

Chapter 5

A Matter of Affection: Ritual Friendship in Central India

AMIT DESAI

Despite the general paucity of writing on the anthropology of friendship, one area in which the latter has received significant attention has been in the discussion of what are variously called fictive kinship, ritual kinship, ceremonial friendship or ritual friendship relations. That anthropologists have examined these kinds of relationships at the expense of less formal modes of association is entirely understandable: they have a ritual form that can be studied, and their sociology can be precisely plotted and compared in a way that may be more difficult with the nebulous and diffuse networks of 'ordinary' friendships. Alternatively, the focus on these ritualized forms may betray the biases of anthropological knowledge that valorized the 'jural' domains of life at the expense of the 'domestic', and which were heavily criticized by those who argued that this divided approach offered only a limited understanding of kinship, and by extension, gender and power. Either way, the study of ritual friendship has about it the air of mouldy pages in an old anthropology journal. Nevertheless, as I hope to show in the discussion that follows, there is still considerable analytical value in exploring ritual friendship, especially when, following our informants' lead, we place it in the context of other social relationships such as caste and brotherhood.

I look here at the structural role of ritual friendship among people in central India, and examine both how people talk about such a relationship and how they practice it. In particular, I raise questions about the way in which ritual friendship is opposed to ideologies both of caste and of brotherhood, and why the idea of love or affection (*prem*) occupies such a central place in its imagination. I suggest that the experience of disputes between brothers and the expectation that they will fall out with one another, coupled with a heightened fear of the power of witchcraft and

sorcery, especially used within kin groups, leads people to see ritual friendship as a form of association which is safe from dispute. As such, in ideological terms it is constructed as founded purely on sentiment, unencumbered by material concerns and thus free from the sorts of entanglements that relationships with agnatic kin tend to suffer from. In a society characterized by a fear of malignant mystical attack, one creates a relationship of ritual friendship that is 'like brothers' but is ideally and ideologically disinterested. Whereas ritual friendship is always seen in terms of sentiment and affection (and, as a corollary, involving exchange which is not predicated upon calculation of a return), brotherhood is characterized precisely by the give-and-take of daily life: sentiment is present but it finds its basis in existing kinship relations. Where sentiment is bound up in other spheres of social life, such as in the relationship between brothers, there is the risk of dispute over land or other resources and jealousy has plenty of opportunities to rear its ugly head. And where jealousy walks, the fear of witchcraft and poisoning surely follows. The ideology of ritual friendship, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of dispute or argument between friends. Through its emphasis on affection, ritual friendship becomes abstracted from a social life grounded in materiality, especially if, as people say, the best ritual friends are those who live far from one another.

In a manner not altogether dissimilar to the Chinese 'same-year siblings' described by Santos (this volume), the basis of ritual friendship in central India is sentiment: it is founded in the affection two people have for one another. It is not, however, restricted to these two people. Contrary to Pitt-Rivers' (1973) assertion that sentiment among friends is confined and therefore socially unimportant, in this case we can see that the ties of affection that bind people together are also conceptualized as bringing different families closer together. One could also argue that the sum of these individual ties of sentiment produces wider bonds between all people in a community such as a village beyond their own personal relations of kinship and friendship. For India in particular, others have looked at locality-based senses of belonging (e.g. Lambert 1996, 2000; Froerer, this volume) and have argued that the traditional emphasis on caste in India has relegated the importance of links between people who share a common residence (e.g. a village or a neighbourhood). Taking this line of reasoning further, I would argue that the existence of locality-based relationships enables people sharing the same physical space (a village) to think of one another as essentially the same, something that the ideology of caste works hard to negate. Sentiment is valued here between people who are friends, but one could argue that the consequences of sentiment have a wider effect on the imagination of a village community bound together by the ties of locality (as opposed to caste or kinship-based

relationships). The importance of such an approach is that it recognizes that an ideology which ignores caste, as ritual friendship does, can exist alongside a contrary ideology that affirms caste. Ritual friendship, the sentiment it involves, and the ties of affection it builds beyond individuals, express the recognition of a fundamental affinity of people and the assertion of people as the same, an idea that caste denies. As such, looking at ritual friendship offers alternative bases for thinking about Indian society.

Ritual Friendship in Markakasa¹

Forms of ritual friendship are common throughout central and eastern India (Orans 1965; Babb 1975; Jay 1973; Prakasam 1993; Skoda 2004). The generic Chhattisgarhi term used for ritual friendship in the village of Markakasa is *phul-phulwāri* of which there are several types.² The name given to the relationship depends in most cases on the substance exchanged at the ceremony creating the ritual friendship. One such substance is *prasād* (ritual gift of the deity) from the Jagannath Temple in Puri in Orissa, known as *mahāprasād*. This then comes to signify the name of the relationship and also the title by which one addresses the other. Taking one's ritual friend's name is not permitted, and a fine (a small amount of money or a coconut) is imposed for transgressions. Other common substances exchanged include *ganga jal* (holy water from the River Ganges) and *tulsi jal* (water sprinkled into the mouth using leaves of Indian basil, a holy plant). Both men and women can form these types of *phul-phulwāri*, but the friendships must be between members of the same sex. Of these three types of *phul-phulwāri*, *mahāprasād* is the most common in Markakasa.

People in Markakasa become ritual friends for different reasons and in different circumstances; in all cases, however, *prem* (love, affection) is described as the basis of the friendship.³ For some, the friendship was already of long duration before the ceremony and they wanted to formalize and publicize their *prem*; for others, often those people who had struck up an acquaintance based on working together in another village or town, the ritual friendship marked the beginning of a more profound relationship. People who had performed the ceremony in their youth or childhood often mentioned that they became ritual friends because they used to walk to school together, play together or share food from one another's lunch boxes. For others it was because they had met working in the same gang on a government work project building a road or reservoir. One young Mahar (ex-Untouchable) man became *tulsi jal* with a man from a neighbouring village because they both liked racing bullock chariots

and always ended up competing against each other. I formed a *mahāprasād* ritual friendship with a Markakasa man, Radhelal, the village shopkeeper. A fellow villager, Shamrao, had first suggested it to me, saying that we clearly had *prem* for each other, and went on to add that not only our *prem*, but the *prem* between our respective families, would increase. I was a regular visitor to Radhelal's house and knew his mother and brothers well, and he had attended my mother's brother's son's (MBS) wedding in Nagpur.⁴ Now, if he ever went to Nagpur again, he, as my *mahāprasād*, could always call on my *māmā* (mother's brother) and so the *prem* would grow, Shamrao explained.

For a number of other people the *prem* also came after the ceremony: their fathers or grandfathers arranged their friendships in order to keep the families close and to enhance the connection between them (*'samanda vādna'*). In this situation the ritual friendship between individuals is a symbol of a wider union. Pardhu, a middle-aged Gond man with two *mahāprasād* relationships, told me that his first one was made when he was a child of about six or seven years old with a Rawat (cow-herder) boy from a neighbouring village. It was arranged by their parents to ensure that the relationship between the two families would endure. He met his second *mahāprasād* while they were both servants at the village headman's house and lived and worked there together. They became friends and decided to become *mahāprasād*. Interestingly, Pardhu's younger son has become ritual friends with the son of his father's second *mahāprasād*. Though the sentiment for the two ritual friends in cases of 'arranged friendships'⁵ seems to be absent, what is in fact being affirmed and continued is the original sentiment that caused the old ritual friendship to be made. What is evident here is that *prem* does not map easily onto individual autonomous persons. Rather, sentiment is located among many different people and is thus more diffuse; but it is still constitutive of particular friendship relations between named and distinct individuals. Thus, we are dealing with a configuration of personhood and sentiment that looks very different to the one proposed by Carrier (1999), who claims that only a model of personhood that stresses individualism and autonomy (and one particular to a Western history) can produce the untrammelled sentiment necessary for the production of friendship (see also Killick and Desai's introduction to this volume).

That the children of ritual friends can themselves become ritual friends suggests a tension in the elaboration of the relationship as one of kinship. Brothers or other close relatives cannot become *mahāprasād* to one another, and since *mahāprasād* is conceptualized as being 'like brotherhood', it would follow that their respective children are also to be regarded as agnatic kin, and barred from forming ritual friendships with one another (cf. Prakasam 1993: 202–3). My data demonstrate that existing ritual

friends do arrange the friendships of their children and in doing so they implicitly deny that they are 'real kin' or 'real brothers'. It suggests that in reality what is being created in ritual friendship is a relationship that looks very much like agnatic kinship or brotherhood but is in fact something rather different. Ritual friendship is not the same thing as 'fictive kinship'.

Whereas caste is relevant in much thinking in other spheres in village life, people are emphatic that it is not a consideration when choosing a ritual friend. Even to suggest it in connection with *phul-phulwāri* seemed distasteful to those I spoke to. Those who in other conversations and contexts were the most disparaging of the village Untouchables (Mahars and Chamars) were clear that *phul-phulwāri* was blind to caste. Most ritual friendships are formed out of caste, unlike marriage of course which is (almost) always, and ideally, contracted within caste. Of the forty-five relationships within the village, thirty-six were contracted with members of a different caste and nine were contracted within caste. Of the seventy relationships that Markakasa people contracted with people from other villages, thirty-eight were with different castes and seventeen within caste.⁶ Ritual friendships also crossed the clean–Untouchable divide: of the thirty-six relationships contracted within the village but outside one's own caste, thirteen were between Untouchables and non-Untouchables.

Similarly there seems to be no concern to restrict the making of ritual friends to people of the same class: wealthier villagers made ritual friendships with poorer ones, poor with poor and wealthy with wealthy. All in all, the impression is of a rather chaotic 'system'. It was important that the two friends be at a similar stage in their lives: though I was closer friends with my landlord than with Radhelal, it was never suggested that I become ritual friends with the former, in large part because he was married and had children and I was not.

The ceremony is not complicated and takes about five minutes to complete. A ritual specialist is not always required. Most people made do with a member of the family or a friend, though some people did ask the village *baiga* (ritual specialist) or the barber (*nai*) to officiate. People often chose to perform the ceremony at the time of the annual village fair (*mandai*) or at weddings, in part because it is at these times that the largest number of witnesses will be gathered in one place, and partly because the feasting that goes on in any case at these times can be hijacked to celebrate the friendship ceremony too. Also, as mentioned above, the ideal, according to some people, is that the ritual friend live in another village, and it is at weddings and *mandai* that guests (*saga*) visit the village and old acquaintances from far away are given the opportunity to become something more intimate.

The two parties sit on wooden blocks (*pidi*) facing each other, and two mounds of clay or mud representing the goddess Gauri (Parvati) and her

son, the god Ganesh, are placed on a plate. These are the divine witnesses to the ceremony. Each friend brings with him a plate containing a coconut, some money (five or ten rupees, but the same amount in each), a sprig of bound grass, red vermilion powder and a heap of husked rice grains (*chāwal*). The two friends anoint the gods with vermilion powder and then one another on the forehead. The sprig of grass is placed behind the other's left ear and then the plates are exchanged between the parties an odd number of times (five, seven, nine), so that they each end up with the other's plate. The friends feed each other the ritual substance (be it *mahāprasād*, *ganga jal* or *tulsi jal*) and then embrace. They then feed each other *pān* (a betel leaf concoction), and the coconuts are broken up and distributed among the assembly as *prasād* (the divine gift).⁷

Becoming a ritual friend is not necessarily an individual act. As mentioned above, it can involve a wider class of persons than the two friends. And the relationships that are created are not restricted to these two people. One's ritual friend's brothers and sisters become like one's own siblings; their parents are referred to, both when speaking to them and about them, as *phul bābu* ('flower father') and *phul dai* ('flower mother'). If the ritual friends marry then their respective wives also automatically become *mahāprasād* or *tulsi jal* to one another without a separate ceremony being required, and the same is often, though not always, true for husbands of ritual friends. Ritual friendship seems to borrow many of the attributes of 'real' kinship – kinship is after all an extremely powerful and accessible idiom – yet in ideological terms a different sort of relationship is imagined.

The Content of Ritual Friendship

The obligations that ritual friends have to one another are only loosely articulated. What is emphasized is not what ritual friends should and could do for one another, but simply that they have love (*prem*) for one another. Ritual friendship is of a different quality to other more casual forms of friendship. As one young man, Suresh, told me: 'Friendship (*dosti*) can break but *mahāprasād* is for life. It's a question of *vishwas* (trust or faith). The level of trust you have in a *mahāprasād* is different to that which you have in an ordinary friend'.

People generally say that if ritual friends live in different villages they ought to visit one another, which is a result of the *prem* that exists between the two. As mentioned above, life-cycle events such as weddings and death rituals are often occasions when those ritual friends who live a distance from one another may visit. The act of visiting friends and relatives in other villages is an important part of both men and women's

lives. Through this act it is possible to create an imaginary landscape of relatedness, in which one comes to conceptualize other villages as linked with one through ties of sentiment. But this has implications between people living in the same village too: not only is the tie between the Markakasa person and his friends or relatives in the other village, but also with people in Markakasa who have friends or are related to residents of that other village. Thus, contrary to Pitt-Rivers' assertion, ritual friendship is capable of creating sentiment that extends beyond the two people who have directly formed the relationship. My landlord Dhansai's family's ties of friendship with a family in another village provide a good example.

About eighty years ago, a man of the Sidar⁸ caste from a village called Patratola, fifteen kilometres to the east in what is now the state of Chhattisgarh, bought some land in Markakasa and became friends with Mayaram, the father of my landlord Dhansai. As he also had land in Patratola, he would only occasionally visit his holdings in Markakasa and when he did he would bring his son, Pyarilal, with him. Mayaram's eldest son, Kashiram, worked with Pyarilal and they helped each other out with their respective fields. In time they became good friends and decided to become *mahāprasād* to one another. Their fathers were happy too since it cemented the relationship between the two families. During Dhansai and his sister Didi's childhood, there was much coming and going between Markakasa and Patratola. They would often spend several days visiting each other's households and they considered Pyarilal their 'older brother'; his father was their *phul-bāba* ('flower father').⁹ The links were strengthened by Pyarilal's sister marrying and settling uxorilocally on her father's land in Markakasa as a *lamsenin*.¹⁰ Today the *lamsenin*'s grandchildren are very close to Dhansai and Didi's family: they often work together, both in work gangs on government projects and as agricultural labour, and are among the most common visitors to the house. In addition, Pyarilal's father's brother's son (FBS), Samlal, who also inherited land in Markakasa, set up a house there and even now shuttles between the village and Patratola. His family is close to Dhansai's, too. Samlal's wife, for instance, cooks and cleans for Kashiram, Dhansai's brother, when his adopted son and daughter-in-law are away, and nursed his late wife before she passed away. Thus, though Kashiram's father's younger brother (FyB) lives in Markakasa, and they have cordial relations, it is to Samlal and his wife (his *mahāprasād*'s FBS and a member of a different caste) whom he turns to in times of need. When Pyarilal's wife came to Markakasa to attend the wedding of one of the 'grandchildren' referred to above, she contrived to spend as many nights as possible with Didi's family, rather than sleep in the houses of her affines and caste-fellows. When I asked her why, she replied that there were tensions with both the other households relating to old disputes in

Patratola and so she felt more comfortable staying with Didi. This reveals another facet of the nature of ritual friendship that I highlighted at the beginning of the chapter: it is set up in contrast to the kinship relations one might have with one's real brothers (or one's husband's brothers, as in this woman's case).¹¹

Along with visiting, also central is the idea that ritual friends should dine together whenever they can; it was said that one should always invite a *mahāprasād* to dine at one's house. Festivals such as Diwali were important occasions when dining between ritual friends living in the same village would take place. In cases where their ritual friends are members of an Untouchable caste, Markakasa villagers pursue different strategies. People often said that young, unmarried men and women could eat at the house of an Untouchable without censure or pollution regardless of whether they were ritual friends or not. When young people marry, however, they ought to stop. However, despite this general rule, all those who had conducted ritual friendships across the Untouchable/'clean' divide said they had no qualms about eating at Untouchable households and that they did not think about such things when it came to ritual friends. And, of course, Untouchables friends were invited to eat at clean caste households. Caste councils, though active in other areas of life such as marriage and divorce, did not police the 'breaking' of these dining rules.

Ritual friendships stand outside the key institutions and relationships of caste and kinship. In creating connections between people of different castes, whether they live in the same village or not, people express the idea that sentiment has a value that transcends that of caste. Put in other terms, the idea of difference that is promoted by an ideology of caste is countered by the idea of similarity involved in the ideology of ritual friendship. It is this similarity that permits and sustains *prem*. In the course of a telling off I received for having addressed my ritual friend in an inappropriate way,¹² a man explained to me that we were both the same and equal and should treat one another with respect: 'what is in you here', he said pointing at my chest (and heart), 'is in him there', pointing now at my *mahāprasād*'s chest. 'It is the same'.

As well as constituting this key ideological function, ritual friends can also offer more instrumental aid, particularly in times of need. The following story illustrates the way in which many people thought about the ideal friendship engendered by this type of relationship.

On more than one occasion (and indeed after my own *mahāprasād* ceremony was performed), I was told the story of Lord Krishna and Sudama. Krishna and Sudama were childhood friends (though not 'ritual friends') of different castes who had played and studied together. When Krishna defeated his evil uncle and took back his throne at Mathura, he told Sudama that if ever he wanted anything he need only ask. Sudama

was a poor Brahmin and his ever-growing number of children compounded his poverty. His wife was something of a shrew by all accounts and pestered him to go and see his old friend Krishna, now a wealthy king, to ask for assistance. Sudama wanted to take a gift, as it had been so long since they had seen each other. All they had in the house however was *pohā* (flattened or beaten rice), hardly a suitable offering to a king; but Sudama grabbed a bagful and set off for Mathura. On his arrival, seeing the splendour of Krishna's court, Sudama grew ashamed of his meagre gift and decided not to give it to his old friend. Krishna greeted Sudama affectionately and washed the feet of his guest. But he had noticed the bag of *pohā* that Sudama was unsuccessfully trying to hide and snatched it from him. He opened the bag and began eating the *pohā* with such joy that his courtiers began whispering about this mysterious gift. 'It's the tastiest food I've ever had', announced Krishna. Sudama was happy but felt uneasy about asking Krishna for help. He left without mentioning the reason for his visit. When he got home, it was unrecognizable; where his hut had once stood there was now a beautiful palace. Krishna had known what his friend had wanted and provided it. This, I was told, was how ritual friends ought to behave with one another.

Ritual friends do help each other both financially and by providing their labour at life-cycle events. But this is not in itself unusual behaviour: 'ordinary' friends or neighbours often do the same. What is different is that the ritual friend can be relied upon to assist one because of the affection that exists between the parties, and because one trusts one's ritual friend to a greater degree than other people.

The Problem with Brothers

When I asked people in the village about the nature of the relationship between ritual friends, they would often reply that forming *mahāprasād* creates a bond like that of brothers, like the closest of brothers, and that it is even closer than brothers because there is no self-interest involved or reason to argue; there is '*sirf prem*' ('only love'). The proof that the relationship is only 'like brothers' is that the children of ritual friends can themselves become ritual friends, an act that would be prohibited if making of brotherhood was actually envisaged. Thus it is misleading at the level of analysis to lump together ritual friendship and kinship despite the apparent similarities in the content of the relationships between the two types of relatedness. I suggest that we can uncover the true meaning of ritual friendship if we instead oppose the categories of ritual friendship and brotherhood. Let us take a closer look at the relations between brothers.

Brothers are regarded as the closest of all kin relations but the relationship is also recognized as the most difficult to maintain successfully, especially after the brothers marry. Before marriage, brothers are seen as working happily together for the good of the common household; after marriage, however, with the arrival of wives, brothers become selfish and quarrelsome. This is, of course, as it is seen from the male point of view, but wives also share the view that the relationship between brothers is fraught with difficulty. The ideal household is one where all brothers, together with their wives, live together and work together without division or jealousy. But this is seen as too lofty an ideal to be realized and as a consequence people often said that having more than one brother was a recipe for trouble.¹³ In fact, most households in the village have at one time or another been seriously divided because of disputes between brothers. Two of the castes in the village, the Mahars and the Desau Gonds, have each split into two factions as the result of fraternal quarrels. Brothers (and their wives) are seen as intensely envious of their siblings. The most common cause of disputes is over land and inheritance. At least until their father dies, brothers and their families farm the land together and hold the grain produced in common. Maintaining this arrangement can, however, be difficult and in several cases a division of property (*hissa*) has been made in the father's lifetime, so that brothers farm separately and hand over a portion of their grain to their parents. Moreover, accounts are certainly kept of how much labour one brother's household contributes to the other. The disappointing experience of brotherhood is for many in sharp contrast to the idealized vision of ritual friendship.

I returned to the village in April 2005 for a month of fieldwork, and a series of incidents involving my *mahāprasād*, Radhelal, highlighted the interested/disinterested dichotomy between brothers and ritual friends. Radhelal, as I mentioned before, is the village shopkeeper. In a tiny space of less than two metres by two metres, he stocks a rather wide range of household goods; he also buys and sells unhusked rice, *mahua* flowers (used to make alcohol), tamarind, and other farm and forest produce. The shop makes a handsome profit, and many people praise Radhelal not only for his fair rates and prices but also for his commercial skill. He is the youngest of four brothers and a recent event affected relations between them.

April is the time when the *mahua* flower, which is used to make alcohol, blooms and falls and is collected by villagers to sell. The sale of *mahua* flowers to private shops, however, is illegal; all *mahua* must be sold to the State's Tribal Development Council (*Adivasi Vikas Mahamandal*), which guarantees a 'fair rate'. For Radhelal, the buying and selling of *mahua* can be highly profitable but it is also dangerous. Forest officials regularly

conduct raids, and the transportation of *mahua* between merchants – which often takes place at night – is risky and subject to interception. Tractors transporting *mahua* had been caught on two separate occasions in the area that month and had, together with the flowers, been confiscated by the Forest Department. According to Radhelal all the traders were nervous. But he could not sit on his *mahua* any longer; he was short of money and needed to sell it on. So one day before dawn he sent three bullock cartloads off to his buyer. Unfortunately, fifteen forest officials were waiting for them and impounded the carts and the produce. Radhelal rushed to the Forest Office as soon as he heard and managed, with the help of a local leader from a neighbouring village, to persuade the officials to release the carts and the *mahua* in exchange for a large sum of money. On his return, his brothers Naresh and Mer Singh berated him for his lack of judgement in selling the *mahua*. The income that he would have made was eaten up by the bribe he had handed over. His sister-in-law, Mer Singh's wife, also began to criticize him, suggesting that the shop had lost enough money, and that they ought to shut it and Radhelal should do something else. Naresh and Mer Singh agreed. This was a surprising statement since everyone knew how well the shop did and that it was as a result of the income from the shop that the household had grown so wealthy. Radhelal said as much to his brothers and sister-in-law. Angry and upset, he went to open his shop for business. Later that day, he came to my house and told me what had happened:

I can't understand why they're behaving like this. I had to sell the *mahua*. And that's what business, running a shop, is like: you have to pay people off all the time. My brothers don't understand that because they don't run the shop. How can they say I should close it down? They don't like seeing me doing so well, that's what the problem is. They can see that I'm getting to know lots of important people, traders, and they can't bear it. They can't bear the fact that it's because of me that the household runs at all and if any of them want money it's me they come to.

That evening he stayed and ate with me and came again the following evening too. He said that he just did not feel like eating at home with his brothers. The atmosphere was bad and his mother was crying all the time. Though he has other friends in the village, it was striking that he chose to come to my house, the house of his *mahāprasād*, while he was fighting with his brothers. Compared to the intensely interested relationship he had with his brothers, our relationship was disinterested in that neither of us could constrain each other's action, nor were we involved in each other's household affairs. Significantly, whereas brothers are expected to fight and fall out, it is said that ritual friends never do.

This discussion of disputes and arguments among brothers (or agnatic kin more generally) is important because such conflicts, if not resolved satisfactorily, run the risk of involving magic, used to eliminate an enemy. Attacks of witchcraft and sorcery are fairly common, and most people have, during the course of their lives, been subject to unwelcome attention of this kind. Malignant spiritual attacks are of two broad types: those perpetrated by witches (*tonhi* or *saude*), who may or may not need a reason to attack, and those initiated by laymen with the help of a sorcerer/diviner (*baiga* or *pujāri*). The latter kind of spiritual attack is most commonly committed by close kin, in particular close agnatic kin, of which one's real brother is the ideal type. While a brother is often accused of attack, it is also common to suspect his wife, who also has an interest in harming her brother-in-law and his family. Consider the following example.

My landlord Dhansai had a longstanding dispute with his elder brother Kashiram that has only recently been resolved. The relationship between the two brothers has never been good, and was characterized by a dispute over inheritance and property. Kashiram, Dhansai's brother, has no children of his own, but he had adopted a boy around fifteen years ago when the child was eight. Adoption is common in cases of childlessness but the adopted child is usually someone from within the family, a brother's son or daughter for instance. The reasoning is simple: 'an outsider should not eat one's land'. In this case, Shanta, the adopted boy, although a relative, is not of their lineage. Dhansai felt great bitterness over this: Kashiram ought to have adopted one of Dhansai's children so that the land would remain in the family; Kashiram's four acres would instead go to this 'outsider'. In the midst of all these claims and accusations of betrayal, Kashiram's wife, according to Dhansai, went to see a *baiga* (sorcerer) to ask that he cast a spell (*mantra*) to kill him. Dhansai duly fell ill, with recurring headaches and unexplained weight loss, and was at death's door for the good part of a year.

One could argue that interested relationships, such as those involving brothers, are susceptible to the use of witchcraft and magic, especially as weapons in the course of a dispute. Ritual friendships are ideally disinterested relationships, and as a result could be interpreted as being free from the types of risks associated with interested ones. The terms interested and disinterested suggest that ideas and theories about gifts and exchange may prove useful in understanding ritual friendship.

In a recent chapter discussing ritual friendship in Orissa, eastern India, Pfeffer (2001, cited in Skoda 2004: 176) makes the intriguing observation that 'love, nothing but pure love is expected from and given to the [ritual friend]. They will never demand a buffalo but their alter egos will surely provide for them'. Though not expressed in quite the same terms, the

ideology seems to be very similar to what I have described above. Firstly, that love, 'only love' (*sirf prem*), is the most important factor in a ritual friendship, and secondly, that gifts are given without any expectation of return. This is in sharp contrast with the type of exchange that takes place between brothers: although brothers and their families may appear to give to one another with no expectation of return in the short-term, accounts are certainly kept for the long-term. Over the course of one's life, generalized reciprocity eventually becomes balanced. Sahlins (1974) argues that generalized reciprocity, as a kind of open-ended responsibility, is the sort of arrangement that exists between close kin. The experience of agnatic kinship in Markakasa seems to suggest that over the course of time it has to become balanced, or at least have the semblance of balance, for any sort of relationship to endure. A permanent imbalance will lead to conflict and a rupturing of relationships.

Take the example of my landlord Dhansai again. His elder brother Kashiram and he have now reconciled and they live and work together. The adopted son Shanta and his wife were asked to go and live in her natal village and renounce their claim on inheriting his land. Kashiram is much older than Dhansai; he is in his late sixties and can only perform the least demanding of tasks, such as collecting tamarind or *mahua*. Dhansai supports his brother now; he pays for his medicine and the repairs to his cycle, and sweeps and cleans his elder brother's living quarters. But this is part of the deal. When the childless Kashiram dies, Dhansai will inherit his land. The acrimonious dispute of more than twenty years standing appears to have been forgotten.

No such accounts are kept with ritual friends: people are expected to give with no expectation of return. On my return that April, Radhelal would insist that I eat with him every evening; after the fifth dinner in as many days I remarked that I felt awkward that I could not reciprocate. (As I ate my meals with my landlord and his wife, I found it difficult to invite people to dinner.) 'But we're *mahāprasād*', he replied. 'That sort of thing doesn't matter, you should eat with me everyday'. The motivating force is sentiment and affection; there is no 'looking to the future'.

Seen in terms of reciprocity and the gift, the story about Krishna and Sudama, recounted earlier in the chapter and told to me almost every time I asked someone specifically about ritual friendships, can be considered in a new light. What is appealing about the story is not, as I had initially supposed, that it is a general statement about how friends should behave with one another. Rather, the essential point of the story might be that Sudama cannot ask his friend for anything but Krishna knows what he wants and gives it to him without Sudama's knowledge.¹⁴ As Parry states: 'the genuine gift is never solicited and the gift should be made in secret' (1986: 461).¹⁵ I am not suggesting that this holds true in reality for the

types of exchanges that occur between ritual friends, merely that the ideology appears in contrast to the types of interested exchange that transpire between brothers. The gift between ritual friends does not need to be repaid.

Ritual friendship captures an 'image of eternity' (Graeber 2001: 218). Unlike the expectation of disputes with brothers (raised almost to the level of ideology), it is said that ritual friends never fall out. This can be seen in the exchanges that take place in the ritual which makes people into friends. As mentioned above, each party has a plate containing some money and rice which is passed back and forth between the parties five, seven, or nine times. The significance of odd numbers is not only that at the end of the process, each party holds the other's plate, but that as a result of this long back-and-forth, the parties become confused as to whose plate they are holding at any point during the exchange. This has two implications: firstly, it suggests that this type of exchange is represented in ritual as continuing indefinitely and as an 'image of eternity', explained by the prolonged series of exchanges; secondly, the fact of exchange becomes irrelevant because of the confusion caused by the passing back and forth – the knowledge that one has given to the other seems to be enough.

I should say here that I am not suggesting that the relationship between brothers is characterized by a complete lack of an 'image of eternity'. I am simply proposing that the type of reciprocity that goes on between brothers (or other agnatic kin) is subject to change from generalized to balanced (or in Graeber's terms, from 'open' to 'closed'; 2001: 220¹⁶), whereas the ideology of exchange which characterizes relations between ritual friends remains permanently 'open'.

This brings us neatly back to a discussion of equality and hierarchy, and the opposition of the ideology of ritual friendship to the ideology of kinship and caste. Taking my cue from Graeber, I contend that gifts do not need to be repaid between ritual friends because the relationship is not identified with inequality between the actors: 'Gifts have to be repaid when communistic relations are so identified with inequality [as in the case of brothers of the same household] that not doing so would place the recipient in the position of an inferior' (Graeber 2001: 221). The relations between ritual friends are not characterized by inequality but the relations between brothers (especially those who share a household) certainly are. By not repaying the gifts received from a brother, one places oneself in a position of inferiority in relation to that brother. Take the example of Dhansai and Kashiram once again. Dhansai provides for Kashiram and receives nothing in return for the moment. Kashiram, although older, is put in a position of inferiority as long as no return is made. This situation will change once Kashiram is dead and makes his return by giving his

land to Dhansai. That ritual friends are regarded as equal is supported by the fact that, since sentiment is the basis of their relationship, they are not compelled to make a return: there is no question of an inferior or superior ritual friend.¹⁷ Likewise, equality is a key element in the story of Krishna and Sudama: one man's commentary on it was that by giving Sudama a palace, Krishna was making Sudama the same as him, creating similarity out of the undesirable difference of inequality between friends.

And yet, are ritual friendships in reality, as they are experienced and not as they are idealized, ultimately about self-interest and is that why people make them? The idea held by some that ritual friends ought to be from different villages, ideally far away, seems to indicate that friendships are made to expand social networks beyond the confines of one's village and 'to get to know more people' – people one would not otherwise encounter. Interestingly, in answer to my questions about why people *married* less either within the village or to cousins than in the past, I was often told that to do so meant one did not get to know new people, and knowing new people was seen as valuable. By bringing the fear of witchcraft back into the discussion, however, one could alternatively suggest that the greater the distance between ritual friends, the smaller the chance the relationship could become interested and thus susceptible to the types of attack that occur among kin and neighbours. In contrast to Western notions of friendship, intimacy is actively discouraged between ritual friends. In stark contrast to 'ordinary' friendships, the ritual friendship is strictly non-joking and the injunction against referring to one's ritual friend by name is always enforced.¹⁸ Distance and formality are necessary components of this type of relationship.

One could look at the benefits of ritual friendship in two ways: material and moral. Gana, a forty-five year old Teli man, has a *mahāprasād* relationship with a bullock-seller who visits the village once or sometimes twice a year. When I asked them and others why they had become ritual friends, they gave the stock answer: *prem* (love or affection). But it is also clear that for the bullock-seller, having a ritual friend in Markakasa means that on a cold winter's night he is fed and housed during his stay while the other members of his party shiver outside under the mango trees. He also has the moral benefit of being treated not as a complete outsider, as his fellow bullock-sellers are, but explicitly as a *saga* (guest) of the village because of his relationship with Gana. It is impossible to ascertain, however, whether this moral benefit would translate into material benefit, in the form of improved sales of bullocks for instance, but certainly in the eyes of Gana's fellow villagers there was a sense that they would get a fairer deal from a man connected with them in this way. Nevertheless, the cornerstone of the relationship is still idealized as being one of love and affection (*prem*), despite the actual experience of the ritual friendship once

it is formed, which may involve material or moral benefit. The practice and reality of ritual friendship can be as disappointing as the relations with brothers: friendships made in youth can fall away in later life and, although I never heard of ritual friends arguing or fighting, simple avoidance can be the expression of a disagreement or of a sense of growing apart. After all, ending a marriage or building a separate house from one's brother signals the end or at least the suspension of those respective relationships. But how does one publicly end a friendship? In contrast, however, to the relations with brothers and wives, there is a strong presumption that ritual friends do not argue and that it is a lifelong association. Although the friendship is undoubtedly idealized, it is noteworthy that it is my informants who do the idealizing, and not the anthropologist who could quite naturally be accused of viewing their social world through rose-tinted glasses.

Conclusion

Friendship should indeed be seen as a process (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991), as a form of belonging that changes over the course of a lifetime: at different points in one's life certain relationships are privileged over others, and parents, peers, siblings, spouses, children, as well as friends, fade in and out. This process has important social significance. But as I have shown here, looking at friendship as structural (in both senses of the term), as well as functional, can also provide valuable insights into different forms of sociality.

By looking at the function of this particular form of friendship in the context of social life in Markakasa, it should be made clear that 'ritual friendship' is not at all the same thing as 'fictive kinship'. Despite the fact that ritual friendship is modelled on kinship to a certain degree (e.g. the use of kin terms), what is constructed in ideological terms is a type of association that is ultimately contrasted with kinship, not assimilated to it. The fear of witchcraft or magic, the expectation of disputes between brothers, and the accompanying disappointment one might feel about the fraternal relationship all contribute in large part, I suggest, to the construction of an ideology of ritual friendship that is typically disinterested and based purely on affection. Where there is no 'interest', at least in ideological terms, one can create a safe relationship which is not subject to spiritual attack or spectacular dispute. Ritual friendship also demonstrates that sentiment between people of different castes acts as a counter to the ideology of caste in certain spheres of social life, and also that this sentiment extends beyond the two individual parties to the friendship. In addition to affirming the social body of the village by

connecting people across caste, kin and class lines and thereby emphasizing a fundamental affinity as members of a common humanity localized in a particular space, ritual friendship creates a landscape of relations with people outside one's locale, which has the effect of reinforcing ties with related people within one's village. Reorienting the focus so that ritual friendship is put at the centre of the analysis demonstrates how the classic tropes of Indian sociology – kinship and caste – can be seen in their proper context. It is precisely because caste and kinship are social arenas of such importance in people's lives that ritual friendship, with its emphasis on affection, takes the form that it does.

Notes

1. Markakasa is a pseudonym. It is a small multi-caste village located in a 'tribal' area at the eastern extremities of the state of Maharashtra, close to the border with the state of Chhattisgarh. Fieldwork was conducted for a total of twenty months (from 2002 to 2004, and again in 2005 and 2008). The research was supported by an Economic and Social Research Council Postgraduate Studentship (PTA-030-2002-00731), and Postdoctoral Fellowship (PTA-026-27-1681), an Emslie Horniman Award from the Royal Anthropological Institute, and an award from the Sutasoma Trust. I wish to thank Jonathan Parry, Veronique Benei, Evan Killick, and the participants at the 'Anthropology of Friendship' workshop and LSE South Asia Seminar for their comments on various versions of this chapter.
2. Jay (1973) refers to the word *mitān*, which he translates as 'friend', and which is used in the same way Markakasa people use *phul-phulwāri*; Jonathan Parry (personal communication) also reports the use of this word in and around the industrial city of Bhilai in Chhattisgarh. To my knowledge, Markakasa villagers never used *mitān* to refer to these specific ritual friendships, and indeed the title *mahāprasād* was sometimes used, incorrectly, as a generic term.
3. Okada also observes that mutual affection is the primary reason why people enter into similar sorts of ritual friendships in Nepal (1957: 214).
4. A large city 180 km to the west where my maternal uncle (MB) lives.
5. This is my category, not one that Markakasa people used.
6. In two cases, the Markakasa villagers did not know the caste of their ritual friend, which itself is striking in the Indian context. For the remaining thirteen relationships outside the village, I have no data as to the caste of the ritual friend.
7. It is important to note here that the ritual does not 'make' similarity out of difference. It simply affirms a pre-existing similarity that is enabling and constitutive of the *prem* between the parties.
8. A Scheduled Tribe under the Indian constitution and therefore 'Adivasi' but not Gond.

9. Although it was Kashiram who was Pyarilal's *mahāprasād*, the terminology used extended to his siblings.
10. *Lamsenin*: the wife of a *lamsena*, a man who lives uxorilocally and farms the land of his father-in-law.
11. Bloch's (1973) discussion of affinal and agnatic kinship may suggest a complementary interpretation. He argues, following Fortes, that affinal kinship relationships need to be constantly activated and 'used' in order to be maintained: thus they have force in the short-term. For the long-term, however, one knows that it is agnatic kinship relationships which endure and have the greatest moral force. This may be the case here, with 'affinal kinship' replaced with 'ritual friendship' in the analysis. There are a number of differences, however, not least that ritual friendship acts to make up for the failings of brotherhood and in the process is transformed into a different type of social relationship altogether. It is because one knows that the long-term experience of brotherhood may be ultimately disappointing that the ritual friendship based on sentiment has more moral force.
12. I was on my way to a musical performance in the village and said to my *mahaprasad*, 'Are you coming?' This offended a man who was standing nearby who proceeded to instruct me that my question lacked the requisite tenderness that one should display when speaking to a ritual friend. The correct formulation should have been 'Are you coming, *mahaprasad*?'
13. Thus, though strictly speaking the ideology of brotherhood involves harmony, the experience of failed fraternal relationships leads to the creation of an 'almost-ideology' of brotherhood as problematic.
14. That Krishna is a god is almost irrelevant in the telling of this story, and the contexts in which I was told it make this clear. It is not Krishna's divinity that is emphasized but his quality as a friend, and he realizes what Sudama wants because he has *prem* for him. It is not surprising that the story featured a god: throughout much of India stories of gods are told in exactly this fashion to signify exemplary behaviour to be aspired to by ordinary mortals.
15. Okada makes a similar observation regarding the practice of what he terms 'ritual brotherhood' in Nepal: 'A man has the right to ask his *mit* for help although the ideal situation is that both should be on the alert to assist each other without being asked' (1957: 217).
16. Whereas 'open reciprocity' means that which 'keeps no accounts because it implies a relation of permanent commitment' (Graeber 2001: 220), 'closed reciprocity' occurs when 'a balancing of accounts closes the relationship off, or at least maintains the constant possibility of doing so' (Graeber 2001: 220).
17. In fact, this is one of the few major criticisms of the *phul-phulwari* institution, voiced by a particular minority who dislike it because of its caste blindness, in particular the types of associations it creates between clean castes and Untouchables, and the emphasis placed on commensal dining in these sorts of relationships. In this the opponents seem to recognize the social value of these kinds of friendships, that the sentiment they create and express has implications beyond the individuals concerned and their households.

18. Ritual friends do drink alcohol with each other. However, among brothers, it is generally frowned upon for younger brothers to drink in the presence of older brothers: to do so would imply a lack of respect (*marjada*). This supports my contention that, in contrast to brotherhood, ritual friendship emphasizes the essential equality of the two parties.

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