



Vratas in Context to Patriarchal Control and Female Agency in Indian Society

Samriddhi Choudhary¹

Abstract:

Vratas represent the dual meaning as both a means of patriarchal control over women's bodies through ritualized activity and as a space of female agency. The Vratas as a ritual tradition in Puranic literature, and Dharmanibandhas can be understood in the context of inclusion of the woman in these practices and the patriarchal norms that are reinstated through it. The democratization of Vratas during the Puranic period allowed for the participation of women and marginalized groups in previously elite sacrificial rites and for the establishment of popular models of devotional practice.

Although women and marginalized groups were allowed to participate in Vratas through the democratization of Vratas during the Puranic period, their participation operated within the ideological confines of patriarchal structures. This study interrogates how Brahmanical ideology used Vratas to maintain traditional gender norms, control women's autonomy, and reinforce ideals such as pativrata dharma and chastity and purity, while at the same time arguing that women actively negotiated these structures by appropriating Vratas for their own personal, emotional, and social use. Through the use of a comparative philological and historical/textual methodology, this essay argues that Vratas served both as mechanisms of dominance and also giving some sort of autonomy to the women. In summary, the present study examines the complicated interactions between devotion, dominance, and negotiation that defined Vratas as a significant form of cultural expression and tradition both in the past and present.

Keywords: Vratas, Pativrata Dharma, Brahmanical Control, Inclusion, Dharma or Duty, Liberation or Moksha, Saubhagya.

¹ Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi



Introduction

Vratas, also known as fasts or vows, occupy a vital place, showcasing significant flexibility and adaptability within the Indian religious traditions. In the modern day, the popular fasts ranging from Ekadashi, Karva Chauth, Navaratri, and others, have found their profound place within the domestic sphere rather than just being institutional-centric. These fasts or observances are taken up for a number of reasons like for the wellbeing of the family, for wealth and prosperity, or for emotional comfort. These ritual practices have been simplified making it more inclusive in nature. Vratas, in contemporary times, through media, calendars and popular narratives allows the practitioners to balance modernity and tradition simultaneously. And this makes the tradition of Vrata significant for understanding its long-term evolution and its historical depth and how it still remains as an integral part of the vast Hindu ritual traditions. Vrata, as a religious practice, is seen as more of a dynamic institution rather than a static one that has gradually evolved over time, adapting the social, political and theological structures. Earliest reference that we get is in the Vedic literature which eventually was articulated precisely in the Epics, Puranas and nibandhas points out the gradual transition from the complex sacrificial ritualism to a more domestic, individualized, less complicated and more accessible mode of practice.

Was this initiative development due to the growing social and political authority? Or was this the result of consolidation of power? The central focus of this examination is to understand whether the evolution was due to the expansion driven by political and social authority, meant to legitimize or to exercise control by creating a much more inclusive tradition Also, to examine whether practices like Vrata was just another strategy used by the Brahmanical discourse to reproduce the notions of gender norms, dharma, purity and social hierarchy through forms of discipline and devotion. Further, the amalgamation of the role of householders and other marginalised groups, is seen as a distinct mode of ritualism that offers a non-sacrificial and less complex alternative to an otherwise elite-sacrificial Hindu religion, but was it solely done to make it more appealing to the masses? or was the intention to expand their authority to masses especially over women through the practice of dietary restrictions, ritual correctness and in the hopes for desired outcomes?

This ritual tradition is very central to the popular Hindu religion and has evolved with time. The practice of Vratas that we witness in the contemporary times, as a ritual law or form of devotion, is different from the way it was understood and practiced in the Vedic times, suggesting it was in an evolving state. The term Vrata was associated with duty or command or moral practices, aligned more towards ideas of discipline or self-restraint along the cosmological laws, in the Vedic literature through which the humans and gods



could upkeep or cosmic order. But with time Vratas as a tradition with restrictions on food, behaviour and other practices became more household centric for the fulfilment of one's own desire and wishes. We do not find Vrata as an elaborate ritual practice here. During the time when the Brahmanas and the early Upanishads were being composed, we see the beginning of a more ritualised form of fasting. Even though sacrificial rituals were still very much in prominence, we witness Vratas acquiring new meanings like upavasa or fasting and religious obligations, which again proliferated to an advanced concept with the arrival of the Puranic literature. Another transition that we note is during the time of the Epics, such as the Mahabharata, where the ritual is expanded and becomes more accessible to all, including women and other marginalized groups. It no longer remained as a specialist-centric or ascetics but became much more domestic or household centric with less complex ritual practices leading to their ultimate popularity in the later stages. So these texts act as an important bridge to the popular understanding of Vrata in the modern times, as an attempt was made to simplify the rituals of the Vratas, to make it more accessible to the people in Kaliyuga.

The configuration of Vrata as a household centric, optional (kanya) ritual duty which includes fasting, deity-worship and also certain restrictions, for a desired outcomes or rewards and even for liberation or moksha, comes primarily from the Puranas and the medieval nibandhas. Vratas alongside upavasa, danas, dikshas, etc. were ways by which the common people could worship their deities and the vedic yajnas became confined to only the upper strata of the society. The inclusion of women, shudras and even prostitutes in the practice of Vratas showcases the transformation from an exclusive vedic tradition and narrow orthodox Brahmanism to a more inclusive Hindu tradition in order to stay relevant and popular against the other existing traditions like Buddhism and Jainism. The popular culture of Vratas in domestic spheres in the modern times resonates with the democratisation of Vratas as a ritual practice that happened during the Puranas and the nibandhas.

Another aspect of the ritual observances practiced today, is that how it is majorly associated with women or the female agency, they are the ones who are expected to practice such traditions for marital success, family prosperity and wealth. But this can be seen as the reproduction of those same traditional gender norms and patriarchal expectations of women being restricted to households. At the same time, we come across women negotiating with those same gender norms and adapting those same ritual roles according to their own convenience and personal concerns which also highlights the fluid nature of this devotional practice which explains how it still survives as a ritual tradition to this day. This study not only limits itself with reading Vratas as a prolongation of the same patriarchal norms but also aims to understand the



intersectionality of devotion, restraint, dialogue and liberation, that helped in shaping the popular practice in modern times.

Methodology

The essay uses historical-textual comparative approach to understand the tradition of Vratas in context to inclusion of women and the Brahmanical dominance. The concept of Vratas during Vedic times was in an evolving state. There was not one but several meanings of the word for Vratas and Vrata as an important religious institution only developed during the time of the Puranas that is the early medieval India. Through a thorough reading and understanding of the various historical texts and sources, we aim to understand the gender notions of Vratas, from the inclusivity of women in a mainstream Brahmanical tradition and to assess the reason behind this inclusion. At the same time, how it was a form of restraint exercised through this tradition while simultaneously how it provided female agency.

The Democratisation of Vratas as a Ritual, the Inclusion of Women and the Exercising of Brahmanical Control

The democratisation of Vratas began with the coming of the Puranas, where more prominence was given to bhakti and devotion over sacrifices. The most prominent aspect of this was the inclusion of women in the practice of Vrata and other marginalised communities who were otherwise excluded earlier from ritualistic practices. This gave women visibility and a place within the mainstream Brahminical traditions. But as we will see later on, Vratas were prescribed for both men and women which was not an obligation for any yet it was the women who mostly practiced it. So was Vratas really not obligatory for women? Or was this an obligation? Or was this restraint asserted by the Brahmanical Patriarchy on the women in order to control their purity, sexuality through this concept of Vratas? Did Vratas, as a tradition, provide autonomy to these women? Or were these Vratas seen as part of fulfilling their stridharma? And by performing these Vratas were the women expecting rewards or benefits for themselves?

Texts like Dharmanibandhas and Puranas believe that the Vratas or votive rites become the primary vehicles for performing religious duties within orthodox Brahmanhood. The concept of Vrata in these texts are seen as optional rather than obligatory. They regard Vratas as means of attaining moksha or spiritual liberation and even women could attain some form of liberation which was not the case in the Vedic Age. Liberation cannot be attained directly by women according to Brahmanical traditions; therefore, the purpose of a woman according to these texts is to perform her dharma, or duty, as a devoted wife (pativrata). And by



performing specified Vratas such as EkadashiVrata, a woman can move towards gradual liberation and they will eventually be liberated when she is born as a man in the next life. These Vratas, hence, are also means for both immediate and long-term rewards for a woman.

Vratas rewards can be categorised into mundane and transcendent. The first category involves the rewards that one could attain in the material world like, property, success, good health, wealth, etc., whereas the second category includes rewards such as the spiritual liberation or in the case of women the gradual liberation. The authors of the digests regarded the Vratas as an easy way to attain liberation, it is not surprising that some philosophers have a low regard both for votive rites and for the type of liberation attained through them.

The authors of these digests, present Vratas as personal goals, for example, saubhagya, emphasizing it as one of the obligations for the women. Also, with talking of ultimate goals, they think that male-centric goals and values are universally applicable (in context to subjects like moksha), while ignoring the women's roles and experiences that are more focused towards maintenance rather than acquisition.

According to these Brahmanical traditions, a woman's primary duty is to be the ideal or devoted wife (patiVrata). And through observing such Vratas or votive rites, can help the women achieve the status of being a saubhagya or a patiVrata patni. And this would allow women to pursue dharma, artha, kama and ultimately striving for the moksha or liberation.

Most of the women in the modern times, perform the Vratas for marital bliss or saubhagya. They observe these Vratas for the good health, long life and prosperity of their husbands, which forms their primary purpose. Other than this, the women observe votive rites for the well-being of their children. And not many women perform these rites for their own health and well-being.¹

The women taking part in rituals like Vratas shows us the unselfishness and the utter devotion on the part of the women (without desire), while at the same time, they perform these rituals for desired outcomes, for example, health, prosperity, long life for her family (with desire).

So, as a whole, the women who perform the Vratas often see it as a crucial part or an obligation or as fulfilling patiVrata as her dharma/duty and for the attainment of saubhagya, it is seen as necessary, and not perceived as optional as the texts mention. These Vratas, nowadays are mostly associated with the patiVrata dharma. It is seen as an obligation on the part of the woman to perform such rites and if a woman does not perform it is seen as neglect towards her husband and her family and seen as not upholding her stridharma.



A woman who devotes her life to her husband and her children will grant her the highest status in the society. This could be regarded as some sort of liberation for the women, especially in a society where the sole expectation from a woman is to be a patiVrata and through these rituals she could attain the respect and admiration from the society. Hence, a woman attaining saubhagyavati through these rites is the greatest form of respect or even liberation for her.

Even though these texts and digests, mention Vratas as optional for both men and women in order to seek material desires as well as for liberation or moksha or in case of women, gradual liberation, but it is shallow in its classification. The women by and large are the ones who perform such rites not for their own motives or desires but with the sense of duty or obligation towards their own family and in order to upkeep their patiVrata or to attain saubhagya. These obligations often, not always, overshadow the optional aspects of such Vratas and seem to overlook the personal desires of women in general. Rituals like Vratas performed by women are more associated with the fulfillment of her dharma, which is to be a devoted wife (patiVrata) or stridharma, which would garner her respect and higher status in the society.

The practice of Vrata was never peripheral and was since the puranic times, a popular and mainstream component of the Hindu religion across various castes, classes, regions, etc. The authors of the Puranas gave more importance to rituals like Vratas as means of attaining liberation or other worldly pleasures rather than on sacrifices that were important in the Vedic Age. The practice of Vratas according to the textual sources were open to both men and women, the women from different social stratas observed fasts more frequently than men. Women's Vratas are strongly tied to relational roles and upkeeping the patiVratadharmas but also tries to provide women with a sense of ritual responsibilities giving them some sort of ritual agency. Also, these Brahmanical texts, on one hand provides some sense of autonomy, even if limited, to the women, including their ritual roles in the popular Hindu religion but, on the other hand, through regulation of their food, sleep, sexual access, as mentioned in these Vratas, the Brahmanical discourse tried to exercise control over their bodies, sexuality and purity.ⁱⁱ

These Brahmanical texts have institutionalised the patriarchal control over the women and this became more pronounced since the onset of the Puranic period. Through the notion of pativrata dharma, women incorporated their attempts at fulfilling the ideal notion of womanhood that is constructed through the ideologies rooted within their social culture.ⁱⁱⁱ Vratas as a religious institution have been used as forms of subjugation and subordination of women in order to control their sexuality and purity and the inclusion of women in these rituals were done so that these Brahmanical traditions do not lose its relevance especially to the other growing religious sects like Buddhism and Jainism.



Also, these Brahmanical traditions highlight the importance of upholding the chastity and purity of women.^{iv} This becomes important in order to maintain the caste purity and lineage in order to preserve the patrilineal land, property, etc. Hence, the concept of an ideal wife or patiVrata dharma, and being a chaste woman was reinforced through the practice of Vratas. For example, the Skanda Purana while talking about NavratraVrata, talks about the importance of kumari puja which was mainly done to sort of reward or acknowledge the chaste women who were not astray and were loyal to one's husband and hence were regarded higher in the society and in return should be worshipped. The Puranas even talk about thirty-eight different Vratas dedicated for getting a male offspring not a single one prescribed for a girl child which again conforms to the patriarchal norms of the society. Some of the Vratas are also prescribed for husband-worship.

According to the Puranas, a person who is engaged in EkadashiVrata is asked not to speak with the husband of an unchaste woman. Some Vratas even talk about women with uncertain character who should not be trusted upon. But since they are the means of securing dharma, artha and kama, they should be guarded like a gem.^v This can help us understand as to how these religious ideologues used the institution of Vratas in order to subjugate the women section of the society, as the women were asked to seek the permission from one's father, husband, son before indulging themselves in any sort of Vrata practice and if a woman performs the rituals without seeking permission then she would not attain desired fruits. Puranas like Markandeyapurana and Adityapurana, although Vratas should reflect inclusivity and should provide female agency so that women participate more actively, a woman cannot perform a separate Vrata on her own.

Puranas also mention about Vratas that could be performed by the prostitutes in order for them to attain salvation from their unchastity and can attain purity in life, which again reinforces the notion of a pure and chaste woman and only then could one get the respect in the society and ultimately attain some form of liberation.

Vratas as practiced today, has become a form of personal devotion for the women, where she performs the rituals for her family welfare, and not necessarily always follows the classical orthodoxy. This means that the women are, to some extent, negotiating with the power within their households. But this does not take away from the fact that Vratas have become a family-centric obligation for such women who actively participate, but under the regulation of patriarchal dharma. The women do not take upon these Vratas to get liberation but for her own family's continuity. So, the woman, through these rituals, is able to leverage Vratas to protect her family, implying pockets of autonomy. But it is also very important to understand that through equating pativrata dharma and purity to these rituals again reinforces the same old patriarchal



norms to restrict women's power, making it a compulsion for the women to perform in order to be considered a "good" or "devoted" wife by the society and that no one can question their moral character.

Conclusion

Vratas have evolved from the vedas, based on ideas of duty and cosmic order, to now being a widely accessible, household practice, widely popularized by the Puranas; it has evolved a great deal since the time of Vedic literature. Although the democratization of religious practice for women may appear to be an expansion from the sphere of elites or Brahmanas, upon close examination it can be said that these practices were established within Brahmanical controlled societal structures.

As a whole, the practice of Vratas themselves can be reasonably concluded to be optional for men and women as prescribed by the Puranas but were made obligatory for women socially and culturally. Through the ideals of pativrata dharma, chastity, and devotion to the family, the Vratas reinforced the same Brahmanical norms of subordination over women and exercising control over their bodies, sexuality and purity. The societal emphasis on the familial and marital benefits resulting from female participation provide further examples of how female involvement was reinforced through male-oriented constructs where these traditions were equated with upholding the pativrata dharma or being a devoted wife and only then women could secure themselves the respect and higher status in the society. But at the same time, women through their participation in the Vrata traditions, have created their own spaces of ritual authority, providing them with sort of social recognition and visibility in an otherwise male-centric ritualistic tradition.

Above all, Vratas cannot be seen only as dynamic practices influenced by a combination of devotion, domination and agency. Today, the relevance of traditions like Vratas not only showcases the ongoing power of tradition, but also shows us the ability to re-interpret and reshape these traditions over time.

References

Bharadwaj, R. M. (1999). *The Brahmanical patriarchy and the religious vratās (vows) during early medieval India*. Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 60, 137–142.

Chakravarti, U. (1993). *Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state. Kali for Women*. New Delhi.



Jamison, S. W. (1996). *Sacrificed wife/sacrificer's wife: Women, ritual, and hospitality in ancient India*. Oxford University Press.

Kane, P. V. (1930–1962). *History of Dharmasastra* (Vol. 5, Pt. 1). Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Kane, P. V. (1941/1974). *Hindu fasts and festivals*. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute; Motilal Banarsidass.

McGee, M. (1991). *Desired fruits: Motive and intention in the votive rites of Hindu women*. In J. Leslie (Ed.), *Roles and rituals for Hindu women* (pp. 71–88). Motilal Banarsidass.

Pearson, A. M. (1996). *Because it gives me peace of mind: Ritual fasts in the religious lives of Hindu women*. State University of New York Press.

ⁱ Mary McGee, *Desired Fruits, Motive and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women*, in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 71–87.

ⁱⁱ Anne Mackenzie Pearson, *Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind: Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ Uma Chakravarti, *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, EPW, April 1993, p.579,

^{iv} Radha Madhav Bharadwaj, “The Brahmanical Patriarchy and the Religious Vratās (Vows) during Early Medieval India,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 60 (1999): 137–142.

^v P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol.V part I, chap. III, p.395.

Publisher's Note: *The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher, editors, or the editorial board.*