



Raksha Bandhan: Festival of protection that became a symbol of social and political power

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Abstract

Raksha Bandhan is often associated with the image of a sister tying a sacred thread around her brother's wrist. Yet, historical processes associated with this popular cultural practice have produced a wide range of social relationships and cultural meanings. Ideas of rakhi have been closely associated with protection, trust, kinship, honour, loyalty, and social bonds. Its significance has been linked with regional and historical contexts, meaning that its cultural origins are difficult to determine. This paper studies shifting cultural meanings of Raksha Bandhan by exploring historical processes such as mythology, folklore, regional practices, gender, and politics. Particular attention is paid to how the exchange of rakhi in Rajasthan could produce relationships beyond biological kinship that were linked to political protection. This paper aims to explore the role of women and how the ritual practices associated with Raksha Bandhan could offer opportunities for social and political agency. The festival's cultural significance has changed in the modern era due to nationalism, public holidays, political practices, cinema, welfare, and popular culture. This paper argues that Raksha Bandhan should be studied in the context of changing cultural traditions where notions of protection, identity, authority, and social relationships were expressed.

Keywords: Raksha Bandhan, Rakhi, Rajasthan, Rajput, folklore, women, kinship, political culture, social history, symbolism

Introduction

Indian festivals offer a valuable insight into the cultural practices and traditions of different communities. They represent people's religious worldviews, customary practices, interpersonal relationships, and collective memories. At the same time, cultural traditions are not static elements. Their meanings can shift under the pressure of societal transformations, and historical processes can reveal how societies negotiate their cultural practices and their significance. The history of Raksha Bandhan is an interesting case in this regard, as the cultural practice associated with the festival has appeared in different cultural settings and has incorporated a wide range of meanings. The simple thread associated with the ritual can represent affection, obligation, protection, friendship, honour, and loyalty. Therefore, the meaning of rakhi cannot be understood in the context of the popularly known relationship between sisters and brothers.

An important aspect of Raksha Bandhan lies in its folklore traditions that are filled with cultural practices and memories. Although such traditions do not always provide concrete information concerning the history of this festival, they help understand how people perceived this festival and what values it embodied. Different cultural traditions and their historical contexts are needed to discuss the relationship between oral and written cultures. As A. K. Ramanujan has argued, oral and written traditions can complement each other, and their comparison can highlight valuable insights.

Rakhi, becomes a valuable symbol that embodies cultural and social practices of Rajput people. The exchange of rakhi has the potential to express more profound relationships that go beyond simple domestic values. In particular, social and political aspects of this ritual act can be discussed in the context of Rajasthan's political culture and its peculiar historiography.

Gendered aspects of Raksha Bandhan are equally interesting for discussion. Women did not simply participate in the cultural traditions associated with Raksha Bandhan, but they had the opportunity to shape their social relationships via exchanging rakhi. This act could signify the establishment of a relationship that goes beyond one's domestic sphere. Therefore, a discussion of women's role in Raksha Bandhan can help investigate this festival in greater detail.

The changing cultural meanings of Raksha Bandhan continue to this day, influenced by the development of print culture, nationalism, cinema, mass media, and political practices. Raksha Bandhan has been invested with new meanings in the modern era when the concept of a public holiday has gained greater ground. New ideas of social responsibility and solidarity can be seen as part of this cultural tradition and its continuous reinterpretation. This paper discusses Raksha Bandhan as a cultural practice that is open to reinterpretation in different historical settings. Particular attention is paid to folklore practices, Rajasthan's traditions, women's role in Raksha Bandhan, and social and political aspects of this festival.

Research Objective

The main objective of the study are:

1. The mythological and cultural background of Raksha Bandhan
2. The social and political significance of rakhi in Rajasthan, especially among the Rajput and Marwari communities;
3. Raksha Bandhan in modern India and its connection with various social and political movements, as well as women's empowerment, and economic growth.

Methodology

This study is based mainly on secondary sources. It uses a historical and analytical approach to examine traditions,

folklore, historical accounts, cultural practices, and modern representations of Raksha Bandhan.

Discussion

The Sanskrit word “Raksha Bandhan” roughly translates to “bond of protection.” The thread is a symbolic link between two people. Over time, the meaning of this connection has expanded from family protection to wider social and political relationships.

One popular mythological tradition is associated with the conflict between the gods and demons. According to the story, the gods were facing difficulties during their battle with the demons. Indra, the king of the gods, was concerned about the possibility of defeat. Indrani, his wife, performed religious worship and received a sacred thread. She tied the thread around her husband’s wrist, intending to protect him and ensure his victory. The story gives the Rakhi a protective and sacred character. The thread is not just an ornament; it is a symbol of strength, faith, and protection during a difficult situation.

Another tradition is connected with the Mahabharata. A popular story describes how Krishna injured his finger. Draupadi used a piece of cloth to cover the wound. Krishna is then associated with a promise to protect her. This story became an important element of the popular understanding of the brother-sister relationship. The importance of these stories lies not only in the fact that they represent historical events. They demonstrate the cultural values associated with Raksha Bandhan: protection, loyalty, affection, sacrifice, and mutual responsibility.

The historical traditions of Rajasthan provide an example of how the Rakhi could exceed the family sphere. Rajput society placed great importance on honour, loyalty, kinship, military service, and protection. Women participated in ceremonial practices associated with men going to war. According to traditional accounts, when Rajput men left for battle, women applied a tilak to their foreheads and tied sacred threads around their wrists. The thread symbolised the desire for their safety and victory. The ritual connected the emotional world of the household with the military world of the Rajput warrior.

One of the most famous stories associated with the political symbolism of Rakhi concerns Rani Karnavati of Mewar and the Mughal emperor Humayun. According to the popular narrative, when Bahadur Shah of Gujarat threatened Mewar, Karnavati sent a Rakhi to Humayun asking for his assistance. The story has hence become an example of the idea that the Rakhi could create a relationship of protection outside of religious and political boundaries. Whether every detail of this story can be historically established, the cultural significance is considerable. The story represents the Rakhi as a symbol capable of crossing religious boundaries and creating a moral obligation between people. This illustrates how a domestic ritual could acquire a wider political meaning.

The political significance of Raksha Bandhan becomes even clearer in the history of Rajasthan’s princely states. During the eighteenth century, several thikanedars became powerful due to their military resources, land, and political influence. The rulers of Jaipur and other states had to maintain relationships with these local powers. In such circumstances, symbolic rituals could be useful in strengthening political connections. The exchange of Rakhi could represent a relationship of protection and loyalty; it

provided a cultural language through which political relationships could be expressed. The importance of Raksha Bandhan can also be seen in ceremonial records associated with royal households. The daughters of important thikanedars could receive special attention during the festival. Gifts could include land, clothing, money, and other valuable items. When an important woman could not attend a royal ceremony personally, gifts could be sent through an official representative. These practices show that the festival was connected with more than just personal affection; it could become part of the system through which the royal court-maintained relationships with influential families.

In this context, the Rakhi functioned as a political symbol; it helped communicate honour, recognition, obligation, and friendship. The value of the ritual was hence partly based on the social status of the people involved.

The political history of Rajasthan has often focused on male rulers, warriors, and administrators. As a result, the political importance of women’s activities has sometimes been overlooked. However, ceremonial traditions provide evidence that women participated in political culture in significant ways. Women could act as participants in rituals through which relationships were created and maintained. The exchange of Rakhi was one such practice. Through these ceremonies, women could become part of networks of kinship, honour, protection, and political communication. This does not mean that women always exercised political power in the same way as rulers or military leaders. Their influence often worked through cultural practices. Rituals created opportunities for women to communicate relationships and establish symbolic obligations. Therefore, the study of Raksha Bandhan can contribute to women’s history; it encourages historians to examine political activity outside of formal institutions such as courts, armies, and administrations.

The Marwari community has a distinctive tradition of Lumba Rakhi. In this practice, the sister-in-law is included in the Raksha Bandhan ceremony; a Rakhi is tied to the brother, while a Lumba Rakhi is associated with the sister-in-law. This custom reflects the importance of marriage in shaping family relationships. After marriage, the brother’s wife becomes an important member of the family. The ritual hence expands the meaning of Raksha Bandhan beyond a direct brother-sister relationship. Another interesting tradition is the practice of older women tying Rakhis to younger girls. Here the idea of protection is not limited to men protecting women. Women can promise care and support to other women. This challenges the common understanding of the Rakhi always representing a one-directional relationship in which the brother protects the sister. Such customs demonstrate that communities can reinterpret traditions according to their social needs. The Rakhi can hence represent mutual care rather than only male protection.

The traditional understanding of Raksha Bandhan is closely connected with gender. The brother is often associated with the role of protector; the sister is presented as the person who receives protection. This reflects wider patriarchal ideas in which men are associated with physical strength and responsibility for women’s security. However, contemporary interpretations have started to challenge this narrow understanding. Women tying Rakhis to other women, social organisations using the festival to promote

women's welfare, and campaigns linking Raksha Bandhan with women's economic independence all demonstrate that the meaning of protection can change. Protection can mean emotional support, economic security, social equality, education, and freedom from harmful practices. This transformation is important because it shows that festivals are not fixed traditions; their meanings can be reshaped by communities and institutions according to changing social conditions.

Cinema has played an important role in shaping the modern understanding of Raksha Bandhan. Indian films have frequently represented the relationship between brothers and sisters through stories of sacrifice, separation, responsibility, and protection. In many films, the family is incomplete or the parents are absent; the brother is presented as responsible for the care and future of his sister. Such representations reinforce the traditional idea of the brother as protector. At the same time, films can also reveal social structures. Through representations of family, gender, marriage, poverty, and responsibility, cinema provides material for understanding changing social attitudes. Therefore, the study of Raksha Bandhan in cinema is useful for gender history and social history; films do not reflect society but can also influence people's understanding of relationships.

The political potential of Raksha Bandhan was not limited to princely states. During the colonial period, festivals and cultural symbols could become associated with political mobilisation. Festivals created opportunities for people to gather, communicate, and express collective identities. A familiar cultural symbol could hence acquire a political meaning when used in a particular historical situation. The Rakhi was especially useful because it already contained the idea of a bond. It could therefore be interpreted as a symbol of unity, friendship, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. This demonstrates how political movements can use existing cultural traditions rather than creating completely new symbols.

After independence, the state also started using festivals as opportunities for public welfare and social communication. Government institutions introduced special arrangements during Raksha Bandhan, including postal facilities and transportation measures to make travel easier. The symbolic meaning of Raksha Bandhan gradually expanded; it became associated with social welfare, women's empowerment, environmental awareness, and public campaigns.

One example is the encouragement of women, including women from tribal communities, to produce Rakhis from natural or seed-based materials. Such initiatives connect the cultural tradition with environmental concerns and economic opportunities. Another example is the "Umeed Ki Rakhi" initiative associated with women's self-help groups in Delhi. Such programmes use the popularity of Raksha Bandhan to encourage women's participation in income-generating activities. The Rakhi becomes hence not only a symbol of affection but also a means of promoting economic independence.

Political leaders have frequently participated in Raksha Bandhan ceremonies. Prime Ministers and other public figures are often photographed receiving Rakhis from children, elderly people, women, and different social groups. Such public ceremonies have symbolic importance; the political leader becomes part of the wider social family. The Rakhi can create an image of closeness between the

political leadership and ordinary citizens. Women ministers and political representatives have also participated in programmes where Rakhis were tied to soldiers. This practice connects the traditional idea of protection with national security; the soldier is represented as someone who protects the country, and the Rakhi expresses public gratitude and emotional connection. Here, the traditional family relationship is transformed into a relationship between citizens, soldiers, and the nation.

The symbolism of Raksha Bandhan has also been used to encourage social reform. The Rajasthan Government, for example, has associated the festival with campaigns against tobacco and substance use. Under such initiatives, sisters encourage brothers to give up harmful habits and take a pledge against tobacco consumption. In this case, the Rakhi represents not simply protection from external danger but protection from self-destructive behaviour.

This is an important transformation in the meaning of the festival; the brother is not only expected to protect the sister but the sister also becomes an active participant in protecting the health and well-being of her brother. The relationship, therefore, is more reciprocal.

Another important development in modern times is the use of Raksha Bandhan to represent unity across communities. The popular story of Karnavati and Humayun is often interpreted as evidence that the Rakhi could cross religious boundaries. In modern public life, such stories can be used to promote the idea that cultural relationships are not necessarily limited by religion, caste, or region. However, it is important to distinguish between historical evidence and subsequent cultural interpretation. Stories can acquire new meanings as societies change; the continuing popularity of such narratives shows that communities use the past to address contemporary concerns.

The history of Raksha Bandhan demonstrates a gradual expansion of the meaning of the Rakhi. At the household level, it expresses affection between family members; at the community level, it can express mutual responsibility and social solidarity; and in political contexts, it can represent loyalty, alliance, protection, and recognition.

For Rajput rulers and thikanedars, Rakhi could support political relationships; for women, it could provide participation in ceremonial and social networks; for governments, it can provide a popular cultural platform for welfare campaigns; for political leaders, it creates an image of emotional connection with citizens; for social organisations, it can be used to promote gender equality, environmental awareness, and social reform. This flexibility is one of the most important features of the festival.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Raksha Bandhan is not merely a cultural activity or festival. It has directly and indirectly demonstrated its influence through political and social dimensions and has acquired symbolic as well as historical significance. We can also observe that festivals such as Raksha Bandhan have historically been used to establish and strengthen political relationships.

In the modern period, cinema has been an important medium through which the relationship between brothers and sisters has been represented. At the same time, it has also contributed to an understanding of gender history and social structures. Thus, Raksha Bandhan can be understood not only as a festival of familial affection and protection but

also as a cultural practice whose meanings have changed over time and which has been used in social, political, and economic contexts

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