

*Oral Tradition*, 12/1 (1997): 54-75

## **The Beggared Mother: Older Women's Narratives in West Bengal**

**Sarah Lamb**

“Let me tell you a story,” one white-clad and white-haired widow and mother of eight said to me on my first visit to her rambling family home crowded with descendants and the smoke of several cooking fires, “about the way it is to be a mother these days. Mothers raise their children with such effort and pain. But when they grow up, the children don't even recognize them.” And she proceeded to tell me a story—which I will repeat shortly—of an old and devoted mother who comes to be forgotten and turned into a beggar by her only and beloved son.<sup>1</sup>

Studies of South Asian women's expressive traditions have largely left out the voices and perspectives of older women. Where older women do appear, they are most often characters (such as mothers or mothers-in-law) in narratives told from the viewpoint of a younger woman (a daughter, daughter-in-law, or young wife), not the central protagonists of the tales themselves.<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps because the images of older women in the literature on South Asian women's oral traditions have come largely from younger women's tales that these images are generally of powerful, fortunate matrons: the revered older mother or the domineering mother-in-law. Daughters, for instance, tell of how they love and revere their mothers. Margaret Trawick (1986; 1990:163-70) describes women's folk songs in Tamil Nadu in which daughters (the protagonists of the songs) yearn for

---

<sup>1</sup> Research in West Bengal during 1989-90 was generously funded by the Fulbright-Hays Foundation, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. My deepest gratitude is reserved for the people of West Bengal, especially the residents of Mangaldihi, who enabled me to live among them. For their valuable comments on earlier versions of the paper, I wish also to thank Edward Black, McKim Marriott, Diane Mines, Gloria Goodwin Raheja, Sylvia Vatuk, and the anonymous reviewers for *Oral Tradition*.

<sup>2</sup> For an exception, see Ramanujan's story of a poor, old widow (1991:42-43). Gold 1994 also examines the storytelling of a “widow in her sixties,” Shobhag Kanvar. Even this widow's story, however, has as its central protagonist a young girl.

continuity with their mothers, while it is their mothers who cut them away. Ramanujan's tale from Karnataka, "A Flowering Tree" (elsewhere in this volume), opens with two daughters devoted to their elderly mother. They turn into a flowering tree for her sake, to make money to relieve her from the menial tasks she must perform to feed and clothe them. In her study of social dyads in a vast number of South Asian folktales, Brenda Beck likewise observes that "a son's sentiments toward his mother are uniformly depicted in positive terms," as are those of a daughter for her mother (1986:96-97).

There is also the familiar image in studies of South Asian women's oral traditions of the domineering mother-in-law, who oppresses her sons' wives by trying to prevent the establishment of conjugal intimacy, keeping the wives away from their own natal kin, and forcing their daughters-in-law to overwork. Raheja and Gold provide rich examples of songs and narratives in this vein. In one song, a young bride speaks to her husband: "How can I come, how can I come near you? Husband, your grandmother is very cunning. She fights with me and then puts her own cot down next to our bed" (1994:127).

The images of older women in such tales and songs are consistent in many ways with the portrait of the powerful, post-menopausal Indian mother-in-law commonly found in other studies of South Asian women's lives. This picture of the mother-in-law playing the role of matriarch to a large extended family of sons, sons' wives, and grandchildren is a familiar one in the literature, although—as Vatak points out (1995:295)—it has not been subjected to close analytical scrutiny, or examined critically from the perspective of the older woman herself.

In this article I wish to concentrate on the less often heard voices of older South Asian women by looking at the stories they tell about motherhood. Stories told by older women in West Bengal, from a mother's perspective, tend not to focus on the power of mothers and mothers-in-law, but on their powerlessness; not on the revered mother, but on the beggared and displaced one. I suggest that it is through such oral narratives that many Bengali women scrutinize and critique the social worlds they experience, giving voice to their experiences through the language of story. Many women come to believe, as they grow up and listen to the more dominant oral traditions and much of everyday talk, that becoming a mother-in-law and a mother of grown sons will lead to unparalleled freedoms, unquestioned authority, and devoted affection; but they encounter instead plaguing disappointments and troubling ambiguities. Their narratives form, then, a kind of subaltern voice, through which they present alternate visions of motherhood and a woman's old age, visions that

contrast with the more official ones.

I will concentrate here on three tales. The first is a traditional story about a revered mother, told from a daughter-in-law's perspective. It is included here as counterpoint. The latter two, a folk tale and a personal narrative, concern beggared mothers and the compelling ambiguities of a woman's old age.

It was while living in a large village called Mangaldihi in 1989 and 1990 that I heard these stories and met the women who tell them. Mangaldihi is located in the gently undulating red earthen terrain of the Birbhum District of West Bengal, about 150 kilometers northwest of Calcutta, about five hours by train and bus. In 1990 it was home to about 1,700 residents, including seventeen Hindu caste groups, a neighborhood of Muslims, and a neighborhood of tribal Santals. When writing of "older" or "old" women here, I will be using the indigenous sense of the term *burī*, which basically means women whose children are married, who tend to be widowed, and who are largely white-haired and white-clad.

### **The Revered Mother: A *Vratakathā* Story**

First, let me tell you a story told from a young woman's perspective. It portrays the cultural ideal of the older woman as revered mother and mother-in-law. This is a domestic ritual story, or *vratakathā*, one of the more popular women's narrative genres in West Bengal. *Vratakathās* are stories told mostly by upper caste women to accompany the performance of domestic rituals or vows called *vratās*.<sup>3</sup> They are largely happy stories, emphasizing the powers of women to bring about domestic well-being through correct moral action and ritual attention to deities. In Mangaldihi, these stories are performed mostly by young, upper caste daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law who gather together in groups of five to twenty-five in the courtyards of their homes, where they tell and listen to the stories just before breaking their ritual fasts. The *vratakathā* stories, once only orally transmitted, are now usually read from small paperback pamphlets compiled by Brahman priests and available inexpensively at local markets.

The protagonist in such ritual stories is usually a young wife or daughter-in-law (*boumā*) who lives in a household headed by her mother-in-law (*śāśurī*). The young wife's husband is generally more loyal to his

---

<sup>3</sup> Women's *vratakathā* storytelling traditions are also popular elsewhere in North India. See, for example, Wadley 1975:61-90; 1986.

mother than to his wife, and it is the primary duty of the young wife to serve and honor her husband's mother. Ultimately, such respectful devotion toward the elder mother brings about material and spiritual well-being for the family and society as a whole.

One dawn, soon after I had moved into Mangaldihi, a group of neighborhood girls arrived breathlessly at my door to invite me to come hear a *vratakathā* story. Their mothers had sent them, knowing that I was a young wife and thinking that the story would be personally edifying for me. I picked up my notebook and tape recorder and went off. Women and children were meandering into the earthen-walled courtyard of a modest Brahman home. They were wrapped in light shawls in the early morning sun. Some were knitting; others were attending to children. There was an underlying hum of gossip. The women and many of the daughters had been fasting since the previous day in honor of the goddess Mangalcandi, as they did whenever a Tuesday fell on the final day of the lunar month. The reading of the story would mark the end of the ritual fast. It went like this:<sup>4</sup>

There was once a very poor Brahman man. His household included himself, his wife, and his mother; other than that, they had no one at all. Their days passed with difficulty. One day the Brahman said to his wife, "Look, you can't run a household without money. So I've been thinking that I'll go to the king's palace to try to earn a few things to bring home. You look after Ma with care. See that she doesn't suffer at all."

After saying all this to his wife, the Brahman decided on a good day and took off on his journey. At home, the wife began to look after her mother-in-law (*śāśurī*) with great effort (*khub jatna karte lāglo*). But to what effect? Day by day the mother-in-law began to dry up like a piece of burnt wood.<sup>5</sup> The wife's life-breath (*prān*) floated away with fear. She thought, "What's this? I'm feeding her milk and ghee with such care. Why is she still drying up like a piece of burnt wood?"

Three or four months went by like this. With each passing day, the Brahman wife's fear increased. "What will my husband say when he returns? That I had a scheme to kill his mother by not feeding her and drying her out? If you care for someone, do they dry out like this?" Thinking and worrying in this way, the Brahman wife couldn't sleep any more at night. She would toss and turn all night long, thinking all sorts of

---

<sup>4</sup> See *Meyeder Vratakathā* (Bhattacharjya n.d.: 52-57). The story is called the "*Mangal-Sangkrānti Vratakathā*," the "Tuesday-on-the-last-day-of-the-month ritual tale." As it is a long story, I translate the most relevant portions of the narrative verbatim and summarize others, as indicated by brackets.

<sup>5</sup> Bengalis commonly associate becoming "dry" with aging and sickness.

troubled thoughts. . . .

[One morning,] as soon as it began to get light, the wife got up and swept the house. Then she washed the dishes and took her bath. A little later the Brahman appeared. He brought with him two porters bearing rice, dal, oil, flour, ghee, clothes, towels, and so much more! The Brahman had also brought back a lot of money. The wife quickly took all the things into their home. The Brahman washed his hands and feet, and entered the house to call his mother. But when he saw his mother's appearance, the Brahman fell back ten steps in fear. His wife pleaded, "I wasn't lax at all in serving Ma. But I too have been so worried seeing Ma somehow dry out day by day like this. I've been worrying and worrying now for several months."

[The Brahman then took a bath, ate a little bit, and went to his mother.] "Oh, Ma!" he asked, "Did your daughter-in-law (*boumā*) look after you well?" The mother answered, "Yes, dear! My *boumā* looked after me with great care. She cooked all kinds of food for me, and she gave me a big bowl of milk twice a day. Why, dear, why are you asking this?" The Brahman replied, "Well, she is the daughter of another (*parer meye*).<sup>6</sup> You look like you haven't eaten for days. Have you been sick at all?" The mother answered, "No, dear! I haven't noticed anything." The Brahman then went to his wife and said, "Look, I'm going away again. If I can find some medicine to make Ma better, I'll come back. If not, I won't come home again." Saying this, the Brahman left the house.

He went on his way, and at noontime as he was going along, the Brahman came upon an old *sannyāsi* woman meditating under a banyan tree. He folded his hands and sat down beside her. At dusk, the *sannyāsi* woman broke off her meditation. The Brahman bowed down to her and said, "Ma, you are all-knowing. But I have no idea what kind of illness has befallen my mother," . . . and he one by one recounted to her everything that had happened. The *sannyāsi* woman listened and responded, "This sickness occurs when someone [i.e., your wife] touches a copper worship dish, Brahman man, conch shell, or cow [all sacred items] while in an impure [*asuci*, i.e. menstrual] condition. But if one performs the *Mangal-sangkrānti vratā* [Tuesday-on-the-last-day-of-the-month ritual for the goddess Mangalcandi], then this sickness will be cured." [The *sannyāsi* woman then instructed the Brahman as to how he must travel to a certain queen, where he could acquire all the necessary items and knowledge for performing the special ritual.]

[When the Brahman had learned all he needed to know,] he made the trip back to his home. When he arrived, he told his wife everything. [He gave her the ritual ingredients, and she immediately went to work performing the ritual very carefully. When she was finished, she offered her mother-in-law the ritual water to drink.] Four or five days later, after

---

<sup>6</sup> The phrase *parer meye* means literally an "other's girl," that is, the daughter of strangers. It is a phrase often used to highlight the common feeling that inmarrying wives are not a real part of their conjugal families.

drinking the water, the mother-in-law was completely cured!

All of the other village housewives came to listen to the Brahman wife's story, and they all began to perform the *Mangal-sangkrānti* ritual.

And if you do this ritual, then even if you touch things while in an impure condition, no harm will occur. This ritual is one that every woman should perform.

This story contains interesting elements regarding the management of menstrual impurity, but I must leave that topic aside here to focus on the story's mother. Several of this story's themes are common in *vratākathā* narratives and in other traditional tales about family relations that focus on the duties of young wives. First, the daughter-in-law's primary duty is to serve and honor her husband's mother. If any ill befalls the mother, it is the young wife who is held culpable. The wife tosses and turns at night worrying about how her husband will blame her for his mother's illness, and he does return home to do just that. In fact, it turns out that it really is the wife who is to blame, for it is the ill effects of her actions (here, the improper management of menstrual impurity) that flow up to harm the elderly mother.

Second, the son's devotion to his mother overrides that to his wife. The Brahman tells his wife, "I'm going. If I can find some medicine to make Ma better, I'll come back. If not, I won't come home again." The family line or *baṃśa*, represented in the form of the mother-son bond, is stressed here over conjugal ties—and the son's reference to his wife as a *parer meye* ("other's girl," or "daughter of strangers") highlights this emphasis. The son is more attached to his mother than he is to his wife; if his mother cannot reside harmoniously with them, he no longer wishes to be a part of the household.

Finally, the mother in the tale is presented as a venerable being. Note how the ill effects of the wife's menstrual impurity flow up to harm her mother-in-law, who is associated with other sacred objects—the copper plate (*tāmār ṭāṭ*) and conch shells (*śāṅkh*) used in daily worship, the sacred thread (*paitā*) that Brahman men wear, and the sacred cow—that the wife unknowingly touches in her state of menstrual impurity, causing the mother to become ill. Women listening to the story in Mangaldihi noted, in fact, that this is one of the main morals of the tale: one should treat one's mother-in-law and mother with respectful devotion (*bhaktī*), as one would other sacred things.

Such *vratākathā* stories, according to Ramanujan's classification of narrative genres, are "interior, domestic" stories, told by women in the inner courtyards of their homes, and told mostly about women's domestic

relationships (Ramanujan 1986; see also Wadley 1986:200). I suggest, however, that compared to many other women's narrative genres in Mangaldihi, such as the folktales and personal narratives favored by older women that I will get to shortly, the *vratakathā* stories are actually relatively public. First, they are performed, although in inner courtyards, by relatively large groups of women in conjunction with popular rituals, and they are also now printed in publicly accessible paperback pamphlets (which have been compiled, furthermore, by male Brahman priests).

Second and even more importantly, *vratakathā* stories express widely held cultural beliefs and values, forming part of a dominant discourse about the way things ought to be. People in Mangaldihi frequently described to me moral values and family relations similar to those portrayed in the *vratakathā* narratives: mothers and mothers-in-law are “like deities”—as are other elders—because of their “senior” or “grown” status. Mothers are also revered, Bengalis say, because of their reproductive powers. A mother is like the earth (*prthibī*) or land (*bhūmi*), as is the earth like a mother, for in the wombs or “fields” (*kshetra*) of both, “seeds” (*bīj*, of semen or of food) are nourished and brought to life. The sacred Hindu cow is also compared to a mother, for both bring forth milk, the food that has the power to nourish and sustain human life. Some of Bengal's most popular deities, such as Durga, Kali, and Sitala, are also mothers (Nicholas 1982), and devotees call out to them in moments of devotional fervor, “O Ma!,” like children calling their own moms.

But women's oral narratives in Bengal contain multiple voices and perspectives. Once older women have taught their daughters and daughters-in-law the *vratakathā* stories, they rarely take any more interest in either performing or listening to them. The stories they tell, from a mother's perspective and traditionally in even more interior and private settings, paint a very different image of motherhood and a woman's old age.

See what happens, now, in an old woman's story about a mother who becomes a beggar.

### **The Beggared Mother: Older Women's Folktales**

There was once a mother who raised her only son with much effort and suffering. She sold all of her wealth to feed him when he was young and to give him a good education; but in the end he gave nothing back to her. When he grew up and she gave his marriage, he and his wife left her alone and went to spend all of their time traveling around here and there. So what could the mother do? She ended up as a beggar. After a while she

made her way to Bakresbar [a local Saivite pilgrimage spot] and there she lined up every day with all of the other old beggars and her begging bowl in front of her.

One day it happened that her son and his wife went on a trip to Bakresbar. There the son's mother was sitting as usual in a line with all of the other beggars along the path to the bathing area. Can a mother ever forget her son? Never. But the son did not recognize his mother. He dropped a coin into her begging dish, and at this moment, his mother called him by his name, the name she had called him when he was a child. He was startled; he knew that no one knew this name but his mother. He was about to stop and say something to her, but his wife would not let him stand there. She pulled on his arm and said, "You don't have to talk to that old woman," and she led him away.

"So, you see," the old woman storyteller closed with a sigh, "mothers raise their sons with such tremendous effort and pain, but the sons forget" (*mārā cheleder bahut kaṣṭa kare mānus kare, kintu chelerā mane rākhe nā*).

This story was told to me by a high caste (*Kāyastha*) widow in her nineties from the neighboring village of Batikar, on a late fall morning as I visited with her in a spacious mud-walled room with two of her great-granddaughters. The old widow, called Debu's Ma, was herself proud to live in a large ancestral home crowded with four generations of descendants still eating rice from the same pot. But she also enjoyed telling stories about the problems of old mothers.

Like other older women, she told stories primarily to friends or to grandchildren, in back rooms, in inner courtyards, or on the cool platforms of temples, in the middle of the day while other people were busy doing work. Their stories did not constitute part of special ritual performances, nor were they formally performed before large groups of friends. Rather, they were told as parts of everyday conversations, as a means of scrutinizing and commenting upon the social worlds they experience. Before opening her story, Debu's Ma had been telling me about the lamentable ways of mothers and sons:

Mothers raise their children with such effort and pain. But the children don't even recognize them when they grow up (*ār cinte pāre nā*). Children . . . come from their mother's deepest insides within the womb (*nārī*). The mother feeds them her breast milk and cleans up their urine and excrement. But does the son now remember those days? No.

In her story a mother yearns for intimacy with her son, while her son abandons and forgets her. It follows a sequence of events familiar in stories told by and about old mothers: a mother sacrifices everything for her son,





Debu's Ma, teller of the story of the beggared mother, 1990.

but ultimately there is a failure of reciprocity. When the son grows up, he gives nothing back to her. The son turns from his mother to his wife, and in the end he forgets her altogether. Being abandoned and forgotten by her son in this way, the mother is stripped not only of material support but also of her identity. She can do nothing else but become one in an indistinguishable line of old beggars, waiting silently with her tin bowl in front of her. The blame in this story, furthermore, falls mostly on the son's

wife rather than on the son. For although the son abandons and forgets his mother, it is the son's wife who plays the active role in leading him away.

In another story, told by an eighty-year-old Brahman woman known as Choto Ma (or "Little Mother"), a son leaves his mother not for his wife but to go off to work in a faraway city. Choto Ma told this story to me while chatting with several of her friends, as they often did, to illustrate the particularly degenerate nature of "modern society" (*ādhunik samāj*) and the ways old mothers get especially short shrift in these times.

There was a mother, as Choto Ma told it,<sup>7</sup> who lived with her only son and his wife. One day the son decided to take a job in a far-off city, and he left his mother behind with his wife, promising to come home as soon as he could make some money. Several days went by, but they received no word from him. Then one day, without saying anything, the daughter-in-law began to dress up to go out, putting on a fine sari and powder on her face. She didn't even ask her mother-in-law's permission or tell her where she was going! She simply caught the noon bus and left the mother there all alone.

"You see," Choto Ma said, "it is no longer the age of mothers (*māyer jug*); it is the age of daughters-in-law (*bouer jug*). Daughters-in-law want their independence (*svādhīnatā*). They say, 'I married your son, not you'." Choto Ma's friend and sister-in-law, Mejo Ma, added knowingly with concern, "And now everyone is going to cities to work. Who will serve the mothers?"

This story, although much more spartan in detail, has a parallel structure to the *vratakathā* story that I opened with above. In both narratives a son goes away from his mother in order to make money, and he leaves his mother behind with his wife. But while in the *vratakathā* story the son parts from his mother reluctantly, carefully entrusting her to his wife's care, and finally returns home eager for reunion, here the son seems to leave indifferently and we never hear of him again. Furthermore, while the *vratakathā* story revolves around the wife's devoted care for her husband's mother, in this old woman's story the son's wife just casually takes off.

Before adding any further commentary on these tales, let us turn to a personal narrative told by another elderly widow, Billo's Ma, that echoes many of the same themes.

---

<sup>7</sup> I did not record this story. The account here is reconstructed from notes I took several hours later. I include it here, then, not to examine the specific language of Choto Ma's narrative, but to illustrate the kinds of themes older women convey in their own daily lives.

### The Life Story of Billo's Ma

Stories older women in Mangaldihi told me about their own lives mimicked in many ways the same themes—of being forgotten and becoming beggars—found in their folktales. I was the primary elicitor of and audience for the personal narratives I collected, but the narrators readily took to the practice, calling their narrations their “life’s stories” (*jībaner galpa*). In fact, such personal narratives also became a kind of public narrative performance as I stayed on in the village, as visitors would come to the large courtyard of my landlord’s home in the evenings (where many people also often congregated around the television) and ask to hear such and such a Ma’s taped life story. Several white-clad and white-haired women also sought me out, climbing the three flights of stairs to my high



Older women gather in the late morning to gossip or tell stories (*galpa kara*), 1990.

room and veranda, lining up to say, "You haven't taped my life story yet," and demanding that their stories also be recorded and listened to publicly on tape.<sup>8</sup>

Older women in Mangaldihi tended to divide their life stories into a strikingly uniform sequence of events and life phases. The narratives would begin with a brief but glowing account of the happy years of childhood. In this period a girl lives in her father's house (*bāper bāri*) and receives, as women describe it, unlimited supplies of food and love. Next come the years in a father-in-law's house (*śvaśur bāri*) as a young wife or *bou*. Women tell here of being painfully torn away from their natal homes, and of their relationships with their mothers-in-law (*śāśurī*), who were often kind and loving but who were also usually strict, watchful, and demanding. The third life phase is that of a mother of young children. Women describe becoming gradually a part of their marital homes, with long years of sacrifice and work raising children, pouring out endless quantities of love, breast milk, food, and material wealth to them. The final life phase is the current one: that of an elderly or "increased" (*briddha, burī*) mother of sons who have brought in wives.

I will focus here on the story of Billo's Ma. Her story is a little different than some, for she had a difficult early childhood: she was orphaned as an infant, although raised with love by her mother's brother. It is a story that became popular in the village and contains one of the more dramatic and moving narratives of motherhood. Billo's Ma was an elderly *Bagdi* (low caste) widow, with four married sons and two married daughters, called by most, as is typical, by reference to her eldest son. She was a small, worn woman with a strong, independent spirit and thin gray-black hair pulled back into a scant knot. She lived in a compound with three of her sons and their wives but considered herself to be living "alone" (*ekā*), for she maintained a small mud hut and cooking stove of her own, obtaining food by making cow dung patties for fuel for wealthier Brahman families. She told me her life story one afternoon as her daughters-in-law were off at the local video hall and she sat tending a fire, boiling some rice for her evening meal. She told her story with a great deal of emotion, at times breaking into tears. Several neighborhood children listened as she spoke. Following are lengthy excerpts from my recording, including some of my questions and comments, which clearly influenced the unfolding of her story:

---

<sup>8</sup> For more on personal narratives as an oral performance genre, see Dolby-Stahl 1983, 1985; Robinson 1981; and Carlin 1992. See also The Personal Narratives Group 1989 for more on using personal narratives to study gender and women's lives.

I [Interviewer]: What all has happened in your life since childhood?

B [Billo's Ma]: . . . In my childhood my mother and father weren't there. I have no parents. My mother and father died in bed. My mother, father, and older sister—they all died in the same bed in one day and one night, from cholera. I was in the bed with my dead parents, lying on top of a dead mother and dead father. And then Ma Manasa [the snake goddess] picked me up and gave me to my *māmā* [mother's brother]. And my *māmā* raised me. . . .

I: Do you remember that?

B: How would I remember it? I don't even remember my parents. They died when I was ten months old. My aunt and uncle brought me up. They kept me in their house. They gave my wedding when I was seven. My husband was then eighteen. Because I was so young, they didn't take me. I mean, just the wedding happened [but the marriage wasn't consummated at that time]. But they were saying that if they waited until I was older, then my wedding wouldn't happen because I would be too old. Back then it was like that. So I was kept at home [for several years]. It's not good for a young girl to stay in her father-in-law's house (*śvaśur ghar*). I lived very well with my parents. I couldn't call my aunt an aunt; I called her mother.

And then after staying [in my father-in-law's house] for five years, my oldest son was born. And then all the rest happened—I had eight children—six sons and two daughters. . . . My father, that is, my uncle, died before my wedding. . . . He died, and my family (*saṃsār*) happened. I began to make a household with my kids. . . .

I brought up my children with great difficulty (*khub kaṣṭa kare*). And their father was sick for two years. He would walk a little and then he couldn't walk any more. All my kids were still very young when their father died. Not one of them was old enough to work. So I had to bring them all up. During the time when their father was sick I had to sell one and a half *bighās* [about a half acre] of land. I sold a house. Water jugs, plates, dishes, I had to sell everything. There was nothing left. Ankle bracelets, a waistband, three pairs of gold earrings, silver and conch shell bracelets, a necklace and pendant—all these I had to sell. But even with selling all this, nothing happened. We took him to the doctor . . . , and we took him to an astrologer (*ganak*) who said he had a stone in his stomach. But no one could stop the illness. And then he began to emit a foul odor when he breathed. And his urine was as red as the *āltā* [red dye] you wear on your feet. And he never had any bowel movements—the tiny bit that happened was as black as coal tar. And he was in a lot of pain.

But even though we sold all of our things, nothing could be done. We had a broken house then where we would stay. I would work all day long, then come home and cook a bit of rice. There was no room to sleep in

our house, so the kids would go to sleep in the courtyard of Babu's house [a nearby Brahman household]. And two of us would stay in the broken house. There was no room for more than that to sleep. I used to tell him [my husband] before he died, "You'll die, and how will we live?"

I suffered a lot raising those children. We didn't even have clothes to wear. At that time one sari cost about six or ten rupees. I would buy one of those, cut it into two, and I would wear one part and my oldest daughter would wear the other. I would give my daughter the better part. . . .

So I raised my children with so much difficulty. I cooked for some, washed clothes for others. I did whatever anyone told me to do. A neighbor Borgi man, Golap Das, used to look after us a lot. Every day on his way to the office in the morning he would ask the kids, "What did you eat?" I would answer, "We had tea." He'd say, "You did have tea?" And I'd say, "Yes." He'd say, "Good." And then on his way home every day he would ask if we had eaten rice. On the days that we had eaten, I'd say, "Yes, we ate." [Then she began to cry, and continued through her tears:] And on the days we hadn't eaten, I would say, "No, we didn't eat today." [She stopped crying and paused for a moment.] Then his mother would send us rice, or a bit of flour. One day she gave three fish to feed to the kids. They sometimes gave a few clothes to the kids as well. And during festival time I would work in Khudi Thakrun's [a wealthy Brahman woman's] house. I did all kinds of work. And I would take what people would give me. It won't do to slander anyone. Whoever gives, gives; whoever doesn't give, doesn't give. . . .

I: Then what happened? Your children grew up, and then?

B: My sons all grew up, and I gave all their weddings. All of their own families have happened, and now whose am I? Now whose am I (*ei bār āmi kothākār ke*)? I am no longer anyone (*ār to āmi keu nay*). Now someone [one son] is saying, "I came from a hole in the ground." Another is saying, "I fell from the sky." Another is saying, "I came from God," and yet another is saying, "My hands and feet came on their own; I grew up on my own." Who am I now (*ei bār āmi ke*)? I'm speaking the truth. What kind of thing is a mother *mā ābār ki eman jinis?* . . .

Listen. I have four sons. If they had all lived in one place, that would have been good, wouldn't it? If they would all come to eat [together]. If they would take the money they earned, put it into my hand and say, "Ma, will you handle this for me"? Then my heart would have been happy. But now, whatever your brothers [i.e., her sons] bring home, whom do they give it to? Their mother? Or their wives? Huh?

I: You mean your sons give everything to their wives?

B: Yes. They have their own families and their own work. How will I take anything from them? . . .

I ate as many days as there was food in my fate. I don't depend on

anyone—only God. God is my support. Now it's time for me to die. I could just close my eyes and it would happen.

Her story was interrupted when a neighboring wife arrived and asked Billo's Ma, "Where did they [i.e., her daughters-in-law] all go?" Billo's Ma answered in a sarcastic tone, "All of those well educated girls went to watch the video. What intelligence and education they'll bring back, understanding it all and laughing about it! And how much work I've done since they've been gone! I collected firewood, came home, swept the courtyard, made tea, and now am cooking rice."

Billo's Ma, like the beggared mother in the *Kāyastha* widow's folktale, yearns for intimacy with her sons, but her sons and daughters-in-law turn away from her. She sacrifices all of her wealth to raise her children, but in the end—as she tells it—she receives nothing in return.

### **Mothers, Beggars, and Women's Stories**

At this point I must note that very few of the women in Mangaldihi who told stories of beggared mothers were impoverished themselves, at least by village standards, nor were most (not even Billo's Ma) neglected, in any blatant way at least, by their sons. Then why is it that so many of the older women I knew told stories of beggared and forgotten mothers, in contrast to much of the public discourse and popular ritual tales (*vratakathā*) about loved, revered, and even divine mothers?

I suggest in this article's final section that telling such stories provides women a forum for presenting an alternate way of looking at things, a way that resonates more soundly with the ambiguities of their own life experiences. Even if not literally beggared, these women narrate circumstances in their own lives that make them, in significant respects, like beggars. The theme of the mother as beggar works here, I suggest, as a polyvalent metaphor conveying a loss of love, a vulnerability to poverty, and the ephemeral character of a woman's identity over the life course.

Let us turn now to some of the themes in Billo's Ma's narrative, themes that recur in other life stories and tales I heard told by older Bengali women. First is the theme of the failure of reciprocity. Bengalis say that a mother's sacrifices for her children are immense. She provides them the tremendous gifts of birth, breast milk, food, material wealth, and love. But these gifts do not form merely a one-way transaction. In giving to her children, a mother creates in them an immense debt (*ṛn*), a debt that the children are expected to strive to repay their mother in her late life. The

relationship between a mother (or a father) and children, then, is thought to be a long-term reciprocal one, in which children—particularly sons—care for their parents in old age in exchange for the tremendous gifts previously bestowed upon the children.<sup>9</sup> This kind of intergenerational reciprocity is portrayed in many of the *vratakathā* ritual tales, such as the one I told above. That whole story revolves, in fact, around the unfailing devoted care the son and his wife provide for their elderly mother.

In the stories that older women tell, however, there is almost always a breakdown in mother-child reciprocity. A recurrent theme in the narratives of older women is that of mothers who have given everything they have to their sons—birth, breast milk, food, and material wealth—but who ultimately receive nothing in return. The sons in these stories grow up; not only do they begin to give to their wives instead of to their mothers, but they do not even recognize their mothers anymore. Even worse, they deny that their mothers ever gave them birth. Billo's Ma reports her sons as saying, "I came from a hole in the ground," "I fell from the sky," "I came from God," "My hands and feet came on their own; I grew up on my own." This is very important, because if a son forgets his mother's previous sacrifices, he does not owe her anything. In this way the mothers in the stories are pushed out of the family body, no longer partners in reciprocal family exchanges. They become beggars *par excellence*—persons who receive scattered handouts but who are not recognized as having given anything themselves. Such scenarios convey a pervasive sentiment of older women—that even if they are not blatantly rejected by their sons, their previous sacrifices are never sufficiently appreciated or rewarded. Beggary here works as a metaphor for the loss of love. Sons grow up and turn to their wives and their own children. Mothers will always love and give to their children more than they are loved and given in return.

A second recurrent theme in older women's narratives is that of poverty. In the *vratakathā* ritual tale I told here, although the old mother does not control property in her own right, she is well cared for in her son's home. The son returns from the king's palace laden with household goods and money to support not only his wife but also his mother.

In older women's tales, however, the mothers most commonly not only have no property of their own—having sacrificed it all previously to raise their children—but they also are not provided for by their sons. The

---

<sup>9</sup> See also Vatuk 1990 and Lamb 1993:98-136 for more on intergenerational reciprocity in Indian families. Note that since daughters usually move to their husbands' homes upon marriage, it is the sons (with their inmarrying wives) who are primarily responsible for caring for the parents in old age.



son in the mother-as-beggar tale abandons his mother without leaving behind any food or money, so she has no other recourse but to become a beggar. Billo's Ma tells of how her sons give money and food to their wives and not to their mother, forcing her to labor, making cow dung patties for food and clothing through her last days. This image of the poverty-stricken, even beggared mother was one that continued to crop up in older women's life narratives. Another white-haired woman, a widow referred to by many as "Khudi Thakrun's daughter" (after the proud, most senior woman in the village), related in the same vein:

I have given everything that I had to my daughter. Now I have nothing at all. I am now sitting dressed as a beggar. I have nothing at all. . . . But now they no longer love me as they did. I gave everything to them and now they don't really care about what's left. . . . This is my life of sadness (*ei āmār dukher jiban*). This is my history (*ei āmār itihās*).

Indeed, the image of the beggared mother speaks to a real vulnerability of older women *vis à vis* property. Women in Bengal rarely own or control property in their own right. Although Bengal has widow inheritance laws requiring that widows inherit a portion of their husbands' property, very few observe these laws in practice. Older widows almost uniformly turn over any property, either by verbal agreement or legal transfer, to their sons upon their husbands' deaths. It is significant, too, that the majority of women do become widows during the last stage of their lives, for Bengali women commonly outlive their husbands and still only rarely practice widow remarriage, especially if widowed in late life (Lamb 1993:365-99, Chen and Dreze 1993). Women, then, more often than not become entirely dependent on their sons in late life not only for emotional but also for material support, and thus are threatened with beggary should their sons desert them.

Significantly, images of beggary do not surface as commonly in narratives by and about older men. True, I heard several fathers express anxiety lest their sons abandon them in late life; but the threat of becoming a beggar is not one voiced often by old men. In one folktale told to me, in fact, a son does abandon his elderly father, but the father is not thereby forced to beg. Instead, it is the son who loses his inheritance.

In fact, there are more destitute, homeless, and beggared old women in West Bengal than men. Pilgrimage spots such as Bakresbar in the mother-as-beggar folktale attract flocks of elderly female beggars dressed in tattered white saris; and the new old-age homes in Calcutta are filled almost

exclusively with women.<sup>10</sup> So the old mother as beggar is a reality for many older women, if not literally for those who tell stories while surrounded by sons in Mangaldihi, at least as an image that enters their perceptions of what could be and of the poverty and vulnerability of older women.

Finally, a third recurrent theme in older women's narratives is that of a loss of identity. A woman's identity in Mangaldihi and throughout West Bengal is at any rate shifting and ephemeral compared to a man's. As a girl, she is defined primarily as the daughter of her father; after marriage, she is a daughter-in-law and wife (*boumā*) in her father-in-law's and husband's family line. Finally, as she grows older, a woman comes to be identified increasingly as the mother of her sons, and she is addressed by community members as so-and-so's Ma, such as Debu's Ma and Billo's Ma, as I have done here. In the midst of such shifting identities and relations, Bengali women say that it is the mother's bond with her son that is potentially stronger, longer-lasting, and more difficult to sever than any other of a woman's bonds. This is because a son comes from the mother's deepest insides within her womb and does not move away from her when he marries as a daughter does. The old woman in the *vratakathā* story told above has no identity except as a mother, but this is an identity that is enduring and strong, one that makes her loved and revered.

In the stories that older women often tell, however, the mothers lose their identities as their sons grow up to abandon and forget them. For without their defining relationships to sons, the old women literally become no one. Billo's Ma queries bitterly: "Whose am I now? I am no longer anyone. . . . What kind of a thing is a mother?" If a woman is not anyone's (note the possessive), then she is no longer anyone. If a woman is defined largely via her relations with others (fathers, husbands, sons), then if these relationships wane her identity fades as well. She becomes, at least metaphorically, like the old woman in the mother-as-beggar tale, one in a long line of nameless persons whom no one recognizes or wishes to heed.

Through such tales of being forgotten and becoming "no one," women express a common sentiment that was conveyed to me in other settings as well: even if women produce sons, they can never become a full part of their marital families, just as they were never allowed to remain a full part of their natal homes. Women's relational ties must be broken and

---

<sup>10</sup> In 1990 when I visited Navanir Homes for the Aged, two new old-age homes for Bengalis in Calcutta, they housed 113 women and only 7 men. Many fewer Bengali men need the services of such facilities, since men tend to have both property and family to depend on, while women are much more often left without either.

then remade as they move from family to family; they are thus always partly “other” (*parer*) as well as partly “own” (*nijer*).<sup>11</sup> This ambiguous, shifting identity is highlighted for women in late life by the fact that they cannot look forward to becoming ancestors as fathers can. After the initial funeral ceremonies are performed for women, food and water are never offered directly to them again, nor are their names recited during the many ritual occasions when male ancestors are nourished and remembered (Lamb 1993:360-64). Mothers thus face, if not in old age, then at least after death, a dissolution of the mother-son bond, and a gradual process of being forgotten and becoming no one.

These themes of the self-sacrifice of women as mothers, coupled with the failure of reciprocity and betrayal by sons, surface powerfully as well in a popular Bengali short story called “Stanadayini” (or “Breast-Giver”) by Mahasweta Devi (1988). In this story, Jashoda, a poor rural Brahman woman, mother of twenty and nursemaid of thirty more, spends her life pouring out her body’s milk to nourish her own and her master’s children. But in the end she is abandoned by them all. When she becomes old and can no longer reproduce or nurse, her almost fifty sons all forget her, and her breasts—the distinguishing organ of the woman as mother—become the site of ugly, festering, cancerous sores. Jashoda cries, “Must I finally sit by the roadside with a tin cup?” (234), and then moans spiritlessly, “If you suckle you’re a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal [two of her sons] don’t look at me, and the Master’s boys don’t spare a peek to ask how I’m doing.” The author adds: “The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes” (236). In the end, Jashoda dies alone and without identity, except for a tag marking her as “Hindu female,” and she is cremated by an untouchable.

To this story’s author, Mahasweta Devi, the narrative is a parable of India—as a mother-by-hire—after decolonization. If nothing is given back to India as mother, then she will die like Jashoda of a consuming cancer (Spivak 1988:244). But I also hear in this story of the breast-giver the voices of older mothers in Bengal, who lament in their own more private oral tales: How fickle and short-lived are the joys of motherhood! How women as mothers give of themselves their whole lives and receive nothing in return!

---

<sup>11</sup> See also Raheja and Gold 1994:73-120, Sax 1991:77-126, Dube 1988.

## Conclusion

The stories of older women in Mangaldihi thus challenge dominant representations of motherhood and family roles found in more public folklore genres and much of everyday talk. The alternative worlds of these tales speak of what the more official worlds (which are also real and important to these women) cannot: of doubts and imperfections, disappointments and loss. Both together make up part of what Ramanujan (1991:53) calls the “indissolubly plural” nature of India’s oral traditions, and the multiplicity of women’s (and men’s) perspectives encoded within.

I close by noting that although the older women in Mangaldihi protest in their narratives about waning domestic powers and being pushed aside by their sons’ wives, they now have more overt freedoms to display themselves orally, to complain publicly, to narrate their life stories on tape, and to be teased and applauded by listeners than they ever would have had as young wives or *bous*. With all of its difficulties, the position of being senior or “increased” as an old mother or mother-in-law also entails tangible liberties that, due to the demands of modesty, younger women do not ordinarily have. And indeed the older women I knew in Mangaldihi seemed to take great pleasure in telling their private tales, even if (or especially because) their stories were most often those of pain and chagrin.

*Brandeis University*

## References

- Beck 1986                      Brenda E.F. Beck. “Social Dyads in Indic Folktales.” In *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Ed. by Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 76-104.
- Bhattacharjya n.d.            Gopalcandra Bhattacharjya, ed. *Meyeder Vrataskathā*. Calcutta: Nirmal Book Agency.
- Carlin 1992                    Phyllis Scott Carlin. “‘That Black Fall’: Farm Crisis Narratives.” In *Performance, Culture, and Identity*. Ed. by Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer. Westport, CT: Praeger. pp. 135-56.
- Chen and Dreze 1993        Marty Chen and Jean Dreze. *Widows and Well-Being in Rural North India*. London: The Development Economics

## Research Programme.

- Devi 1988                      Mahasweta Devi. "Breast-Giver." Trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In Spivak, ed. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge. pp. 222-40.
- Dolby-Stahl 1983              Sandra K. Dolby-Stahl. "Personal Experience Stories." In *Handbook of American Folklore*. Ed. by Richard Dorson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 268-76.
- Dolby-Stahl 1985              \_\_\_\_\_. "A Literary Folkloristic Methodology for the Study of Meaning in Personal Narrative." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 22:45-69.
- Dube 1988                      Leela Dube. "On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23(18):11-19.
- Gold 1994                      Ann Grodzins Gold. "Purdah Is As Purdah's Kept: A Storyteller's Story." In *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*. Ed. by Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 164-81.
- Lamb 1993                      Sarah Lamb. "Growing in the Net of Maya: Persons, Gender and Life Processes in a Bengali Society." Unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.
- Nicholas 1982                Ralph W. Nicholas. "The Village Mother in Bengal." In *Mother Worship*. Ed. by James J. Preston. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. pp. 192-209.
- Personal Narratives Group  
1989                              The Personal Narratives Group. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Raheja and Gold 1994        Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, eds. *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ramanujan 1991              A.K. Ramanujan. "Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales." In *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*. Ed. by Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret A. Mills. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 33-55.

- Ramanujan 1986 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Two Realms of Kannada Folklore." In *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Ed. by Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 41-75.
- Robinson 1981 John A. Robinson. "Personal Narratives Reconsidered." *Journal of American Folklore*, 94:58-85.
- Sax 1991 William S. Sax. *Mountain Goddess: Gender and Politics in a Himalayan Pilgrimage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spivak 1988 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World." In Spivak, ed. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge. pp. 241-68.
- Trawick Egnor 1986 Margaret Trawick Egnor. "Internal Iconicity in Paraiyar 'Crying Songs'." In *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Ed. by Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 294-344.
- Trawick 1990 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Vatuk 1990 Sylvia Vatuk. "'To Be a Burden on Others': Dependency Anxiety Among the Elderly in India." In *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*. Ed. by Owen M. Lynch. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 64-90.
- Vatuk 1995 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Indian Woman in Later Life: Some Social and Cultural Considerations." In *Women's Health in India*. Ed. by Monica Das Gupta, T.N. Krishnan, and Lincoln C. Chen. Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 289-306.
- Wadley 1975 Susan S. Wadley. *Shakti: Power in the Conceptual Structure of Karimpur Religion*. Chicago: Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
- Wadley 1986 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Katha of Sakat: Two Tellings." In *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*. Ed. by Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 195-232.