Women within the Hierarchy: The *Jajmani-Purohitani* Relationship in the *Brata* Ritual of Bengal

Masahiko Togawa

1. Introduction

The topic to be analyzed in this article is the social relationship formed by village women, in the village under study, through the practice of the ‘brata’ ritual, which is dedicated to the goddess Šaśṭi. The *brata* ritual is well known as a series of domestic rites that form an integral part of the Hindu ritual, and in which the village women are usually the sole performers. The *brata* ritual is performed all over South Asia and can be traced back to the classical literature such as *Rg Veda* and is discussed in some detail by Kane [1974: 1–50]. In particular, the *brata* ritual in Bengal is famous for its fine design of *ālpanā* (floor decorations), the pastoral scene of maiden rite, and the severe fasting by widows. Since the pioneering study by Abanindranath Thakur [1919 (43)] many scholars have discussed the foundation of Bengali culture through its folk art, folk literature and ethnography. This academic interest over the *brata* ritual has increased still more among the Bengali intellectuals. For instance,
Shila Basak [1998] was recently awarded the honorable prize of Anandaprabhakar in Calcutta for her ethnographic work. In this article, however, we shall concentrate the discussion on anthropological topics. First, we will take a general view of the major studies by anthropologists, which have rapidly increased since the 1980s.

Leela Dube [1988] argues that the ideological implications of the Hindu ritual lead women to take a subordinate position to their husbands and other paternal relatives. For instance, the emphasis on the image of the ideal bride or wife in the discourse of the brata ritual represents the women’s ideological code of conduct and expected norms and values. The participation by the women in these rituals makes them a subordinated gender subject structured in the patrilineal Hindu society. The arguments by Kakar [1981] and Mazumdar [1981] seem to support this view from the psychological standpoint of the Hindu rituals. In other words, they clearly pay attention to a controlling trait of the Hindu ritual. But, at the same time, this view omits the reason why the women participate voluntarily in these rituals, even though the rituals certainly help to keep them in a subordinate position to the male.

Wadley [1984] responds to the problem by taking up the discourse of the brata ritual narrated by women in northern India. According to her thesis, Hindu women regard the brata ritual as an opportunity for them to transform their destinies, which have been predetermined by deeds in a past life. They consider the ritual as a positive chance to change their destined fate, which they view with some trepidation, into a desirable one. Interestingly, she tries to place this women’s ethos in the tradition of the Bhakti religion. Her discussion, however, seems to be mainly based on a literary analysis, and mostly ignores the social context of the women’s behavior. The ‘destiny’, which the women are attempting to change, might be, ironically, the same religious norms and values keeping them in a subordinate role. They never question the framework of their religious life itself. On this point, Wadley [1980] suggests another positive aspect of the brata ritual: the psychological support derived from their cooperative participation in the ritual. Similar arguments are also presented by Freeman [1980]. The shared experience of the ritual might bring them a psychological comfort, but it seems to be different for the individuals who attempt to breakaway from the framework of the ritual practice itself.
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Pearson [1996] tries to tackle this inconsistency. In her discussion, she stresses the normative aspect of the brata ritual, and argues that it is neither controlling nor optional as many scholars have maintained. Rather, the religious motivation rewarded to the women is the main reason attracting them to the brata ritual. Pearson [1996: 9-11] thinks that the women can become empowered through the practice of the brata ritual and gain the self-reliance and confidence enabling them to extend the scope of their activities. It is an interesting point in her argument that instead of the salvation of the soul (moksha) through asceticism, which is exclusively reserved for men, women can attain the same heavenly blessings through the practice of the brata ritual. The title of her book: Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind directly addresses this point. The peace of mind enables them to expand the auspicious state of being of a woman, which is referred to as ‘saubhāgya’ in the narration.

In the meantime, in spite of Pearson’s evaluation of the ritual’s ability to bolster the self-sustaining character of the women, she does not deny the ideological aspect of the ritual, which expresses and transmits an ‘androcentric gender ideology’, so that ‘Hindu men can indirectly control women’ [1996: 10]. On this point, there seems to be some scope to examine the ritual’s benefits for the women because, on some occasions, the women practice the brata ritual for the peace and happiness of their husbands and children, but at the same time, it could strengthen them and expand their independent sphere of activity. In other words, it performs a controlling function from the standpoint of the men, while on the other hand, from the women’s standpoint; it allows a means of expression. In short, the brata ritual consists of multi dimensional discourses, allowing various interpretations to a disparate group of participants.

The brata ritual is a complex one organized by many participants. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate the society’s various social groups within its context by gender, caste and generation. For this purpose, Pearson’s argument seems to be supplemented by the field data collected from the rural women living within the religious framework of the ritual. In particular, the following three points are required here to examine our discussion. First is the field data regarding the ritual practices observed in a specific community. Second is inclusive data regarding the ritual practice spread over annual and life cycles. Third is an analysis based on
the field context from specific standpoints such as those of gender, caste, and generation. In short, the social relationship among the women is an indispensable topic for the discussion of the brata ritual, and seems to be lacking in most studies so far.

The composition of this paper is as follows: the next chapter will examine the condition of the surveyed village. Chapter 3 outlines the general character of the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī. Chapter 4 is a case study in detail of the brata ritual of aranya-ṣaṣṭhī. Chapter 5 contrasts the character of the ritual organization as it pertains to women and men. Chapter 6 discusses the peculiarities of the jajmānī-purohitani (female priest and female patron) relationship in particular. Chapter 7 is to give some concluding remarks.

2. An Overview of the Village

The survey village is Khsiragram, which is located at the centre of the Kshiragram Gram Panchayat area, in the eastern end of the Mangalkote block of the Bardhamān (Burdwan) District, West Bengal.2) The village consists of three mauza: JL. No. 127, No. 128, and No. 129. From the university town of Bolpur-Santiniketan it takes more than six hours by bus to get to this village. This includes the time required to change buses three times and cross the river Ajoy by boat. Owing to this difficult journey, the village is considered extremely isolated.

The total area of the village is 1,268.03 hectares (3,133.26 acres) according to the 1991 Census. There are three primary schools, one high school, and one rural health centre in the village. On the outskirts of the village, there is a Gram Panchayat office with a jurisdiction of seven surrounding villages.

The population of the village, according to the 1991 Census, is 4,263 (Male = 2,191, Female = 2,072), and the number of households is 729. The population of the Scheduled Castes is 1,930 (Male = 990, Female = 940), and the Scheduled Tribe is 28 (Male = 10, Female = 18). All the Scheduled Tribes belong to the Santal community who mainly migrated to the village after Independence.

The village society consists of eighteen caste groups. Table 1 shows the population composition of the village with respect to caste. This indicates that the largest group in the village is the Ugra-Kshatriya caste.
The second largest group is the Bagdi caste, and the third largest is the Brahman. The number of households of these three groups equals 480; that is 73% of the village total. These three caste groups have distinctive features, and are closely interdependent.

The Ugra-Kshatriya caste own a relatively greater share of the agricultural land of the village. They claim to be of the Khsatriya caste of Bengal. They are divided into two sub-castes, namely ‘jānā-āguri’ and ‘sutā-āguri’ in the village, and also into nine lineages which are distinguished by their titles: Datta, Samant, Malla, Sani, Ray, Bara-Ray, Josh, Chota-Samant, and Caudhuri. The lineage of Datta and Samant belong to the sub-caste of jānā-āguri, and the others are sutā-āguri. Each branch sends a representative to participate in the temple ritual, and occupies an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste/Sub-caste</th>
<th>No. of households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ugra-Kshatriya</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jana Aguri</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suta Aguri</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bagdi</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahman</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muci</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaera</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bauri</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanti</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dom</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santal</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutradhar</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayastha</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bene</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hari</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napit</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baiti</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maera</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malakar</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunri</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>655</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
important role in the annual village ritual. Thus, the Ugra-Kshatriya can be considered the dominant caste of the village with respect to population, landholdings, and ritual status.

The Bagdi caste is the largest Scheduled Caste in the Bardhaman District. They are mostly landless and are mainly engaged in agricultural labour. It is the Ugra-Kshatriya and the Brahman who hire them as day labourors. The Bagdi live for the most part in poverty; however, they have been entrusted with important ritual roles in the temple. They are regarded as relatively of a higher rank in the caste hierarchy of the village than the other lower ranked castes, i.e., the Bauri and the Dom. The Bagdi caste has its own priest (deyásin) for their temple dedicated to the goddess Manasa.

The Brahman caste has the third largest population in the village. In particular, nine households of the Sebaita-Brahman (servant Brahman) form a ritual organization for the daily service and the annual ritual of the village temple. They engage in a ‘jajmān-purohit’ relationship as family priests (kula-purohita) for the Ugra-Kshatriyas (which will be discussed in detail later). They consider each other to be of the same lineage in a previous existence. As servants of the temple goddess, they enjoy owning the tax-exempt land, which was endowed to them by the Maharaja Bardhamān during the medieval period. In this way, they are prominent in the religious life of the village society as temple priests, as well as being the family priests of the Ugra-Kshatriya.

In its geographical layout, the village is centered around the temple (the Jogadya temple; Jogādyā-mandir) in the order shown in Map 1. The Jogadya temple is famous for being one of 51 sakta-pithas, which are sacred centres of the sakta-cult, and are scattered all over the Indian subcontinent. The temple management has been under the strong patronage of the Maharaja Bardhamān Raj since the medieval period. As the temple priests, the Sebaita-Brahman inhabit the centre of the village. The other castes occupy areas that form concentric circles around the temple; the Ugra-Kshatriya caste, the Goera caste and other service castes, and the Bagdi caste, are positioned in this order. The Bauri caste, the Dom caste, and the Santal occupy the outer fringes of the village. Thus, the higher the socio-ritual position of a group, the closer its location to the village temple.
3. Ritual of the Goddess Śaśṭhī

3.1 The goddess Śaśṭhī

The name of the goddess Śaśṭhī appears in both the Devī-bhāgavata, and the Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa [Das 1953: 36–7]. These Sanskrit texts are supposed to be not earlier than the 12th or 13th century. Mackay thinks, however, that the origin of the guardian deity for children in rural India can be traced back to the tradition of the Indus civilization [Mackay 1948: 54]. In the series of folk literature in Bengal called ‘maṅgal-kābya’, the name of the goddess appears in several ways [Maity 1989: 66]. In particular, the Śaśṭhīmaṅgal is the most famous text regarding the goddess, which was written in the latter half of the 17th century [Bhattacharyya 1998: 905–914]. Nowadays, the texts called ‘brata-kātha’ (the story of brata) are very popular among Bengali women, in which the
anecdotes about the goddess are narrated in various tales [e.g. Majumdar (ed.) 1992].

In the folk tradition of Bengal, the goddess Śaṣṭhī is known as the guardian deity of children. During every step of childbirth and childhood, the people worship her and dedicate offerings. The mothers pray for the happiness of their children, and barren women pray for a child. The goddess Śaṣṭhī is the main deity worshipped by the wives of the Hari caste in Bengal; they are famous as midwives. In this way, the goddess Śaṣṭhī is a popular folk deity in Bengal, and the women play a leading part in the cult of the goddess.

The Śaṣṭhī ritual can be divided into two categories: the occasional ritual and the periodic. The former is concerned in particular with childbirth and could be regarded as one of the Hindu rites of passage (saṃskāra) [e.g. A. Bhattacharyya 1948]. The latter deals with the brata ritual of the goddess, which will be discussed here. In the village, the rituals of śaṣṭhī-brata are performed on the 6th of the bright fortnight in every month. The word śaṣṭhī means literally ‘sixth’ in Bengali, so śaṣṭhī-brata means literally the ritual on the sixth day. Logically, there are twelve ritual occasions in every lunar month [e.g. Basak 1995; S. R. Das 1953], but only eight of them are generally known as śaṣṭhī-brata, while six rituals are performed in a village field as practice.

### 3.2 The Rituals of Śaṣṭhī-brata in the Village

In general, there are six rituals performed in Bengal following the lunar calendar marking the changes of the seasons. Table 2 shows the list of the rituals performed in 1994–5 in the village, along with the food items to fast from, the places to worship, and the idols to symbolize the goddess.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lunar month</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Food to fast</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jaiśtha</td>
<td>Aranya</td>
<td>Rice/Meat/Fish</td>
<td>Śaṣṭhī-talā</td>
<td>Āśwattha tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śrāban</td>
<td>Lotan</td>
<td>Food using fire</td>
<td>Priest’s house</td>
<td>Sacred stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhadra</td>
<td>Getu</td>
<td>All foods</td>
<td>Bank of pond</td>
<td>Sacred stick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Māgh</td>
<td>Śītal</td>
<td>Hot food/Dry food</td>
<td>Devotee’s kitchen</td>
<td>Stone mortar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitra</td>
<td>Āsok</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Priest’s house</td>
<td>Stone pestle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitra</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Śiva temple</td>
<td>Liṅga</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The seat of the goddess Śaṣṭhī, śaṣṭhī-tala in Bengali, is usually regarded as the altar of the śaṣṭhī-brata; but in practice every occasion presents a different location as an altar for the goddess. The ritual items adopt the daily utensils of the housewives such as the flat mortar and pestle (śīl-norā) used in the kitchen. But, it is interesting to note, that every ritual item is offered following the different occasions and places in the year.

Some scholars try to characterize these ritual types on the basis of their geographical distribution. For example, A. Bhattacharyya [1948] once argued that the ritual held out of doors at the foot of a tree is popular in West Bengal while an altar in the household is popular in East Bengal. But, as can be discerned from Table 2, the same villagers can perform the ritual at the tree altar at one time, and at an altar inside the house at another time. In other words, each ritual is part of the annual cycle of complex rituals dedicated to the goddess Śaṣṭhī. It could be, therefore, somewhat misleading unless we analyze them as parts of the ritual cycle that is practiced over the whole year, and the patterns of the women’s participation in each part. We shall now look more carefully into the rite of aranya-śaṣṭhī observed in the village.

4. **Aranya-Śaṣṭhī (jāmāi-śaṣṭhī)**

4.1 General Setting

In the village, aranya-śaṣṭhī is usually called jāmāi-śaṣṭhī (ritual for the son-in-law). It is popular as a ritual reception for the son-in-law by the mother-in-law, whose daughter has recently been married. Maity [1989: 67] maintains that the ritual of jāmāi-śaṣṭhī is nothing but another name for the ritual of the goddess Śaṣṭhī, because it is derived from the prayers to the goddess of childbirth and children’s wellbeing, although nowadays people forget this original meaning. According to James Tod [1972: 675], in the region of Rajasthan during the eighteen-century the ritual of aranya-śaṣṭhī was performed by the women in the forest. In Bengal, most of the folktales regarding this ritual tell the same story: that the women are blessed with their children by the grace of the goddess Śaṣṭhī, when they abandon themselves to grief in the forest [e.g. Majumdar 1992: 32-3]. Thus, the word ‘aranya’ signifies the forest, where the goddess Śaṣṭhī herself appears at the entreaty of the women. In the
village, the altar of *aranya-saṣṭhī* is placed at the foot of the pipal tree (*ashwattha; ficus religiosa*). It is called ‘saṣṭhī-talā’ and symbolizes a sacred forest. Most households, including those of untouchable castes, have the ritual of *jāmāi-saṣṭhī*, but it is the households of the Ugra-Kshatriya that mainly dedicate offerings to this altar — which is the ritual of *aranya-saṣṭhī* in a narrow sense.

### 4.2 Ritual Composition

In the village, the wives of the Brahman priests visit the altar of *ṣaṣṭhī-talā*, and dedicate offerings to the goddess. They are called ‘pūjārinī’ or ‘purohitani’ by the villagers, which means ‘female priest’. The word *pūjārinī* is a pair word of *pujāri*, which means the person who engages in *pujā*, and it signifies the Brahman male priest in the Hindu ritual context. The Hindu priest recites the Sanskrit mantras in the ritual of *pujā*, and the women are excluded from the learning of Sanskrit, as they have no initiation to rebirth (*upanayana*) through the Hindu rite of passage. In addition to the Brahman priest, there are many others who belong to different castes such as the Bagdi and the Bauri of rural Bengal. They are usually called ‘deyāsin’, which means a votary in a specific deity. But, the priests belonging to the other castes are excluded from chanting the Sanskrit mantra, because they have no initiatory rite for learning Sanskrit. As a result, ‘*pujāri*’ (male priest) must by definition be the male Brahman who is the only one permitted to learn Sanskrit, although, in practice, women and non-Brahmans can act as a priest in the Hindu ritual context. In fact, it is not necessary to belong to the Brahman caste in order to be a priest in the village, but the priest is expected to be a Brahman if he expects to get support as a religious authority and obtain patronage from other castes.

On the other hand, the priest called *pujāri* is by definition the Brahman caste; but the Brahman is not always a priest [e.g. Fuller 1984]. In fact, there are three major strata of the Brahman caste in the village: *kulīn-brāhmaṇ, sebāit-brāhmaṇ, and nimna-śreni-brāhmaṇ*. The first, *kulīn-brāhmaṇ*, are the Brahman who are well known for their religious authority and supremacy over the other castes — and have been in Bengal since the medieval period [e.g. Inden 1976]. The supreme Brahman, for example, never engages in the jajmānī relationship as priest with the patrons of the other castes. The second category is the Sebaita-Brahman
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(sebāit-brāhman), who addresses the performance of their priestly duties to both the village temple and the patrons of the Ugra-Kshatriya families in the village. The priests who belong to the third category never engage in the jajmāni relationship with the village upper castes, and their main patrons are the lower castes such as the scheduled castes. They are usually called ‘barna-brahman’ in Bengali, and some of them are well known for their special occupations in the funeral rite (śrāddha) and the rite for the expiation of sin (doṣ-kātāna).

Like the pūjāri (male priests), the women of the Brahman caste do not always engage in the ritual service as pūjārini (female priests). The wife of a Brahman is called ‘brahmani’, which means simply a female Brahman, but she is not always a pūjārini. As has already been discussed, it is only the Sebaita-Brahman who performs the ritual as a family priest (kula-purohita) on behalf of the village’s upper castes. Likewise, the female priest (pūjārini) must be a wife of a Sebaita-Brahman, because she needs enough support from her female patrons to engage in their family ritual services. The villagers also rephrase the word ‘pūjārini’ as ‘purohitani’ for the same reason. The word ‘purohita’ is the name of the Vedic priest referred to in the classical Sanskrit text, and has become, since the famous anthropological study by Wiser [1936], very popular in Bengal as the ‘jajman-purohita relationship’ [e.g. Inden & Nicholas 1977: 120–1]. In this sense, purohita denotes the priest who engages in the hereditary priestly occupation with the patronage families; which is called ‘jajmān’. Wiser called such a reciprocal patron-client relationship between ‘jajmān’ and ‘kām-vāle’ (the name of the service castes in northern India), a ‘jajmani relationship’, and thought it the foundation of the village caste structure.

4.3 Ritual Setting

The ritual of aranya-ṣaṣṭhī starts in the early morning, and continues until noon. In 1994, there were eight female priests (pūjārini) officiating at the altar on the day of aranya-ṣaṣṭhī. The female priests take a bath before the rite, and arrange various ritual items such as flowers, fruits and other offerings. At the foot of the tree, they put a brazen pot containing the sacred water of the Ganges (gaṅgā-jal) and a mango leaf. In a way similar to the ritual of ghaṭa-sthāpana (installation of the ritual pot) by the male priest, they perform their ritual service involving the
pot of the goddess Sāṣṭhī. The pot is offered with the sacred clay from the riverbed of the Ganges. The priests put a paste of turmeric, vermillion, yogurt, and mustard oil on the trunk of the tree, which is decorated with flowers. Then, they put the paste in the pot in front of the tree, and dedicate incense, votive lamps and flowers to the Goddess.

Many women bring their offerings to the goddess Sāṣṭhī and pay homage to her altar. Women who want to dedicate their offerings must have fasted since early morning. They can eat only flour for the entire day. Most of the women are matriarchs from the households enjoying the jajmān-purohita relationship with the priest’s family. They carry the offerings on a ritual plate. Ritual items on the plate are: rice, yogurt, cucumber, five types of beans, vermillion, sweets, banana, apple, mustard oil, turmeric, flowers, money offerings, incense, and so on. The ritual items on each plate are varied, but the main portion is rice — about what an average family might eat in one time. And, it is considered that yogurt and turmeric are indispensable for the altar of aranyā-ṣaṣṭhī. The female priests accept the offerings, and they dedicate them to the altar. They smear the trunk of the tree with turmeric, yogurt, vermillion and mustard oil from their plates. The yogurt and turmeric are mixed with the clay of the Ganges at the altar. The female priests dab the mixed paste on the forehead of each woman as an offering mark (phontā) of the goddess Sasthi. Then, the women supplicate themselves before the altar. The priests place all the offerings on the plates into their own baskets but leave a small portion of the offerings on each plate. The women receive the plates as the goddess’s offering to them (prasād). The most important item is the clay mixed with the turmeric and yogurt. The priests hand it over along with some sweets and flowers. The other items such as rice, fruits and vegetables remain in the priest’s basket as offerings to the goddess. About twenty to forty women bring the offerings to each priest during the course of the ritual. Then, each priest ends up with donations weighing from 20 to 40 kilograms. At the end of the ritual the priests pour the water and flowers from the pot into the pond as the final part of the ritual.

The women take the plates home with them. There, they distribute the offerings of the goddess to each member of the household. The sacred mark of the clay is the most important part of the offering. The head women of the house anoint the forehead of each family member
one by one. The anecdote of the goddess Ṣaṭṭhī recounts how a mother brought the dead members of her family to life by anointing their foreheads with yogurt and turmeric. The present popular custom on the day of jāmāi-ṣaṭṭhī, when the mother-in-law receives her son-in-law by putting the sacred mark on his forehead, certainly originated from this ritual practice.

Meanwhile, during the lunar month of Magh, the priests make the offering of sītal-ṣaṭṭhī using a kitchen mortar as a religious icon. For the rite of aṣok-ṣaṭṭhī in the month of Caitra, the core of the flower of the Ashok tree (saraca indica) mixed with banana is the most important item made as an offering.

4.4 Jajmāni-Purohitani Relationship

Most of the women who visit and dedicate offerings to the altar come from the family of the Ugra-Kshatriya caste. In general, the head woman of a household (ginnī), pays a visit to the altar. She is usually the mother-in-law, or wife of the eldest brother in the household. Some of the daughters-in-law attend with their mothers-in-law. The ritual patron, who invites the family priest (kula-purohit) to participate in their domestic rite, is called jajmān in Bengal. But, in the context of ṣaṭṭhī-brata, it is not jajmān, but the wife of jajmān who is the major participant in the ritual of the goddess. This female patron is called jajmānī in Bengali, which is a pair word with ‘jajmān’. This connection of the female priest in the ritual service to the women of Ugra-Kshatriya is traced by the same line as the male priest to his patrons. In other words, the female devotee must dedicate herself at the altar of the wife of their family priest. Every woman of Ugra-Khsatriya has a predetermined female priest with whom she is obliged to carry on an exclusive ritual relationship. And, every female priest has a right to receive from her female patrons the offerings of the ritual service. We call this female patron-client relationship in the brata ritual a ‘jajmānī-purohitani relationship’.

Each female priest has from twenty to forty women in their congregation who make regular offerings. The villagers say that some of the wives of the Sebaita-Brahman who are left out of the ritual service in the ṣaṭṭhī-brata must go to other female priests to fulfill their ritual practice. No new interloper could start receiving offerings for the goddess Ṣaṭṭhī from the village women. This right to receive the offerings is inherited
only by the wife of the Sebaita-Brahman who has historically attended the family. For the same reason the patron is not allowed to change his family priest without his permission. It is a unilateral relationship where the family priest has a right to terminate the ritual relationship with his patron at his convenience but the patron is never allowed to cut the connection with his family priest.

Each household of Ugra-Kshatriya has a representative for every ritual occasion dedicated to the goddess Śaṣṭhī. It is usually the head woman of the household who carries the offerings to the altar. But, sometimes, she sends other women to represent her and also sends small daughters to act as attendants. But, it is necessary to be a married woman in order to represent the other members of the household. As they have no ritual relationship with the Sebaita-Brahman the other castes, such as the Bagdi and the Muci, can worship at any altar they wish as long as they have the permission of the priest. But, in practice, they follow the patron-client relationship of their husband; that of an agricultural labourer to the land holding Brahman. It is, however, difficult to say whether it used to be a custom of the lower caste women who attend the altar of the Sebaita-Brahman, as there are still so few cases of this sort of relationship in the village.

4.5 Other Rituals of Śaṣṭhī-brata

The female priest performs the ritual of the goddess Śaṣṭhī for the village women six times in a year at the changing of the seasons. During the ritual of śītal-śaṣṭhī in the lunar month of Magh, the female priest calls at the house of every one of her female patrons in the same way as the family priest visits the houses of his patrons. The women prepare the ritual the evening before. After finishing the cooking, they purify their kitchen wall with sacred cow dung, and draw on the wall with rice powder fine designs called ālpanā. They place a paste of turmeric and yogurt on a flat mortar and pestle and stand them on leaves of bamboo against the purified wall. This is the altar of śītal-śaṣṭhī. A washcloth (gāmchā) is placed over it for the night.

The next morning, every woman gets up early, takes a bath and begins fasting. The head woman dedicates various offerings to this altar installed in the kitchen. The offerings are: rice, sweets, vegetables, fruits, beans, durbā grass (Cynodon dactylon), and flowers. In particular, the
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flowers of the *bashak*, beans (*karāi*), and the fruit of the *kulu* (*Zizyphus jujuba*) are regarded as important offerings for *śital-śaṣṭhī*. The women in the kitchen wait for the arrival of their female priest. The female priest dedicates incense and votive lamps to the mortar and pestle altar. She spreads the turmeric, yogurt and mustard oil paste, on the mortar, and places the *bāshak* flowers and *durbā* grass over them. Then, the priestess takes the paste from the mortar and places a sacred mark on the foreheads of the women in attendance following which the women supplicate themselves before the altar. Afterwards, the priestess returns the mortar to the matriarch of the household who in turn places paste on the mortar and anoints the foreheads of the other household members with the mark of the goddess. In this way, the priestess visits the kitchen of every one of her female patrons and can visit as many as twenty to forty households in one day.

During the ritual of *lotan-śaṣṭhī* in the lunar month of Srabana, the female priest installs the goddess’s altar on a sacred stone on the verandah of her own residence. On this occasion the female patrons visit the altar in the house of their female priest. In the ritual of *ghetu-śaṣṭhī* in the lunar month of Bhadra, the altar is installed on the bank of a sacred pond in the village. In this ritual, the symbol of the goddess is a sacred wooden stick standing at the water’s edge. The women throw *jige* (okra: *jige-bisarjan*) into the pond after the ritual, precursing the end of the rainy season.

5. The Organization of the Women

In the ritual of *śaṣṭhī-brata*, only the priestess and her congregation participate in the ritual practice. The ritual organization of the women, therefore, has some different characteristics to those dominated by male participants. The *śaṣṭhī-brata* stresses the reproduction process and is exclusively given over to the women. The goddess Śaṣṭhī is regarded to be the guardian deity of children, the one who watches over the birth and nursing of children.

S. K. Ray [1961] maintains that only women can engage in the *brata* ritual because this is specified in the tradition of the domestic rite. This contrasts sharply with the temple ritual in Bengal, which is dominated by a male priest, and displays the characteristics of a public and a politi-
cal rite. Thakur [1943: 38–9] distinguishes the brata ritual from the annual ritual in Bengal by the consistency of the ritual performance and prayer. Thakur thinks, therefore, that the primordial rite of brata (khāti-brata) is exclusively held by women. We will, however, take issue with this from the standpoint of the social structure of the women. The premise of our argument is divided into the following two points: (1) The ritual form of the women and (2) The Jajmani relationship created among the women.

5.1 Ritual Form

The ritual of ṣaṣṭhi-brata has clear differences to the ordinary ritual performed by male priests in the following three ways: first is the formation of the ritual. The image of the deity is generally the most important symbol in the puja ritual of Bengal, although the brata ritual never requires it, and only the ritual pot is put in use. The farewell rite is never directed towards the image. There are several kitchen utensils, such as a mortar and pestle, which are used in the daily life of the women. And, every ritual of ṣaṣṭhi-brata is one of six that make up the series in the annual cycle.

Second is the concept that women become somehow impure during their menstrual period; enough so to make them keep away from the deity during this time. An occasion was observed at the altar of the goddess when the husband of a priestess received the offerings from the village women on behalf of his wife who was having her period. It is interesting to note that an old widow priestess at the altar is thought to be free from such a taboo on impurity.

Third is the use of mantras. The women priests never wear the sacred rope, which is the identifying symbol of a Brahman male priest. The initiation rite (upanayana) is an obligation for the Brahman youth, and it is a symbol of the introduction and admission to the learning of Sanskrit. The village women are never allowed to use Sanskrit, but can use the Bengali mantras to install the ritual pot at the altar. For example, the chanting of sacred words in Sanskrit such as ‘aum’ is permitted only to the male Brahman priest, but the women can chant words such as ‘namah’ (devotee) in Bengali. Usually, the village women, including those of the non-Brahman caste, make their devotions to the goddess Lakshmi in their household using the ritual pot. Using the Sanskrit mantra is a
privilege that the villagers believe is reserved for the male Brahman, although, here too, there are several distinctions among them, such as the Vedic priest (baidik-purohita) who uses the Vedic mantras and the Tantric priest (tantra-purohita) who is an ordinary Bengali priest.

5.2 Jajmani Construction

The Jajmani-purohitani relationship is a division of labour for the women and is organized around the exchange of ritual services and offerings. The priestess has a different standing to the male priest, and can structure a ritual organization with her female patrons, from which male participant are excluded. Many studies have already been done on the relationship between the priest and the patron. But, it seems that there have been few studies on the jajmani relationship from the viewpoint of the women. We will take a quick look at the various discussions summarized in three points since the study of Wiser [1936].

First is the transformation of the jajmani relationship caused by ‘modernization’. Many scholars have observed that the ‘traditional’ division of labour, based on a reciprocal exchange of services and goods, is disappearing under the influence of a cash economy [e.g. Lewis 1958; Nicholas 1968]. However, it is interesting to note that traditional ritual services such as those performed by the priest and the pot maker are undergoing a simultaneous revival. Even in the urban context, some of them are reorganizing through the spread of popular Hinduism. Second is the historical aspect. In this area, Fuller’s [1977] contribution is most important. Fuller pointed out that the jajmani relationships reported by anthropologists since the 1950s are rather new inventions and sprang up under colonial rule, which introduced system of tax collection that affected every stratum of rural society throughout British India. Third, is the dominant caste centered model presented by Raheja [1988]. Raheja thinks that the jajmani relationship is based on the center-perihelia model between the dominant caste and the other service castes in rural society, and is a counter argument against the common view based on the hierarchical model of the caste relationship, which places the Brahman caste at the top.
6. Women as Priestesses

The ethnographical data presented in this article so far may be considered to be an extension of the ordinal jajmani relationship of the women. It could be interpreted that the husbands have a ritual relationship using their wives to exchange services and goods from each household. In this sense, the women’s social relationship is ultimately based on the relationship among households, which is dominated by the patriarch. However, there are still a few points urging us not to jump to the conclusion that the women’s relationship through the exchange of services and goods is only an imitation of the male jajmani relationship. Now, we will discuss this problem in the following three points: (1) the women’s special sphere of activity, (2) the priestly organization of the women, and (3) the hierarchical relationship among the women.

First, is the women’s special sphere of activity. As has already been discussed, the blessings of the goddess Šaṣṭhī are exclusively of concern to women: those of pregnancy, childbirth, and children’s welfare. The priestess only engages in the ritual of the goddess in the same specialized way that the women of the Hari caste act as midwives. At the same time, only the female patrons of the Sebaita-Brahman represent their households and dedicate the offerings to the goddess. Similar examples can be pointed out in various ways in the village such as the women of the Napit caste who engage in the special role in the marriage ceremony for the bride, and the priestess of the Bagdi caste who works the oracle of the goddess Kali at the request of the village women. In this sense, the priestly occupation with the goddess Šaṣṭhī is not a simple substitute for a priest’s wife. It is, rather, based on the division of labour among the women, by which the priestess can control the rites entailed in the exchange of services and goods.

Second is the priestly duties of the priestess. In the Šaṣṭhī-brata, only the female priest installs the altar and puts the sacred mark on the forehead of the devotees. It is the wife of the Sebaita-Brahman who exclusively holds the right to perform this ritual while most of the devotees in the ritual are from the households of the Ugra-Kshatriya. As a result, the Šaṣṭhī-brata allows an organization of women to exist who can give each other mutual support and avoid the interference of the male priest or the husband. The priestess can perform the ritual when she wishes
and has no need to ask permission from her husband. This contrasts sharply with the orthodox Hindu rituals as described in the *Manusmṛti*. The priestess can continue presiding over the ritual service after the death of her husband, although she does need the consent of her mother-in-law. Thus, her ritual position at the *brata* altar is not merely that of a married woman (*eyo-strī*), nor of a wife of the Sebaita-Brahman (*brāhmanī*), but rather as a woman, wife and mother (*mā*).

Third is the hierarchical order of the women. The sequence of anointing of the sacred mark (*phonta*) on the forehead during the course of the ritual helps to throw some light on the pecking order of the women. The priestess at the altar is the exclusive giver of the mark to the female devotees' foreheads. Every household sends its matriarch as a representative to the altar. She brings back the offerings to the household, and then she in turn puts, with her own hand, the mark of the goddess on the foreheads of the other household members. The other women, such as wives (*bau*) and daughters (*meye*) within the household, are under the authority of the matriarch. Thus, it is a hierarchical relationship composed of several strata of women: the female priest (*purohitani*), the female patron (*jajmānī*), the head of the household women (*ginnī*), the wife, the daughter, and so on. And, this relationship is ultimately based on the framework of the caste hierarchy and social structure of the men.

7. Concluding Remarks

The ritual organization of the *ṣaṣṭhī-brata* is a social structure in which the women form a hierarchical relationship that filters privilege and special interests through the practice of the ritual. The women share this relationship exclusively as it concerns their special sphere of activity: childbirth and nursing. However, because the women have a monopoly on the performance of the ritual it does not necessarily mean there is equality among them. The village women are, in this respect, not a homogeneous entity, which the implications of the ritual ideology tend to demonstrate: the increasingly subordinate images such as the faithful, subservient wife and the obedient daughter in the patrilineal context. There is, not surprisingly, frequent discord and rivalry among the women over their interests and privileges.

At the same time, this ritual order is ultimately dependant on the
relationship formed by the husband and his patrons. It suggests an analogy for the ‘modern phenomenon’ of the political organization, in which the women’s organization (mahirā-samiti) is often parallel to the peasant organization of West Bengal (krishak-shabhā) at the local level. In particular, the women who have husbands or fathers who are influential activists in local politics may occupy many of the election seats reserved for women. In this respect, the structure of the women’s hierarchy seems, interestingly, to follow that of the existing male dominated power structure, and it is still a rarity to find an independent structure in which the women are able to challenge male domination itself.

Notes
1) The word ‘brata’ corresponds to the word ‘vrata’ in Sanskrit. In this article, the transcription basically follows the modern Bengali in common use. The word ‘vrata’ is derived from the root word of ‘vr’. Kane [1974: 1–50] deals with the derivations and meanings of this word in detail. Konishi [1974] discusses the difficulty of properly translating and transcribing this word into Japanese.
2) The fieldwork in this village was carried out for one and a half year period from January 1994 to May 1995.
3) Regarding the practice of the reservation seats for women, see Kaushik [1993] and Datta [1992]. Also, see Togawa [1997b].
4) Wadley [1992] once mentioned a woman who held an eminent leadership position in her village, though Wadley describes her as ‘a marginal person’ who was enabled to conduct herself free from the scrutiny of the “patriarchal society”.

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