatively controlled by the human participants. In several regions of India, for example, there is a folk-response to drought that involves staging a wedding for frogs. This ritual is known as *manduka parinaya* in Karnataka, or *bhekuli biya* in Assam, and it is unusual among the traditions we have examined so far, in the sense that the bride and groom prepared for the event actually match each other in form, species, and the function they fulfil towards the event's purpose. In the case of this ritual, they are always both frogs (Shankar 2023 [internet resource], emphasis original):

> As dusk descended and the crowd gathered in anticipation, the main event was about to begin. The bride and groom were about to make their grand entrance for their sacred union. The bride was dressed to the nines, her attire resplendent and attracting attention from all. As the rituals unfolded, they exchanged wreaths, and red vermilion (*sindoor*) was gently applied. Echoes of wedding songs filled the air, infusing it with joy and celebration. The wedding ensued in full Indian, *Band Baaja Baaraat* style with a pompous celebration… Everything was like any typical wedding, save for one peculiar fact – **the bride and groom were not humans, but frogs!**

Further, like we have already seen for other Hindu folk-weddings (ibid),

> [t]he ritual of the frog wedding mirrors the traditions of a classic Indian wedding. A female frog is carefully chosen and prepared for her big day. Her skin is anointed with oil, following which she is left to rest for a while. Later, she's bathed in water and adorned in attire fit for the special occasion. Meanwhile, the groom frog arrives with much fanfare, with dance and celebration marking the joyous event. The wedding ceremony then takes place, followed by the release of the newlywed couple into a pond – a honeymoon to their natural abode.

Weddings for frogs raise several themes we have already encountered. Like *tulsi*-weddings, frog-weddings seem to be carefully designed to mimic local wedding customs, whether that means giving the bride a *mangala-sutra* to adorn her neck or a toe-ring to slide onto her webbed foot. But, like *bel* or tree weddings, the fundamental purpose of the frog wedding is to solve a deeply human problem. In this case, the problem being addressed through the ritual is not the difficulty of human marriage relationships, but the difficulty of living in uncertain climates, and worsening ecological conditions. With large proportions of the Indian subcontinent still reliant on subsistence farming, droughts (and floods) are matters of fundamental seriousness and constitute a community-wide danger. A frog wedding offers an option for relief in the face of helplessness. But do the people who perform a frog wedding 'believe' it will work? Possibly. But it seems more likely that most people approach it with more of an attitude that it 'can't hurt/ might help': most people prefer to respond to a dire problem in some way rather than do nothing. Perhaps a frog wedding would not bring rain—but the community might as well try something that will at least be fun and bring everyone together to think about their collective problem in a light-hearted way. Plus, on the off-chance that the ritual works too well, and brings so much rain that everything floods—as supposedly happened

[10] For more on animal agency and the lively messy boundaries between animal and human lives, see Radhika Govindrajan's excellent book *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

in Bhopal in 2019—people always have the option to reverse the potent wedding-ritual's work by finding the married frogs and divorcing them (Singh 2019).

In addition to frog-weddings, we can also find ritual-problem-solving in the context of unorthodox weddings of people and dogs. Stories periodically show up in contemporary Indian news outlets regarding such cases where people stage weddings for a human being and their canine bride or groom. Dog-weddings resemble frog-weddings in that they are designed to address and repeal situations of misfortune, but whereas frog weddings are designed to rescue a whole community from the calamity of a drought, dog weddings appear designed to ameliorate or reverse more individualised problems faced by the central human participant. In Odisha, for instance, there is a tribal tradition among the Ho people that prescribes dog marriage as a solution for poor omens that surface in childhood. The local belief is that when a child's baby-teeth emerge in an irregular pattern, it is a sign that the child is in danger from evil spirits. For example, in 2009 (Dash 2009):

> An infant boy was married off to his neighbors' dog [to] stop the groom from being killed by wild animals, officials and witnesses said on Wednesday. Around 150 tribespeople performed the ritual recently in a hamlet in the state of Orissa's Jajpur district after the boy, who is under two years old, grew a tooth on his upper gum. The Munda tribe see such a growth in young children as a bad omen and believe it makes them prone to attacks by tigers and other animals. The tribal god will bless the child and ward off evil spirits after the marriage. The [baby-]groom, Sagula, was carried by his family in a procession to the village temple, where a priest solemnized the marriage between Sagula and his bride, Jyoti, by chanting Sanskrit hymns, a witness said. The dog belongs to the groom's neighbors and was set free to roam around the area after the ceremony. No dowry was exchanged, the witness said, and the boy will still be able to marry a human bride in the future without filing for divorce.

Other dog-weddings have been reported for children of the same tribal community, of both genders, from baby-hood up until late childhood. Such dog-weddings are designed to absorb and deflect the dangers of the unpredictable world around their child-participants.[11] But it is not only children who marry dogs. In 2007, an adult man named P. Selvakumar of Sivaganga district in Tamil Nadu decided to marry a dog in order to atone for a negative act of his past.[12] Selvakumar had stoned to death two mating dogs some fifteen years earlier, and hung their bodies from a tree. In the intervening years, he had suffered a variety of misfortunes, including partial paralysis and hearing-loss. On the advice of an astrologer, Selvakumar planned a dog-wedding in the hopes that if he married a dog and honoured her as though she were his wife, it would make up for his prior unethical act (Shekhar 2007):

> So Selvakumar got his relatives to find a stray bitch, which was [named Selvi], given a bath and draped in a saree. Selvakumar (33) and Selvi then marched in a procession to [a local Ganesh] temple where Selvakumar tied the *thaali* (*mangalsutra*) around the dog's neck. While the bridegroom and his relatives had a sumptuous meal, the bridal dog was given a bun.

[11] See for example "Human-dog marriage continues in tribal Ho village in Odisha", *Orissa Post* (2023): https://www.orissapost.com/human-dog-marriage-continues-in-tribal-ho-village-in-odisha/ (accessed 24.05.2024).

[12] GC Shekhar (2007). "Man marries bitch to atone for his sin." *Hindustan Times*: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/man-marries-bitch-to-atone-for-his-sin/story-uYodd2dmZ86jWtNJ1XL9KM.html (accessed 24.05.2024)

Another dog-wedding was held in Jharkand in 2014, when a young woman named Mangli Munda was married to a dog to resolve her astrological and spiritual problems. While Selvakumar appears to have planned his own wedding, Mangli Munda's dog-wedding appears to have been planned by her parents and other adults in her community, based on problems in her astrological chart. Apparently, when her parents went to arrange her marriage, their initial consultation with a local guru revealed that she had problems in her astrological chart. Her parents then sought council from the local village Panchayat committee, and took steps to arrange a dog-wedding to absorb their daughter's difficulties. They found a yellow-brown stray dog that they named Sheru. On the day appointed for the wedding, dozens of members of the community gathered, and Mangli was dressed in a white and red sari with a gauzy red and gold veil. Sheru the groom was garlanded and blessed with *tika* powder anointed on to his forehead, and then driven to the wedding in a hired automobile (Perez 2014).

> Treating the dog as they would a man, the locals decked him out in ceremonial tribal garments and danced alongside him to traditional drumming. "Apart from the fact that the groom is a dog, we followed all customs," said Munda's mother, Seema Devi. "We respect the dog as much as we would respect a normal groom." Around 70 members of Munda's village and family attended the ceremony, which elders said was the only way Munda would be able to enjoy a harmonious life, according to Barcroft. "We had to make sure that the evil spell is destroyed," said Munda's father, Sri Amnmunda. "And marrying a dog is the only way to get rid of the bad luck." Munda will now have to live with Sheru and raise him for the next few months, but luckily the marriage will not truly affect her love life because village customs say she is free to marry again without having to go through the hassle of a doggy divorce.

Like the child/ dog weddings of Odisha, the idiosyncratic dog-weddings of Selvakumar and Mangli Munda are designed to fix bad luck and negative spiritual influences. None of the dog weddings lock human participants into a long-term relationship with the dog; none of them block human participants from taking human partners in future marriage. What is particularly interesting about the wedding folk-rituals involving animal-brides or animal-grooms (whether dogs or frogs) is that the participants are much less predictable than the basil-brides or *bel*-fruit grooms discussed earlier in the article. There is very little that a plant can do to resist a situation—but a frog might hop away from the proceedings, while a dog might run away, fail to remain stationary, or in worst case scenarios, even bite its prospective bride or groom. A video of Mangali Munda's wedding shows her dog-groom, Sheru, being variously carried and herded around has emerged on YouTube;[13] he eventually flopped down on his side beside her, rather than sitting decorously through the ritual. A dog or a frog is a fuller participant in a ritual than a plant is: an animal is, thus, less reliable and less pliable, and more likely to disregard the wishes of the human ritual planners.

When these cases of dog-weddings or frog-weddings get reported in Indian or international media, they are often offered up as wacky interest stories, showcasing the superstitiousness or the lack of sophistication of India's rural or tribal poor, meant for the entertainment of her educated urban elites. How 'ridiculous' it must be for someone to misapprehend whom to marry, these news-pieces suggest! But of course there is no one who thinks that a dog or a frog would make a good spouse. On the other hand, it is equally obvious that the organisers and participants of these rituals come to the ritual from a space that has a richer-than-literal understanding of what is happening. They must necessarily understand the nature of the materials they are assembling, and they must also be purposefully allowing those materials to

[13] See "Woman Marries Dog in Traditional Ceremony in India", (2014). *Truly-Channel, YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcyDb3w5PLQ (accessed 24.05.2024).

act on their lives in complicated ways. They must be thinking along with the ritual, doing along with the ritual, playing alongside with the ritual… and perhaps letting the ritual play with them.

Conclusion: Assemblage and Agency

Up until now, in my work seeking to understand rituals (Mocko 2016), I have always made a point to examine what people do with the rituals they perform—how they use it to think, organise experiences, construct and contest social identities, and reshape their worlds. This lens offers valuable insights into Hindu folk-weddings for non-humans, prompting us to view human participants and ritual actors as purposeful and strategic actors. From this perspective, we might ask: What strategies or purposes are served by a non-literal wedding? How do rituals like marrying a basil bride or a canine groom enable people to negotiate their social identities or reflect theologically on their worlds?

However, this anthropocentric approach also has its limits. By centring human agency and relegating non-humans to passive roles, it risks obscuring a more nuanced understanding of agency, particularly in the Indian context. Indian philosophical and theological traditions have long embraced a more fluid and interconnected view of existence (see e.g. Kachru 2021), and most traditional Indic thought-worlds resist rigid distinctions between human agents and inert non-human objects. Instead, the traditions of India would teach us that the world operates on a continuum where even minutest matter possesses some degree of agency, and where all living beings—including plants, animals, and gods—exist in dynamic, ethically inflected relationality. Traditionally (Nicholas 2013: 31),

> Hindus do not draw a sharp line between a material and a spiritual body, or between humans and gods. There are humans who should be worshipped as gods, such as one's parents or one's guru. Gods have bodies and bodily lives, and bringing them near for worship is as natural as worshipping one's parents when they are present; both are *pujaniya*, 'worthy of worship.'"

To analyse these rituals through a Eurocentric lens of human dominance over inert objects is to miss the profound fluidity and participatory capacity attributed to non-human entities in Indic traditions. But we can start to better capture such a fluid, participatory capacity for a range of participants by viewing rituals as assemblages. An assemblage, as Kajri Jain describes it, is "a set of working links that takes on a certain consistency, coherence, and durability but does not form an organic whole or a closed structure" (Jain 2021: 11). Such a perspective invites us to consider the "thing power" of the non-human participants—the plants, statues, and other entities that, while not ensouled, may still possess a liveliness of their own. By extending agency beyond the human participants in a ritual, we can take seriously the idea that a basil plant might be not entirely a bride, but also not merely a plant.

In other words, viewing ritual as an assemblage allows for a more distributive agency, where the objects and substances involved are not simply tools of human intention but active collaborators capable of shaping realities. This framing shifts our understanding: it is not only that people do things with rituals, but also that rituals do things with people. Basil-brides, *bel*-fruit grooms, and newly married frogs are not inert symbols; they are active participants in remaking and enlivening the world. Together, they challenge us to rethink the boundaries of agency and the vibrant possibilities inherent to ritual life.

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