



Negotiations between Work and Rituals: Working Women and the Construction of an Idiosyncratic Womanhood during Religious Festivals

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ABSTRACT

India, a nation known for its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, is home to many cultural festivals and seasonal celebrations. In Indian society, festivals serve a religious purpose, and women cannot be excluded, as they play a prominent role in both their preparation and celebration. But festivals, which are meant to bring joy and togetherness, often put pressure on many women, especially working women. From shopping, cleaning, decorating, to observing fasts, cooking several meals, and making traditional sweets for the family and other guests, alongside work deadlines, their labour is both physical, emotional, and cultural. This paper analyses the importance of festivals in working women's lives and how they structure their time during several festive occasions. Whether they perform cultural labour under pressure or by their own belief systems. It also focuses on how working women negotiate traditional expectations to construct an idiosyncratic womanhood that aligns both with faith and autonomy. The study's findings reveal that, even though working women find ways to balance both work and tradition, this still increases their burden. The study emphasises the importance of adopting a gender-neutral approach during festivals to ease the burden on working women and preserve the Indian culture.

Introduction:

In Indian society, festivals hold deep cultural and emotional importance and offer opportunities for expression, spiritual fulfilment and social cohesion. Festivals bring vibrancy to the ordinary, mundane



life through food, clothing, decorations, and most importantly, music and dance. While some festivals are celebrated nationwide, such as Maha Shivaratri, Holi, Diwali, and Navratri, others have regional significance, such as Makar Sankranti, Naag Panchami, Bihu, and Pongal (Jauhari & Munjal, 2015). Behind every festival lies a religious belief, or we can say that religion and festivals are inseparable in Indian society. As religion and festivals go hand in hand, women also share a strong association with festivals (Arora, 2022).

In Hindu society, celebrating life through festivals is a cultural tradition in which women play a prominent role in their preparation and celebration. In both rural and urban areas, women make their active participation in many religious rituals in a year (Wadley, 1977). The spiritual and ritual knowledge of women, along with the numerous practices associated with them, keeps religious beliefs alive in many cultures. But festivals, which are meant to bring joy and togetherness, often put pressure on women, especially working women. There is no doubt that working women experience a double burden in managing their public and private lives (Hochschild, 1989), but in the presence of religious prescriptions, this burden intensifies. Festivals differ in how they are celebrated; some are celebrated at the family level, whereas others are celebrated at the community level. In the household settings, women's work increases tenfold; from shopping, cleaning, decorating, to observing fasts, cooking several meals, and making traditional sweets for the family and other guests, alongside work requirements, their labour becomes physical, emotional, and cultural. The fact that women are more religious than men, and that their participation in religious activities is also higher than men's (Pew Research Centre, 2016; Becker et al., 2026), when they enter paid employment, they face challenges in keeping up with the traditional values of the family. The expectations placed on them to maintain traditional values alongside their professional work make their lives challenging. In response, working women try to maintain a balance in which they do not completely reject the traditions and customs associated with a festival, but do so in a way that still looks appealing.

Objectives of the Study:

This paper is based on two objectives.

1. It attempts to analyse the importance of festivals in working women's lives and how they structure their time during several festive occasions.
2. It focuses on how working women negotiate traditional expectations to construct an idiosyncratic womanhood that aligns both with faith and autonomy.

**Research Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative approach and draws on both primary and secondary data. The research was conducted in Chandigarh, with a sample of 20 working women employed at higher educational institutions. These participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the research objectives. Primary data were collected through personal interviews to understand their lived experiences during festivals. Pseudonyms have been assigned to the respondents. Additionally, secondary data were utilised from books, journal articles, book chapters, reports, and websites. The collected data were thematically analyzed to identify common patterns and meanings associated with negotiation and role management. The study is divided into three parts: the first section discusses how festivals are a component of gender. The second examines the significance of festivals in the lives of working women. The third explores the negotiation strategies that working women use to balance their work and ritual duties.

Festivals as a Site of Gender Performance:

Festivals have been a significant part of people's lives throughout history (Cudny, 2014). In many societies, festivals are not gender-neutral, as both men and women perform different roles and responsibilities, often dictated by religious texts and scriptures. In Hindu society, women's primary role is within the family sphere, where they perform domestic chores and child-related activities. Apart from that, they are also responsible for daily worship of the deities and performing occasional rituals to please God. Their worship is closely linked to the prosperity of family members, including wealth and good health (Bose, 2010).

Since most of the festivals are observed at the family premises; thus, it falls under the responsibility of women to organize them. As men spend most of their time in paid work, they get the freedom to minimise their contributions and participation in religious activities (Becker et al., 2026). They are free from observing fasts, shopping, cooking sweets, and decorating homes, which are traditionally associated with festivals (Wadley, 1977). On the other hand, women who stay at home and look after household responsibilities invest their time and energy in organising and celebrating these festivals as part of family and community culture. Women prepare special food as offerings to the God or Deity and also observe fasts for the long life of their husbands and sons, and the well-being of their family members. The fast completes after performing certain rituals, such as reciting the katha (Bose, 2010). This division works for women who are not employed, but when women enter paid employment, they face challenges in maintaining traditional family values. During festive seasons, the entire workload falls on them, from



shopping, cleaning, and decorating to performing rituals, observing fasts, cooking festive-specific food, arranging family gatherings, and attending to guests. The next section discusses the importance of religious festivals in women's lives through their personal experiences and narratives. It also analyses whether they perform cultural labour under pressure or in line with their own belief systems.

Importance of Festivals in Working Women's Lives:

Societal norms around religion and morality suggest that it is women's duty to uphold family values and unity (Wadley, 1977). Festivals are one such occasion when all family members and relatives gather and experience what Durkheim describes as collective effervescence (Durkheim & Swain, 1915). Since festivals are closely linked to religion, women's beliefs keep them engaged in activities with religious significance, and in this way, festivals also hold a significant importance in women's lives. The process of participating in festivals begins in childhood, when girls observe their mothers participating in religious activities. They also help their mothers with cleaning, decorating, and preparing festive sweets and offerings. Mothers also ensure their daughters participate in family traditional rituals and religious activities, such as going to the temple, observing fasts, reciting katha (storytelling), singing devotional songs, and attending local Jagrans (religious vigil).

As women grow up, they internalize these values and understand their moral responsibility during festive seasons. When these women marry and join a new family, the eldest female member shares her knowledge of family rituals with the newly married daughter-in-law, who then observes them within the family. In this way, the women contribute in preserving the family tradition by passing it down from one generation to the next. Now the question arises: whether women perform this work under pressure or out of their own belief systems.

Negotiation Strategies in Constructing an Idiosyncratic Womanhood:

Idiosyncratic womanhood refers to how women construct personalized ways of being a good woman and selectively merge tradition and autonomy rather than fully rejecting or accepting it. In doing so, women employ different negotiation strategies to balance their work and ritual responsibilities. During the interview, most respondents admitted that they have the primary responsibility for managing and organizing festivals. They shared that they do not follow the ritual as their mother-in-law did. They are a little flexible and adjust the timing and method of ritual performance.

One respondent, named Shiksha, shared:



It's always a woman's responsibility to manage the household activities. Festivals are also one of those where the expectations lie on women. While others enjoy and celebrate, women work tirelessly to make that happen. Earlier, I used to feel very burdened, maybe I was trying to do everything perfectly. But slowly, I have realised that it's not possible for me to manage everything. In the workplace, nobody thinks oh it's festival time, let women have some extra time to focus on their festive responsibilities. It does not work like that. That's why I have started doing things in my own way. I do not blindly follow; I keep my faith in whatever way I do.

Another respondent, named Manju revealed that,

Festivals hold not only religious but also emotional value, and it's that time when we all feel together and connected. At the same time, they demand women's time and energy as well. Since I am a working woman and it's difficult to do everything on my own, I have started depending on technology. I shop online, be it pooja items, decorative items, rangoli colours, Prashad (sacred offering), sweets, or whatever is required. It does lower my burden to a great extent.

While some women admitted they actively negotiate, others found festive experiences difficult and exhausting.

A respondent named Alka also shared

Since childhood, I have helped my mother during festival time. We used to do it in a simple, subtle way, but when I got married, I understood that my in-laws are very particular when it comes to religious activities. They want things to be done on time and in the same way they have been doing for generations. It creates a lot of pressure on me, and nobody understands my working position. So if you ask me, festivals are the busiest time of my life, where I don't feel happiness or excitement but stress and anxiety.

Another respondent shared a similar experience by saying that festivals are joyful until you are not married. Once you get married and have kids, festivals no longer excite you. She further stated that:

During festive seasons, I wake up early and start household and ritual activities earlier than usual to accommodate my work schedule. I spend the whole day at work, where I hardly get time for rest. In the evening, when I get back, I start on the remaining work again.

The stories of these women highlight the intense gendered expectations imposed on women during festival times, where festivals become a burden rather than a source of joy for them.

**Findings of the Study:**

In the Indian context, festivals hold social and cultural significance as they promote social bonding and strengthen relationships between people. However, these festivals often come at the expense of women's efforts and sacrifices made during religious celebrations. The study's findings highlight that working women face a triple burden: professional responsibilities, domestic duties, and ritual obligations. These women described their festival experience as exhausting, as they are supposed to manage work schedules alongside ritual and household responsibilities. The respondents revealed that their participation in festivals is closely observed by their mother-in-law and other relatives, particularly older women, which puts pressure on them to perform them precisely. The study also highlights that women who live in nuclear families have autonomy to negotiate while those who live with in-laws do not get such liberty.

The respondents shared that they do not have the option to completely opt out of the rituals; instead, they adjust the timing or the way the ritual is performed.

At the same time, respondents also showed their active negotiation rather than passive acceptance of these roles. Many women discussed modifying rituals to align with their personal beliefs and practical circumstances. Some women reported performing only essential or symbolically important rituals. Women admitted that they reorganize their daily schedules during festivals by starting household and ritual work earlier than usual to accommodate working hours. Working women also use technology, such as online shopping and ordering and delivery services for groceries, sweets, clothes, and ritual items, to save time and reduce physical workload during festivals. Ritual practices like fasting are modified rather than abandoned. Women negotiate fasting by shortening its duration or observing it only on key days, and in ways that do not disrupt their attendance in college. Some domestic tasks, like cleaning and decorations, are shared with other family members

Respondents also point out that during festival times, the paid work does not reduce, but personal rest and leisure time are sacrificed.

Conclusion:

In Indian society, women are the heart of every festival, and without their participation, the celebration is incomplete. But one cannot deny that during festive seasons, women's workload increases tenfold. In traditional societies, when women were restricted from entering the workforce, they could still follow family traditions. But now the situation has changed: many women have entered paid employment, which makes it difficult for them to manage household work alongside festive rituals. However, the study



reveals that women employ diverse negotiation strategies, such as selective participation, sharing responsibilities with other family members, and rescheduling rituals to manage the competing demands of work and family life. These negotiations challenge the traditional gender norms that expect women to follow and preserve the traditional values of the family and society at large. The study's findings also reveal that, even though working women find creative ways to balance work and tradition, this still increases their burden because they lack family support. This study strongly suggests adopting a gender-neutral approach during festivals to reduce the burden on working women and preserve the Indian culture.

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