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Fasting, Praying & Storytelling**Pragya Shukla***Lecturer, English Language and Literature, K.P.S, Bilaspur, (Chhattisgarh) India***Sudhir Kumar***Asst. Professor, Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communication, Guru Ghasidas University, Bilaspur.
(Chhattisgarh) India***Abstract**

Fasting or *vrats* are an important aspect of Hinduism. It is believed that observing fasts makes the mind strong and determined. People select a particular day of the week according to the position of planets in their horoscopes or as directed by astrologers. Devotees eat fruits only on such days. Most important part includes worshipping the presiding deity of the day. Part of the worship usually involves reciting or reading the Vrat Kathas or stories associated with the deity of that particular day. People who participate listen avidly to these stories as they are a part of the ritual and are essential for appeasing the presiding deity.

Key Words -vrats kathas, its exposition, narratological technique, analysis

In the Indian literature, the term 'Vrata' has found usage since the early Vedic Period. It is repeated over two hundred times in the *Rig Veda*, the oldest classical text of Hinduism. (Kane 51) Although finding constant reference in the *Samahitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Upanishads* and the *Shashtras*, the true implication of the term has yet to be fathomed. Scholars debate on the authentic meaning of the term till date.

In the words of Pearson:

... The concept of *Vrata* in the *Rig Veda* is closely connected with the larger metaphysical concept of the cosmic order, righteousness in the Hindu tradition; and with the governed and governing activity of the Gods. (Pearson 76)

To observe a *Vrata* is considered to be a part of *Dharma* or 'the way it is'. Some of them are practiced on a regular basis to achieve particular objectives. They are

observed by following of prescribed rules which have been transmitted over generations. It would be safe to conclude that the observance of a *Vrata* is usually associated with Hindu women.

The ideology behind the concept of *Vrata* is very ancient. It constitutes a form of folk religion which developed parallel to the mainstream sacrificial and ascetic practices attested in Sanskrit texts. These practices were transmitted orally over female generations; and went largely ignored by the male ideologues. The practice of a *Vrata* is believed to help in attainment of both *Bhukti* (objects or worldly enjoyment) and *Mukti* (destruction of sins and final release).

There has been a definite shift however, in the range of meanings for the term *Vrata*, ranging from an enforced command or law to that of a voluntary vow. The *Bhavishya Puranas* states that one easily crosses the

deep ocean of hell on the boat of *Vratas* and *Niyamas*.

From an early age, Hindu girls learn about the procedure, principles and meanings of *Vrata* from their female peers. In her celebrated work *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, Julia Leslie observes that:

out of a survey conducted on 108 women, 94% observed fasts for marital felicity, 71% for health and longevity of the husband, 65% for conception of children, 21% for attainment of worldly power, 37% for drawing nearer to the almighty and only 30% for liberation. (Leslie 95)

The concept of *Vrata* signifies a set of rules and principles and stems from the verbal root '*Vrn*' which literally means 'to choose'. These vows are said to be imperative ritualistic obligations.

While observing a *Vrata*, one must abide by several rules to protect the holiness of the ritual. The devotees are required to keep clean, observe celibacy, speak the truth, practice forbearance and avoid non-vegetarian food. A *Vrata* should never be left incomplete, nor should a new one be started before conclusion of an older one. (Subramuniyaswami).

The system of *Vrata* also prescribes restrictions or specifications regarding food. *Sattvik* food, i.e. the kind that leads to purity of thought is allowed and *tamsik* food, the variety that arouses passion is prohibited. A *Nityavrat* is one which is obligatory, aimed at self-purification or preparation for a new role of significance. A *Kamyavrat* on the other hand is motivated by desire and is undertaken for

the fulfilment of a worldly desire. Thus it is obvious that *Vrata* as a practice recognises the motivation of desire, the control of the body as well as the role of the self.

Observance of a *Vrata* involves partial or completes fasting, ritual worship of a deity and the recitation or hearing of the relevant story or the '*Katha*'. Narration of the *Katha* includes a systematic recitation with exposition. Although the noun *Katha* is often understood to mean simply 'story', this English translation tends to overly nominalise a word that retains a strong sense of its verb root. In the Indian context, a story is first and foremost something that is 'told', and the Sanskrit root '*Kath*', from which the noun is derived means "to converse with, tell, relate, narrate, speak about, explain"

Hence, the term *Katha* can thus be better understood as 'telling' or narration. Monier-Williams gives the most archaic meaning of *Katha* as — "conversation . . . talking together" (Monier—Williams 771)

A dialogical milieu is thus fundamental to performance of the *Katha*. To tell a story implies that there must be someone to hear it, and in the Hindu performance traditions the role of the hearer (*Shrota*) is participatory rather than passive.

Exposition of the *Katha* is a pan-Indian phenomenon. The three components of the genre are: the text or the *Katha*, the storyteller and the listener. Instructions for a *Vrata* usually require that the *Katha* be recited to someone, and only when the story has been told can the requirements of the *Vrata* be considered to be fully met.

The narratological technique of the *Vrata Kathas* is a mix of fairy tale and fable. Dr. Jasbir Jain considers the *Vrata Kathas* to

be — “social pacifiers”. (Susan Wadley describes them as — “transformers of destiny”. (Wadley). The concept of *Karma* is invariably related to all major events of life in the Indian philosophy. Observation of a *Vrata*, it is often believed, can overrule *Karma*: where in all sins are washed away/evil deeds forgiven and destiny altered.

Observation of a *Vratas* and recitation of *Kathas* essentially strengthen faith in the Almighty. This in turn checks devotees from committing further sins and instils in them the spirit of universal brotherhood. The paraphernalia associated with the observation is a complete family enterprise. The youngsters join the ritual and participate in the execution in form of a support system. On conclusion of a *Vrata*, the elders of the family bless the youngsters for successful accomplishment. The entire exercise binds the family into one closely knit unit.

Astrology and the influence of planets on daily life are intrinsically entwined with the Hindu belief system. One category of *Vratas* is those observed around the different days of the week. These are based on worship of specific attributes of the planets which are said to gain prominence on that particular day and the Gods associated with them. The pantheon of these benevolent Gods is believed to mitigate the malevolent attributes of the associated planets.

Thus, the *Vrata* observed on Sunday aims at appeasement of the planet *Surya* (Sun) and is devoted to worship of the Sun who is Godhead himself. The *Vrata* observed on Monday aims at appeasement of the planet *Chandrama* (Moon) and is devoted to worship of the Lord *Shiva*. The *Vrata*

observed on Tuesday aims at appeasement of the planet *Mangal* (Mars) and is devoted to worship of the Gods *Ganapati* and *Hanumana*. The *Vrata* observed on Wednesday aims at appeasement of the planet *Buddha* (Mercury) and is devoted to worship of the Lord *Krishna*. The *Vrata* observed on Thursday aims at appeasement the planet *Brihaspati* (Jupiter) and is devoted to worship of the Gods *Vishnu* and *Dattatreya* (primeval *Guru*). The *Vrata* observed on Friday aims at appeasement of the planet *Shukra* (Venus) and is devoted to worship of the Goddess *Lakshmi* and her variant *Santoshi Mata*. Similarly, the *Vrata* observed on Saturday aims at appeasement of the planet *Shani* (Saturn) again Godhead in his own right. The benevolent Lord *Hanumana* is also worshipped on this day.

The Sunday *Vrata Katha* narrates the story of

. . . A virtuous lady who accepted all the rituals imposed upon her without any questioning or intervention of personal will and observed them simply because they were there... . and since that was a common practice, they needed to be observed.(Jain 238-239)

She wakes up early in the morning before sunrise, plasters her courtyard with cowdung and takes a bath and offers her prayers to *Surya*, the Sun God. Only then does she have her breakfast. She leads a life of peace and tranquillity.

The neighbour who allowed her to take cowdung from her shed begins to feel jealous of the virtuous woman. She stops providing cowdung to the old lady so as to disrupt her daily routine and mar the serenity that shone on her face. The old

lady is not able to offer her prayers in the unclean courtyard so she goes hungry the entire day. The envious neighbour is glad as the old woman's plight reaffirms her illusion of being the bestower of the old woman's harmony and which she found prudent to withdraw.

The old woman is blessed for her abstinence and the Sun God gifts her with a cow and a calf. Her neighbour goes berserk. Her anger is further ignited on the discovery that the gifted cow and the calf excrete gold. She can take it no more and informs the king about the gifts. The king orders seizure of the cow and the calf and has them transported into his palace.

At this stage, the Sun God intervenes again. Overnight the cow and the calf pile the palace with cowdung and the stench becomes unbearable. The king fathoms the divine intervention and immediately restores them to the old lady. He went further and promulgated that all his subjects would observe a *Vrata* on Sunday for fulfilment of desire, peace and contentment. The kingdom began to prosper. The subjects were never bothered by illnesses or natural calamities. They lived happily ever after.

This *Vrata Katha* also articulates the underlying power struggles among women, neighbours and also involves the head of state as an equal player. Both the listeners and the narrator develop an innate understanding that everyday problems are common to all classes of people and central to nature. Some *Kathas* are believed to change luck and provide a deeper understanding of problems. Other *Kathas* reveal the hidden virtues of women that otherwise goes unnoticed by their male relatives.

In general, a *Vrata Katha* instils a feeling of positivity and optimism in the devotees. The protagonists in the *Kathas* suffer as any other human. They are portrayed as performing menial jobs, despised and misunderstood. And yet they are able to overcome all difficulties armed with faith in the divine. Both the deities and the protagonists act as role models for the devotees.

The Monday *Vrata Katha* narrates the story of the prosperous merchant who had no dearth of wealth. Yet his childlessness kept him from leading a happy life. Every Monday, the merchant worshipped the Lord *Shiva* and the Goddess *Parvati*. On the insistence of the Goddess *Parvati*, Lord *Shiva* is shown to have blessed the merchant with a son but with a catch that the son would survive for twelve years only.

The merchant overhears this conversation among the deities. As a result, he is unable to join the festivities when a son is born. When the son turns eleven, the merchant decides to send him to the holy town of Kashi for education. The boy sets forth on the long journey with his maternal uncle. On the way, the two of them cross a kingdom in which a princess was about to be married to a one-eyed Prince. On seeing the boy, the princess persuades her father to marry this young boy. After the marriage ceremony, the boy proceeds on the journey with his uncle.

On reaching Kashi, the young boy meticulously studies the scriptures, performs numerous *Yagnas* and gives alms to the poor. On his twelfth birthday, he passes away. This coincides with the occasion when the Lord *Shiva* and Goddess *Parvati* had descended upon

Kashi. The Goddess *Parvati* takes pity on this and persuades Lord *Shiva* to bestow on him a new life. On completion of his education, the boy returned to his native kingdom along with the princess. The merchant's happiness knows no bounds.

The Monday *Vrata Katha* reveals much about the prevailing social set up. Firstly that success and prosperity in those days was judged by the number of sons a man had — it was a measure of both manhood and respectability. Wealth was of no significance for a man who had no son. Secondly, Education was given importance and Kashi was an important centre of learning. Thirdly, Lord *Shiva* paid heed to the wishes of his consort. The Princess voiced her unwillingness to accept the one-eyed Prince as her husband and her parents succumbed to her wishes. Both these instances reveal that the womenfolk had a voice of their own and their words did find eager ears.

The Tuesday *Vrata Katha* narrates the story of a childless Brahmin couple. The Brahmin is so aggrieved that he renounces the world and departs to the forest. The wife stays back and prays regularly to Lord *Hanumana*. Lord *Hanumana* is pleased and blesses her with a son.

In the second part of the *Katha*, the husband returns from the forest and is surprised to see a small boy playing in his courtyard. He refuses to believe his wife's version and accuses her of infidelity. Again the poor lady invokes the benevolent Lord *Hanumana* who intervenes and reconciles the couple.

This *Katha* clearly illustrates how a woman is expected to carry out her duties with regularity while he is free to wander away and return at will. It also underlines

that the chastity of such a woman is always suspect.

The double demand that a man imposes on women leads them to live a life of duplicity. He wants the woman to be his but at the same time, he stays mentally aloof from her. He fancies her as a servant and an enchantress. If a man disobeys the laws of the community, he continues to belong to it; he is only an *enfant terrible*, offering no profound menace to the order of the society. If on the other hand, a woman evades the rules of the society, she returns to Nature and to the demon . . . in some traditions of the past, a woman sinner was disrobed, stoned, buried alive, drowned or burnt. She was believed to be given back to nature after being deprived of her social dignity. (Simone 222)

The Wednesday *Vrata Katha*, is the story of a woman who visits her parental home. Her husband is discomfited by her absence and orders her back. The wife has a break from the grinding routine and is enjoying herself. She requests her husband to allow her more grace in the matter but he responds with vile threats. Pleas and requests of her parents fall upon deaf ears and the lady is forced to follow her husband homewards. Her virtuosity is celebrated.

Here, we get a glimpse of the ideal woman: one who has no say in affairs of the world. She is owned by her husband in the same fashion as he owns a cow and a buffalo. Her sole duties were to follow him voicelessly and unquestioningly.

As the *Katha* depicts, passivity is considered an essential characteristic of a

woman. This trait is introduced early in life clothed in the garb of destiny. It is later affirmed repeatedly during her upbringing by the teachers and peers.

In woman, there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her 'being the other'; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a doll and is refused liberty. Thus a vicious circle is formed; for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the lesser resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject. (Ludendorff)

The Thursday *Vrata Katha* narrates the story of a prosperous merchant who is reduced to beggary because of selfishness and laziness of his wife. They invoke and pray to Lord *Vishnu* who rids them of their plight. In course of the narration, it is revealed that if a woman shampoos her hair, washes her clothes or eats non vegetarian food on this day; her husband is bound to become penniless. It also lays down that in order to attain wealth & prosperity, it is the duty of the wife to feed the hungry and provide clean drinking water to the thirsty.

As depicted in this *Vrata Katha* and in others, the underlining element is reward for strict adherence and punishment for any deviation. There are attempts to strike fear in the minds of women and persuade them to perform their duties with utmost care. These rituals can be definitely said to contribute to the subordination of women.

The *Vrata Kathas* generally encode a patriarchal ideology, making a

woman responsible, through correct ritual, for the health and success of her male kin . . . the *Vrata Kathas* generally present a mechanistic vision of ritual performance, in which seemingly minor errors provoke divine anger and prompt retribution. (Ludendorff)

The *Santoshi Mata Vrata* is observed on Fridays. In the beginning of this *Vrata Katha*, the lineage of the Goddess is traced and the positive effect of her devotion is highlighted — her devotees lead a life of peace and contentment. She has the virtue to provide contentment to the listener and the narrator of the *Vrata Katha*. Ashish Nandy has observed that:

. . . this Goddess is of recent origin, made popular by the growing trend of materialism". (Nandy)

The media has also increased the import of this subject by devoting much attention to it over a long period of time. A film was also made on the *katha* of *Santoshi Mata*. The main narrative concerns an old woman who has seven sons. It is a happy, united family. Six of the sons are prosperous but the youngest is unemployed. The youngest son is lazy and wakes up late and is fed with leftovers. When the son discovers this, he is both angry and unhappy. He renounces his home and sets out to seek a job.

In his absence, his wife is treated shabbily by her mother-in-law. The oppressed young woman turns her attention on *Santoshi Mata* and becomes an ardent devotee. On occasion of her fast on the second Friday, a letter arrives from her husband. On the third Friday, her husband sends money. But the husband, deeply engrossed in his new job, does not return

home. At this point the Goddess intervenes. She appears in the young man's dream, reminds him of his wife and the husband returns.

In the succeeding story, the young besotted woman does not adhere to the rituals on a given Friday and this leads to serious repercussions. She understands and invokes *Santoshi Mata* and repents her sins. The Goddess acquiesces and soon everything falls into place. The family lives happily ever after.

According to Ramanujan:

When a ritual error occurs through no fault of the heroine's, an evil result befalls her automatically, which can only be remedied through a corrected ritual performance. (Ramanujan 41).

The Saturday *Vrata Katha* narrates an argument among the nine planets regarding their supremacy. Lord *Indra*, the king of the Gods is at a loss to resolve the dispute. He sends the nine planets to the court of the great king *Vikramaditya*, known for his justice and sense of impartiality. The king too falls into a dilemma for the matter involved pleasing one God and antagonising the other. The king gives his final verdict and earns the wrath of Lord *Shani*.

A series of misfortune engulf the king. He loses his kingdom, is further accused of theft and his limbs amputated. He is reduced to earn a livelihood by pulling a bullock cart with his teeth. One day, the king is singing a song. Incidentally, this is the moment when the period of punishment (imposed by Lord *Shani*) draws to a close. His melodious voice reaches the ears of the princess and she insists on marrying the master of the

golden voice. Endless reasoning and persuasion falls upon deaf ears and the king reconciles to marry his beautiful daughter to the limbless man. After marriage, *Vikramaditya* undergoes a complete transformation and becomes a strong & handsome king once again.

This narrative bears a strong resemblance to the fairytale — *The Beauty and the Beast* which was first published in 1756 by Jeanne-Marie le Prince de Beaumont. In this tale, the protagonist returns from her father's house to find the beast close to death. She weeps over him, saying that she loves him. When her tears strike him, the beast is transformed into a handsome Prince. The Prince informs Beauty that long ago a fairy had turned him into a hideous beast after he refused to help her, and that only by finding true love, despite his ugliness, could the curse be broken. He and Beauty are married and live happily ever after. (Web)

Vrata Kathas, according to Jasbir Jain act as a medium of both empowerment and disempowerment.

...They are disempowering when they are carried out without any questioning or intervention. When they are undertaken with a specific aim in mind, they also reflect a material (and worldly) attitude even as non-worldly methods are adopted. The relation between the devotee and the object of faith may be seen through multiple frames: as one between two friends or as a contractual one where the *Vrata* is the payment for the gain. (Jain 238-239.)

When a woman undertakes a *Vrata*, she is appreciated for control over her body. The

festive get-togethers enable her to escape from the drudgery of the daily routine. Deth and Vandereycken have pointed out that:

...a woman's self starvation is linked to a broader issue of their position within society and should be interpreted as a response to and struggle against male domination. Control would be a basic issue to socially disempowered women who adopted relentless fasting as a vehicle for self expression and simultaneously for manipulation. (Deth).

The *Vrata Kathas* reflect the continuous rise and fall of events in correspondence with the performance of the acts of devotion. It also links action with discipline and lays special emphasis on the need to act. Instead of giving significance to family ties or hierarchy, importance is given to the husband-wife relationship.

The *Vrata Kathas* can also be viewed as a master narrative as it has several narratives embedded in it.

The first narrative which can be taken to be the frame explains the origin of the *Vrata* or the *Kathas*. The next describes the paradigmatic observance of the *Vrata* by a human devotee: something usually goes awry in this observance, with disastrous consequences that are overcome by performing the *Vrata* correctly a second time. (Manushi)

The characters of the *Vrata Kathas* are nameless and generic — 'an old woman', 'a rich merchant' and so on. It is typical of what A.K. Ramanujan calls "the most interior" (Ramanujan 41) kind of folktales: those generally told by women within domestic spaces. When these tales move outside — out of the four walls, they are taken up by professional bards in public space, the characters acquire names and assume more complex personalities.

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