

"BECAUSE IT GIVES ME PEACE OF MIND"

"Because it gives me peace of mind"  
FUNCTIONS AND MEANINGS OF VRATS  
IN THE  
RELIGIOUS LIVES OF HINDU WOMEN IN BANARAS

By  
ANNE MACKENZIE PEARSON, M.A.

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AUTHOR: Anne M. Pearson, B.A. (University of Toronto)  
M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Paul Younger

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the meaning and function of vrats (votive fasting rites) among Hindu women in Banaras. While both men and women observe vrats throughout India today, women observe far more of them, at more frequent intervals, and for a wider array of reasons than do men. In general, girls are trained to direct the performance of vrats to the attainment of a husband, or, for married women, to the well-being and long life of their husbands and children. Essentially, the vrats that women perform are tied to domestic life and traditionally defined family and gender relationships in a way that vrats men perform are not.

Scholars who have written on women and the vrat tradition have documented the ways in which women's performance of vrats are expressive of both their religiously prescribed duties as women and of their special connection to one of Hinduism's central values: auspiciousness. In this thesis, however, by focussing on the personal narratives of individual women that I interviewed in Banaras, I demonstrate that women's sense of duty and obligation to ensuring the well-being of their families through the performance of vrats only partly explains the appeal of these rites to Hindu women.



While my field data confirmed that married women perform vrats for maintaining their "suhāg" (the auspicious married state), they also perform these votive fasts for the psychological, social, physical and spiritual benefits that vrats bring to themselves. I argue that not only do vrats provide an avenue for the expression of profound spiritual yearnings, but some women see the use of vrats as a way to gain control over their own lives; as a source of empowerment in an environment in which women frequently lack control and feel disempowered. I further consider how women, traditionally denied access to formal asceticism, have found a way to tap into this powerful realm for their own benefit through the performance of vrats.

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lives. A number of these women I would not have met without the help of my research assistant, Kalpana; and so I thank her for that and for all the other help she provided.

For other forms of assistance in Banaras, I would be remiss not to mention Srimati Dr. Vimla Karnatak, Professor of Sanskrit at B.H.U. Women's College, and Virendra Singh for Hindi lessons and for rescuing me one night after an accident on Sonapur Road. In Mussoorie, I thank Citranjan Dutt and Dinkar Rai of the Landour Language School for assistance both in transcribing the tapes of my interviews and in translating vrat-vidhi-kathā books. In Kerala, I thank George Jacob and Srimati Matthews who arranged interviews with women and acted as interpreters.

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I am grateful to my parents, Landon and Geoffrey Pearson, for giving me and my siblings the opportunity to live in India as children. I want to further thank my mother for her sustained interest in my work, for her valuable editorial comments, and for having first kindled my interest in religious values and in the study of culture.

Finally, I thank my husband Mark without whose sacrificial involvement in parenting our children, this thesis would have taken another ten years to complete!

\* \* \*

#### DEDICATION

To my grandmothers

Alice Sawtelle Mackenzie and Maryon Moody Pearson

who died

and to my daughters

Kira Alice, Rachel Francka, and Lucy Landon

who were born

during the preparation of this thesis.

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## ABBREVIATIONS OF SANSKRIT TEXTS

AP	<u>Agnipurāṇa</u>
AitBr.	<u>Aitareya Brāhmaṇa</u>
ApDS	<u>Apastamba Dharmasūtra</u>
AV	<u>Artharvaveda</u>
Gītā	<u>Bhagavadgītā</u>
GP	<u>Garuḍapurāṇa</u>
LP	<u>Līṅgapurāṇa</u>
MP	<u>Matsyapurāṇa</u>
Mbh.	<u>Mahābhārata</u>
Manu	<u>Manusmṛti</u>
RV	<u>Rgveda</u>
ŚB	<u>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</u>
TS	<u>Taittīriya Saṃhitā</u>
Yāj.Sm	<u>Yajñavalkya Smṛti</u>
YS	<u>Yogasūtra</u>



#### NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

I am responsible for all translations from Hindi, French and German sources, and for the translation of passages quoted from the Sanskrit Nibandha text, the Vratarāja. For other Sanskrit material, I relied on the translations of others, as indicated in the text. Many of these translations were checked against the original source to ensure relative accuracy. I sometimes indicate in square brackets what the Sanskrit word being translated is.

Diacritics are used with transliterated Sanskrit and Hindi following standard usage. In general, I use the Sanskrit forms (e.g., vrata) when referring to the Sanskrit textual tradition, and Hindi forms when referring to modern contexts (e.g., vrāt). Hindi versions of Sanskrit words are often marked by dropping a middle and final "a" (e.g., Skt. devatā is rendered in Hindi as devtā).

Indian place names, names of individuals I interviewed, and words that are now familiar to Western readers (mantra, guru) as well as genres of texts that are used adjectively (vedic, purāṇic) are rendered into phonetic English and are not underlined. The names of gods and goddesses, authors of and characters referred to in Sanskrit and Hindi texts are rendered with diacritics.

The great majority of interviews with women were conducted in Hindi (or Malayalam in Kerala) and taped. The remarks of women quoted in this thesis are based on my translations of the transcribed tapes. When inverted commas are used in a quote, they indicate that the word or phrase was used exactly as noted.

## INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of women's religious lives is a subject that has provoked considerable interest in the scholarly and the non-academic world alike in recent years. This thesis offers a contribution to this burgeoning field of study by exploring the vrata tradition and the important place that "vrats" (votive rites) have come to occupy in the religious lives of contemporary Hindu women.

### Characteristics of Vrata

Literature on vrata in English frequently refers to the Sanskrit term vrata (Hindi "vrat") as a "vow" or "fast." The translation of vrata as fast is easily understood, as some sort of fast is characteristic of a vrata, and Hindus I spoke with during my stay in India in 1984-85 most often used this English word when I mentioned vrata. But vrata is more than just a fast; there must be some association with a vow. In English the word "vow" has a variety of senses, such as "personal promise," "pledge," and "commitment."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to E. Klinger, "In the broadest sense, vows are unconditional promises to do something specific - good or evil. In the narrower sense, they are unqualified pledges to do good, not evil, and as such they are directed solely to God." "Vows and Oaths," Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade (N.Y.: Collier MacMillan Publishers,

We may also think of institutionalized vows, like marriage vows, monastic vows or the renunciatory vows of the ascetic. Vratas share many of these senses, including a voluntary personal promise or resolve to undertake some course of action (in a secular or religious context), or a promise made in front of religious authorities to adhere to a specified code of conduct in rites of initiation.<sup>2</sup> Yet the English word "vow" fails to bring to mind a specific form of observance; it has become rather more generalized and abstract. In Hindi-speaking India, however, the word vrata usually elicits an image of a particular observance involving fasting, worship (pūjā), the listening to or recitation of a narrative about the efficacy of the rite (kathā), and the giving of gifts (dān) consisting of money and items of food and clothing to a Brahman priest. A vrata is usually understood to be a rite that is performed on a regular basis to achieve particular objectives, following rules that have been transmitted from one generation to the next. Further, many Hindus, in my experience, immediately think of women in connection with vratas. Vratas are

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1987), 303.

<sup>2</sup> There are other words in Hindi which refer to taking "pledges", such as pran, which used with the verbs karna or rakhna means "to take a pledge," "to keep a vow." The words pratigna and bhuja uthana also mean to resolve, to swear (to do a thing).

predominantly something women do and have done for generations.

Vratas are normally instrumental in nature. A response (usually believed to be effected by the deity to whom the vrata is directed) is expected by the votary, although she or he is fully aware that it may not be immediate or even tangible. Vratas do not usually take the form of bargaining pledges of the sort: "If you (God) will cure my son, I will go to shrine X." The form they take is, more commonly, "I will undertake such and such a regimen for this period of time and may you, O God, pleased by my devotions, protect my family."

There are different forms of instrumentality associated with vratas. Interestingly enough, some of these forms have already been described by the anthropologist W. Christian with reference to vows made by Catholic women in rural Spain. Thus, sometimes vratas are similar to Christian's description of a "promesa," a kind of conditional vow made and observed primarily by women.<sup>3</sup> Essentially something is given up in order to secure something else, redemption or aid. In a promesa, a pledge is made involving some

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<sup>3</sup> William Christian, Jr., Person and God in a Spanish Valley (New York: Seminar Press, 1972), 119-128. When vratas are turned into conditional vows, they are usually called manauti; from the Urdu word manaut, "to resolve." Examples of these are described in chapter seven.

sacrifice of resources such as money or time, sacrifice of pride, denial of pleasures or the undertaking of hardships (e.g., pilgrimages on bare feet). These forms of self-imposed hardship may occur in a vrata. For both promesas and vratas, a specified proxy may be used (in certain conditions), but the vow must be fulfilled or dire consequences are believed to ensue.

Vratas may also resemble Christian's category of "petitionary devotions" - a subset of instrumental prayers. These are devotional acts which put God in "one's debt," in which one can "earn credit with the divine for divine actions on this earth."<sup>4</sup> For example, a novena might be performed for the sake of souls in purgatory. Underlying the devotional attitude expressed in the novena is the petitioners's hope that God may feel in some sense compelled to act favourably towards her at some later time.

Finally, certain vratas can also be like Christian's description of the "prayers for the fulfillment of the annual round."<sup>5</sup> These are prayers in which no definite response is expected other than the continuation of the existing (positive) state of affairs. They are usually made by women, Christian notes, in the context of annual visits

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<sup>4</sup> Christian, Person and God, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Christian, Person and God, 117ff.

to shrines. He says these visits become something of a psychological necessity, a way of fulfilling a regular, calendrical contract.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, certain annual vratas are associated with generalized purposes, but carry with them a sense of obligation such that if they were not observed a pap ('sin') would be incurred or misfortune might strike in consequence.

To this point I have discussed vratas in the present tense, and have given some indication of their forms and function in contemporary religious practice. But, in fact, vratas have been a feature of Hindu religious life for millenia. The word vrata emerges in the oldest extant literature of Hindu India - the Vedas. This means that the term itself, if not all its ramifications, goes back at least three thousand years. However, it is not possible to demonstrate that the vrata tradition, consisting of the particular votive rituals discussed in this thesis, is much older than the beginning of the Common Era.

A fully comprehensive study of the history of vrata turns out to be an enormous task. Even P.V.Kane, the author of the indispensable five volume History of Dharmaśāstra, who devoted 462 pages of his work to a discussion and

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<sup>6</sup> Christian, Person and God, 117.

description of vrata from Sanskrit Dharmasāstra texts, admitted that the tabulation of all the sources of vrata (including all the regional and local variations, some of which are recorded in works written in modern Indian languages, and all the vratas observed by women and by aboriginals) "would entail an enormous amount of labour" and "would require the co-operative effort of a large team of workers spread over many years," but which, when completed, would result in "a monumental [work] on the social anthropology of India."<sup>7</sup> This last phrase is appropriate because the observance of vratas is so common and widespread and incorporates (or relates to) so many aspects of Hindu religious practice and thought. As a result, learning about vrata enables one to understand a great deal about Hindu religiosity in general, and Hindu women's religiosity in particular.

Today, vratas are found throughout India. Under different names (usually variations of the Sanskrit vrata), these rites are observed across regional boundaries, caste and jati groups, sectarian affiliations and educational backgrounds, in both rural and urban localities. They are

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<sup>7</sup> P.V.Kane, History of Dharmasāstra (Poona: Bandharkar Oriental Research Institute, 2nd ed., 1974), vol. V, pt.1, 60.



common to the young and the old; to the married, unmarried and widowed.<sup>8</sup>

There are great variations in the actual practice of a given vrata. This variation affects not only those vratas known across India but also those vratas peculiar to small regions of the country. Personal predilections, family and jati practices can all influence the way a vrata is performed. Vratas can be done for virtually any purpose concerning one's own or another's well-being. With few exceptions, a vrata is never observed for the purpose of harming someone. In the texts and in practice there are, for example, vratas for attaining beauty or progeny, for ensuring the long life of husbands or brothers, for eradicating one's past sins, for averting snake bites and disease, and for securing a place in one of the god's lokas ("heavens"). New vratas are still being generated. The rise of the new goddess Santoṣī Mā and her vrata is already well documented.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, vratas are not observed equally among these various groups. Young boys or men, low caste persons, the very poor, or highly "Westernized" persons, for example, may observe very few as a group and many do none as individuals. Nevertheless some among them do observe vratas.

<sup>9</sup> Santoṣī Mā and her vrata is documented, for example, by A.L.Basham, "Santoshi Mata: A New Divinity in the Hindu Pantheon?", Proceedings of the 28th International Congress of Orientalists Canberra, 1971 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harossowitz, 1976); and M.Robinson, "Santoshi Ma: The Development of a Goddess", 1979).

The performance of vratas intersects with a wide range of practices in Hinduism and governs a wide range of acts and behaviours, both ritual and ethical. These practices include worship, speech and silence, sleep, clothing, sexual activity, food (kind, preparation, amount, time when eaten), cooking (how, where, when and for whom), gift-giving and receiving, story-telling, singing, the creation of ritual art, and pilgrimage.

Finally, vratas encompass many different strands, including those that some scholars have characterized as "oppositions" in Hindu culture. For example, vratas are part of both the orally-transmitted, local laukik ("worldly"; "folk") traditions and the written, śāstri (brahmanical) pan-Indian traditions. Vratas share features of both the bhakti (devotionalistic, theistic) strand of Hinduism, where the deity's grace and boons are sought by the devotee, and the smārta ritualistic strand wherein correctly performed ritual is of itself efficacious. Vratas also share the form and worldview of both grhastha-dharma (prescribed "duty" of the householder), in which specific, 'worldly' concerns, values and desires are expressed or sought out, and at certain levels sannyāsa-dharma (renunciatory dharma), in which increasing detachment and finally release (mokṣa) from this same 'world' is the goal.

It is this truly encompassing nature of vratas and the

vrata tradition which renders their study such a valuable key to both the indologist's and non-specialist's understanding of so many features and aspects of lived Hinduism. This view of the encompassing nature and importance of the vrata tradition was not, until recently, fully appreciated among indologists in general nor in the scholarship on vrata. On the contrary, most of the literature on vratas has tended to isolate certain aspects of votive rites to the exclusion or detriment of others. This has been done, for instance, by marginalizing vratas as "women's rites" or "folk rites"; by making vratas appear to have had no connection to or history in the śāstras; by suggesting that vratas are somewhat shallow popularizations of smārta rites; or, finally, by emphasizing the this-worldly interests of vratas while minimalizing their self-disciplinary ascetic features. This thesis is intended in part to help correct these distorted views about the nature and significance of vrata.

### History of Scholarship

The first detailed account of the history of meaning of the term vrata from traditional Sanskrit sources of dharma (religious law), from the Vedas to the Nibandhas, is that done by P.V. Kane. This historical overview is presented in the first 80 pages of volume five, part one of his larger

work, The History of Dharmaśāstra. The remaining few hundred pages are descriptions and lists of various vratas and festivals found in Dharmaśāstras, Purāṇas and Nibandhas. The latter two groups of texts, it may be noted, contain the antecedents to many of the vratas in current practice. One significant omission in Kane's overview of the meaning of vrata is the important Sanskrit epic literature. The Mahābhārata in particular is often quoted by later Purāṇas and digests as an authoritative source of dharma, and it contains a number of references to vratas. On balance, however, a great debt is owed to Kane for his preliminary charting of the vrata landscape in dharmaśāstric literature.

Most recently, Mary McGee has written a dissertation<sup>10</sup> the first half of which focuses on vrata in the large corpus of Nibandha literature (religio-legal digests written between the eleventh to eighteenth centuries). Her textual analysis is complemented in the second half of her thesis by field work conducted with women votaries in Poona, Maharashtra. This is a very important contribution to the scholarship on vrata. Because McGee's thesis addresses both current practice as well as the textual tradition, I will

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<sup>10</sup> Mary McGee, "Feasting and Fasting: The vrata tradition and its significance for Hindu women" (Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1987).

discuss the nature of her contribution presently.

A larger body of scholarly literature exists when we come to the arena of actual vrats performed in different regions of India. One of the earliest references to vrats by a foreigner is that made by the Muslim traveller Alberuni in the eleventh century.<sup>11</sup> There are also accounts in some eighteenth and nineteenth-century Christian missionary writings.<sup>12</sup> Nineteenth-century orientalist occasionally described a vrat rite in various journals current at the time.<sup>13</sup> And, in this century, the anthropological journal Man in India has featured a number of articles describing vrats.

In the twentieth century, one of the first scholars to take a serious look at vrats was Abanindranath Tagore. Tagore's main interest was in popular Bengali culture, and the place of the folk arts in this culture. He could not help but notice the omnipresent and lively "brat" (Bengali

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<sup>11</sup> Such references may be found in Edward Sachau's translation of Alberuni's journals: Alberuni's India (reprint of 1888 ed., Delhi: S.Cand and Co., 1964).

<sup>12</sup> For example, in the works by W.Ward (A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos, Birmingham: W.H. Pearce, 1817), and the abbé J.A. Dubois, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies. Trans. by H.K. Beauchamp. 3d. ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978 [1897]).

<sup>13</sup> These include such journals as The Indian Antiquary and the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society of Bombay.

for vrat) traditions, with their rich but ephemeral ritual art (ālpanā) and their stories. His book, Banglar Brata (1919), describes many of the brats he saw performed in Bengal and speculates on their origin. It may be that vrats have proliferated in Bengal more than in other parts of India, or that Tagore's researches (perhaps given added weight by the stature of his family) sparked scholarly interest among his fellow Bengalis; whatever the reason, the majority of subsequent studies on vrats also focus on Bengal (e.g., Bagchi 1922; Rowlands 1930; Banerjee 1946; Das 1950; Mukherjee 1950; Sen 1959; Ray 1960, 1961; Mazumdar 1981; Gupta 1983; Robinson 1985). With the exception of Ray's (in English) and Eva Maria Gupta's (in German) book-length studies on brata and their ālpanā, these references are to articles or chapters in books. Among these works, E. M. Gupta's is the most important contribution to the ethnography of vrat in Bengal. She builds directly on Tagore's earlier book and provides short but informative descriptions of a large number of women's bratas, and an analysis of the content and symbolism of the ritual art. Her book also contains probably the largest number of brata ālpanā reproductions currently available.

Rowlands, Mazumdar and Robinson look at selected vrats only within the larger context of Bengali women's religious lives. Rowlands is interested in what we can learn about

the lives of medieval Bengali women through Bengali literature, and Mazumdar in how vrats are used as agents of socialization for Bengali girls. Robinson's dense article discusses "cultural constructs of the feminine" in Hinduism and through a descriptive analysis of the Itu Vrata and its kathā shows how vrats "illustrate salient dimensions of women's religiosity in Hindu devotionalism."<sup>14</sup> All of these studies, in fact, attend to vrats as women's folk rites essentially separate from the Brahmanical Sanskrit tradition.

Apart from Bengal, the state of Uttar Pradesh has received the most attention from scholars writing on vrats. Relevant studies include Marriott (1958), Lewis (1958), Luschinsky (1962), Khare (1976), Wadley (1975, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1983) and Tewari (1982, 1991). Again, Marriott, Lewis, Luschinsky and Khare only look at some vrats within the larger context of their studies - the first three on village life, and Khare on the cultural significance of food and food management among Brahmans in an area around Lucknow. Luschinsky's exclusive focus, however, is on women and she provides some valuable ethnographic data in the form of descriptions of ten women's vrats set in the context of

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<sup>14</sup> S. Robinson, "Hindu Paradigms of Women: Images and Values," in Women, Religion and Social Change, eds. Y. Haddad and E. Findley (Albany: SUNY, 1985), 202.

the daily (and yearly) lives of women in a north Indian village. Tewari's (1982) article is brief but helpful in providing a quick overview of the names, dates and purposes of several important women's vrats currently observed in central Uttar Pradesh. Wadley's important series of studies relating to women and vrats in U.P. and their role in preparing the questions for this thesis will be explained below.

To complete this survey of literature on vrata, a few other works need to be mentioned. Recent studies on selected vrats in other parts of India and Nepal include Freeman's (1980) article on the Habisha Vrat observed by post-menopausal women in Orissa, Reynold's (1980) article on the role that vrats (here "noṇpu") play in the lives of Tamil married women, and J. Bruce Long's (1982) article on the important Mahāśivarātri Vrat as observed in Madras. Babb, in his book (1975) on popular religion in Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, discusses some vrats that are observed during the annual festival cycle, and McGee (1987) describes, with reference to both texts and practice, many vratas that are current among women in the state of Maharashtra. The anthropologist Lynn Bennett (1983) provides a detailed description of the Tij-Rishi Pancami and the Swasthani "bartas" (Nepali for vrat) that Brahman-Chetri women from one village in Nepal observe. Bennett also



provides a stimulating symbolic analysis of the kathās that accompany these two vrats.

Other articles have focused on certain elements of vrat rites (elements which are not necessarily specific to vrats) such as the ritual art (e.g., Ray 1961; Kramrisch 1985), or the stories (e.g., Wadley 1978, 1986). L.Tewari's recent book (A Splendor of Worship: Women's Fasts, Rituals, Stories and Art), despite its title, is focused entirely on stories. It contains 55 vrat stories and variations that are part of fifteen "fasts and festivals" annually celebrated by Kanyakubja Brahman women in the Kanpur region of U.P. This book is valuable as a primary source of vrat stories that have been orally transmitted by women for generations. But the book contains very little commentary or analysis, other than the provision of indices of tale types and folk motifs. Finally, one can find ample mention or description of vrats in books or articles on Hindu festivals and on the calendar (B.A.Gupte 1916; Underhill 1921; Sharma 1978; Sivananda 1983), or in works about pilgrimage or pilgrimage centres (e.g., Bhardwaj 1973).

Susan Wadley, working primarily out of one village near Delhi, has probably contributed the most (prior to E.M.Gupta and McGee) to the analysis of the function of vrats in the

lives of Hindu women.<sup>15</sup> Wadley was the first anthropologist to take a serious and continued interest in women's performance of vrats. Among her contributions, Wadley pointed out the important role that women's rites play in the transmission of Hindu ideas and values, and drew attention to the role of kin as "religious symbols." According to Wadley, a study of these calendrical rituals "can provide new insight into the role of kinship in Hindu ritual behavior and ideology."<sup>16</sup> While Wadley clearly placed women's vrats in the context of "strī-dharm" (women's "duty") and as a "fundamental aspect of being a pativrata" (the ideal Hindu woman),<sup>17</sup> she also emphasized positive aspects to these rites through which women express their roles. She suggested, for example, that rituals like vrats "may give psychological support to the women themselves, because they allow women to have active control of events rather than depend completely on their male kin. Ritually,

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<sup>15</sup> Wadley has also written about the plethora of vernacular vrata booklets currently being produced and has described the effects that this written literature is having on the formerly primarily oral traditions found in village settings. See S. Wadley, "Popular Hinduism and Mass Literature in North India: A Preliminary Analysis," Religion in Modern India, ed. Giri Raj Gupta, 81-103 (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> S. Wadley, "Brothers, husbands and sometimes sons: kinsmen in North Indian ritual," in The Eastern Anthropologist (29, no.1, 1976), 150.

<sup>17</sup> Wadley, "Brothers," 164.

only a wife or a sister can really save a husband or brother from death..."<sup>18</sup> In large measure, it was through reading Wadley's articles on religion in Karimpur village that I became interested in the vrata tradition. Both my own work and that of McGee's on women and the vrata tradition build in particular on the foundation of research and ideas that Wadley (in the field) and Kane (in the texts) have established.

McGee's main contribution is, first, her detailed, instructive and comprehensive study of the concept and treatment of vrata in the Dharmaśāstra (especially Nibandha) literature, a study which essentially expands and amplifies Kane's work. In the textual portion of her dissertation, McGee analyzes how certain mīmāṃsā categories<sup>19</sup> are applied by the Nibandha writers to vrata in these texts and examines the gender implications of these categories. This analysis sets the stage for her investigation of the roles of vratas in the lives of high-caste Hindu women in western Maharashtra found in the second half of her dissertation. McGee argues

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<sup>18</sup> S. Wadley, "Hindu Women's Family and Household Rites," in Unspoken Worlds - Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures, eds. N.Falk and R.Gross (San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 109.

<sup>19</sup> The mīmāṃsā refers to a school (or method) of vedic textual exegesis. The particular categories referred to here (which I discuss in my chapter two) are the "nitya", "naimittika" and "kāmya" classification, which McGee calls the "motivational categories."

that, contrary to the way the Nibandha authors have categorized vratas that women perform, women view their vratas as "rites of maintenance" rather than "rites of acquisition." That is, women by and large do not see the vrats they perform as "supererogatory," as optional meritorious rites to acquire some specific object, but as obligatory rites that help to fulfill their specific dharmic duties. This is an expansion of Wadley's observation that women consider some vrats they perform as "necessary" - those for husbands - while others are less essential.<sup>20</sup> Another important contribution that McGee brings to the study of Hindu women is the analysis of the concept of saubhāgya - the "state of marital felicity" - and she directs our attention to how vratas explicitly contribute to the maintenance of saubhāgya as well as to the promotion of the central Hindu values of purity and auspiciousness.

My own research into the topic of vrata began in 1982 and resulted in an M.A. thesis entitled "A Study of the Purāṇic Vratas" in 1983. The following year saw acceptance of my Ph.D. proposal which aimed to extend my earlier textual research on vratas into the field of practice of these rites among women in modern day India. For what I

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<sup>20</sup> S.Wadley, "Brothers," 164.

felt was still missing from Wadley's - and others' - work on vrats was a more detailed and comprehensive examination of the vrata tradition, one that linked the Sanskrit textual (Dharmaśāstra) corpus formulated by male Brahman pandits with the lived tradition whose practice is dominated by women, and then analyzed the interplay between the two. In addition, I wanted to explore in greater depth the various factors that can account for the apparent pervasiveness and popularity of the vrata tradition among women in India.

I arrived in the north Indian city of Banaras in the autumn of 1984 to begin collecting data on high-caste women's vrata observances. During my stay in India I learned that McGee was working on the topic of vratas and, when in 1989 I was finally able to read the results of her research, I discovered that she had also recognized the importance of the vrata tradition in Hindu religious history, had seen its special significance to women and women's religiosity, and had identified the gaps then existing in the scholarly literature on vrata. Independently we had asked many of the same questions and had reached, in a number of cases, similar conclusions. In constructing the argument of my thesis I have tried to render my work complementary to hers so that together our dissertations would advance the field of knowledge. While accepting some of the lines of McGee's argument, I go on to present a differently nuanced view of

Hindu women's religious life and the role vrats play in it as I understand it based on the interviews I conducted in Banaras.

The following section discusses social and theoretical issues pertaining to the analysis and assessment of women's performance of vrats. I then describe my own contribution to the study of the vrata tradition and its significance for Hindu women.

### Vrats and the Social Construction of Gender

In the Purāṇas and Nibandhas, the major Sanskrit textual descriptive and prescriptive sources for vratas, both men and women, of all castes, are deemed eligible to perform the rites. The textual descriptions of vratas in which it is clear men, and only particular men (such as a king or a celibate student), can perform the particular vrata, constitute a small fraction of the total vrata descriptions. One can find a few more vratas which single out women as the suitable performer of the vrata and this is usually marked by the addition of "saubhāgya" to the list of goals or rewards accruing to the votary. Most vrata descriptions, however, do not designate the sex of the votary, though some may add that "forest hermits" or widows can perform the vrata. In reading these texts alone, one would not receive the impression that vratas were especially

designed for women, nor could one predict that while both men and women observe vrats throughout India today, women observe far more of them and at more frequent intervals than do men.

In general, I found that in Banaras high caste men, who come from observant families, tend to perform a handful of annual vrats that are part of their family's traditional practices. If they have a strong sectarian affiliation, they may perform vrats more often (for example the semi-monthly Ekādaśī Vrat if they are Vaiṣṇavite). In addition, men of all castes (and, as I found, Buddhists and Jains too) may take on a short-term weekly vrat on the advice of an astrologer to counter a prevailing malefic influence of a planet or a certain celestial configuration. In a few instances, I encountered men of lower castes (in one case, a rickshaw driver) who had taken on the Santoṣī Mā Vrat as a means of soliciting help from the goddess to solve a particular problem.<sup>21</sup> Finally, I met a number of men who had taken on a vrat in honour of their "favoured" deity (iṣṭadevatā), as a demonstration of devotion or to seek the deity's blessings.

Women may observe vrats for all these same reasons, and

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<sup>21</sup> A rich bania (merchant) may seek to accomplish the same goal by sponsoring an expensive "havan-pūjā" ceremony with Brahman priests officiating.

in similar contexts. Nevertheless, while there are many regularly occurring vrats that only women perform, I did not discover any "calendrical" vrats performed only by men. Further, there are discernible differences between the sexes not only in the frequency of their performance of vrats, but also in the way the vrats are performed, in the purposes for which vrats are kept, and finally in the significance which male and female votaries attach to these rituals. One way by which these differences can be explained is by appealing to the cultural construction of gender that is woven into the heritage (or cultural milieu) of every Indian. Indeed, it would be impossible to fully appreciate the significance of Hindu women's performance of and relationship to vrats without taking into account the implications of the cultural construction of gender in India.

The scholarship on Hindu women in the last two decades has amply documented that women as a group have had ascribed to them (by dominant patrilineal and patriarchal religio-cultural ideologies formulated largely by male Brahmins) different natures and functions than men as a group.<sup>22</sup> Views about the nature and roles of women have been, over a

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Prabhati Mukherjee's Hindu Women: Normative Models (1978); Lynn Bennett's Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters (1983); Julia Leslie's The Perfect Wife (1988); and Vanaja Dhruvarajan's Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology (1989).



period of centuries, worked out fairly cohesively and set down in texts (in particular, Dharmaśāstras) the ideas of which remain influential to the present. In general, women's natures are depicted as unsteady, lustful and weak, and their functions depicted as centering on their roles as wives and mothers under the control of male kin. Such an ideology regarding women (expressed in both sacred and popular literature, films and common adages) informs and reinforces social conventions so that it is typical to find girls in India actively socialized to be modest, obedient, self-effacing, and self-sacrificing for the sake of others in the family. In the context of vrats, we find girls trained to direct the performance of vrats for the attainment of a husband, or, for young married women, for the well-being of their husband and children, being trained, that is, to understand the purpose and meaning of vrats within a relational context. Men's rituals (including their performance of vrats) tend to be self-directed, that is, concerned with their own aims and well-being. In essence, the vrats that women perform are tied to domestic life and traditionally defined family and gender relationships in a way that the vrats men perform are not.

A number of researchers who have discussed women and vrats (e.g., Kakar 1978, Mazumdar 1981) have portrayed vrats as essentially normative practices which reproduce cultural

values emphasizing (or reinforcing) the structural subservience of daughters to fathers and wives to husbands. It is from such a perspective that in 1986 the editors of the important journal Manushi disparaged vrats as rituals contributing to the subordination and disempowerment of women in India. Other scholars (e.g., Freeman 1980; Bennett 1983), while acknowledging that women's vrats reproduce cultural values that place women in a subservient role, have emphasized women's creative responses - revealed in their votive rites and in the stories they tell - to the strictures placed on their behaviour.

The explanation and significance of gender differences between men's and women's performance of vrats can be approached from another angle besides social conditioning through a dominant ideology. The historian of religion, Carolyn Walker Bynum, has examined the issue of gender difference in socio-religious contexts from the premise that all experience is gendered. In response to Ortner and Whitehead's statement that women's (and men's) actions and "perspectives are to a great extent constrained and conditioned by the dominant ideology,"<sup>23</sup> Bynum argues that "Even where there is no hint of an alternative ideology to

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<sup>23</sup> S. Ortner and H. Whitehead, eds., Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality (London: Cambridge U.Press, 1980), x.

counter a dominant one, subordinate and dominant individuals [or women and men] will experience this accepted ideology in different ways."<sup>24</sup> Bynum argues that not only gender-related symbols (which can be "about" values other than gender) but all symbols arise out of the experience of "gendered" users and that no theory of symbol (or one could add, religious practice) can be adequate unless it incorporates women's experience and discourse as well as men's. She says further that

If we take as women's rituals and women's symbols the rituals and symbols that women actually use, and ask how these symbols mean, we may discover that women have all along had certain modes of symbolic discourse different from those of men. Even where men and women have used the same symbols and rituals, they may have invested them with different meaning and different ways of meaning.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly vrātas can be viewed as symbolic constructions expanded into ritual and narrative, and it is possible to demonstrate through a study of vrats that Hindu women have "modes of symbolic discourse different from that of

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<sup>24</sup> C. Walker Bynum, Harrell and Richman, eds. Gender and Religion - On the Complexity of Symbols (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 5.

<sup>25</sup> C. Walker Bynum, Gender and Religion, 16. For an interesting application of Bynum's insight see Lynn Bennett's description of a cycle of goddess myths shared by men and women in ritual contexts in which she argues that the image of Durgā "reflects a predominately male view, focused on the problematic woman, while Parvati presents Hindu women's own idealized perceptions of themselves and the problems they experience." (L. Bennett, Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters, 274)

men's." For instance, in the vrats that only women perform, there are a number of elements appearing in their pūjās, ritual art and stories that are expressive of women's responsibilities and concerns: reproductive fertility, the health of their children and familial well-being in general, the problems of a "co-wife," as well as the values of auspiciousness and saubhāgya. Such values and concerns are often transposed by women onto the vrats that are normally observed by both men and women, though these values and concerns in the shared vrats may be ritually far less explicit. It is not the gender symbolism in women's vrats as such, however, that I will be focusing on in this thesis, but rather the "different ways of meaning" that women have drawn from their performance of vrats based on their experience and perspectives as women.

### Statement of Thesis

McGee calls vratas "the primary vehicle available to women for the recognized pursuit of religious duties and aims."<sup>26</sup> She characterizes those duties and aims as the fulfillment of strīdharm ("women's duty") and the pursuit of the well-being of the family. McGee has taken into account

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<sup>26</sup> McGee, "Feasting and Fasting," 1. See also her article: "Desired Fruits: Motive and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women," in Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women, ed. J. Leslie, 71-88 (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991).

"women's experience and discourse" to challenge the Nibandha writers' depictions of women's vrats as supererogatory rather than obligatory. My field data from Banaras confirms that women consider many of the regular vrats they perform as in some sense necessary and as contributing in a fundamental way to the well-being of their families. Indeed, women see their performance of vrats for others as both drawing from and as evidence for their distinctive abilities as women: their physical endurance and fortitude, their moral strength, and their special connection to auspiciousness and śakti (conceived in various ways as a kind of generative raw energy).

In this thesis, however, by focusing on women's personal experiences and accounts, I will show that women's sense of obligation or duty in the performance of vrats only partly explains the remarkable popularity and tenaciousness of these rituals among women in India. I found that while women often spoke initially of vrats as being "for (maintaining) suhāg" (Hindi for saubhāgya - the auspicious state of the married woman whose husband is alive and well), they also spoke directly or indirectly about the psychological, social, physical and spiritual benefits for themselves. For many women, these were not just residual benefits, but primary benefits. For a significant number of women that I interviewed, vrats are an important (even central) vehicle

for expressing devotion and religious fervour, in short, faith in God. Furthermore, the phrase "vrats give me peace of mind" turned up repeatedly in my interviews. As I show in chapter eight, while "peace of mind" includes the feelings of satisfaction, calmness and contentment implied in a surface reading of the phrase, it often had deeper levels of meaning for the women I spoke with. These are meanings connected directly with the Hindu ascetic traditions, for women also spoke of vrats helping them to control their minds and bodies. Women's reflections on what keeping vrats does for them give voice to alternative ways of understanding the purposes for which women keep vrats, the meanings and significance they attach to them, and the functions vrats play in their lives.

I hope to demonstrate, then, that the reasons for the vitality of the vrat tradition among women in India are more complicated than has hitherto been suggested. Though from one angle vrats may be portrayed as a means by which a conservative androcentric gender ideology is both expressed and transmitted to Hindu women - and thus one way in which Hindu men can indirectly control women - I will argue that women see the use of vrats as a way to gain control over their own lives. Vrats have become (if they were not always) a source of "empowerment" for women, providing them with a degree of personal autonomy in an environment in

which women frequently lack control or feel disempowered. Ironically, Hindu women who are culturally placed in a position where they must practice self-denial (for example, as a young daughter-in-law in her husband's home) manage to achieve control over their own lives by practising further forms of self-denial. Asceticism brings power (tapas and śakti) both in a religiously prescribed sense, and in the sense that it provides these women with a feeling that they are in control. Through practising vrats, they can control at least some aspects of their lives; essentially, they are controlling their own bodies (through modifying eating, sleeping, and other physical acts). They can also control men's use of their bodies - by legitimately refusing sexual activity while fasting. Because vrats are religiously sanctioned and are ostensibly performed for the benefit of male family members, there is little resistance to a woman's performing as many vrats as time, resources and her stamina allow. While researchers have been documenting the ways in which Hindu women's lives and their rituals are expressive of their domestic social milieu and of the values of the householder, they have neglected to consider how women, traditionally denied access to formal asceticism, have found a way to tap into this powerful realm for their own benefit through the performance of vrats.

### Format, Methodology and Sources

As I am convinced that it is impossible to make full sense of the current practice of vrats in India without having some background knowledge of the long textual tradition on vrata, chapters one and two of this thesis provide a text-historical overview of the usage and development of the term in Hindu 'sacred' or authoritative (śruti and smṛti) literature. The primary texts referred to include the vedic corpus, the epic Mahābhārata, a selection of Dharmaśāstras, Purāṇas, and Nibandhas, all of which are in Sanskrit, and the modern Hindi vrata-kathā literature.<sup>27</sup> The reasons for the choice of these texts are various. The Rgveda is the first Sanskrit text to mention the word vrata and so it sets the context for the word's initial meanings. The Mahābhārata is not only the longest and oldest Hindu epic in Sanskrit, it provides (arguably) glimpses of life in pre-Common Era northern India and of vrata as (possibly)

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that the analysis of vrata in virtually any one of these texts or genres could itself constitute a separate thesis. Further textual sources for vrata descriptions (whether semi-sociological or prescriptive) which could be fruitfully investigated include: the Rāmāyana epic, the early Tamil epics and other Tamil literature, the Vaiṣṇava Pañcaratras literature, Śaivite Āgamas and Śakta Tantras, Sanskrit and vernacular plays, and then, of course, the remarkably numerous locally published paper books and pamphlets describing the yearly and weekly vrats observed in that region.



practiced at that time. In addition, the concept of vrata in the epics has not yet been treated at any length. I use the Sāvitṛī story found in the Mahābhārata to introduce ideas that I argue have continued to inform the concept of vrata, and women's relationship to it, to the present day.

Both the Purāṇas and Nibandhas contain numerous prescriptive accounts of vrata, representing a wide span of time. The Purāṇas develop, if not introduce, bhakti, theistic devotionism, in the concept of vrata. (This is another aspect of the vrata tradition that women have particularly embraced.) The Nibandhas firmly plant vratas into the soil of "dharmik karma", thus making them acts which contribute to the social and moral order.

Following the textual overview, chapter three introduces the city of Banaras and my research population, and situates vrats within the Hindu festival calendar. The remaining chapters attempt to convey women's experience and discourse on vrats by quoting their own words as much as possible on various issues. Chapter four profiles a small group of vrata-observing women, including two widows and an unmarried young woman. (For reasons which I describe in chapter four, these women were selected for profiling from among several dozen interviews that I conducted.) Chapter five investigates the parameters of vrats (what makes a vrata a vrata?), and chapter six their procedures (what does one do

when one does something called a vrāt?). Chapters seven and eight are both concerned with addressing the questions of the role of vrāts and the reasons women give for observing these rites. Chapter seven juxtaposes gender ideology (as expressed in the Dharmaśāstras) with conventional social practices and expectations, and with women's personal narratives concerning their performance of vrāts at different stages in the life cycle. The final chapter focuses on the less explicit dimension of women's vrāt observance - their appropriation of ascetic values: self-control, self-discipline and spiritual power.

The city of Banaras was selected as the fieldsite for several reasons. First, its population is predominately Hindi speaking, a language of which I have a working knowledge. Second, there had not yet been much research done on vrāt practices there. And third, Banaras is well known as one of the major and oldest centres of Hindu orthodoxy - and so a place where the observance of vrāts would have a long and continuous history, where pandits, priests and astrologers would be well acquainted with them, and where local and pan-Indian vrāts would be known. Fieldwork in Banaras was carried out over a fourteen month period in 1984-5.

My research population, described in detail in chapter three, consisted largely of women whose native tongue was

Hindi, who resided permanently in Banaras or its immediate vicinity, and who regularly observed vrats. The majority of the women interviewed were Brahmans and most lived in the areas between "Chowk" and Banaras Hindu University to the south of the city. The former area is a very densely populated and old part of the city where many long established and orthodox families live. I tried to include a variety of age groups, marital statuses, and related family members in my interview sample. My research assistant was a "high" Brahman, single and in her early thirties. She had many relatives, friends and acquaintances in the city and I relied heavily on her for my initial contacts. After that I used the "snow-ball" method to find new contacts. I make no claims about having adequately represented even one segment of the vrata-observing population of India, U.P. or even Banaras. This was not my intention. Rather, my intention was to find women with whom I could establish a climate of trust in which they could share with me their views and feelings on their religious lives in general and on their observance of vrats in particular. In turn I hope to have conveyed their voices as truthfully as possible - voices that the non-Indian scholarly community seldom heard in the past.

## CHAPTER ONE

### VRATA IN THE TEXTUAL TRADITIONS OF HINDU INDIA

#### (1) Vrata in the Early Literature: R̥gveda to Dharmasūtras

##### Vrata in the R̥gveda

Like many other important Sanskrit words, the word "vrata" appears in the earliest and most revered group of texts of classical Hinduism, the Vedas. In the R̥gveda, the oldest of the Vedas, vrata occurs just over 200 times alone or in combination with other words,<sup>1</sup> and it continues to turn up with some regularity in the later vedic Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads and Sūtras. However, while the word vrata occurs often enough in this literature, its meaning is far from clear.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there has been some lively

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<sup>1</sup> P.V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, 2d.ed. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974), Vol.5, pt.1, 4. (From this point forward all P.V. Kane references will assume his History of Dharmaśāstra, Vol.V, pt.1, unless otherwise indicated. Because of the frequency of references to Kane, unless additional material is to be included in a footnote, page references to his work will be placed in the text.

<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century the indologist F.Max Müller noted that vrata "is one of many words which, though we may perceive their one central idea, and their original purport, we have to translate by various terms in order to make them intel-ligible in every passage where they occur." (Vedic

controversy among scholars about the etymology (and hence early meanings) of the word vrata. This controversy has centred on the problem of which root the word is derived from.<sup>3</sup> P.V. Kane, following the lead of the St. Petersburg Dictionary,<sup>4</sup> preferred the root vr - "to choose, select" as the best derivation for vrata, and in fact this derivation received very early approval in the classical Hindu tradition as it is given by the influential lexicographer Yāska

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Hymns, SBE vol.32, pt.2, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964 [1891], 236, n.2.)

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of this controversy see Kane, 1-21; P.V.Kane, J.B.B.R.A.S., 29 (1954), 1-28; V.M.Apte, Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute, 3 (1947), 407-488.

For example, Max Müller (Vedic Hymns, II, 236) took vrata to be derived from the root vri meaning "originally what is enclosed, protected, set apart", whereas the Sanskritist W.D. Whitney held that vrata derived rather from the root vr̥t - "to proceed, turn" - thus meaning "procedure, course, line of movement, course of action, conduct or behaviour, obligatory actions imposed by religion or morality." (Apte, B.D.C.R.I., 411) Later, the lexicographer V.S.Apte, accepting the ✓vr̥t derivation, focused on "route or circular path". Apte held that the divine vr̥tas mentioned in the R̥gveda mean the heavenly routes, the divine rounds, the periodical movements around the sky closely adhered to by the gods themselves. (Kane, 3) Finally, Kane refuted Apte on the grounds that Apte's derivation of the meaning does not at all account for the way the term is used in many passages in the R̥gveda.

<sup>4</sup> Böehtlingk, O. and R.Roth, Sanskrit Wörterbuch, 7 vols. (St. Petersburg: Buchdruckerei des Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1855-1875).

in his Nirukta (c. 6th to 5th century B.C.E.).<sup>5</sup> It is the one that will probably remain the most widely accepted.

Kane (p.5) suggests that choosing involves willing and thus /vr can also mean "to will," and /vr with the suffix ta can mean "what is willed," and by extension "law or ordinance." Kane (p.6) continues:

When persons believe or feel that they must perform certain acts as ordained by gods, then arises the sense of religious worship or duty. If a man imposes upon himself certain restrictions as to his behaviour or food to win the favour of gods that becomes a sacred vow or religious observance. Thus the several meanings of the word 'vrata', which I derive from the root vr, are command or law, obedience or duty, religious or

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<sup>5</sup> According to McGee's translation of the relevant passage from the Nirukta, "'Vrata' is a verbal noun meaning 'the action of abstaining,' derived from the causative of the verbal root vr, 'to prevent from,' 'to check.' Another word 'vrata' [i.e., the term as applying to a vow] is derived from the same root in the meaning 'to choose.' Food is also called 'vrata' because it envelops the body..." (McGee, 20) McGee comments that, "In his definition of 'vrata' in its Vedic context, Yāska emphasizes three aspects of meaning that are still present in the conventional meaning of the term: action, abstinence (or discipline), and choice."

A few centuries later, the scholar grammarian Patañjali gave a 'definition' of vrata in his Mahābhāṣya (c.150 B.C.E.) which is not so different from Yāska's; viz. "vriyate iti anena." S.R. Das comments that (thus) "Vrata is a thing by which a choice or selection is made. While explaining and giving examples of Vrata he speaks of things that are admissible as food to the Brahmanas and other dvija-castes. It is clear that Patañjali understood Vrata as niyama or vinaya or rules of conduct... Applied to food it means the selection of what was to be taken and what was not to be taken by [the dvija castes]... While describing the Vratas he says that milk and such other liquids were the Vrata or vinaya of the Brahmanas, yavagu of the Kshatriyas and amikshya of the Vaisyas." ("A Study of the Vrata Rites in Bengal," Man in India, 32, no.4 [1952]: 212)

moral practices, religious worship or observance, sacred or solemn vow or undertaking, then any vow or pattern of conduct.

Kane goes on to illustrate his derived meanings of vr̥ plus ta by citing a number of passages from the R̥gveda where vrata occurs.<sup>6</sup> He insists that the sense of "command" or "law" is quite appropriate (contra Apte) in more than half of the R̥gvedic passages in which the word vrata occurs without prefixes.

It is difficult to accept some of Kane's meanings, in particular, "religious or moral practices," "religious worship or observance" and "sacred or solemn vow" - meanings which he derives from both prefixed and unprefixed occurrences of vrata - because he appears to be reading into the uses of vrata in the R̥gveda what he knows about its later uses. His unprefixed examples are not convincing - e.g., Kane (p.9) cites RV X.65.11: "(the Viśva-devas) that are good donors make the sun rise in heaven and spread about the

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"Vratas are spoken of as dhruva (immutably fixed) as in II. 5.4, III. 56.1, V. 69.4 and as adabdhā (unharméd, unsailable) as in I.24.10, II.9.1, III.54.18, VII.66.6 and daivya (divine) as in R̥g.I.70.1, I.92.12, VII.75.3. One must carefully remember these facts when ascertaining the exact meaning of vrata mentioned in connection with almost all the prominent gods of the R̥gveda. It is often stated in the R̥gveda that the vratas of the god whom the sage for the moment praises are not violated by other gods. ... [some examples:] R̥g.III.7.7 'the gods observe the vratas of gods'; II.38.9 'I invoke for my welfare with salutations god Savitr̥ whose vrata is not violated by Indra, Varuṇa, Mitra, Aryaman, or Rudra or by the (god's) enemies'..." (Kane, 8-9)

Arya vratas over the earth" as an example for the meaning "religious practices or modes of sacred worship." The content of this sentence, however, does not really indicate what the "Arya vratas" actually are. The less loaded term "ordinances" may be more appropriate. It must also be kept in mind that ascertaining the intended meaning of a word that has been prefixed or suffixed in Sanskrit (especially vedic Sanskrit) is notoriously problematic, as Kane (p.2) himself suggests in another context when criticizing Apte. Other scholars take the word vrata in its early vedic context to mean simply laws in general or ordinances of the ṛta<sup>7</sup> ("Cosmic Order," or the universal absolute and eternal "code" which W.Norman Brown describes as "impersonal in itself and entirely objective and mechanistic in its operation"<sup>8</sup>). J.Gonda takes vrata to mean fixed and regular behaviour, and personal function.<sup>9</sup>

In the Rgveda, the gods are spoken of as having their own vratas, and as ruling over the vratas of the animate and inanimate world; (RV 3.4.7) "Praising the Ṛta they (the

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<sup>7</sup> S.C.Banerjee, "Purāṇic Basis of the Vratas Mentioned in Bengal Smṛti," Indian Culture 13, no.1 (1946): 35.

<sup>8</sup> "Duty as Truth in Ancient India," in India and Indology Selected Articles by W.Norman Brown, ed. L.Rocher (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), 111.

<sup>9</sup> J.Gonda, A History of Indian Literature (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), I, 97, 167.



gods) proclaim the Rta; observers of their duty (vrata) they concentrate upon their duty (vrata)."<sup>10</sup> The god most often (though not exclusively) mentioned in connection with both the rta and with vratas in the Rgveda is Varuṇa. He is portrayed as the "trustee of rta," in Bloomfield's words. He also has a direct influence in human lives through his role as a divine punisher and rewarder of those who violate or observe the vratas ordained by the gods.<sup>11</sup> The following Rgveda prayer is a recognition of human inclination to break the gods' vratas, and it is to the god Varuṇa that the plea is directed: "Whatever... [vrata] of thine, O Varuṇa! we may break day to day as people (subjects)... do not reduce us to death..."<sup>12</sup> It is in this role that Varuṇa is sometimes addressed as "dhṛta-vrata" (upholder of the vratas). The gods Agni and Sūrya are often called "vratapah" (protector or lord of vratas) in the Rgveda and later Saṃhitās.

Vrata and the word dharma, perhaps the key concept of the Hindu tradition, are also semantically connected in the Rgveda and in some usages their meanings "appear to have

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, "Duty as Truth," 112.

<sup>11</sup> See T. Day, Conception of Punishment in Early Indian Literature (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U. Press, 1982), 32 and ch.2, n.5.

<sup>12</sup> RV I.25.1-2, quoted in Kane, 9.

coalesced," as Kane puts it. Among other passages he cites RV VII.89.5 to illustrate his claim: "when we destroy (or violate) your dharmans through heedlessness...,do not harm us, O Varuṇa, on account of that sin."<sup>13</sup> There are also passages where the three words ṛta, vrata, and dharma occur together and appear to mean much the same thing.<sup>14</sup> But their interrelationship in vedic literature is subtle and complicated and, though meriting attention, would require further investigation beyond the scope of this thesis.

To recapitulate, the derivation of the word vrata and its meanings in the Rgveda are matters of contention. Nevertheless, one can say that vrata in the Rgveda is closely connected with the ṛta, the larger metaphysical concept of Cosmic Order, with dharma (a concept whose full ramifications have yet to emerge), and with the governed and governing activity of the gods. In many contexts the word has the sense of "immutably fixed ordinances" that keep the

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<sup>13</sup> Kane, p.20 and n.31

<sup>14</sup> Day, Conception of Punishment, 256, n.6: "... such as RV 5.63.7, 'O Wise Mitra and Varuṇa! according to your fixed rule of conduct (dharmān) you guard your ordinances (vrata) with the wonderful power of an asura; you rule over the whole world according to the principle of cosmic order (Rta); you establish in the heaven the Sun that is a brilliant chariot.' In RV 5.72.2 and 6.70.3 vrata and dharmān occur together, while in RV 1.65.2; 2.27.8; 3.4.7; and 10.65.8, Rta and vrata occur together in a manner which suggests that they carry equal force with vrata, according to Kane, ..."

universe in order (keep or support the ṛta) and to which all beings are subject. In one passage, RV 9.112.1, it is stated that the various vocations which men engage in are their various vratas. A person's vrata may be "that of priest, or of warrior or ruler, or of some humbler occupation - physician or bard or artisan or agricultur-  
alist..."<sup>15</sup> It is also not surprising to find that "the sacrifice, which is the single most important activity that vedic man could perform, is described as a vrata at RV 1.93.8"<sup>16</sup> Some vratas seem to be related to individual status and primary roles - so that one god's vrata may be quite different from another's, or humans' from gods' or one human from another. Other vratas seem to have universal application. In all cases failure to comply (to observe one's vrata or the vrata of the gods) is a 'sin' against the gods and against Order and Truth (sat).

### **Vrata in the Later Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads**

As is well known, a number of passages from the Rgveda

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, Duty as Truth, 112.

I did not come across any references to specific gender related vratas. It is entirely possible that in vedic literature women's maternal functions could have been called their "vrata," as their wifely functions came to be called in later Smṛti literature.

<sup>16</sup> C.Heckaman, "Toward a Comprehensive Understanding of Ṛta in the Rg Veda," M.A. Thesis (McMaster U.), 1980, 57.

reappear in later Saṃhitās, and these include some with the word vrata.<sup>17</sup> With respect to the usage of vrata in the later Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads Kane notes that while vrata appears "here and there" in the sense of "ordinance of a god or of gods" the usual senses of vrata in these texts are two,

viz. (1) religious observance or vow, or restrictions as to food and behaviour when one has undertaken a religious vow, or (2) the special food, that is prescribed for sustenance when a person is engaged in a religious rite or undertaking such as cow's milk, yavāgū (barley gruel) or the mixture of hot milk and curds (called āmikṣā).<sup>18</sup>

What Kane means by "religious observance" or "vow" are prescribed ritualistic obligations incumbent on the sacrificer (yajamāna) before, during or after a vedic sacrificial ritual. These may include general ethical injunctions - "He should not speak what is untrue," behavioural restrictions (not to eat meat, not to sleep, not to have sexual intercourse with a woman), and specific kinds of injunctions: "he should not wash his clothes in salt water."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For example, the verse RV I.22.19: 'Mark the deeds of Viṣṇu, the helpful friend of Indra, whereby he watches over his ordinances [vrata]' occurs also in TS I.3.6.2, AV VII.26.6, Vajapeya Saṃhitā VI.4. (Quoted in Kane, 22)

<sup>18</sup> Kane, 23. He also mentions that both meanings of vrata are given by Yāska in his Nirukta (II.14). See this chapter, n.6.

<sup>19</sup> Kane (23) cites TS II.5.5.6 'this is his vrata (vow); he should not speak what is untrue, should not eat flesh, should not approach a woman (for sexual intercourse),

The Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads offer new nuances for the meaning of vrata - as well as carrying over older senses. This is not surprising considering the radically different orientation and intended audience of these texts. The new significations reflect the interest in metaphysical, ascetic and meditational themes characteristics of this literature. M. Bhagat in his book on ancient Indian asceticism mentions the "Arunaketuka Vrata" in the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka (I.32) prescribed for "ṛsis" (mendicants) where the vrata seems to be an open-ended course of behaviour for the "seeker of knowledge."

The Ṛsis, it is laid down, should live on water or every day eat whatever is obtained by begging - should worship Agni; they should not have any possession; they should live in [the] forest; wear 'Kśauma' garment, either yellow or white and carry on the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

While such a 'vow' presages the sannyāsin's ("renouncer's") vratas of later Hinduism, it also presages the introduction of ascetic behaviour and values into the concept of vrata as

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nor should his apparel be washed with water impregnated with cleansing salt; for, all these things the gods do not do.' And, TS V.7.6.1 'birds are indeed fire; when one who has performed Agnicayana [an important vedic fire sacrifice, the altar for which is in the shape of a bird] eats the (flesh of) birds, he would be eating fire and would meet with disaster (or distress); (therefore) he should observe this vrata (not to eat bird's flesh) for a year, for vrata does not extend beyond a year.'

<sup>20</sup> M.G. Bhagat, Ancient Indian Asceticism (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1976), 120-1.

we find it in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas.

Typically the Upanisads go further in their rarefaction of the idea of vrata. The statement of the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (1.5.21-23), writes T. Day, "that 'one should perform only one vrata,' namely, one should only breathe in and emit breath 'for fear that Death may seize him' reflects a yogic specificity in the usage of the word vrata." But, he goes on,

since in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (3.7-10) several vratas are mentioned - namely, one should not speak ill of food; one should not shun food; one should not refuse accommodation to a needy stranger, etc., it appears that vrata applies not only to strictly religious or liturgical procedures, observances, and obligations, but to propriety itself in the sense of the conduct proper to each situation which arises.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, "proper conduct" frequently is religiously prescribed. Nevertheless, the point is that some of these examples reveal a moral dimension to the concept of vrata that, while perhaps implicit in its vedic usage, becomes increasingly explicit in the later (especially dharma-śāstric) literature, as we shall see.

Kane also observed that the sense of "a proper course or pattern of conduct for a person" - in a more 'secular' sense - is a "secondary" meaning of vrata, though he obtains this from the Brāhmaṇas rather than the Upaniṣads. Kane (p.25) cites an example from the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa which is

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<sup>21</sup> Day, Conception of Punishment, chap. 2, n.5, 254.

essentially advice - called a vrata - for the proper conduct of a king vis-à-vis his enemy. Brief mention should also be made of another "secondary" meaning of vrata which Kane derived from certain contexts in the Brāhmaṇas - that of upavāsa or a fast.<sup>22</sup> The connection of vrata with upavāsa or fast is also to develop in the literature and continue on into the present day.

It is the second of Kane's two "ordinary senses of vrata" - that is, food or sustenance when a person is engaged in a religious rite - that is taken up by Keith and Macdonell in their Vedic Index of Names and Subjects. They say that vrata in the Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas "has the peculiar sense of 'milk' used by one who is living on that beverage alone as a vow or penance."<sup>23</sup> These references, as the ones cited by Kane, often refer to the dikṣita (one undergoing a dīkṣa or consecration ceremony for a vedic sacrifice). During the ceremony the dikṣita undergoes

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<sup>22</sup> Kane, 26. The "other secondary meaning of vrata," he writes, "seems to be upavāsa (i.e. Yajamāna's passing the night in the Darśa-iṣṭi and the Pūrṇamāsa-iṣṭi near the Gārhapatya [central home fire] and other fires, or [and?] reducing his intake of food or fasting): 'that he performs upavāsa in Darśa and Pūrṇamāsa iṣṭis is so because the gods do not partake of the offerings made by one who has not undergone vrata; therefore he undergoes upavāsa with the thought 'the gods may partake of my offering'" (Ait.Br. VII.II)

<sup>23</sup> A.B.Keith and A.Macdonell, Vedic Index of Names and Subjects (London, 1912), 2, 342. References cited include: AV VI.133.2; TS VI.2.5, 3.4; SB III.2.2, 10.17; 4.2.15.

purificatory rites and evidently milk is considered one of the substances that is particularly pure and suitable for the sacrificer. In this case vrata, identified with the milk, may symbolize the purifying process which the initiate is undergoing - as dīkṣa has also been construed as an initiation rite.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the ritual practices involved in the dīkṣa ceremony have a number of parallels with vrata rites as described in later literature such as the Purāṇas. For example, the dīkṣita must eat certain foods and/or refrain from eating others, he makes a series of oblations into the fire (homa), recites certain mantras (sacred verses or syllables), and feeds and gives gifts to Brahmans.

The link between vrata and dīkṣa appears again in both the Śrautasūtras (aphoristic texts on vedic sacrifices, based on the Brāhmaṇas) and the Gr̥hyasūtras (texts detailing domestic rituals for the householder; c.600 - 400 B.C.E.). Gonda has pointed out that the Gr̥hyasūtras generally use the term vrata in connection with the dīkṣa of the young boy about to become brahmacārin (a celibate student under the tutelage of a Brahman preceptor), but also with the dīkṣa of a snātaka (one who has finished his studentship and is ready

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<sup>24</sup> See Eliade, Birth and Rebirth; the Religious Meaning of Initiation (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), chapter on dīkṣa. See also Uma Marina Vesci, Heat and Sacrifice in the Vedās (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985).



to become a householder) and of a householder.<sup>25</sup> The vratas as part of the dīkṣa are intended to prepare the initiand for the study of sacred texts and to make him a recipient of its fruits. Yet even after the dīkṣa a student was expected to undertake particular vratas when he studied a new section of vedic literature.<sup>26</sup> So, for example,

... before a student began to study the Mahānāmī or Sakvarī verses forming a supplement to the Sāma-Veda, he has to prepare himself by keeping a vow, the sakvarī-vrata for twelve, nine, six, or at least three years... Among the many duties connected with this vow, the student was required to wear a single [dark] cloth... and eat dark food; he should keep standing during the day time, and pass the night sitting; when it rained he should not seek cover; ... After he has prepared himself by these and other austerities, the verses were recited to him...<sup>27</sup>

The Śrautasūtras also mention vrata in connection with, for example, the special initiation restraints on behaviour during the preparatory period of the new paterfamilias' first kindling of the gārhapatya (home) fire.<sup>28</sup> His vrata,

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<sup>25</sup> J.Gonda, Change and Continuity in Indian Religion (The Hague: Mouton & Co. 1965), pp.329-331.

<sup>26</sup> H.C.Chakladar, "Some Aspects of Social Life in Ancient India," in Cultural Heritage of India, ed. by a Board of Scholars, 2d ed. (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, 1962), II, 569. For more descriptions of these now obsolete vratas that every student of the Veda had to undergo see Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, Vol.II, 370-3.

<sup>27</sup> Chakladar, 569-70.

<sup>28</sup> This important two-day ritual, called the agnyādhāna (or agnyādheya) was performed when the young head of a family considered "himself capable of assuming responsibility for his own household and of celebrating the prescribed

which may be in effect for up to a year, consists of the sort of behavioural restrictions we have previously described.<sup>29</sup>

In the early Dharmasūtras (c.600-300 B.C.E; religio-juridical texts) the term vrata continues to have the sense of restrictions concerning food and behaviour during a certain stage in one's life, i.e., as a brahmacārin, grhasthin, vanaprasthin, or sannyāsin ("āśrama vratas"), or as part of the purificatory and initiatory rituals in connection with vedic rites and sacrifices. The Āpastamba Dharmasūtra, for example, has a section on the vratas of snātakas regarding garments, answering calls of nature, scandalous talk, not seeing the rising or setting sun, and avoiding moral faults such as anger. This text also "specifies the observances [vratas] to be followed by the

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rites in his own name..." Vesci, Heat and Sacrifice, 150.

<sup>29</sup> In describing the agnyādhana ceremony (based on the Bhāradvāja Śrauta Sūtras of the Taittirīya School) Vesci (Heat and Sacrifice, 159) writes: "During his vrata the new yajamāna must make a vow not to eat meat, not to have sexual intercourse with any woman, not to sit on high stools and not to sleep. Finally, on the eve of the day when the fireplaces have to be erected, the yajamāna ends his period of vrata by observing, together with his wife, the prescribed fast and by keeping vigil the whole night playing the vina and watching over the provisional fire lest it should die out. The fast and vigil are explained by the texts both as a form of tapas to strengthen the yajamāna and as a way of paying honour to the Deities who are present at the ceremony and of thus fulfilling one's duties of host in their regard."

husband and wife from the day of their marriage such as eating only twice in the day, not eating to satiety, fasting on parvan days."<sup>30</sup>

Before we leave these texts, it is worth recording McGee's observation about certain rituals for ensuring worldly success in the Gṛhya and Dharmasūtras that may well have also contributed to the shape of the later Purāṇa and Nibandha vratas. She writes:

These include the śanti rites for averting evil, the precautionary punyaha rites for removing inauspiciousness preceding or during religious rituals, the svāstyayana ceremonies for ensuring safe journeys, the ayusṭya rites for long life, and the maṅgala rites for increasing one's wealth.<sup>31</sup>

### **Vrata in the Manu and Yājñavalkya Dharma Smṛtis**

In the Manu (c.100 B.C.E. - 100 C.E.) and Yājñavalkya (c.100-300 C.E.) Dharma Smṛtis - texts which are frequently quoted as sources of authority on dharma by later digest writers - vrata is identified primarily with the prescribed

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<sup>30</sup> Ap.DS II.1.1 ff., cited in Kane, 27.

<sup>31</sup> McGee, 22. She provides specific references to these rites from the Gṛhyasūtras in note 17. Anyone familiar with the Atharvaveda would note the similarity of these rites with some of the "magical" formulas and "charms" for the same sorts of purposes, as McGee herself comments. See also Margaret Stutley, Ancient Indian Magic and Folklore (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980).

rites of expiation or penance (prāyaścittas).<sup>32</sup> This identification of vrata with penance continues to hold throughout the Dharmaśāstra literature as a secondary meaning of vrata or, put differently, as a certain kind of prāyaścitta. An example from Manu is (XI.117): "But after he has fully performed the penance [vrata], he must give to (Brahmanas) learned in the Veda ten cows and a bull, (or) if he does not possess (so much property) he must offer to them all he has."<sup>33</sup> And, Yājñavalkya Smṛti III.254: "Wearing a woollen garment and matted locks he [one who drinks liquor] should perform the penance of Brahmanicide [brahmahatyā-vratam]; he should eat, in the night, cakes of sesame seeds or particles of rice for three years."<sup>34</sup>

The preceding review of the usage of the word vrata shows that the term shifted in its meaning from its earliest usage in the Rgveda to its use in the Smṛtis of Manu and Yājñavalkya. In the Rgveda, vrata seems to have denoted the

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed discussion of prāyaścitta see Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, IV, 1-30; and D.C.Bhattacharya, "Penances and Vows," in Cultural Heritage of India, II, chap. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Institutes of Manu, trans. G. Bühler, SBE vol.25. See also Manu XI.170, XI.182.

<sup>34</sup> The Dharm Shashtra Hindu Religious Codes, trans., M.N. Dutt, 1 (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications [1908], 1978). See also Yāj. Sm. III.251, 252, 267, 270, 283, 301.

fixed functions or duties of all beings (be they god, human, or animal) which preserve and support the ṛta - cosmic Order or Truth - through the power of dharman ('righteousness'). In the later vedic Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas, the concept of vrata (as Kane suggests) gradually came to be restricted as the concept of dharma became more all-embracing, while the term ṛta disappeared from usage altogether. In certain contexts the term vrata came to refer to the restrictions of food and behaviour when one has undertaken a rite, e.g., as a sacrifice, or a dīkṣa. But, it also came to be applied to the special food prescribed during such a religious rite. In the early Smṛti texts a vrata included not only rules of conduct in particular circumstances, but also referred to the prescriptions for expiating the negative effects of breaking those (and other) rules of conduct.

Before turning our attention to vrata in the epics it is important to note, given the focus on women and the vrata tradition in this thesis, that the Manusmṛti (V.154) also includes a declaration that no sacrifice, no vrata and no fast may be performed by a woman independently of her husband. This would appear to be the first specific prohibition against women observing vrata (alone) in the Dharmaśāstra literature. The Manusmṛti is also the first text on Hindu dharma to clearly outline the dharma of women. The

text has defined woman's role - and her only means of 'salvation' from her inherently flawed womanly nature (strīsvabhāva) - in terms of the strict adherence to the ideal of pativratā, a compound made up of the noun pati, meaning "lord" but in this context understood "husband," and vrata. A woman's vrata - her duty, her "function," and her overarching "vow" - is devoted service to her husband-god (pati-sūśruṣa). This is the essence of strīdharma (women's dharma), irrespective of caste and class. According to Manu, "for women the marriage ritual is held to be the equivalent of initiation [upanāyana], serving one's husband that of residing in the teacher's house [and similarly serving him], and household duties that of the worship of the sacrificial fire."<sup>35</sup> Thus "household tasks become part of the ... vrata or religious observance of the wife [and thus] the high tone in which these apparently mundane tasks are [often] described"<sup>36</sup> in later treatises on strī-dharma. Eulogistic expositions on and illustrations of this pativratā ideal were soon to be found in (probably redacted parts of) Hinduism's great epics. As the ideal became virtually normative, these illustrations and such epic

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<sup>35</sup> I. Julia Leslie, The Perfect Wife - the orthodox Hindu woman according to the Strīdharmapaddhati of Tryambakajvan (Delhi: Oxford U. Press, 1989) 38, quoting Manu II. 6-7.

<sup>36</sup> Leslie, The Perfect Wife, 50.

goddess/women as Satī/Pārvatī, Sītā, Draupadī, Sāvitṛī, and Anasūyā found their way into the later Purāṇa and Nibandha vrata stories accompanying descriptions of these rites.

## (2) Vrata in the Epics: The Mahābhārata

The word vrata appears numerous times in the Mahābhārata<sup>37</sup> - chronologically the first and the lengthier of India's two great Sanskrit epics. Its usage here reveals a wide array of meanings some of which are found in earlier texts and others which portend later usage. One reason for this wide array may be due to the fact that the epic itself was orally transmitted for many centuries and so reflected the shifting meanings of vrata. Later Smṛti writers (Purāṇas and Nibandhas) quote from sections of the epic as authoritative statements on vrata. In particular, the Śanti and Anuśāsana parvans are quoted most frequently, two

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<sup>37</sup> As is well known, neither a single author nor a single date can be assigned to the Mahābhārata. It was a popular work that underwent numerous changes in style and language before it was committed to writing. The oldest portions, the core Bhārata story, are hardly older than 400 B.C.E. The last books, the Śanti and Anuśāsana parvans, an introduction to the first book and later dharmaśāstric material (redacted into various parts of the epic) were added between 200 B.C.E and 200 C.E. The complete text according to current views cannot be later than the 4th or 5th cent. C.E. Kane believes that the extant Mahābhārata is later than the extant Manusmṛti because, among other things, there are verses in the epic which correspond exactly with verses in Manu. (Kane, I:344)

books which are now considered to have received the most recent interpolations.

In the Mahābhārata, vrata as a kind of rite or vow, whether in a "religious" or "secular" context, begins to come to life. For the first time, particular individuals are associated with the observance of a vrata, including women. The vratas themselves range from a simple vow not to refuse to play dice when challenged (Yudhiṣṭhira's vow, Sabhāparva 58.16) to non-descript, almost monastic-like vows (general self-restrictive behaviour) accordant with a Brahman status and way of life. Finally, there are vows that sound more like present-day vratas. Sometimes what the vrata entails is described, but often it is not. Sometimes a specific purpose for the rite or vow is given, other times it is not.

In notes on his translation of the Mahābhārata, van Buitenen wrote:

'Vow' or 'life-rule' will consistently translate vrata, a self-chosen life-rule involving abstinences, usually vowed for a particular term; it cannot be broken except to the detriment of a person's 'truth'. Since especially the brahmin way of life involves vratas of various kinds, the description 'of strict vows' can be applied to almost any brahmin.<sup>38</sup>

While his comments are not incorrect, they do not properly

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<sup>38</sup> J.A.B. van Buitenen, trans. and ed., The Mahābhārata, 3 vols. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1973-1978), 1, 436.



describe the full range of usage of vrata actually found in the text.

The most common usage of vrata (thirteen out of twenty-five times in the Adiparvan) occurs, as van Buitenen notes, in the context of a description of a Brahman - priest or ṛṣi - who is of good character and action; in other words, one who acts in ways deemed appropriate to the Brahman varṇa. For example,

At this feast, son of the bard Lomaharsana, the learned family chieftain has taken the office of the brahman priest, capable, keeping to his vows,... an invariably truthful man, given to serenity, austere and strict in his vows [dhr̥ta vrata], he is esteemed by all of us... (I.4.5)

He was a great seer who never spilled his seed, ... well-versed in the Law and relentless in his vows. (I.13.9)

And, "... no one was to surpass him [Kṛṣṇa Dvaipayāna = Vyāsa] in austerities, in the study of the veda, in the observance of vows and fasts, in progeny, or in temper..." (I.54.1) The specifics of these "vows" are rarely spelled out in the epic. Yet from their contexts one can surmise that the vratas were indeed a kind of self-imposed, and hence "chosen life-rule," involving various behavioural restrictions observed for particular periods of time, serially or indefinitely. Though some of the vows may be chosen, others were evidently prescribed (as part of the observance of vedic rituals). In many examples it is

unclear whether the "vows" are performed for any particular purpose other than to submit oneself to the now generally esteemed (though in the Mahābhārata ambivalently viewed)<sup>39</sup> 'culture of austerity'; that is, the practices of self-restraint and the cultivation of its creative power (tapas, see below). One can at least say, without doubt, that the observance of vratas was considered praiseworthy behaviour.<sup>40</sup>

In other contexts we can see that male Brahmins were not the only ones to observe "vows." The Kshatriyas Dṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu and Vidūra are said to have undergone the

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<sup>39</sup> It has been noted by numerous scholars that while there are a number of contradictory views in the epic, reflecting its history and the interests of its multiple redactors, one central tension is that between dharma and mokṣa; or, more specifically, between the duties and responsibilities of this-worldly life, on the one hand, and on the other, the abandonment of dharmically-ordered society for the pursuance of personal power and/or mokṣa through ascetical practices. Thus in the epic dharma and the practice of austerities are alternately shown to be antithetical to each other and necessary to each other. An example of the futility and potential dangers of asceticism is illustrated in the well-known Jaratkāru story (1.13.8ff., 1.41.5 ff.), the central message of which is that there is no point in being "of strict vows" if one does not beget (male) offspring to fulfill one's debts to the ancestors.

<sup>40</sup> This praiseworthy behaviour is at various points in the epic contrasted with the "fallen" state of Brahmins and humanity in general in the decadent Kali Yuga. For example, in Mārkeṇḍeya's description of the Kali Yuga (3.188.25ff.) he says: "Men who had always been firm in their vows at a sraddha or sacrifice will be harnessed with greed and exploit one another. ... The brahmins shall find fault with the veda and abandon their vows..."

samskāras ("life-cycle ceremonies"), vratas and studies until they reached manhood (1.102.16). Here again the vratas may refer to those indicated in the Brāhmaṇas and the Sūtras in conjunction with vedic study.<sup>41</sup> A king's "peoples" are said to do vratas, among other things, in the following passage: "Bent upon sacrifice and vows, wont to pursue liberality, ritual and Dharma, ... the people were prosperous then." (1.102.5) Not surprisingly, Shudras are denied the vratas and observances of the three upper varṇas: "... obedience to the twice-born is declared to be the dharma of Śūdras, as it is of those who study with a guru, though the former are denied the mendicancy, oblations, and vows of the latter." (3.149.37) This does not mean, however, that Shudras could not engage in any vratas for another passage from the late Anuśāsanaparva (106.11 and 13), echoing Manu and other Dharmaśāstras, "provides that brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas should not engage in a continuous fast for more than three days and that vaiśyas and śūdras can observe a continuous fast for two days only..."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Another reference, however, provides a different possibility. Adiparvan 121.24 says: "The Bhargava voiced his assent and gave him the weapons, and all his lore of weaponry with its secrets and vows." (sa rahasya vratam ca iva)

<sup>42</sup> Kane, 55. See also Rāmāyana V.28.5, VII.76.2, VII.75.25 where Shudras are forbidden vedic instruction and also the right to "practice religious austerities or penance" (Bhagat, Asceticism, 253). There will be further

The description "of good vows" (suvrata) or "of strict vows" (niyatavrata) could also apply to women, as in these passages:

... and Satyavatī of the good vows bade Bhiṣma farewell and departed for the forest with both her daughters-in-law. They did awesome austerities, and at last the princesses shed their bodies ... and went the great journey. (1.119.10)

This Prthā, Kuntibhoja's daughter, was gifted with beauty and character; she rejoiced in [dharma] and was great in her vows [mahāvratā]... (1.105.1)

What beauty did Princess Śantā of strict vow possess that she seduced his heart when he lived like a deer? (3.110.8)

Or, in the case of a mother-in-law, Kuntī, who in exhorting her daughter-in-law, Draupadī, to good behaviour says: "Be thou the wife at their sacrifices, strict in thy vows, and gifted with joy!" (1.191.5) Once more, it is not clear whether specific sorts of vratas are being exhorted and/or whether the phrase once more refers to a general attitude and conventionally prescribed and esteemed self-restrictive behaviour. What is significant is that women, no less than men, were expected to subject themselves to this sort of self-restrictive behaviour in this form. In later literature it is increasingly explicitly channeled to the service of husbands.

Demons (asuras - the confounders of dharma) are also

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discussion of this sort of stipulation in chapter two.

portrayed as performing (ascetic) vows and mortifications. The reasons for undertaking such a course of behaviour are, of course, usually sinister rather than benign. But even if their intentions are sinister, the power (tapas) arising from such self-mortification is still available to them.<sup>43</sup>

Specific vratas in the sense of prāyaścitta (expiation) can be assigned in given circumstances. For example, Arjuna says to king Dharma (Yudhiṣṭhira), "Assign me my vow [vrataṁ ādi śyatām mama]. I have violated the covenant by looking at you..." (1.205.24) when you were occupied with Draupadī.

Observing a vrata for particular ends such as having children also appears in the epic, ends which are very familiar to contemporary vrata observers. For example, "It was at this very time that the radiant Goddess, Dakṣa's ... daughter Vinatā, was wishing for a son. Her austerities performed, her vows for the birth of a son faithfully fulfilled, the pure woman lay with her husband." (1.27.25) Or, in the description of the birth of the Paṇḍavas (fathered by five gods), Pāṇḍu wants a fourth son through Indra and he says:

I shall obtain from him a powerful son when I have satisfied him with austerities. The son that he will give me shall be my choicest. Therefore I shall mortify myself greatly in acts, thoughts and words. Thereupon the lustrous Pāṇḍu Kaurava took counsel with

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<sup>43</sup> Just one example of demons performing such ascetic vratas is in the story of Sunda and Upasunda (I.201.5-7).

the great seers and enjoined on Kuntī a holy, year-long vow. The strong-armed prince himself stood on one foot and with supreme concentration undertook awesome austerities. (1.114.17-21)

Pleased with the demonstration of devotion, Indra obliges Pāṇḍu with a boon.<sup>44</sup>

In the story of Sāvitṛī (III.42. 277-283), a story which, incidentally, is the basis of a three-day annual vrata still widely observed by women in India,<sup>45</sup> we find a description of a rigorous niyama (bodily and mental self-restraints) performed for the purpose of begetting a child. This niyama is, in essence, a vrata, which is why van Buitenen translates the word as "vow." This is an early example of the conceptual relationship between vrata and niyama; a relationship which is clearly established in the Purāṇas (as we will see in the chapter two). In the episode, king Aśvapati, the father-to-be of Sāvitṛī, under-

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<sup>44</sup> Both S.Jayal (The Status of Women in the Epics, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966) and Bhagat mention and provide references for penances and austerities performed for the birth or well-being of children. Jayal (152) says: "For the well-being of sons mothers performed various penances, kept fasts and offered prayers. Kausalya and Kunti propitiated the deities with fast, penances and various rites and ceremonies. [Ram.II.20.48; 25 (whole sec.); Mbh.V.83.37ff.] Bhagat adds (257): "It was common to perform austerities with a view to having a son."

<sup>45</sup> The Vrat Sāvitṛī Vrat, observed over the new moon day in the month of Jyēṣṭh (in northern India). For textual references see: Kane, 91-94; for textual descriptions see: AP chap.194, MP chaps.208-114; for descriptions of this vrata in practice, see: B.A.Gupte (1919:238-45); McGee (1987:469-475); Tewari (1991:40-43).

takes a "severe vow" to beget a child. At mealtimes he restricted his food, he was continent and subdued his senses, he offered oblations a hundred thousand times with the sāvitṛī formula [mantra]... and forewent his meal every sixth time." He observes this "life-rule" for eighteen years at which time the goddess Sāvitṛī (after whom he later names his daughter) grants him a boon, being well pleased with his "continence, purity, restraint [niyama], and self-control [dama]," as well as with his "whole-hearted devotion" to the goddess. He asks for offspring, and is granted a daughter in due time. It is remarkable that the description of this niyama undertaken for the purpose of having a child is not so very different in broad outline from current vrata practices among women in India: the kind and amount of food is curtailed, pūjā is performed, behaviour is altered in certain self-restrictive ways for a (predetermined) period of time.

### Sāvitṛī - The Pativrata as Tapasvinī

The Sāvitṛī story, in fact, offers us more that can shed light on the concept of vrata as it was developed in later literature as well as on related ideas about Hindu women. In the following I shall take the opportunity to explore some of the elements and themes that are relevant to our subject.

Later in the story, the "Śrī-like" daughter Sāvitṛī, who has married a prince whom she knew was fated to die within a year, undertakes a three-night vow (vrata) just prior to her husband's appointed death. In this vow she stands all night each night. Her father-in-law tries to dissuade her because he thinks Sāvitṛī's austerities are too severe. However, she remains firm and her reply is interesting: "Do not feel sorry, father, I shall finish the vow; for it is done with resolve [vyavasāya] and resolve is the reason." (280.6) In other words, her fixed determination (or resolution) is her support during her self-imposed acts of austerity, and is what makes these acts of austerity a "vow." On the morning of the third day of the vrata, her parents-in-law encourage her to eat. Evidently, then, her vow also involved fasting of some sort, and the breaking of the fast would signal the vrata's completion. But she refuses, saying, "I shall eat when the sun is down and I have fulfilled my wish. This is the intention [saṅkalpa]<sup>46</sup> and covenant I have conceived in my heart." (280.17) Her intention, of course, is to save her husband's life, which, unknown to both him and to his parents, is under mortal threat that day.

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<sup>46</sup> As we shall see in later chapters, the word 'saṅkalpa' also refers to the sacrificer's or votary's formulaic ritual pronouncement of intention to perform the sacrifice, vrata, or other observance.



Sāvitṛī's resolve may or may not have been formally spoken (as it should be according to the much later Sanskrit digests on vratas). What is important for Sāvitṛī is her resolve to fulfill the vow she had made to herself, so that the vow in turn fulfills her wishes. It is the firmness of her intent, despite being "gaunt from [her] fast and vow" as her husband remarks, that further gives her the stamina to follow Satyavat into the woods. ("I am not weak from my fast, and I do not feel fatigue. I have set my heart on going, please don't stop me!" 280.21) Her singleness of purpose lends her the courage to confront the "terrifying" god of death, Yāma, when he arrives to take away the soul of the unconscious Satyavat. Finally, it is her knowledge of dharma (the "Law") together with her nimbleness of mind that eventually outwits Yāma and wins back her husband's life and more.

Sāvitṛī herself declares to Yāma that her course shall be unobstructed through "the power of my austerities, my conduct toward my elders, my love for my husband, my vow, and by thy grace..." (281.21) Significantly, these are more or less the same elements (including her resolve, determination and faith) to which women votaries in present day India attribute the efficacy of their vrats.

One of the most important ideas found in the story of Sāvitṛī is that of the power of tapas (literally "heat" but

which came to include in its meanings the practice of austerities) in relation to vrata. Though intent on performing his own duty, Yāma deigned to reply to Sāvitṛī's initial supplications because, as he says, "you are a devoted wife, Sāvitṛī, and possess the power of austerities." A few verses later the text itself describes Sāvitṛī as, "this stately, devoted wife, perfected by her stressful vow."<sup>47</sup> What is this "power of austerities" which Sāvitṛī is credited with having? How does it function in the context of a 'vow'? And what is its relation to the 'power' of the devoted wife, the pativrata so extolled in Indian literature? While much has been written about the role of women as pativrata, and on the intriguing concept of tapas in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religious history,<sup>48</sup> their

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<sup>47</sup> Mbh.281.18. The Sanskrit reads: niyama vrata saṁsiddha mahābhaga pativrata. While this clause could be translated in a different (and less dramatic) way than van Buitenen has done, I am accepting his rendering as close to the overall intent of the author.

<sup>48</sup> The word tapas is derived from the root tap meaning to "irradiate heat," to "shine," to "consume by heat," to "suffer." In its early vedic context, Vesci writes: "As the heat of the sun or of fire, tapas penetrates, without leaving any immediately visible traces, into the depths of those things on which it alights and transforms from within. As a verb, or as a verbal participle tap it is ... linked with śrta" [cooked, boiled, especially as in boiled milk - Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1088]. "Its effects," Vesci continues, "are psychologically felt by the person who experiences it and who exerts it on any given object, as, e.g., the ritual implements to which the priest transmits energy, not only through the direct action of the fire but also through his internal ascetic power." Thus the

interconnection with the concept of vrata has not been seriously investigated. I would like now to draw attention to certain ideas and connections that I believe have informed the vrata tradition (both its expounders and its practioners) on implicit if not always explicit levels. In particular, I want to consider first some of the vedic antecedents to and implications of the idea of one being "perfected" by a "stressful vow"; that is, I would like to look at vratas as (self-sufficient) agents of transformation and spiritual power juxtaposed with earlier conceptions of the transformative "cooking" ("perfecting") of the vedic sacrifice through the heat (tapas) of the fire.

To do this, I refer to U.M. Vesci's book tracing the role and function of heat in the Brāhmaṇic Sacrifice.<sup>49</sup> Vesci argues that in the Brāhmaṇas sacrifice came to be absolutized as self-sufficient action, the centre and source of creation itself, an effect of which was the relegation of

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term tapas assumed a bi-polarity, "which includes both the end to be achieved and the means to achieve or produce it..." (21) and which has remained characteristic of it to the present day.

On tapas see, for example, C.Blair, Heat in the Rgveda and Atharvaveda (New Haven: AOS, 1961); D.K.Knipe, In the Image of Fire - the Vedic Experience of Heat (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975); Uma M.Vesci's Heat and Sacrifice; and L.Bhagat's Asceticism, especially pp. 14-27.

<sup>49</sup> U.M. Vesci, Heat and Sacrifice. As I will be quoting frequently from this book in the following, page references will be placed in the text rather than in footnotes.

the gods to a position as dependent on it as humans. At the risk of oversimplifying and misrepresenting some of her carefully constructed arguments, I want to extract a few ideas and quote several passages from her book that have a bearing on our subject; that is, that illustrate the evolution of certain ideas that I would argue passed over into the vrata tradition.

As is well known, fire and sacrifice assumed an unusual prominence in the religion of ancient (vedic) India. Ritual and speculative attention focused on the power of fire and heat to change that with which it came in contact. Cooking, Vesce writes (p.19), became "so significant [in the Vedas] that what [was] not cooked [could not] even be considered either as a proper offering to the Gods or a suitable portion for a meal, to such an extent that to eat raw food [was] a way of eating without breaking ritual fast." In fact, the suitability of raw food ("roots and fruits") as fasting food has continued to the present day in vrata (and other) rites. Heat (tapas) was understood to purify and equip that which is heated with a kind of divine energy. ("Soma, thus, rises up to the gods, only when transformed, purified and fully endowed with energy." [Vesce, p.32]) In this early conception, Vesce argues (p.38), the divine world "seems to receive power from the offering, not so much in the form of nourishment (as common elsewhere) but by wel-

coming in their midst a 'friend' who gives them power by his very presence full of energy." Further,

The discovery of the sacred properties of heat, exhibited in the sacred fire enables the Vedic priest to make use of this energy to surmount through using the transformation of the victim the distance between Heaven and Earth and to overcome the difference between Divinity and Humanity... It is the sacrificial fire, with its heat, which transforms, prepares, 'cooks' the offerings, consecrating into the very 'substance' of the Sacred. (Vesci, p.51)

When a correlation is made between the results of sacrifice and the sanctifying heat, a shift in the understanding of the ritual occurs, such that the sacrificial offering becomes the centre of liturgical action and the "Sacrificial Act" acquires "Absolute Power" insofar as it is identified with the Divine on a creative and universal level. As she writes (p.55): By

attracting the liturgical attention on itself, the [sacrificial offering]... ends up by giving value to the sacred Action as such and in itself. By its being transformed by means of the power which is internal to the cult and operative within the cult itself viz., 'cooking', the victim brings into relief the nature of the whole liturgical complex. If it is the sacred action itself, which effects the transformation and the immortalization of the victim, it is natural that it tends to become self-sufficient and independent of the whole Ultimate Reality, absorbing in its own sphere of action both men and Gods. Sacrifice becomes a vivifying force independent of any other agent superior to it, and acts directly first of all on the victim itself and then on the whole universe. Thus it gradually becomes the sole guarantee for the fulfillment of what is asked of it (from the continuation and maintenance of the cosmic order to the granting of progeny and wealth) independently of any eventual intervention by Gods. Thus, the whole sacrificial Action is divinized, by being made to represent the divine activity par

excellence, and later on by being absolutized in such a way that it itself becomes cosmic and eternal...

The role, function and power of the individual Divinities become "diminished and yet continue to exist and even to remain the recipients of the Sacrifice at least for a certain time."<sup>50</sup> In certain texts man is depicted as dependent on the Sacrifice in and of itself for desired aims and for the attainment of immortality, "detaching himself from the necessity of having to ask for graces and favours from the divinities."<sup>51</sup> The gods become "models to copy" because of their perfect way of performing the ritual, and guarantors (but not the source) of ritual power. (Vesci, pp.70, 96)

However, although the "independence of the Sacrifice" had the effect of "liberating" the sacrificer from the uncertain response of the gods to his desires,<sup>52</sup> it also

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<sup>50</sup> Vesci, 58. Vesci later argues that in the Atharvaveda, Vesci continues, "one can observe a new phase in the cosmicization of the Sacred Action in the fact that specific tasks hitherto reserved for the Divinities have transferred to the ritual implements," like the sacrificial pot (gharma, also lit. 'heat') which as it is heated and the milk inside bubbles over is said to "milk" out the present, the past and the future, discharging "all the duties (vrata) of the Gods". (AV iv.ii.2, quoted in Vesci, 66)

<sup>51</sup> Vesci describes this point of view in the context of the AV, the TS (e.g., VI.2.2.7), and the ŚB.

<sup>52</sup> "Without the help of a Supreme Divinity which, no matter how capricious in its favours, knows also how to be merciful, the task of the priest engaged in an Action without appeal, far from having been facilitated, has become

had other consequences, consequences which eventually led to the virtual obsolescence of the vedic sacrifice. One consequence was that the rituals of the sacrifice became increasingly complicated, leading to the need for more specialized personnel and to an efflorescence of texts and commentaries produced by various schools of method and interpretation. The performance of the sacrifice also became more dangerous for a mistake made in the ritual, every action of which was now equally important, could have devastating consequences. Hence certain Brāhmaṇas (e.g., Aitbr. 32, ŚB 13) are replete with expiatory formulas to counteract such mistakes, and hence the increasingly rigorous training required of the ritual specialists. There was also the danger of the priest not being able to regulate the "thermic energy" (tapas) of the sacrifice. "Excess heat" could psychically as well as physically "burn" the priests and possibly threaten the very order of existence.<sup>53</sup>

To sum up, Vesce's central thesis is that the heat used

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terribly complicated." ... "Now it is the rite itself which has to overcome the obstacles and it can only do so by itself through the help of its own creative principle: the heat." (83)

<sup>53</sup> This idea of the potential destructiveness of excess heat persisted in various forms and contexts in Indian history. Besides the havoc-provoking 'excess heat' generated by severe asceticism attributed to various yogis, asuras, etc., in the epics and other literature, diseases, fever, emotions (rage, passion), and of course sex are either effects or producers of "excess heat."

to prepare the sacrificial offering for the gods was already in the Rgveda understood to be a unique and sacred power. After a correlation is made between the results of sacrifice and heat, the sacrificial rite is understood to acquire its own power from heat, a power which transforms the ingredients of the offering, endowing it with energy to "ascend to the immortal sphere of Reality." In the end, the gods become secondary to the sacrifice itself which, through the energy of heat, becomes the source of cosmic power.

Returning to our main subject and, in particular, the depiction of vrata in the epic, let us now use this conceptual background in which to consider the possible meanings of the description of Sāvitṛī as being "perfected" by her "stressful vow." We need to remember that in its speculative developments the energy produced by the sacrifice became interiorized through ascetic discipline as tapas. In the epics, many beings - gods, demons, men, women - are depicted as performing austerities for a number of different reasons, e.g., for obtaining power, mokṣa, or children. The word "tapas" is often used to describe both the act and the rewards of self-mortification, as it earlier described both the heat and the results of the heat in the sacrifice. Such performance of austerities is often



portrayed as generating "heat"<sup>54</sup> which "cooks," "perfects," "purifies," "transforms" the actor, producing spiritual energy (and also, at the extreme, "magical" powers - siddhis). Through the "internal heat" which Sāvitṛī generated by her ascetic practices, she, too, "purifies," "transforms" and endows herself with a powerful energy which enables her to accomplish her goal. Thus too she says that it is the "power of my austerities" and "my vow" (among other factors) that will prevent obstructions to her purpose.

Vesci writes (p.88) that the Brāhmaṇa texts explicitly recognize "three functions of Sacred Heat namely, purification, transformation, and the bestowal of energy to the victim that it may reach its goal..." The transformative function of heat "can be found in a term of comparison which the exegete [brahmavādin] uses to clarify the effects on the priest or on the sacrificer by his consecration (mahā-vrata).". In the Gopatha Brāhmaṇa (1.4.13) the priest or sacrificer is compared to "an earthen vessel baked by the heat of his ascetic power (tapas, already in the sense of heat obtained by personal effort and abstinence)." (Vesci, p.93) The consecration (dīkṣa / vrata) the yajamāna or

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<sup>54</sup> For example, the woman Ahalyā is described in the Rāmāyaṇa (I.49.17) as "magnificent, flaming in ascetic energy" after practicing austerities. (see Bhagat, 15)

dikṣita undergoes transforms and protects him from "being melted" (as the text puts it), just like the raw clay vessels are first "purified" and transformed (hardened) by heat so that they can then withstand the heat of the sacrifice itself. The presence of the right amount of heat "is a condition sine qua non for the sacrifice to be efficacious" (Vesci, p.90), whether to obtain "wealth, or interior change, or ascension to the higher worlds." (Vesci, p.94)

The resonance of these ideas in the vrata tradition as it emerged centuries later and is practised and understood today is, to my mind, striking. For, already in the Purāṇas (as we shall see in the following chapter) vratas are described as a form of tapas. Thus they have a transformational power on the votary brought about through the purifying and perfecting of her or himself by the austerities she or he performs, just as tapas transformed the vedic sacrifice from the raw material of the offering to the energy which finally (re)creates and sustains the universe, and which gave to the sacrificer the power to achieve desired goals without the help of the gods. The idea of the efficacy of self-mortification alone achieving one's desired aims, while usually subsumed under a devotional cast, persists today in the performance of certain vratas where the gods are apparently secondary or

almost irrelevant to the success of the rite. Such ideas regarding the power of tapas also offer one explanation to why it is, for example, that, as I was told in so many words, the harder the fasting and other abstinences, the greater the tapas generated, and the more assured the results.

The connections between tapas and vrata will be pursued further in later chapters. Having explored the power of austerities and its functioning in the context of a vow, we now briefly turn our attention to our third question, the relationship of vratas and tapas to the pativrata. In the story of Sāvitṛī there are two other (related) elements that make her, and women who behave in the same sort of way, 'powerful'. One is Sāvitṛī's feminine "śakti," often described as a kind of raw generative energy present in the world as a whole, and in women in particular. (I will discuss this in chapter seven.) The other is her "truthful" chastity, her sincere single-minded/hearted devotion to her husband Satyavat. To the chastity of women (that is, faithfulness to one man, rather than celibacy) the epics and later literature ascribe all manner of marvelous properties. Bhagat writes: "The epic eulogizes tapas, its efficacy and power. There is nothing superior to it. Its might enables a person to achieve great results. The ascetic through tapas acquires supernatural power... But such powers are

accessible to women also if they are chaste."<sup>55</sup> While some commentators have suggested that such praise of the pativratā by male Brahmans occurred in large measure in order to recommend such behaviour to women, I think there is more to it than that. On the one hand, the power of chastity derives from the cultivation of tapas in the self-restraint and single-mindedness involved. On the other hand, taking on the vrata of pati-śuśruṣa (service to the husband) has a connection to the power of truth, satya.

In commenting on the themes of Book III of the Mahābhārata (the Āraṇyaka parvan), van Buitenen draws attention to the firmness of Yudhiṣṭhira's pledge to remain in the forest for thirteen years and not avenge his deceitful cousins before that time had elapsed. He says, "From this point of view the Book of the Forest is the celebration of the highest value in the moral code of the ancient Indians, truthfulness and faithfulness under all circumstances."<sup>56</sup> While Yudhiṣṭhira is the main male model for this, there are a number of women who also model this behaviour in their capacity as pativratās, as for example Sāvitrī. Interestingly, even though it is Sāvitrī's husband

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<sup>55</sup> Bhagat, Asceticism, 277

<sup>56</sup> van Buitenen, Mahābhārata, I:177.

who is named "Satyavat," meaning "truthful,"<sup>57</sup> it is Sāvitṛī herself who demonstrates these qualities in the story by word and action. Indeed, after Satyavat has been given back his soul and he wakes up, immediately becoming fearful of finding their way back in the encroaching darkness, and weepy over his parents' possible worry, Sāvitṛī consoles him and then utters a "truth-vow": "If it is true that I have practised austerities, if I have given, if I have offered up, then this night shall be safe for my parents-in-law and my husband. I do not recall that I have ever spoken a lie, even in jest - by that truth [tena satyena] my parents-in-law shall live today!" (281.97)

It is in looking at such "truth-vows" (wherein the word vrata may or may not be used) that one can arrive at the clearest sense of what van Buitenen meant, when he was quoted earlier as saying that "vows" cannot be broken except to "the detriment of a person's truth." Truth-vows usually involve appealing to the truth of one's prior conduct in order to dramatically prove one's fidelity (as in Sītā's case) or otherwise effect a curse, clear an obstruction, or resolve a seemingly unresolvable difficulty. They are, as

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<sup>57</sup> "Satyavat" also means, according to M.Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1135-6), "sincere", "pure," "virtuous," and "effectual."

W. Norman Brown noted, rare in the literature.<sup>58</sup> They are also, in the epics at least, far more often uttered by women than by men.<sup>59</sup> And when women utter them, they often appeal to the "trueness" of their chastity, their fidelity in deed, word, and thought to their husbands. In keeping with the general emphasis on Sāvitṛī's austerities in this whole episode, however, Sāvitṛī appeals not to her fidelity (a given) but to the fact that she had undertaken austerities and that she had never lied. The truth of her (pativratā) behaviour, as well as her austerities (her self-sacrifice for the sake of another) performed with the right intentions (even if socially mandated), then, makes her positively powerful in this story; a story which women tell to each other each year when they perform the Vaṭ Sāvitṛī Vrat.

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In the literature we have examined so far, vrata has been linked to such central concepts and practices in Hindu religious history as ṛta (Cosmic Order), satya (Truth), and dharma (Law), yajña (sacrifice), dīkṣa (initiation), and tapas (heat, austerities), niyama (restraints) and

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<sup>58</sup> See W.Norman Brown's article, "Duty as Truth".

<sup>59</sup> For example, in the Mbh., truth-vows are made by: Damayantī (3.54.17-20), the "frog princess" (3.37.79), Draupadī (3.252.20), and Sītā (3.275.20).

prāyaścitta (penance), and, more obliquely in relation to women, pativratā. Though the idea of ṛta is encompassed by the concept of dharma, and yajña and dīkṣa assume less prominence in later religious praxis, each of these concepts and practices to which vrata is related remain important in some form or other to the present day. The next chapter follows the historical course of vrata as it emerges as a fully developed votive rite in the literature of the Purāṇas and Nibandhas.

## CHAPTER TWO

### VRATA IN THE HINDU TEXTUAL TRADITION II PURĀṆAS AND NIBANDHAS

The Hindu medieval Sanskrit religio-juridical texts, the Purāṇas and the Nibandhas, constitute an immense literature. An extensive overview of the form and concept of vrata in this corpus of texts has been undertaken by P.V. Kane and, most recently, by M. McGee. McGee's treatment is more thematically developed and critical than Kane's, and, as we have noted earlier, she also pays attention, as Kane does not, to gender as a category of analysis. Because the development of the concept and practice of vrata in the Purāṇa and especially Nibandha literature has been so comprehensively discussed, there is no need for me to go over the same territory in the same detail. Rather, summarizing my own findings as well as those of Kane and McGee, I will concentrate on two specific aspects of the śāstric vrata tradition as depicted in this medieval literature; the "dharma of vrata" (or, the code of conduct for the performer of vrata), and the implications for female votaries to be found in this literature written by, and predominately directed to, high caste males.



There are several points about the depiction of vrata in this literature that are noteworthy. First, the mention, description, and discussion of vrata effloresces in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas. This efflorescence indicates that vratas as a specific kind of votive rite had come to be considered a form of religious observance worthy of lengthy disquisitions sustained by pandits over many centuries. In these texts, we find the first relatively consistent portrayals of vrata as a votive rite normally involving at least fasting, pūjā (worship) and dāna (the giving of gifts). We receive descriptions, sometimes detailed, sometimes perfunctory, of their purposes and procedures, of who was eligible to observe them, when, and under what circumstances. We also find attached to many of the vrata descriptions (or even comprising the description itself) the "vrata-kathā," vrata stories that serve to demonstrate the efficacy of the rite. These stories, many of whose episodes and characters come from the epics or from other Purāṇas themselves, first emerge in literary form in the Purāṇas.

Second, the fact that vratas are included so prominently in works on dharma suggests that these rites were embraced and shaped by the Purāṇa and Nibandha editors as a means to inculcate "dharmic" (dharmaśāstric) values and socially responsible behaviour. The ethical dimension in the concept of vrata implicit in earlier Śruti and Smṛti

literature is now more clearly articulated and emphasized. Third, congruent with the rise to prominence of sectarian theism in the first millenium C.E., vratas - especially in the Purāṇas - are given the devotional cast still characteristic of present day vrats. Vratas become a recommended way of expressing faith and devotion to one's chosen deity, as well as a way of soliciting blessings and favours from a god. Fourth, most of the vratas are depicted in these texts as "kāmya" ("desire-born", as McGee puts it) rites. That is, they are set out as optional rites that a householder (or person of any social category) can choose to observe in order to obtain some specific phala ("fruit"). This distinguishes them from their predominately "nitya" (or obligatory) orientation in earlier vedic and smṛti literature.

Finally, it should be noted that women become secondary, if not virtual silent players with regard to vratas in these texts. Although women often figure prominently in the vrata kathās, and a few vratas are slated specifically for women to observe, one generally does not get the sense that women have any special connection to these rites. Rather, women and Shudras are discussed as having the privilege of observing these vows, while they were disenfranchised from other rituals. But even here, there are various restrictions placed by the male dvija authors on when and under

what circumstances women and Shudras could actually keep the vratas.

The vratas are effusively praised in these texts, and favourably compared with vedic sacrifices, among other important religious acts. The merit and rewards for performing (or, as some Purāṇas would have it, even just the hearing about) these rites are lavishly detailed. The vratas are portrayed as a means of achieving not just bhukti (earthly enjoyments - wealth, beauty, learning, long life) but also are given a prominent place among the means of attaining mukti ('salvation') for those living in the Kali Yuga, the fourth and decadent stage of the grand cycle of the cosmos.

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### **The Purāṇas**

The Purāṇas ("ancient stories") are compendia of Hindu religious lore - ritual, philosophy, myths, genealogies - gathered and edited primarily between c. 400 and 1400 C.E. There are conventionally eighteen "major" (mahā) and eighteen "minor" (upa) Purāṇas, though there has been no full consensus on which Purāṇas qualify for which designation. Unlike the Dharmasāstras and Nibandhas, the Purāṇas are not particularly systematic in their presentation of materials. They also tend to be slanted towards one of three sectarian directions - Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava or Śakta.

Probably because of the above reasons and because the Sanskrit in the Purāṇas is not always strictly correct, as well as the fact that they contained such a potpourri of material, these texts were not considered seriously by most Western indologists to be reliable or inspired sources of information on any topic until the second half of this century.<sup>1</sup> This may be one of the reasons that vratas were virtually ignored by European Indologists. But the Purāṇas had gained a stamp of approval among Hindus early on as smṛti (second order 'scripture') and are frequently quoted as authoritative sources in much later literature, including the Nibandhas. They were widely disseminated in India and portions of some of them were translated into vernaculars. In all probability the contents of the Purāṇas were better known to the general populace than were the Vedas and ancilliary texts, and the Dharmaśāstras. Certainly their rich myth and story traditions about the gods and their exploits make the communication of dharma more accessible

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the German indologist M. Winternitz said this about the Purāṇas: "we do not know when this literature [passed into the hands of] the lower priesthood, which congregated into the temples and places of pilgrimage...; and these rather uneducated temple priests used it for the glorification of the deities whom they served, and in later times more and more for the recommendation of the temples and places of pilgrimage in which they maintained and often enriched themselves." (Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, trans. S. Ketkar, 2d ed. revised, Calcutta: U. of Calcutta Press, 1959, I:464.)

and palatable.<sup>2</sup>

Descriptions and discussions of vratas appear in almost all the Purāṇas - usually in one section of the text, but sometimes scattered here and there. Rules for procedures can be extremely elaborate, and some are even made to sound like the ritual details for the complicated vedic great sacrifices described in the Brāhmaṇas.<sup>3</sup> Here the vratin (votary) is called a yajamāna (sponsor of the sacrifice) and the vrata a yajña, leaving us no doubt that vratas are to be considered the direct heirs of vedic sacrifices.

### The Nibandhas

The Nibandha<sup>4</sup> literature essentially took over from the earlier Dharmaśāstras in form and content. They were written in Sanskrit by Brahman pandits between the 12th and 18th centuries. Surviving Nibandha texts number in the hundreds; some of them are mammoth works, comprising five or six volumes. What the nibandhakāras (writers) did essenti-

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<sup>2</sup> A number of women that I interviewed had copies of various Purāṇas in their homes, but none had texts of the Vedas nor of the Dharmaśāstras. The religious texts most frequently found and consulted in their homes were the Bhagavad Gītā and the Tulsīdas version of the Rāmāyaṇa.

<sup>3</sup> An example is the Bhīmadvādaśī Vrata described in the Matsyapurāṇa, chap. 69.

<sup>4</sup> The term nibandha means a "binding together"; in this case, of explanations and examples of dharma. (McGee, 41)

ally was to gather information on a variety of dharmic topics from a myriad of sources including the early Dharma-sūtras, epics, Dharmaśāstras and commentaries, Purāṇas, as well as local practices and customs, and organize all this (often contradictory) information into fairly systematic presentations. At the same time, the nibandhakāras would add their own learned opinions. These treatises tend to be non-sectarian.

There are whole Nibandhas devoted to a discussion and description of vratas, and this discussion is far more detailed than all earlier literature on the subject. The nibandhakāras were often trained as mīmāṃsā specialists (trained in the categories and applications of vedic ritual exegesis) and one sees this training emerge in their discussions of vratas. As McGee points out, it sometimes emerges with curious results, manifested, for example, in the manner whereby the pandit-authors must manipulate the rules to accommodate - not always successfully - the involvement of women and Shudras. For, by this time, the traditions of ritual exegesis were quite accustomed to excluding women and Shudras from any direct participation in the central features of vedic/brahmanic rituals because of their

amantravat<sup>5</sup> status.

The number of vratas described in such early Purāṇas as the Viṣṇupurāṇa was not very large. Gradually, however, their numbers increased until they proliferated almost exponentially in the works compiled in the 9th to the 14th centuries, as in the Padmapurāṇa. Similarly in the Nibandhas one finds an explosion of vrata descriptions from such earlier treatises as Lakṣmidhāra's Kṛtyakalpataru (first half of the 12th cent.), to Hemādri's Caturvarga-cintamāni (end of the 13th cent.) and finally to the works such as Viśvanātha's Vratarāja (early 18th cent.), a work devoted exclusively to vrata.<sup>6</sup> As Kane says: "There is no topic on Dharmaśāstra except probably that of tīrthayātra [pilgrimage] and of śrāddha [funerary and memorial rites] on which the Purāṇas [and Nibandhas] wax so eloquent as on vrata."<sup>7</sup> Though the vratas listed in the works may be counted in the thousands many of them are repeated from one work to another, or different names are given to the same

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<sup>5</sup> Amantravat means one who does not have the authority to say mantras because of his or her lack of vedic education and ritual impurity.

<sup>6</sup> In this chapter I will be quoting the Vratarāja Nibandha more often than other Nibandhas because it was composed in Banaras (my field research site); it is a relatively late Nibandha that incorporated sections from many earlier works; and it focuses entirely on the subject of vrata.

<sup>7</sup> Kane, 57.

vrata. One commonly finds in the later Purāṇas whole sections lifted out of earlier texts, sometimes reformulated with a different sectarian angle. Similarly, in the Nibandha literature authors often took portions of earlier works verbatim and added them to their own. The Vratarāja, for example, contains long passages borrowed from Hemādri and many others.

The topic of vrata is bound up with discussions on kāla (time) such as the tithis (defined as the time or period required by the moon to gain twelve degrees of the sun), as the titles of many Nibandhas indicate. Both the Purāṇa and the Nibandha writers, especially the latter, were very concerned with setting out in great detail the appropriate astrological conditions and most auspicious times for the observance of religious rites and the celebrations of festivals and other important occasions. As a consequence, much of the discussion on vrata is devoted to determining which are the most auspicious times for their effective performance according to these astrological calculations.

### Vrata and Utsava

In this literature, vratas are often conflated with both prāyaścittas (expiations) and utsavas (festivals). This is because vratas, prāyaścittas and utsavas were interchanged in some of the early Dharmasūtras and the rites



continued to share some of the same characteristics in their observance such as eating or abstaining from certain foods, ritual bathing, performing pūjā, observing restraints (niyama), reciting mantras and giving gifts (dāna). Also, writers on vrata were no doubt aware that the intention, if not the circumstances of the celebrant or votary could determine whether a vrata was being observed as a prāyaścitta, or a festival as a vrata. Thus one cannot always clearly demarcate the boundary between these three rites from textual descriptions alone.

Generally, what most distinguishes vratas from utsavas is that the latter are public secular or religious observances often occurring annually, such as the celebration of the birthday of a deity or a saint in which a whole family or community participates, while vratas are usually performed by individuals for specific purposes, and often for delimited periods of time. Another distinction is that whereas vratas can be part of the observance of a festival (as in the case of Kṛṣṇajānamāṣṭamī, the annual celebration of the birth of Kṛṣṇa during which many celebrants will keep a fast [vrata]), a festival (as opposed to festivities) would not be part of a vrata. The relation between vrata and utsava (or Hindi "tyauhār") will be taken up again in chapter five from the perspective of women I interviewed.

### Vrata and Prāyaścitta

Vrata was associated with prāyaścitta in Manu, Yājñyavalkya, and other Smṛtis of around the turn of the Common Era. However, in the later Smṛtis, the Purāṇas and the Nibandhas prāyaścitta and vrata are treated as separate topics though many of the well known prāyaścittas (e.g., Cāndrayāṇa<sup>8</sup>) have been integrated into the purāṇic vratas<sup>9</sup> whose purpose is indicated as expiatory. Indeed, one category of vratas has been called 'expiatory' and is referred to as naimittika (to be done for a special purpose, or, as occasions arise).

What differentiates a vrata and a prāyaścitta, then, is that the latter is a prescribed observance to nullify or moderate the effects of some transgression from a mahāpataka ("major offence") like Brahman-killing to an upapataka ("minor offence" - these are innumerable) like stealing. Doing something intentionally or unintentionally to break a

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<sup>8</sup> The Cāndrayāṇa rite (vrata) is often mentioned in the Purāṇas as a means for expiating the effects of misdemeanours (papa). It involves taking one morsel of food on the first day of the bright half (waxing moon) of the month, on the second day two morsels are eaten and so on until the day of the full moon (pūrṇamāsī) fifteen morsels are taken; then on the first day of the dark half fourteen morsels are taken, one being reduced on each succeeding day.

<sup>9</sup> As well, terms like ekabhakta (one meal per day), nakta (one meal per day to be taken at night) and ayācita (subsisting on food got without begging) used originally with prāyaścittas were adopted into the purāṇic vratas. (see Kane, 103)

vrata is itself considered an upapataka, for which a prāyaścitta is prescribed: "If one gets angry or shows greed about anything during this period [the duration of the vrata], he commits a breach of vow (vratabhaṅga); and the expiation for this is not taking food for three days or tonsuring the head. He many start his vow afresh thereafter."<sup>10</sup> The purpose of prāyaścittas is essentially to purify oneself, to redress one's "karmic" balance, and to pay back society (the dharmic order) for one's transgressions. A vrata may be undertaken as an expiatory rite, but it may be undertaken for many other reasons as well, usually determined by the individual. Prāyaścittas, on the other hand, are usually imposed from without, by a family priest, the village council, or even by a king.

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The predominately Vaiṣṇavite Garudapurāṇa makes the following statement on vratas which describes in a general way the model purāṇic vrata:

Suta said: I shall now deal with the mode of practising those vows [vratas] and penances, O Vyasa, by which a man may win the good graces of the god Hari to the

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<sup>10</sup> Agnipurāṇa 174.40, quoted in S.Dange, Encyclopaedia of Purāṇic Beliefs and Practices (1990), vol.V, 1525. Here one can note the masculine orientation of this injunction, although some Purāṇas and Nibandhas make allowances for women, e.g., a certain length of hair should be cut off rather than the head shaved altogether.

extent that he may be pleased to answer all his prayers. The god should be worshipped in all months of the year and in all days of the week, and under the auspices of all lunar phases and astral combinations. The votary shall observe a fast or take a single meal in the night, or live upon a fruit regimen on the day of the vow, and make gifts of money and paddy for the satisfaction of the god Viṣṇu, for which he will be blessed with the birth of a son and the ownership of fresh landed estates.<sup>11</sup>

The person who supplicates his chosen deity, then, with fasting and pūjā may be granted his wishes and more if the deity is well disposed. The passage recommends constant devotion to God. Indeed, many of the Purāṇas advocate bhakti (devotion) alone as a means of getting what one wants - whether spiritual rewards or a material object. Though statements such as this advise the observance of vratas on any and all days of the week, month and year, they also stress the correct astrological calculation. The gods may be powerful in their own right, but the movement of the planets and stars at all costs must be taken under consideration for they also exert their powers on humans.

Following an introductory pronouncement on votive rites the typical specific vrata description may add a further sentence on the merit that the vrata will confer on the votary such as wealth, prosperity, health, beauty, progeny,

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<sup>11</sup> The Garuḍapurāṇa, trans. by a board of scholars, ed. J.L.Shastri, vol. 12, chap.116 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978). Further references to the Garuḍapurāṇa will be to this translation.

saubhāgya (marital felicity), the removal of the effects of one's (or one's ancestors') sins, or a place in the god's loka (heaven). Next comes the account of how to practice the vrata; when to begin and end it, what deity(ies) should be worshipped and in what manner, what mantras, if any, should be said, and what offerings given in the pūjā. Lastly, the description will specify how many Brahmans and/or others are to be fed in the ending ceremony, the sort of food to be given and the amount and nature of the gifts to be donated. Fasting, either complete or partial, is always a central feature of a typical vrata, as is the giving of gifts. Many Purāṇa vrata descriptions do not include all of these features and indeed some descriptions are extremely short, while others dwell on aspects of the pūjā, the nature of the dāna, or the kathā (which itself may contain the information of when to do the vrata and the basics of the procedure) to the virtual exclusion of other details.

The Nibandha sections on vrata usually begin with the praise of vrata, general rules for vrata and then the description of individual vratas, often arranged by a time category like month, weekday or tithi.<sup>12</sup> Topics which are

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<sup>12</sup> As in the Purāṇas, some of the vratas sound so contrived (the purpose, merits and procedure being tediously repetitious) that they appear to be concocted fillers devised to ensure that there is at least one vrata under

addressed in these statements and descriptions, all elements that may be included in the performance of a vrata, are: saṅkalpa (statement of intent); snāna (ritual bathing); japa (meditational recitation); homa (or agni havan - fire sacrifice); pūjā (worship) - including fashioning the mūrti (image) and the ritual enclosure (mandapa), performing the upacāras (rites honouring the deity) and/or the rite of nyāsa <sup>13</sup>, and making ritual designs (maṇḍalas, yantras, or alpanas); upavāsa (fasting); kathā; dāna; and udyāpana (the final concluding rite of a vrata).

#### The Dharma of Vrata and Vratin: The Taming of Tapas

The phrase, the "dharma of vratin" (votary) or the "dharma of upavāsaḥ" (faster) comes from the Nibandhas themselves, for the discussion of vratas is usually prefaced

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each time category.

<sup>13</sup> The rite of nyāsa, obscure in origin, involves a 'ritual projection' of divinities into various parts of the body. According to Eliade, it is a "practice of considerable antiquity but one that Tantrism revalorized and enriched. The disciple 'projects' the divinities, at the same time touching the various areas of his body; in other words, he homologizes his body with the Tantric pantheon, in order to awaken the sacred forces asleep in the flesh itself." M. Eliade, Yoga, Immortality and Freedom (Princeton U. Press, 1962,) 210-211. An example of the rite of nyāsa required in a vrata is the "Ajachita Vrata" described in the Garuḍapurāṇa, chap. 133.

by statements on the nature of vrata indicating that the observance of vratas is "dharmic action"; action conducive to the moral well-being of the individual and society at large.<sup>14</sup> These statements also spell out the specific physical and mental (or moral) patterns and rules of behaviour that the votary should observe in order to render the activity dharmic. It is in these dicta that we receive the best picture of how the Purāṇa and Nibandha writers conceived of vrata, for the Hindu pandits rarely tried to "define" a vrata as such.

In the prefatory statements made about vrata in these texts there are several terms which emerge repeatedly and which are clearly central to our understanding the concept of vrata in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas as well as to the current practice of vrata. These are dharma, saṅkalpa, niyama and tapas. The first, dharma, is the overarching concept under which vrata, as well as the other concepts,

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<sup>14</sup> McGee has argued carefully and repeatedly in her thesis that vrata are "dharmic" acts (see, especially, pp.55-58). She follows the arguments of Candéśvara (14th cent.) and Hemādri to show how they demonstrate that vratas as intentional acts of self-discipline and devotion are dharmic; they cause one to act virtuously. In discussing Candéśvara's comments on dharma she notes: "Candéśvara's remarks acknowledge two basic kinds of dharma, dharma as means and dharma as an end. The first refers to good acts, that is, observable (dr̥ṣṭa), imitable actions, which are temporary and particular to this world, the latter refers to the universal order, which is unseen (adr̥ṣṭa) and eternal ..." Vratas conform to the former, but contribute to the latter.

have been subsumed, shaped and assigned their place. This is entirely consistent with the nature of these texts, since they, and especially the Nibandhas, are concerned above all with the practical elucidation of the brahmanic ideals of varṇāśramadharmā and puruṣārtha. Varṇāśramadharmā comprises the duties and responsibilities of the four castes and in each of the four "stages in life" viz. student, householder, forest dweller and renouncer. The puruṣārtha are the four "aims" of life: dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa. The Nibandha texts on vrata make a point of showing that vratas fit in with each of these "stages" and "aims" of life. In theory, vratas are an appropriate practice for a person of any caste, of either sex, at any stage of life to achieve each of the four aims provided that other relevant conditions are met.<sup>15</sup>

(i) Vrata as resolve (saṅkalpa)

Nibandha statements on the meaning of vrata, where they occur, tend to focus on vrata as saṅkalpa,<sup>16</sup> the votary's mental resolve to undertake the rite. In reference to

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<sup>15</sup> See section on "entitlement", below.

<sup>16</sup> M. Monier-Williams (p. 1126) defines saṅkalpa as: "conception or idea or notion formed in the mind or heart (esp.) will, volition, desire, purpose, definite intention or determination or decision or wish for...; with √kri, 'to form a resolution, make up one's mind'; ... a solemn vow or determination to perform any ritual observance, declaration of purpose..." See also Kane on saṅkalpa (28-30), and McGee (52-55).



vratas (and other rites) the term saṅkalpa is used in two ways. The first way refers generally to the intention, determination, resolution, the "vow" formed in the mind of the votary which leads him or her to undertake a set of actions. Making the vow commits one to fulfilling this set of actions, and the votary is warned that serious negative consequences are in store for the one who intentionally breaks the vow. The second way refers to the specific act of formally making a saṅkalpa following a standard formula in front of a deity and/or priest at the commencement of the rite. This latter application will be taken up in chapter six when discussing the elements in the procedure of a vrata.

Bhatta Lakṣmidhāra in his Kṛtyakalpataru (c.1100-1130) says that a vrata is a resolution [saṅkalpa] based on the sastra whereby one contemplates what to do and what to abstain from.<sup>17</sup> Śrīdatta in his Samayapradīpa (c.1275-1310) defines vrata as "a steady resolve (niyata-saṅkalpa) having as its object that which is to be done by oneself. It is of two sorts, positive and negative: 'I will do this'

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in B.N.Sharma, Social and Cultural History of Northern India 1000-1200 A.D. (Delhi: Abhinav Pub., 1972), 105.

or 'I will not do this'."<sup>18</sup> Raghunandana in his Vratatattva (c.1520-1575) holds that a vrata means various rites about which a resolve is made and also that a vrata is a niyama enjoined by the śāstra, characterized by upavāsa and the like.<sup>19</sup> The Vratarāja<sup>20</sup> qualifies the identification of saṅkalpa with vrata saying: "saṅkalpa is part of a vrata. It is included in all the vratas, but saṅkalpa by itself refers primarily to the nitya (daily religious duties)."

The Nibandha definitions conform to statements made in earlier Smṛti texts, notably the Manusmṛti (II.3) which says:

Desire is the very root of the conception of a definite intention [saṅkalpa], and sacrifices are the result of that intention; all the vows [vratas] and the duties of restrictions [yamas] are traditionally said to come from the conception of a definite intention.<sup>21</sup>

This statement is made in the context of a discussion on dharma and the role of desire in motivating humans to act.

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<sup>18</sup> (folio 2b) This is McGee's translation (p.53), though the passage is also cited and translated by Kane, 29 and n. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Kane, 30.

<sup>20</sup> page 2. The edition I cite and translate from throughout this chapter is: Vratarāja of Viśvanāth Śarma, ed. with introduction and commentary in Hindi by Mādhavācārya Śarma (Bombay: Śrī Venkateśvar Press, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Doniger, trans. (The Laws of Manu, London: Penguin Books, 1991).

While acknowledging the sort of message found in the Gītā, for example, which advocates the doctrine of "desire-less action" (niṣkāma-karma), the Manusmṛti argues that "here on earth there is no such thing as no desire" (2.2), thus one should rather aim to foster and act on "good" (dharmically ordained) desires and abjure others. In this sense, for the nibandhakāras, a vrata is a resolve to undertake good actions, as determined by the Dharmaśāstras.

(ii) Vrata as austerity and restraint (tapas and niyama)

While the Nibandhas tend to focus on the resolve - the vow aspect of the rite - the Purāṇas tend to focus on the niyamas - on the discipline and restraint aspects of the vrata. One emphasizes the votary's intention, the other aspects of the votary's behaviour that ensues from that intention.

The Agnipurāṇa (175, 2-3) says:

A restrictive rule [niyama] declared by the sastras is called vrata, which is also regarded as tapas; restraint of the senses and other rules are but special incidents of vrata; vrata is called tapas because it causes hardship to the performer (of the vrata) and it is also called niyama since therein one has to restrain the several organs of sense.<sup>22</sup>

In chapter one we saw how the term tapas, which originally meant "heat" in the R̥gveda, came to be associated with the

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Kane, 33.

inner heat generated by śrama (effort) on the part of, for example, the yajamāna, the brahmacarya or the ascetic, and then with any act of self-imposed austerity, as in the Mahābhārata. The term was also used in connection with prāyaścitta and in the Yogasūtra (below) tapas is named one of the "niyamas." By the time the Purāṇas are set down (prior to the Nibandhas), the concept of tapas had become inextricably bound with the concept of vrata.

The Garudapurāṇa (128, 1-2) stipulates that a vrata should be performed together with the observation of Niyamas (restraints) mentioned in the scriptures. A Vrata is a form of penance [prāyaścitta]. Yamas... along with Niyamas...should be equally observed.

The word niyama comes from the root yam with the prefix ni, and in Manu and in the Mahābhārata and other sources of around the beginning of the Common Era it means "to restrain, check, hold back, prevent, control."<sup>23</sup> The concept of niyama as disciplinary practices involving various forms of self-restraint has its roots in the ascetic rules and practices of the early śramaṇas (wandering mendicants). These practices and values were adopted by various streams of brahmanical religion and philosophical schools, as well as by the Buddhists and Jains. Patañjali appropriated this code in his Yogasūtra, a treatise of around the first

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<sup>23</sup> M.Monier Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 552.

century which systematized yogic techniques and placed them within a coherent philosophical and theistic framework. The Yogasūtra recommends both yamas ("abstinences") such as ahimsa (nonviolence) and continence, and niyamas ("observances") which inculcate the performance of meritorious deeds.<sup>24</sup> Patañjali calls niyamas one of the eight yogic "limbs"<sup>25</sup> and says they consist of five observances: bodily and mental purity (śauca); contentment (santoṣa); austerities (tapas); study of sacred texts (svadhyaya); and devotion to God (īśvarapraṇidhāna). In his commentary on this śloka Yardi says that there is external cleanliness - washing the body, eating pure food, etc.- and internal cleanliness "brought about by the removal of [such] mental impurities" as attachment and aversion by the cultivation of attitudes such as friendliness and serenity. "Contentment is the absence of desire to acquire more than

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<sup>24</sup> M. Yardi, The Yoga of Patañjali (Poona: B.O.R.I., 1979), 42.

<sup>25</sup> (2.32) Bhagat (54) notes: "The Yoga-Sūtras describe yoga as consisting of eight limbs (aṅgas): the various forms of abstention from evil doing (yama), the various observances (niyama), posture (āsana), control of the breath (prāṇāyama), withdrawal of the mind from the sense-objects (pratyāhāra), concentration (dharma), meditation (dhyāna) and absorption in the Purusha (samādhi)." Yardi adds (42): "Of these, the first five are known as external aids to conscious contemplation, as they merely facilitate the mood of contemplation and aid yoga only indirectly. The last three are known as internal aids, as they constitute the very core of conscious contemplation..."

the means at hand. Austerities include...[subjecting oneself to] hunger and thirst, heat and cold, ... silence...and includes the observance of vows" (for which he lists in a note such examples as kṛcchra, cāndrayāṇa, and sāntapana - all also prāyaścittas). "Sacred study means the reading of scriptures and includes the repetition of the sacred syllable Om." Devotion or "surrender of works to God" is the dedication of all actions to God.<sup>26</sup>

The five Yamas, namely, ahimsa, satya (truthfulness), brahmacarya (continence<sup>27</sup>), asteya (not stealing), and aparigraha (not taking more than one needs, or acquisitiveness) are called by Patañjali the mahāvratas, or "great vow", which is binding on all who wish to be yogins.<sup>28</sup>

The Purāṇas and Nibandhas incorporated the idea of yamas and niyamas into their discussion and description of Hindu dharmic observances such as vratas, accepting them (in

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<sup>26</sup> Yardi, 186-7.

<sup>27</sup> Some people translate brahmacarya as 'celibacy', which it does clearly mean in some contexts. However, Patañjali's own commentators were divided on its intent, as Yardi has noted (44-5). That is, some held brahmacarya to mean complete abstention from sex (or such things as remembering or looking at a woman); others held it meant sexual restraint in permitted situations.

<sup>28</sup> Ideally being an ascetic would facilitate this path, but I am not convinced that Patañjali intended his work to be applicable only to ascetics or renouncers, for his version is a rather moderate form of asceticism, easily adapted to grhasthins (householders).

modified form) as models for the virtuous conduct of a householder (grhasthin). The Agnipurāṇa (175.10-11), for example, mentions the ten "niyamas" which are to be practised while observing a vrata: "forgiveness or patience (kṣma); truthfulness (satya); compassion (dāyā); charity (dāna); purity (śauca); control of the [six] sense organs (indriyanigraha);, deva pūjā; fire sacrifice (homa, or agni havan); contentment (santoṣa); and not stealing (asteya). This ten-fold dharma is declared as common to all vratas."<sup>29</sup> The similarity of this list to the that of the Yogasūtra list of yamas and niyamas is obvious.<sup>30</sup> It is

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<sup>29</sup> Agnipurāṇam, trans. M.N. Dutt (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 2d. ed., 1967). Other Purāṇa and Nibandha texts also have such lists of 'niyamas' or 'vrata-dharmas'. For example, the Vratarāja (p.9) quotes Hemādri (who probably took it from the AP itself) as listing these same ten common features (dharma) of vrata. McGee (p.88, n.30) quotes the Nirṇayasindhu (22) quoting Devala, who "gives a briefer list of what Devala calls the 'supreme aṅgas' of vrata, viz., celibacy (brahmacarya), purity or cleanliness (śauca), truth (satya), and the avoidance of meat (amāṃsa)."

<sup>30</sup> McGee saw this similarity between the AP list of niyamas and those yamas and niyamas listed in the Yogasūtra, and she highlights this similarity in her thesis by providing a comparative table. She then discusses the modifications made of the "vrata-dharma" by what she calls the "ascetic dharma." She notes that the (Purāṇa and Nibandha) writers had to take into account the "aims and duties of the householder" and "thus the ascetic discipline of celibacy is emended to a more generic 'control of the senses'..." (90) Essentially, McGee accepts the Yogasūtra as a prescriptive text for the ascetic while the Dharmaśāstras (Purāṇas and Nibandhas included) are directed to the householder - so she contrasts the 'niyama' lists on the basis of the two aśramas to which they are directed. While there is good reason to

also clear here that the term niyama is being used in the Agnipurāṇa in a larger sense than "external restraints" - indeed "dharma" used in the last sentence is the more appropriate term to cover the range of psychological and moral qualities, behavioural restrictions and ritual actions mentioned in the list. In the theistic context within which vratas were now usually placed, the ultimate purpose of these "niyamas" was the cultivation of inward and outward purity, and physical and spiritual discipline required to take a votary and/or devotee closer to God, or to union (sayujya) with God. This is the goal, also, of the yogin, described not only in the Yogasūtra, but also in such texts as the Bhagavadgītā.

It is clear that there is a long history of inter-connection between the concepts vrata, prāyaścitta, tapas, upavāsa and niyama. Though each term may have had a separate and specific meaning in its earliest usage, we find that by the period that the Purāṇas were being set down, all five terms are brought together, not quite as synonyms, but as closely related elements in religious observances. These are all elements which serve to discipline and spiritually

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look at these texts this way - one should also keep in mind that the Yogasūtra was written centuries earlier and is a philosophical, rather than religio-juridical work. I believe Patanjali meant for all people to abide by his sutras.



develop the householder for whom these texts are intended. In the case of the Purāṇa vratas, the vrata may be viewed as being the 'subject' and tapas, niyama and prāyaścitta its 'modifiers'. In other contexts, these terms may be constituted or interrelated differently.<sup>31</sup>

### Vrata Dharma in Practice

We have seen, then, that according to the Purāṇas and Nibandhas, a person undertaking a vrata should follow a series of guidelines and rules which discipline and purify the mind and body. These rules include observing the niyamas, not sleeping in the day, reading or listening to the śāstras and religious stories, doing auspicious work, curbing one's temper, and sleeping on the floor at night. Some texts also recommend avoiding contact with "low," "bad," or ritually impure persons which may involve also shunning contact with women in general.<sup>32</sup> The rules and

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<sup>31</sup> If one examines the dictionary definitions of these terms, one will find that they are often given the same or similar series of meanings. For example, in Apte's The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), the term niyama, in addition to its primary meaning of "restraints", is given the meanings "vow", "obligation", "penance", "devotion", and "religious austerity".

<sup>32</sup> See AP, 175; GP 128; LP 24. The VR quotes Hārīta as saying that the faster (upavāsah) or votary should avoid these sorts of people: one who does bad things, a

prohibitions governing the behaviour of the votary, however, get much more detailed than indicated to this point. For the broad principles and norms of vrata-dharma are translated into the practical minutiae of mundane activities like bathing and eating. This is a task at which the Dharma-śāstras excel. The texts provide us with long lists of the multifarious foods, articles and practices that are to be strictly avoided. The Garudapurāṇa (chap.128) for example says that a votary,

should not take anything out of a bowl of Indian bellmetal, nor consume any potherbs, nor take honey, grain, and koradushaka [?], nor chew any betel leaf on the day of breaking his fast... A fast is vitiated by using flowers, perfumes, unguents, collyrium, a toothbrush, a new cloth, or an ornament. A vratee should wash his mouth with pañcagavyam in the morning before breaking his fast. The merit of a fast is destroyed by gambling, by indulging in day sleep or in sexual intercourse, and by constantly drinking water...

The Agnipurāṇa (chap.175) has much the same list but adds wine and boiled rice belonging to others as items to be avoided while fasting and includes garlands, bright-coloured clothes, fumes of burning incense, sandalpaste and "suchlike

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scoundrel, a show-off, a non-believer, a liar, one who speaks pruriently. Viśvanātha Śarma then adds: "one who speaks and does not act, one who does not control [his/her] senses, and one who eats forbidden foods" should be avoided. Finally added to this list are: menstruating women, a candāla, a dhobi (washerman), a woman who has just given birth, and those who do not wash their mouth after eating. [p.13] The latter list consists of people whose condition or employment render them extremely 'polluting'; and the others listed are all, of course, people who act in adharmik ways.

articles of luxury" as forbidden things to use.<sup>33</sup> Oily or cooked foods are also often proscribed in the vratas.

There are many possible reasons for these specific prohibitions, but we will confine ourselves to a few general comments. In the first place the votary is supposed to be undergoing a form of tapas and general restraint, so sense enhancing or 'luxurious' items like perfume, ornaments and betel leaf are to be avoided. However, exceptions to some of these items, like collyrium and ornaments, are made for married women because the primary vrata of married women is pativrata and so she should try to remain beautiful to her husband. Unless, that is, he is away, in which case these prohibitions against the use of toiletries and ornaments apply whether or not she is observing a vrata. Second, as is well-known, foods (as well as utensils, activities, kinds of employment, etc.) are divided by Hindus into categories

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<sup>33</sup> The Agnipurāṇa gets even more detailed in later verses in its various prohibitions and requirements of the votary. It says: "The man who bathes every day, practices moderation in all his acts... and worships the gods, the Brāhmaṇas and his preceptor, should abstain from taking alkaline substances, small grapes, salt, wine and meat. Grains such as wheat, kodruva, and all other grains except sesamum orientale and mudga, gram, devadhanya... constitute alkaline food... Seeds such as vrihi [black sesame], jasthika, mudga, pulse, barley and sesamum should be used in vows and penances, while vegetables such as gourd, alavu, eggplant and palanki must be avoided... Water, edible roots, milk, ghee, the fervent prayer of a Brāhmaṇa, and the ambrosial words of one's spiritual guide, are the... things which can never vitiate a vow ..."

of pure, less pure and impure according to their guṇas (qualities). The pañcagavyam (cow dung and urine, milk, ghee, curd) and pañcāmṛta (milk, curd, honey, sugar and ghee) mixtures are considered sāttvik (conducive to lightness and calmness), extremely pure (śuddha) and purifying to the imbiber and are commonly used in religious rituals. Salt, wine, meat, onions, spices, certain vegetables and legumes are generally rājāsik (conducive to excitability). Some of these items are potential conductors of pollution, like someone else's boiled rice, if not polluting in themselves. Thus these items must naturally be avoided if one wishes to be in both a calm and a ritually pure state. Ritual purity is, after all, "the path to dharma, the resting place of the Veda, the abode of prosperity (Śrī), the favourite of the gods..."<sup>34</sup> I will discuss the fasting requirements of vrata and their significance further in chapter six.

"Bellmetal" as an inferior metal is also considered impure for religious purposes though not for daily purposes for it is frequently named among the gifts to be given at the end of a vrata. Traditionally vessels used in a sacrifice are made of silver or gold as these metals are

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<sup>34</sup> Hārīta, quoted by Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, Vol.II, 651.

thought to be more pleasing to the gods.<sup>35</sup> Abstention from the use of flowers, sandalpaste, unguents, and toothbrushes refers to personal use as these items are central to the devapūjā. Not using a toothbrush<sup>36</sup> helps one, presumably, to remain sexually chaste.

Even though the above items are generally prohibited, some of the items are nonetheless prescribed in the ritual of certain vratas. At first glance there are plain contradictions and many inconsistencies in these lists of prescriptions and proscriptions. On closer inspection, however, one realizes that despite the plethora of rules it is the particular context (the vrata, the condition of the votary, and other such variables) which finally determines the application of those rules.

There are also many rules governing vratas and time, of which the votary must be (made) aware, since, according to the texts, attention to these rules is crucial to achieving a positive outcome for the vrata. From an early

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<sup>35</sup> See Gonda, Visṇuism and Śivaism (London: the Athlone Press, 1970), 82.

<sup>36</sup> In fact there is a great deal of interest in toothbrushes in Indian texts. According to Gonda (Visṇuism and Śivaism, 176, n.66), "There are manuals (see, e.g.; Agitāgama, 19, 22 ff.) which expatiate upon the bits of wood to be used or avoided, their length (if it has the breadth of eight fingers it may contribute to final liberation) and other qualities." Dantadhāvana (brushing the teeth) is one of the āhnikā rituals (daily duties) from the Vedas. (p.68).

period, vratas have been intimately related to India's elaborate systems of time reckoning. In the Purāṇas and Nibandhas the systems of time reckoning to which vratas are related most closely are the celestial configurations - especially those based on the lunar cycles - tithis and nakṣatras. Thus descriptions of vratas are frequently arranged according to the tithi on which they fall, from one to fifteen for each pakṣa (half of the lunar month). The solar calendar and its cycles are referred to and configured with lunar cycles when particular points of time are deemed especially auspicious or inauspicious for beginning or ending certain vratas or for observing certain ritual aspects of vrata: starting a pūjā or breaking a fast. In general, it is acceptable to begin a vrata any time provided that the time is auspicious (that is, the correct tithi or conjunction of tithis, an auspicious month or time of the year, and so on). Since it can be complicated to determine the correct or auspicious time, votaries in the past would have had to depend on the expertise of a pandit or an astrologer. Today, votaries may refer to printed pañcāṅgas or special religious calendars (see chapter three).

After undertaking a snāna or ritual bath, the votary should perform the saṅkalpa, the formal ritual declaration of resolve, which marks the beginning of the vrata. If subsequently there is a birth or death in the family, or if

a female votary begins menstruation, the vrata is not considered compromised. However, these states of ritual impurity do affect the ritual procedure (e.g., the pūjā) of the vrata and modifications or alternative arrangements have to be made. According to the Kṛtyakalpataṛu, "danger (to the observer of a vrata) from all beings, disease, forgetfulness, the command of one's guru do not break a vrata provided these occur only once (during the period of the particular vrata)."<sup>37</sup> One's guru has the final say and overrules all other rules for the disciple. Since the husband is the guru of the wife, then of course he can also dictate the terms of her vrata if he so wishes.

Breaking a vrata before its appointed completion without sufficient reason, however, was said to have grave consequences. The Vratarāja (p.11) quotes the Smṛti writer Chāgaleya as saying in the Madanratna: "Who does not fulfill a vrata, having already made a saṅkalpa, on account of various desires, becomes a cāṇḍāla [an 'untouchable' caste] in the present life and a dog in the next life."

There are also lengthy statements in the Nibandhas about actions and foods that will and will not break a fast, and so affect the efficacy of the whole vrata. Some of the items that will break a fast have already been mentioned.

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Kane, 49.

But, just as the nibandhakāras were aware that not all votaries had the same means for collecting the required pūjā items, nor for offering dāna, so they recognized that not all votaries could always fast in the stipulated manner. Thus for those unable to keep a complete fast when required, the following foods could be taken (in moderation) without incurring any demerit: water, roots, fruits, ghee, milk, any food with the permission of one's preceptor, and medicine.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the foods mentioned are the most sāttvik and pure foods (referred to as "phalāhar" in Hindi). If one cannot fast completely (nirjala) and one is in doubt about the fasting requirements, one can always count on phalāhar as being acceptable fasting food.

#### Entitlement in the Observance of Vrata

It has been suggested by some scholars (e.g., Kane, R. Hazra) that the Purāṇa writers opened the doors of brahmanical religion to all members of Hindu society as part of their effort to attract more adherents. Basing much of their material on the Purāṇas, the nibandhakāras followed suit. Kane and other scholars have stated that rites like vratas were available to all to perform, in contrast to the

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<sup>38</sup> See S.C.Banerjee, "Purāṇic Basis of the Vratas," 42.



restricted access imposed on most smārta rituals. Indeed, the texts themselves give the strong impression of an 'open door' policy with regards to vratas. For example, Kane quotes the Smṛti writer Devala concerning who could benefit from observing vrata: "There is no doubt that [people] of all varnas are released from sins by observing vratas, fasts and restrictive rules of behaviour [niyama] and by mortification... [tapas] of the body."<sup>39</sup> According to the Vratarāja (p.6), the Skandapurāṇa says:

those who have the authority to observe vratas are the non-greedy, the truth-speaking and those who are actively engaged in the welfare of all living things. Others would find that their vrata efforts were fruitless. Those having faith, who have fear of sin, who are without anger and pride, who follow through on decisions, who are not against the Veda, and who have knowledge are authorized to observe vratas. Those in all four varnas and all four āśramas have the authority to observe vrata.<sup>40</sup>

The Vratarāja then continues: "The Devipurāṇa (quoted in Hemādri says... those who are daily bathers, who believe in performing vrata and who have no jealousy, Brahmins, Kshatriya, kings, Vaishyas, Shudra, Bhaktivan, mleccha

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<sup>39</sup> Kane, 51. Also quoted in the VR, p.6.

<sup>40</sup> VR p.6. And the Kurmapurāṇa adds: "Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra all have the right to do pūjā to Mahādeva... they worship by means of yajña (sacrifice), dāna, samādhi, vrata, fasting, niyama, homa, reading of religious books, and tarpana (libation of water to gods or ancestors)." "Devala has written: people of all varnas who observe the rules of vrata and upavāsa, and (observe) tapas of the body without doubt they are all released from sin." (VR, p.6)

(outcasts, foreigners), and women all may listen to the rules of vrata..."

While some of the restrictions normally imposed on women and Shudras because of their assigned low (or variable) ritual status were lifted in the case of vratas the door was still not as open as the texts themselves would have us believe in their general statements, quoted above, on entitlement (adhikāra).<sup>41</sup> In the case of women, although one can find a number of vratas prescribed specifically for women (including courtesans as one category of female votaries<sup>42</sup>), these vratas tend to underscore a by now well established strīdharmā ideology. Furthermore, the injunctions of Manu (2.66) and others (e.g., Yāj.Sm. 1.13) regarding restrictions against women performing aspects of rituals (like vedic mantras) or any religious rites on their own continued to prevail, if not become further entrenched.

As McGee writes: "Since entitlement to perform vrata

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<sup>41</sup> On the various layers of meaning of "adhikāra" and its relation to vrata and women's performance of vrata, see McGee pp.72-87. I have included a summary of some of this material in this section and because I quote her several times, she will be cited in the text rather than in footnotes.

<sup>42</sup> For example, the Anānyadau Vrata (MP ch.70). In this vrata for courtesans, though the prostitute is promised removal of all her sins and eventually a place in Viṣṇu Loka, she was still required in this life to maintain her role, and further, to be especially obliging towards Brahmins desiring her favours.

implied the right of ownership and enjoyment of the fruit of the ritual, the nibandhakāras [had to take] special care to explain women's and śūdras' rights regarding the performance of vrata."<sup>43</sup> A second type of restriction, she explains, "results from the fact that the rite in question may include or depend upon activities that in themselves are not open to everyone; in such an instance the entitlement to the rite in question is limited by implication to those entitled to perform the activities that it presupposes."<sup>44</sup> A third type of restriction relates to capacity - "physical, intellectual, financial or otherwise - to carry out the ritual activity in question." (McGee, 79) For this reason there are rules in these texts restricting the length of time that Vaishyas, Shudras, and women can fast. For example, the same Devipurāṇa quoted in the VR above stipulates that "Vaishyas and Shudras can fast for only two nights; if they do more their effort will be fruitless."

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<sup>43</sup> McGee, 77. She continues, "A woman's 'right' to ritual performance (be it a sacrifice or a vrata) is complicated by the fact that in orthodox circles she was permitted neither the right of ownership nor direct access to mokṣa."

<sup>44</sup> McGee, 78. She elaborates (79): "This type of restriction is of great practical importance, especially in instances where vratas are thought to require the recitation of Vedic mantras or the oblations of the Vedic fire rituals, activities that were not open to śūdras and women. The effect of this restriction on both groups of people is to limit the ways in which they pursue religious activity, rather than to exclude them from such activity altogether."

Women in like manner are prohibited from fasting for too long with similar consequences if they do. As McGee correctly argues in this regard, there is no realistic basis for supposing that lower caste groups or women are physically (or mentally) less sturdy than Brahmins or Kshatriyas.

She continues (p.80):

But one may easily suspect that women and the lower classes might accumulate a dangerous store of merit, and, more directly connected with the topic of capacity, the fear that physical deprivation might impair the fulfillment of the assigned tasks of the groups addressed. Śūdras and women share the characteristic of being viewed as classes of indispensable servants - the śūdra as serf, bearer, etc., and the woman in her role as housekeeper, cook, etc. - and it is likely that the brāhmaṇas did not wish to have the services of either group endangered by the weakening or distracting effects of prolonged fasting.

Finally, the Purāṇa and Nibandha texts reiterate the old injunction (following Manu 5.147) that married women do not have the authority to observe vrata (or other ritual activity) without the permission of their husbands. Both Kane and the VR quote the Viṣṇudharmasūtra (25.16) which says that "a woman who fasts without the permission of her husband will reduce the longevity of his life and herself will go to hell." The Śaṅkhaḍharmaśāstra is quoted as saying that: "strīdharm is (the observance of) vrata and fasting performed with the permission of the husband." Yet, again, the author of the VR says (p.7), "it cannot be said that only the permission of the husband is necessary for

widows can do vrata too. As the Mārkenḍeyapurāṇa says, women can get permission from husbands, fathers or sons."

In regard to women and entitlement for vrata, then, it would appear that first the Purāṇa and Nibandha writers wanted to make sure that it be known that women had the right to observe vratas. However, the pandits' liberal declarations (whatever the true motivation) when translated into practice kept getting entangled in the somewhat inflexible mīmāṃsā-generated rules - rules and injunctions that were not meant to apply to women or to 'popular' religious practices. The equivocation or ambivalence about women's right to perform vrata among Smṛti writers is illustrated in some of their statements on vrata which would appear to exclude women and Shudras altogether from observing them. For example, the VR (p.13) quotes Dakṣa as saying that "he who does not do (the twice daily) samdhya is impure and therefore has no authority to observe any religious work. If this person should do a vrata, no benefit will accrue." Women were not supposed to perform samdhya. Or again, the VR (p.13) quotes the Chandogapariśiṣṭa as saying, "one should wear a sacred thread and have a topknot - and those who do not cannot receive the benefit of a vrata." Again, obviously, this would exclude women and Shudras.

Second, the Purāṇas and Nibandhas continued to insist that men be given control over women's religious activity,

even when this activity was to be directed for the benefit of the men themselves. The apparent need to reassert Manu's injunction may suggest that many women were already observing vratas (or similar rituals) regardless of fathers', husbands', and sons' approval.

### Classification of Vrata

Various attempts have been made to classify vratas, both within the Sanskrit texts and by researchers for either organizational or descriptive/analytical purposes. The fact that vratas can be and have been classified in so many different ways speaks to the phenomenological, sociological and symbolic richness of vratas. Some classifications are based on objective factors like the time and date on which a vrata begins. Others are based on more subjective criteria (e.g., "spiritual" versus "familial"<sup>45</sup>), criteria which may reveal as much about the attitudes or points of view of the classifier as of the vratas. Here I will simply note some of these classifications and indicate some of their sources. These classifications include both those found in (or which may be extracted from) the Sanskrit texts on vratas and

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<sup>45</sup> R.S. Khare uses this distinction when discussing men's and women's performance of vrats in his book, The Hindu Hearth and Home (Carolina Academic Press, 1976), chapter six.

those that have been applied by scholars from without this textual tradition. A few of these classifications or typologies will be pursued further in this chapter and in later chapters where they may help to elucidate some aspect of vratas, or views on vratas, and where they may be compared with how women votaries distinguish among their vrats.

On the whole, with some exceptions,<sup>46</sup> the Purāṇas do not concern themselves with classifying vratas, at least not in any consistent or formal way. The nibandhakāras, on the other hand, were more meticulous about arranging their

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<sup>46</sup> One exception is the Padmapurāṇa (iv.84.42-44) which Kane quotes as saying: "ahiṃsa ..., truthfulness, not depriving a person of his property by wrongfully taking it, brahmacarya..., freedom from crookedness or hypocrisy - these are mental [mānasika] vratas that lead to satisfaction (or favor) of Hari; ekabhakta [eating only once a day], nakta [eating one meal at night], upavāsa [complete fast], ayācita [eating only unsolicited food] - this is physical [kāyika] vrata...; study of the Veda, recounting (the name of) Viṣṇu, speaking the truth, freedom from backbiting - these are the vratas of speech [vācika]." Though the word vrata is used in the text the meaning is really niyama for almost all the above items are included in lists of niyamas, and are those restrictions that are to be followed by one observing any vrata. McGee also quotes this passage (p.91) and comments that mānasika vratas are conducive to purity of mind, the four types of fasts mentioned help to purify one's body, and the last group refers to 'right speech' [my term, borrowing from the Buddhists], and so purify one's words. These are not types of vratas but rather the three groups of elements that serve to provide the mental, physical and verbal discipline and purity for a person keeping any vrata.

Hemādri mentions a similar classification, but he leaves out the "vrata of speech." (quoted in Das, 213)

material in an orderly manner, following established principles. Thus one can tease out categories repeatedly found implicitly within the textual descriptions themselves such as time<sup>47</sup> (e.g., tithi-vratas, seasonal vratas, annual vratas); deity (vratas directed to Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Kṛṣṇa, or Devī); reward or desired fruit (vratas for progeny, vratas for health, vratas for vanquishing a king's enemies); or the fasting requirement (waterless, eating only once a day). The Purāṇas and Nibandhas are not often explicit about who the votary should be, but in some descriptions of particular vratas a category of persons - "married women," "mendicants" - are listed as suitable votaries. The male votary's marital status is not significant with regard to classification of vratas in the texts or in practice, but it is for the female votary. Thus some vratas are for unmarried girls (kumārī), some for married women (nārī), and some are designated as suitable for widows (vidhvā).

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<sup>47</sup> As we have mentioned, most of the Nibandhas and some Purāṇas arrange (and so in this sense, classify) their presentation of vratas according to time categories. The earliest  nibandhakāra  to arrange vratas according to time categories (tithi, day [vāra], nakṣatra, month, year) during which the particular vrata was to be performed was Lakṣmidhāra in his Kṛtyakalpataru. Others later followed suit. For example, Hemādri arranges his description of vratas into ten groups, each group of which is named for an astrological or seasonal category, except the last which is prakirṇaka or miscellaneous. A minority of Nibandhas arrange vratas according to the deity to whom the vrata is to be directed.



Vratas have been categorized according to whether the vrata is conditional or not (c.f. Ward 1817:I,75]), "purificatory / expiatory" or "devotional" (c.f. Banerjee 1946), "active" (pavṛtti) or "passive" (nivṛtti) (c.f. Banerjee 1946). And, vratas have been categorized according to origin or form, as in "śāstrik" (from the śāstras) or "laukik" / "jyotiṣit" (folk or local) (c.f., Tagore 1919, Robinson 1985).

A very old classification applied initially to vedic rituals by mīmāṃsā scholars, but also applied to other rituals such as vratas by nibandhakāras, is one that has a tripartite division: (i) nitya, (ii) naimittika, and (iii) kāmya. The first two terms literally signify a period of time - nitya meaning "perpetual" or "constant" and naimittika meaning "occasional." The third term refers to desire. Applied to vratas the term nitya<sup>48</sup> refers to those vratas which are to be performed regularly and are held to be necessary or obligatory. These include the dīkṣa and āśrama vratas of the vedic Sutra literature. As McGee notes (p.302) "No extra merit accrues to one observing a nitya rite, but rather sin is incurred if one does not perform a

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<sup>48</sup> Examples of other observances deemed nitya are the "nitya karmas" enjoined on twice-born men: daily morning and evening prayers, bathing (snāna), japa, homa, deva-pūjā, and the receiving and honouring of guests (atithi-pūjā). (McGee, 301-2; see also Kane, 56-7.)

nitya rite." Nitya vratas, then, are those vratas which are to be performed as a duty, out of a sense of obligation, rather than for any reward.

"Naimittika" is applied to "occasion-born" rites and refers to vratas undertaken occasionally, for a specific reason, or at a special time or place.<sup>49</sup> Dīpavālī, Navarātri, and the Kumbha Mela, among other pan-Indian festivals, are classified as naimittika events, McGee notes, and so too are "the birth anniversaries of the deities [e.g., Rāmanavmī], even though they occur annually on fixed lunar days..." (McGee, 304) Expiatory vratas are also classified as naimittika. A naimittika rite, like a nitya rite, "has no positive fruit; it is done simply because the occasion calls for it..." (McGee, 304) Thus nitya and naimittika vratas, following McGee's terminology, are "rites of maintenance" rather than "rites of acquisition."

The designation "kāmya" is applied to optional vratas observed for a limited time and for the purpose of attaining

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<sup>49</sup> "In the broader category of naimittika occasions fall events such as births and marriages, and unusual astronomical occurrences such as eclipses and conjunctions." (McGee, 303-4) While most naimittika occasions are auspicious, some are inauspicious (e.g., a death) and others are highly ambivalent with potential for both benefit and harm, such as eclipses. McGee remarks (307) that "naimittika vratas tend to have an aura of festivity" - but I do not think this generalization holds since all prāyaścitta-vratas are classified naimittika and these are not, obviously, festive.

some specific object. The desired 'object' of a kāmya vrata may be something intangible like spiritual merit or auspiciousness or something tangible like achieving wealth, or healing a sick child. Or, the desired object may be something that can only be secured in the 'next' world such as eternal reunion with loved ones or a blissful place in one of the god's lokas.

A closer look at the application of this formal ritual classification by nibandhakāras to vratas reveals both its limitations and the orientation of its users. Its limitations are exemplified in the fact that while some vratas are labeled as kāmya and others as nitya, these labels are relative (as the texts themselves sometimes acknowledge). For, in practice, individual vratas can be nitya for some and kāmya for others, or both kāmya and nitya or kāmya and naimittika depending on context and player - who is to observe the vow and why. In the case of the much written about Ekādaśī Vrata, for example, there are numerous statements made about for whom and under what conditions this vrata is to be considered nitya, and for whom and under what conditions it is optional (kāmya) based on such considerations as whether the votary is an avowed Vaiṣṇavite or not, his stage in life, and so on.<sup>50</sup> But the texts fail to

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<sup>50</sup> See Kane on Ekādaśī, pp.96 ff.

mention other sorts of conditions that can determine the circumstantial and motivational category of the vrata. Family tradition, for example, may render a 'naimittika' vrata into a 'kāmya' or 'nitya' vrata, as McGee and myself found in our fieldwork.

Perhaps, however, given the fact that women are the primary practitioners of this tradition, the most conspicuous omission in the nibandhakāras' application of this classification of vrata is to the peculiar situation of women - a situation itself 'defined' by these same authors. As I noted in the introduction, one of McGee's important contributions is to demonstrate the "gender-related implications of these distinctions as they are understood by theorists and by the women votaries." (p.301) McGee found that women she interviewed persisted in calling (or in so many words describing) certain of the vratas they performed as nitya, while the texts would label them kāmya. In "their treatment of desire (kāma)," she concludes, "the nibandhas fail to provide a clear slot for the selfless desire"; and secondly, "the nibandhakāras persist in classifying as personal desires (kāma) goals such as saubhāgya that pertain exclusively to women..." (p.317) In other words, the Dharmaśāstras defined women's primary vrata as pati-vrata (which amounts to a perpetual state of unselfishness), and particular vratas that women perform (with the permission of

husbands) are to be directed to his well-being. Thus McGee calls women's vratas (in the main) "rites of maintenance" rather than "rites of acquisition." As I will discuss in chapter seven, women (are socialized to) feel obliged to maintain the state of marital felicity, to secure the well-being of their husbands in order to fulfill their prescribed duty as wife.

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In concluding our examination of vrata in the Hindu medieval Sanskrit religio-juridical literature, I wish first to discuss two quite different views on the origins of vratas and what these rites represent. Then I will review the ways in which vratas are depicted in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas and address the question of why the male Brahman authors/redactors took such an interest in promoting these rites.

In an article called "Vrata Rites in Bengal," S.R.Das argues that the Purāṇas succeeded as popular texts because they absorbed and integrated many "non-Aryan" elements, thus appealing to a large population. Many "popular rites and practices including certain vratas were given new interpretations and eventually incorporated into the Brahmanical

system."<sup>51</sup> Das contends that a large proportion of the vratas found in the Purāṇas were of non-Aryan origin before they and their accompanying kathās were "brahmanized," and that the original folk vratas, still practised in many parts of India, "are nothing but primitive magico-religious rites, [that] do not find any mention in our sacred lore or hieratic Brahmanical literature."

J.Helen Rowlands, in the same vein, thought that the śāstric vratas were introduced in imitation of popular rites. She wrote:

Les brata populaires (açāstriya ou laukika) doivent dater d'une époque pré-pouranique, pre-hindoue. Abanīndranath Tagore suppose que c'est parmi les gens designes dans les Vedas sous le nom de anyavrata qu'il faut chercher les origines de nos brata. ... Les brata canonique (çāstriya) ou pouranique furent probalement introduits à l'imitation des brata populaires, qui existaient déjà dans le pays, pour prêcher la bhakti et répandre l'adoration de certaines devinités.<sup>52</sup>

Eva Maria Gupta's more recent book on Bengali brata and ālpanā also fully accepts Tagore's thesis (spelled out in his 1919 book) that the "Anyavratas" referred to the "different rites" of the autochthonous peoples. Among these, the only rites to survive were those of the girls' and women's because the "world of men" (the exterior, public

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<sup>51</sup> S.R.Das, "A Study of the Vrata Rites of Bengal," 222.

<sup>52</sup> J.Helen Rowlands, La Femme Bengalie Dans la Littérature du Moyen-Âge (Paris: Adrien Maisnonneuve, 1930), 50-51.

world) was more strongly subordinated to the acculturation process of the Aryans than the world of women, the world of the household.<sup>53</sup> Eventually, many women's (or indigenous) and "Vedic vratas" (brought in by the Aryans and performed primarily by men) were changed into the "śāstriya vratas" - forming the basis of the Purāṇa-Nibandha vratas, although Gupta claims that the "maiden" vratas remained unadulterated to this day. New gods were introduced, new vratas were invented, the role of the priests' "esoteric wisdom" increased and a certain disjunction between the names and/or goals of the vratas and their ritual procedures occurred. While women's folk vratas have continued to survive (though influenced to greater or lesser extents by "śāstric vratas"), the "Vedic vratas" disappeared or were completely amalgamated. What we have left, then, according to Gupta's view, are women's essentially "folk vratas" widely practiced in Bengal (and virtually everywhere else in India), and "śāstric vratas," known by pandits mostly through Nibandha texts and prescribed for and practised by a much smaller segment of the population, male and female.

In the second view, rather than arguing that vratas and other popular folk rites were included in the Purāṇas (and Nibandhas) as a concession to their prevalence at a

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<sup>53</sup> Eva Maria Gupta, Brata und Ālpanā in Bengalen (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983), 4.

popular level, P.V. Kane, the Purāṇa scholar R.C.Hazra, and S.C.Banerjee, among others, maintain that the inclusion of vratas (as well as dāna, upavāsa, tīrtha, etc.) and their glorification in the Purāṇas represented a popularization of Smṛti material. That is, these rites were basically 'made up' or created out of the components of vedic rituals. As evidence Hazra cites the following elements of a vrata: "selection of a proper tithi, determination of taking the vow, lying on the ground, bath, japa, ... (homa), keeping awake during the night, and listening to tales..."<sup>54</sup> All these, he says, have their parallels in vedic rituals. In trying to account for why the Brahmans took such an interest in promoting the Purāṇas, Hazra propounds a theory which states that during the early centuries of the Common Era certain heterodoxies (Buddhism, Jainism, Tantrism) had become influential rivals to orthodox Brahmanism. The lower castes and women were especially prone to these influences because (a) they were less educated and (b) they were debarred from a significant role in the vedic religious rites and so had less interest at stake in them.<sup>55</sup> As more

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<sup>54</sup> R.C.Hazra, Studies in the Purāṇic Records (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 240.

<sup>55</sup> Hazra mentions in his discussion (Studies, p.213) that women tended to be more easily morally corrupted too; a belief while not peculiar to Indian culture, has a long history in it.



people strayed from the Brahmanic fold, the Brahmins began losing power, income and prestige. They realized that the revitalization of the varṇāśramadharmā and the authority of the Vedas and Śāstras was essential to the reestablishment of their own authority and economic well-being. Thus, the orthodox "brahmanists," Hazra suggests, began to preach the performance of gṛhya rites through Smṛti works and the more numerous "Smārta-Vaiṣṇavas and Smārta-Śaivas... introduced Smṛti materials into the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas to preach Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism as against the heretical religions..."<sup>56</sup> To attract more followers, then, the exclusivity of vedic rites was relaxed to allow more people to participate in them, the importance of these rites for the well-being and harmony of society was emphasized, and personal devotion to a single god as a way to mokṣa began to be propounded by the sectarian Brahmins through the Purāṇas and Smṛtis.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hazra, Studies, pp.213-14, 226, 257.

<sup>57</sup> Brahmanical religion did experience a revival during the Gupta period (4th to 6th centuries) - though Buddhism and Jainism did not fare so badly either. The Gupta period, says the historian R. Thapar, "saw the acceptance of the Aryan pattern..., an important aspect of which was that the status of the brahman was firmly established." She notes also that "The fact that a number of texts were rewritten with an underlining of the brahman viewpoint indicates that the status was effective and powerful." (A History of India, I, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1966, 166) At the same time, the influence of 'vedic culture' had been growing in the South and a number of Tamil kings patronized

Kane (pp.43ff) and Banerjee in his article, "Purāṇic Basis of the Vratas Mentioned in Bengal Smṛti" (pp.34-35), support the above view and suggest that the success of this popularization of Smṛti rites was ensured by the promises of heaven or "otherworldly and spiritual rewards [made] to those who performed vratas that were comparatively easy and within reach of all instead of sacrifices."<sup>58</sup> The Brahma-purāṇa (29.61), for example, says: "the reward that is secured by the worship of the Sun for a single day cannot be secured by hundreds of Vedic sacrifices or by Brahmanas to whom the fees stated in the texts are paid." The Bhaviṣya-purāṇa (Uttara 7.1) "provides that a man crosses easily the deep ocean of hells by means of the boat of vratas, upavāsas and niyamas."<sup>59</sup> There are also promises of a better incarnation as shown in a passage from the Varāhapurāṇa (47.20 ff.) where king Nṛga, who was a Shudra in his previous birth, is said to have become a king by observance of the Buddhadvādaśī Vrata.<sup>60</sup> There are many other examples of the praise showered upon the vratas in the

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Brahmans. (See Thapar, 184-5) It was during this period and up until the 14th century that the Mahāpurāṇas were composed.

<sup>58</sup> Kane, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Both passages quoted in Kane, 43.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Hazra, Study, 238.

Purāṇa descriptions of them. Often their efficaciousness and power are favourably contrasted with the observance of "hundreds" of vedic sacrifices; in particular, the Áśvamedha or "horse-sacrifice" which was one of the more expensive, complicated and prolonged of the vedic sacrifices sponsored by a king to ritually consolidate his kingdom.<sup>61</sup>

Having both studied the texts on vrata and conducted fieldwork on women's practice of vrats, I would argue that both views contain elements of truth, but neither view is sufficient. The accounts based on Tagore's thesis of the "anyavratas" betray an inappropriate and anachronistic use and understanding of the term vrata. Our review of the history of the term vrata in the earliest texts suggests that while vrata may translate as "ordinances" or "functions" in some contexts, vrata did not refer to votive rites as such before the beginning of the Common Era. It is misleading to speak of "vedic vratas" as if we knew what they were. But we can be even less certain of what the 'original' rites of autochthonous peoples were like, and we cannot say with any certainty whether the women's and girls'

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<sup>61</sup> McGee helps to put this "exaggerated praise" into perspective when she explains the use of "arthavada" - a category of statements whose purpose is to "puff up" the injunction (or rite) by advertising the excellence of the elements involved. In vrata arthavada is used "to emphasize both the greatness of the vrata and the importance of following the prescribed rules." (122)

vrats of today are the direct descendents of these rites. The views of Kane and Hazra, on the other hand, tend to downplay the extent to which "elite" traditions borrow from "folk" traditions (the opposite process of "Sanskritization," or, to use M.Marriott's term, the process of "universalization").

S. Indradeva, in an article entitled "Women in Folk and Elite Traditions"<sup>62</sup> makes this observation:

... there has existed for millenia a relationship of give and take between the classical and folk traditions in the fields of literature, music, visual arts, metaphysics and religion. Numerous forms of folk poetry, motifs of folktales, folk-melodies, popular metaphysical notions and deities were taken over by the elite and integrated in classical tradition with some modification and refinement. At the same time the folk culture has all along been borrowing elements from the classical tradition and integrating them with its own fabric. There is undoubtedly a difference in the nature of the elite and folk traditions but it lies not in the basic spirit or content but in the degree of sophistication, systemization and self-consciousness.

The whole range of vratas - both those described in the texts and those practised in villages and cities today are, in my estimation, a good example of this fusion or interweaving between "folk" and "elite" traditions. Some vratas, especially many of those observed by women, are performed in such a way that they bear scant resemblance to the nibandhic prescriptions, while others are performed with

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<sup>62</sup> in Women in Indian Folklore - A Linguistic and Religious Study, ed. Sankar Sen Gupta (Calcutta: Indian Publications Folklore Series, no.15, 1969), 287.

all the players and accoutrements of the text format.

What can be determined from the evidence of the Purāṇas and Nibandhas is, first, vratas as specific types of votive observances, involving at least saṅkalpa, upavāsa, pūjā, and dāna first appear in these texts (though we can see their beginnings in the epics). Second, descriptions and discussions of them multiply as the texts become more recent. Third, while vrata procedures contain many parallels to vedic rituals they also contain non-vedic elements such as the inclusion of local or non-vedic deities for worship, the use of ritual diagrams and rites like nyāsa. The Purāṇas, in general, absorbed and integrated a number of non-vedic features as the process of compilation and editing continued over the centuries, not only from 'popular religion' but from Tantrism and Buddhism as well.

There are several probable reasons as to why the discussion and description of vratas proliferated in later Purāṇas and in the Nibandhas. While in the Gr̥hyasūtra literature there were vratas that marked the passage from one āśrama to another, the Purāṇa and Nibandha literature rarely mentions these sorts of initiatory rites in the context of vratas. Instead, most of the vratas are now depicted as optional householder rites available to all varṇas and both sexes. They are available to help achieve any or each of the four "aims": dharma, artha, kāma, and

mokṣa. Thus, from its various applications and connotations in earlier literature, as well as quite likely from vrata-like rites already in practice, the concept of vrata was shaped by the Purāṇa and Nibandha writers into the ideal ritual for the householder to express his or her duties, devotion, and spiritual aspirations. Under these spiritual aspirations the doctrines, practices and "dharma" ('yogic' values) of the ascetics are "tamed" and harnessed under the control of the this-worldly dharma of the householder. (While mokṣa is a legitimate aim of vratas, spiritual discipline as a principle of dharma is emphasized.) At the same time, vratas were depicted as a ritual that the Brahman pandit-priests could ritually control and economically benefit from.

To encourage their practice, the purāṇic vratas were made accessible: they were available for everyone (in theory) to perform at any stage of life. Though the texts do not support the view that vratas were especially directed to women and Shudras, there is no doubt that some of the restrictions normally imposed upon these groups primarily because of ritual impurity were lifted in the case of vratas. Widows and menstruating women, females considered either inauspicious or polluting, were yet eligible to continue to perform certain aspects of the vratas, like the fasting requirements and the niyamas. As well, other ritual

impurities that normally affect religious observances, such as a death in the family, did not jeopardize the vrata rite provided the rite had already begun.

In these texts vratas were rendered sufficiently feasible and flexible to accommodate a person's means, in contrast to the greater rigidity of vedic rituals. One did not have to be particularly rich to observe them, for, though pūjās and the giving of gifts were always required, concessions were made for those unable to afford the stipulated items. In many vrata descriptions a choice of considerably simpler procedures is given after the details of the more complicated procedure have been outlined. Of course, the texts probably assume that a Brahman would have to oversee the application of these alternatives.

The range of purposes for which a vrata could be performed was wide - from progeny, beauty or learning, to a higher station in the next world or in the next life. "A woman will be reborn as a man" one vrata promises. It is conceivable that any problem that one wanted alleviated or any desire that one wished to be fulfilled could be sought through the observance of a vrata. However, the nibandha-kāras apparently sought to temper the pursuit of purely selfish and/or material desires by placing an emphasis on the ethical conduct of the votary during the course of the vrata.

The Purāṇa vrata descriptions dwell on the merits promised to votaries at some length and often in rather exaggerated terms. Kane, in particular, focused on this point and expressed the opinion that this was one of the main reasons vratas became so popular. It revealed the "materialistic attitudes and expectations" put "under the garb of religion."<sup>63</sup> The Brahmins pandered to the "ordinary human cravings" through vratas, to which Banerjee adds, "as a means to gain income." What Kane does not say is that the vedic sacrifices (of which he has a higher opinion) as described in the Brāhmaṇas also promised cows and sons and worldly rewards.<sup>64</sup>

It is easy to see why the vratas over the course of centuries so increasingly garnered the attention of the Purāṇa editors and the ṇibandhakāras, and why they came to be so exuberantly extolled in this literature and by their descendents in the popular vrata-kathā literature of modern

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<sup>63</sup> Kane, 55.

<sup>64</sup> As A.B.Keith (in The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upaniṣads, Harvard U.Press, 1925, 259) puts it: "The nature of the ordinary offerings to the gods is expressly stated to be an offering made to the god for the purpose of attracting his attention and goodwill, so that, delighted himself, the god may reward in the appropriate way his worshipper. This is essentially the standpoint of the Ṛgveda where the sacrificer is promised wealth both temporal and in the world to come in return for his sacrifice..."



times.<sup>65</sup> Representing a more typically enthusiastic view than Kane's on the significance or value of vratas is C.S. Venkateswaran who says of vratas: "These have great spiritual and ethical value. They discipline, purify, and sublimate the mind. Hence they are given a prominent place in the scheme of religious duties."<sup>66</sup> Or Madhvācārya, the editor and commentator (in Hindi) of the Vratarāja, who waxes lyrical in his 1984 introduction with such comments as:

When one is absorbed in vrata then one believes in the truth that, 'before I was wasting my valuable time and now I am truthfully using it - and getting rid of the wastage. As much time as I may take up (observing) vrata, it is truthful time, the remainder then is falsehood, that is, its use is false.' The time not used for vrata is time not useful for one's life.

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<sup>65</sup> An examination of the plethora of vernacular vrata (kathā) books and pamphlets reveals the continuity in the treatment of vrata in the textual tradition. It is largely from the Purāṇas and Nibandhas that a number of the current popular vrata booklets draw their material (See chapters three and six.)

<sup>66</sup> "Ethics in the Purāṇas," in The Cultural Heritage of India, vol.II, 297.

## CHAPTER THREE

### VRATA IN CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN INDIA

Having established a text-historical background for the concept of vrata in the Brahmanical-Hindu tradition, I now move to transpose on this background the performance of vrats from one contemporary urban setting. That is, the focus shifts from the more or less clearly defined arena of precept to the much less clearly defined (or definable) arena of practice. This chapter introduces the city of Banaras, the location where I conducted most of my interviews, and describes my research population and fieldwork. Following this overview, I endeavour to place vrats within the context of the celestial and agricultural seasons and cycles in the Hindu religious calendar as it unfolds each year in Banaras. The chapter ends with an examination of sources for the transmission of vrats.

#### The Field: Banaras

Banaras (also called Varanasi and Kashi) is an ancient and densely populated city of about one million situated on the banks of the holiest of India's rivers, the Ganges, in the eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. All over the country "Gaṅgā-jal," or Ganges water, carefully brought

home by pilgrims or purchased in the bazaar in sealed copper pots, is used in home pūjās. As the Ganges is the holiest of India's rivers, Banaras is the holiest of Hindu India's many tīrthas, literally, "sacred crossings," that is, pilgrimage centres.<sup>1</sup> It is a commonly held belief among Hindus that to die in Banaras is to achieve mokṣa (liberation) instantly, or at least a sure place in Śiva's loka, since he presides over the city. Consequently, there is an unusually large number of elderly pilgrims who come from all over the country to spend their last days in Banaras. There is also, at any one time, a large number of ordinary visitors who have come to take darśan (auspicious "viewing") at the better known of Banaras' innumerable temples. As the city of Śiva, the preeminent ascetic god, Banaras also hosts a high concentration of resident and visiting male and female ascetics of various orders, as well as ascetic institutions. Many famous sannyāsins and learned gurus have lived in Banaras or have regularly passed through, offering public discourses. A good number of the Hindus I became acquainted with in the city had either heard these gurus

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<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, much has been written about Banaras, Kashi, or Varanasi, over the centuries by both Hindus and foreigners. Cf. E.B.Havell, Benares the Sacred City, Calcutta: Thacker Spink & Co., 1933; L.P.Vidyarthi et.al. The Sacred Complex of Kashi, Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1979. Diana Eck's book Banaras City of Light (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1982) is an excellent recent contribution to this literature.

directly or were keenly aware of their life-styles, if not of their teachings. Comments about gurus and ascetics often came up in my conversations with women about vrats, leading me to speculate that the general population of Banaras may be more affected by the ascetic tradition(s) than the population of most other Indian cities.

The antiquity of Banaras and its ancient status as an important tīrtha, as well as centre of traditional learning and the arts, have given the city a richly diverse resident population. In addition, Banaras now houses a large national university, with students and faculty from around the country. For these reasons many of the women I met and some of those I interviewed, while having lived in Banaras throughout their lives and speaking Hindi, came from families originating in other parts of India. In fact, though I had not intended it, the diversity of Banaras' population was reflected even in the small group of women whose religious lives I studied.

#### Fieldwork Methods: the interviews

In the course of 62 interviews I spoke with 58 women in Uttar Pradesh and with sixteen women in the southern state

of Kerala.<sup>2</sup> Initial interviews were mostly short and exploratory and served to test out my questions as I sought to prepare a finalized questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was finalized, I used it to conduct longer interviews with women in Banaras, as well as with a few women in surrounding villages and in the northern U.P. towns of Dehradun and Mussoorie. The questionnaire consisted of both open-ended and fixed-answer type questions. It usually took between two to six hours to complete, and not all questions were either asked or answered every time. The first section covered basic information such as age, education, marital status, religious affiliation, and common religious activities (pilgrimages, visits to temples, etc.), and then moved to specific questions about the woman's vrat practices and her reflections on their meaning and benefits. Where time permitted and circumstances were favourable, I would ask further questions from a supplementary list that grew larger as the weeks went by. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded, with the permission of those interviewed.

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<sup>2</sup> I visited Kerala about one third of the way through my stay in India and took the opportunity to interview sixteen mostly Nayar and Nambudiri women in the hill town of Kottayam and the capital city of Trivandrum. The purpose of conducting interviews in the south of India was essentially to obtain first hand comparative data in order to gain a sense of some of the continuities and differences among women's vrat observance in a northern state and a southern state in India. Some of the south Indian material will be discussed periodically in footnotes.

Interviews usually took place in women's homes, after appointments were scheduled in advance. Not infrequently "appointments" were cancelled or put off for future days or interrupted by the demands of small children, husbands, or by any number of situations requiring the immediate attention of the woman I was interviewing. It was not always possible to complete my interviews or to speak exclusively to one woman. In particular, husbands who happened to be present in the home during the interview found it difficult to restrain themselves (no doubt from lack of practice<sup>3</sup>) from adding comments, interjecting a response to a question, or simply answering on behalf of their wives. By force of habit (inculcated through years of socialization) wives often deferred to their husbands' views. There was also a concern that I, the visiting foreign "scholar," should be sure to get the "correct version of the facts." This concern, and the belief of many women that they did not know anything about vrats worth communicating to me, made it difficult for me to persuade women that I wanted genuinely to talk to them, rather than to "panditji" down the street (or in the next room), or to some professor at Banaras Hindu University. Some women were also shy and unaccustomed to

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<sup>3</sup> As is the case in many patriarchal cultures, men commonly speak on behalf of their female dependents (especially wives) in India.

reflecting on their beliefs and practices and articulating those reflections to a foreigner. A certain amount of encouragement, prompting and rephrasing of questions was required. At the beginning my research assistant, Kalpana, an educated but poor Brahman woman in her early thirties, also wanted me to consult books and other "authoritative" sources. While Kalpana also at first tended to 'correct' the responses of the women I was questioning, she soon proved invaluable as an interpreter of my questions, translating my initially awkward and Sanskritized Hindi into idiomatic Hindi or Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi, common in Banaras) as the need arose. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised at the willingness of most women to answer my questions and to allow me to look at their places of worship, watch their rituals, and from time to time, participate with them in their vrats observances.

I learned something new about the lore, practice and function of vrats with each interview, and it became clear to me that this learning could go on indefinitely. Almost every time I formed a conclusion or a generalization about some aspect of vrats, it would be challenged in the next interview. Information I received from one woman might be contradicted in the next interview. These experiences contributed to my privileging the particularity of individual voices in the context of individual lives. Thus, while

I have drawn general conclusions from my fieldwork, I have sought to do so without losing sight of the rich complexity of women's religious experience.

The remaining chapters of the thesis are based on the materials gathered during fieldwork - the interviews mentioned above in addition to three interviews conducted with astrologers, five with pandits in Banaras and Lucknow, one with a vrat-kathā bookseller and one with a pañcāṅga (almanac) publisher. I also attended private pūjās and bhajans, and kathā recitations on vrat days as well as observing women offering pūjā and undertaking Gangā snān (ritual bathing) on the ghaṭṭs (steps leading down to the river) and at several kund (large bathing tanks adjoining temples) in Banaras.

#### Research Population: Women of Banaras

The following sections provide more detailed information concerning the caste, religious affiliation, age and background of the women I spoke with about vrats in Banaras. It was sometimes difficult to elicit specific information about the caste (especially the jāti) of women. The majority of women interviewed were Brahman, about one sixth were of Kshatriya jātis and the remainder were from other



castes.<sup>4</sup> The women's ages ranged from seventeen to 72 years, and their educational backgrounds ranged from illiterate to Ph.D.<sup>5</sup> Just over two-thirds of the women interviewed were married, and the others were either unmarried or widowed.<sup>6</sup> Nine of the respondents had no children.

I often encountered a certain hesitancy and even confusion concerning the question of religious affiliation. For this reason I omitted this question toward the end of my fieldwork. Out of 26 positive answers, four women identified themselves as Vaiṣṇava, two women as Śaiva, one as a Śākta, two as Smārta, and seventeen women as "Sanatānī" - a category I had not even initially included in my first questionnaire. "Sanātānīs" consider themselves followers of the sanātana "eternal" dharm - the non-sectarian 'ancient', 'time-honoured' or traditional religion of India, wherein no deities, no rituals (except the samskāras), and no over-

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<sup>4</sup> Of 44 answering this question, 32 women said they were Brahmans (about half giving a specific jāti); seven said they were Kshatriyas; one was an Ahir (a Shudra caste); two were "Harijans"; one was a Lingayat, and one an Ayyar (both from families originating in Karnataka).

<sup>5</sup> Three women were illiterate, two were home educated, nineteen women had a few grades of schooling, three women had highschool diplomas, and ten had university level education.

<sup>6</sup> There were interviews with five unmarried young women, two unmarried older women, 22 premenopausal married women, twelve menopausal married women, one separated woman, and nine widows.

arching doctrines or dogmas are privileged. Those who identified themselves as Sanātanī usually had mūrtis or pictures of several deities in their homes - sometimes reflecting the various iṣṭa devatas (favoured deities) that different family members worshipped.

### Vrats, the Seasons and the Festival Calendar in Banaras

Every religious culture has some sort of calendar which sets apart "sacred time" when special rites, observances and festivals occur. Because India is the birthplace of several religions with a rich cultural diversity, and has had a long history of interest in astronomy and astrology, there are several such calendars operating simultaneously. Events are configured with solar and lunar cycles, astrological considerations and the agricultural seasons. This section is concerned with the articulation of vrats with such orchestrations of time in Banaras.

I arrived in Banaras in mid-October or the end of the month of Āśvin 1984, as the weather was cooling in the evenings and the autumn festival season reaching its peak. Across the river, still high from monsoon flooding, the

Ramnagar Rāmlīla<sup>7</sup> was nearing its finale after a month of nightly performances by well-trained actors. There was no question among the thousands of viewers that these elaborately costumed actors were indeed the deities (Rām, Sītā, Hanumān) incarnated each evening to play out the divine drama. They had come, not just to watch a spectacle, but to take darśan of the actor-gods. Around the city local neighbourhood renditions of the Rāmlīla were also taking place, although these were much shorter and less formalized versions than the grand Līla across the Ganges.

Throughout the city Durgā Navarātrī - a twice-yearly pan-Indian "nine-night" religious festival in honour of the goddess Durgā - was about to start. Local akhāras ("clubs") and other sponsoring groups were setting up pandāls (small stages or pavilions) in the narrow cobbled lanes of the old city or near busy intersections. These stages would house brightly painted and decorated larger-than-life images of Durgā in her most famous pose, slaying the buffalo demon. Smaller images of Kali on the right side and Sarasvatī on the left of Durgā are also often included. For nine days and nights these consecrated images would be the locus of pūjā by priests and of prayer and darśan by hundreds of

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<sup>7</sup> This Rāmlīla is a highly elaborate annual ritual reeanactment of the Tulsidas Rāmāyana, sponsored by the former Mahārāja of Banaras, and overseen by pandits and priests.

reverent Hindus. On the eleventh day, following Vijaya Daśamī (the day the goddess is victorious over the buffalo demon and Rām is victorious over the evil Ravan), the goddesses would leave their mūrtis and these now 'lifeless' images would be taken in procession to the river to be immersed and washed away.

Amma, a 72 year-old south Indian long-time Banaras resident, reiterated the popular dictum that "Navarātrī is said to be the festival and vrata [in the sense of prescribed observance] of the Kshatriyas, as Yāma Dvitiya is for Brahmans, Dīpavālī is for Vaishyas, and Holi is for Shudras." Of course, she added, "all the four varṇas observe the [Navarātrī] vrata and do pūjā for nine days. Some fast only one or two of these days. Some observe a fast the whole day." Unlike the three other festivals mentioned, Navarātrī is also observed as a vrata (fast) by many Hindus of all castes and sectarian backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

Hardevi, a single 70 year-old Banarsi Brahman and the

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<sup>8</sup> My colleague Hillary Rodrigues, recently returned from studying a Durgā temple in Banaras, told me that many men as well as women fast during Navarātrī; not only devotees of Durgā, but also others who seek empowerment from the goddess during this time of year. Their vows (vrata) may consist of sleeping on the ground, not sleeping at all, or only sleeping for three hours a day. Sexual continence is common. These acts are often combined with daily recitations of the Durgāsaptasāti. Votaries either recite the text themselves in their own homes (if they are literate), or listen to it being recited at the temple.

founder-director of a school, told me that she started observing Navarātrī on a regular basis in 1940 (then aged 35, when she was an activist for M. Gandhi and had refused to marry). She began the vrat because Durgā was her iṣṭa-devtā, her "favoured deity." Hardevi learned the vrat's procedure from her family who were instructed by a pandit. She observes the vrat for the full nine days. In 1940, she initially began the vrat with a formal saṅkalpa made in front of a purohit (a local priest) who told her what to say. This included Sanskrit mantras from the Durgā-saptaśati.<sup>9</sup> In recent years a priest has not been involved in the observance, except, as she explained, when "I don't have time and then I'll call a pandit to do the pūjā." Each morning of the vrat Hardevi takes a bath first thing, "for purification." This is followed by a simple pūjā in which she reads out the Durgā-saptaśati and "all the important mantras." She may also read different ślokas from the Rāmāyaṇ and the Gītā. The pūjā is concluded with an ārati

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<sup>9</sup> Hardevi used the well-known version of the Durgā-saptaśati found in the sixth century Śākta devotional work, the Devīmahātmaya. This text describes the different occasions when the goddess (in her warrior - as Durgā - and terrifying - as Kali - aspects) was summoned by the gods to save them (and humanity) by defeating various demons who had usurped the gods' powers and were terrorizing the universe. "Interspersed between these heroic episodes are hymns of praise to the goddess (stotra) in which the gods beseech her protection." (L.Bennett, Sacred Sisters and Dangerous Wives, 263.)

(the ritual of circling lit lamps in front of the image of the deity). Throughout the nine days she consumes only fruit and milk, the most common fasting regimen during Navarātrī.

Hardevi may also, as is customary for all those keeping Navarātrī, go each evening to the particular devī temple singled out that day for a special pūjā and where the darśan of that facet of the goddess is particularly auspicious. The designation of these nine temples and devīs is prescribed and the circuit remains the same each year.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the vrāt Hardevi gives dān (gifts) to a Brahman: clothes, money and sometimes food.

The month following the Rāmlīla and Navarātrī is Kārtik, when Viṣṇu "wakes up" and the gods descend to earth. As such, it is an especially holy month, hosting another spate of festivals, pūjās and vrats. These include Lakṣmī pūjā and the festival of Dīvalī (the festival of light). At this time, women clean and whitewash the house, and with rice powder draw the footprints of Lakṣmī, the goddess of prosperity, from the doorstep to the centre of the home in order to entice Lakṣmī to bring her good fortune into the

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<sup>10</sup> Navarātra Devī temple circuit in Banaras: (1) Śailaputrī Devī (2) Brahmācārīnī Devī (3) Citraghaṇṭā Devī (4) Kuṣmāṇḍā Devī (5) Skanda Mātā Devī (6) Kātyāyanī Devī (7) Kālarātri Devī (8) Durgānavmī (or Mahā-) Gaurī (9) Siddhidātrī Devī.

home for the year. Other late fall observances include "Bhaiyadūj," when sisters honour their brothers, and the popular women's "Karva Cauth Vrat" observed for the welfare of husbands. During the cold winter months of Mārgaśīrṣ and Pauṣ, festival activity slows down, only to pick up its pace in the next month, Māgh. Māgh is another particularly holy month which hosts Banaras' major Gaṇeś festival on the dark fourth, and later the Spring festival of Vasant Pañcamī. The month of Phālgun is fairly quiet except for the important vrata-pūjā-festival of Mahāśivarātri, the "Great Night of Śiva," celebrated all over India. Festival activity increases significantly in the following month (Caitra), beginning with the exuberant, if not riotous, festival of Holī, the last festival of the religious calendar. In northern India the New Year starts halfway through Caitra and the festival cycle turns again beginning with the Spring Navarātrī, the last day of which is the important vrata/festival of Rāmnaumi.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed description of the yearly cycle of festivals and observances in Banaras consult: D. Eck, Banaras, chapter 6 "Seasons and Times"; Judy Pugh, "Into the Almanac: time, meaning, and action in north Indian society", Contributions to Indian Sociology 17 (1) 1983, 27-49; L. Vidyarthi, et.al., The Sacred Complex of Kashi, Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1979.

### The Vrat Calendar

Today in Banaras, if one wanted to find out what vrats were being observed and on what days, or more specifically at what exact time they were to be commenced, the easiest way would be to go to a bookstall, perhaps near a temple, and buy a wall calendar such as the "Hṛṣīkeś Jantrī." This particular calendar, published locally in Hindi, is in the same format as any western calendar - with the days of each solar month beginning in January listed - but it is packed with other information. On each square is given the north Indian Purnimānta system date (lunar month, pakṣa, and tithi), as well as several other time system dates.

On the right side of the calendar, for each month, are listed all the vrats and festivals and their dates for that month. Included are national holidays and major Muslim, Buddhist, Jain and Christian holidays or observances. The bottom of the calendar explains how to translate dates from one era to another (e.g., Vikrama to Śālīvāhana Śāka), and also provides a summary of the "fruits of the year" (events that may occur). In addition, one finds a listing for each month of the "auspicious moments" for such activities as harvesting grain, preparing medicines, opening a shop or performing the samskāra (life-cycle ceremony) of the infant's first feeding of solid food. On the back of the calendar for each month is given: (1) a list of nakṣatras for the



month and phases of the moon; (2) the exact time for starting a particular vr̥at, śr̥āddh or parv; (3) the monthly horoscopes for each sign of the zodiac; (4) māsp̥hal (the "fruit of the month") - a list of predictions on a range of subjects from the weather to grain prices;<sup>12</sup> (5) mantra-auṣadhi - local medicines and their uses, e.g., snake venom remedies; and (6) najar iharana mantra - mantras to avert the evil eye.

This calendar is basically an adaptation (to the contingencies of a Western calendar-based international business and civic world) of the pañcāṅga (almanacs). As the name suggests, the pañcāṅga deals with five topics: nakṣatra (asterisms or lunar mansions), vāra (the seven solar days of the week), yoga (addition or conjunction), karana (a half tithi), and tithi. The almanacs are prepared from different astronomical texts and are printed today in vernacular languages for local use principally by pandits, priests and astrologers. Aside from personal use, pañcāṅgas are consulted by pandits and astrologers to advise clients on when, for example, to set a marriage date, build a house,

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<sup>12</sup> For the month of January 1986, for example, these predictions included: predicted rainfall (normal); wheat, oil, gram flour will be more expensive; there is a greater than normal possibility of war, plane crashes, and important people dying; countries governed by white people will have more problems; white metals, rice, vegetables and mustard oil will be cheaper; and "yellow things" will be more expensive.

open a new business, observe a festival, and begin or end a vr̥at. Few Hindus are able to 'read' these almanacs easily. Some of the women I interviewed said, however, that they did consult them for their vr̥at observances, as their parents and grandparents had. A calendar like the Hṛṣikeś Calendar just described, however, is more accessible as well as more informative than the almanac - and serves as the layperson's pañcāṅga. I saw them hanging in most of the homes of the families I visited.

There are approximately 134 vr̥ats listed in the Banaras Hṛṣikeś calendar. I say "approximately" because in some cases where two vr̥ats fall on the same day, one encompasses the other. For example, Durgā-navmī Vrat falls on the last day of Navarātrī. Some people only observe the first day of the autumn Navarātrī, some people observe two days of both spring and autumn Navarātrī. It is somewhat arbitrary whether one counts these as one vr̥at or several vr̥ats from the calendar description alone. Of the vr̥ats listed, 72 are regularly occurring semi-monthly vr̥ats - namely: Gaṇeś Cauth, occurring on the fourth tithi of each pakṣa ("wing" or half - "bright" and "dark") of each month; Ekādaśī, occurring on each eleventh tithi; and Pradoṣ, occurring every twelfth or thirteenth tithi (depending on when the tithis start and end). And, twenty of the vr̥ats listed fall under two monthly vr̥ats, namely: Śivarātrī, occurring on the

thirteenth tithi of the dark half of each month; and Pūrṇimā (full moon day), occurring on the fifteenth tithi of the bright half of each month. Thus there is a large, almost bewildering number of regularly occurring vrats that, in theory, one could choose to observe each year. In fact, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, most people assume or choose the majority of the vrats that they perform on the basis of local and family traditions.

It is only a minority of the vrata-observing population that actually keeps all the Ekādaśīs or Pradoṣ or Śivarātris in a calendar year. Those who would observe the full 24 or 12 of these semi-monthly or monthly vrats are generally (though not necessarily) those who have a strong sectarian affiliation; Vaiṣṇavite or Śaivite respectively. Pradoṣ and Śivarātri frequently overlap in the calendar, so, because both vrats are directed to Śiva, those wishing to observe a monthly vrata as an act of devotion to Śiva would ordinarily do one or the other. In my data only one woman out of 44 kept the monthly Śivarātri Vrat, while 23% kept Pradoṣ. Another relatively large percentage (20%) kept all 24 Ekādaśīs. In the textual tradition, the Ekādaśī Vrat is probably the most frequently mentioned and extolled vrata in

the whole Purāṇa-Nibandha corpus.<sup>13</sup>

I did not encounter any person in Banaras who observed all Gaṇeś Cauths except, not surprisingly, a Maharashtrian priest of a local Gaṇeś temple. No doubt other Maharashtrians living in Banaras and many in the state itself, where Gaṇeś has assumed such prominence in the last century, would observe all 24 Cauths in honour of the elephant-headed "Remover of Obstacles."

All Pūrṇimās are auspicious days (except if an eclipse occurs) and because of their inherent auspiciousness, observing a vrāt on this tithi may augment the likelihood of a favourable result. But, again, I encountered very few people (four out of 44) who observed a vrāt on all Pūrṇimās. Since the "deity" in front of whom, or in light of whom, the vrāt is observed is the moon, there is no particular religious affiliation indicated. Indeed, the observance of Purnima (or certain Amavasyas [new moon days], or eclipses) underscores the fact that attention to certain celestial configurations is in some cases more relevant to the

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<sup>13</sup> As Kane wrote, "There are separate treatises on Ekadasi written by Medieval writers, such as the Ekadasi-viveka of Śulapāṇi and the Ekādaśītattva of Raghunandana. Besides, such ... digests as Kālaviveka..., Hemādri on Kāla..., Kālaṇirṇaya of Madhava..., Vratarāja... devote hundreds of pages to discussions on Ekādaśi." (95) Kane himself discusses it in his History of Dharmaśāstra on pp.95-100, and 103-115. For Purāṇa descriptions see, GP chaps.123, 125, 127; AP chap. 187; Naradapurāṇa chap.23.

efficacy of a vrāt than the show of devotion to a particular deity. This becomes clearer in some of the weekday vrats where it is the power of the (divinized) "planets" (grahas) that are appeased, softened or channeled through the observance of the rite.

Instead of observing all 24 or 12 of these regular vrats many people will keep only certain "Cauths" or "Ekādaśīs," totalling between one and four in the calendar year. The special Cauths are those which fall in the months of Māgh, Śravaṇ, Bhādrapad, and Kārtik. In my survey, the Māgh and Bhādrapad ("Bahula Cauth") fourths were the most popular.

The special months for Ekādaśīs are Jyeṣṭh, Āśaḍh, Kārtik and Māgh. There is no special month for Prados - evidently one does them all or not at all. The special months for Pūrṇimā are Māgh and Kārtik. For Śivarātri the special month is Phālgun - the time of "Mahāśivarātri" - often observed by whole families in Banaras. A full 75% of my respondents observed Mahāśivarātri, a not surprising finding perhaps for Śiva's city. Many of those observing Mahāśivarātri do not hold Śiva as their iṣṭa or kul (family) devtā, but they "do a vrāt" in Śiva's honour nonetheless. This situation is paralleled in the Kṛṣṇajanmāṣṭamī Vrat, according to my survey, the other most frequently observed vrāt in Banaras.

The months of Māgh and Kārtik stand out as the months when particular occasions of the semi-monthly or monthly vrats are observed by much greater numbers of votaries. These two months, along with Vaiśākh, are also considered special months as a whole with respect to vrats and other religious observances. That is, if one chooses to do a month-long vrat for the sake of others or one's own welfare, then Māgh, Kārtik and Vaiśākh are the usual months in which to carry out the observance. In the Hṛṣikeś calendar they are called "Māgh-snān-vrat," "Vaiśākh-snān-vrat" and "Kārtik-snān-dān-vrat" respectively. Those choosing to observe one of these month-long vrats (mostly older women and widows in Banaras) would take a daily dawn bath in the Ganges, perform a simple pūjā, perhaps listen to the recitation of religious stories (kathā) by a priest, perhaps give money or food (dān) to the poor, and adopt a fasting regimen - such as eating only once a day or eating only phalāhar ("fruit-food"). Some votaries will also try to get to Allahabad for the important Māgh bathing festival and religious gathering.

There is the twice yearly vrat-festival, described above, the spring (in Caitra) and autumn (in Āśvin) Navarātrī. Among the respondents in my vrat survey, 73% observed a vrat either for the whole festival or for certain days (the first and last being the most important) in both

Navarātris or just one (usually the autumn).

### Cāturmās

We mentioned the three special months where one could observe a month-long vrāt. There is also, each year, a four-month period known since antiquity as "Cāturmāsa," literally, "four months." This period corresponds with barsat, the rainy season, from June through September, or from Asadh bright 11 (Mahā or Śayanī Ekādaśī) to Kārtik bright 11 (Prabodhinī or Devotthani Ekādaśī). It also demarcates on either side the end of the hot season and the beginning of the cold season (i.e., it includes monsoon and post-monsoon). In Hindu mythology this is the time of the dissolution of the world (pralaya) when Viṣṇu reclines on his serpent Ananta - floating on the primeval waters - and withdraws into sleep (Viṣṇu śayanī). Viṣṇu's awakening (Viṣṇu prabodhini) occurs Kārtik bright 11. Traditionally, Cāturmās was the period during which travel and agricultural work temporarily came to an end - and the period during which wandering ascetics and monks (Hindu, Buddhist and Jain) would stop in villages and towns for an extended stay and hold discourses. It was, and remains, a time for listening to religious stories such as vrāt kathās. A Banarasi pandit told me that there are more vrats and vrats are more frequently observed during Cāturmās than at any

other time of the year. "Even Buddhists, Jains and Muslims observe more vratas during this time," he said. Certainly I found that the women I interviewed kept a greater number of vrats during Cāturmās than during any other season or period of the year. The number of vrats listed in calendars, almanacs and Sanskrit digests is also higher during this time.

There are various possible reasons for the existence of more vrats during Cāturmās. One reason may be connected to the agricultural year. The Cāturmās period is critical for the agricultural cycle because if the rains come in adequate but not overwhelming amounts, the newly planted crops - rice and corn - will flourish and the ground will be ready for the next crop planting in the fall - wheat and barley. If the rains are very late or inadequate the crops can fail and scarcity or famine result. E.M. Gupta in her book on Bengali women's bratas (1984) categorizes the bratas according to purpose, one of which is concerned with agricultural themes. Bratas such as the Rone-Eyo brata, the Kojagaru-Lakṣmī brata, the Kṣetra brata, the Punyipukur brata aim to ensure rain, the fertility of the soil, rich harvests, to protect crops and so on. Many of these brata take place during Cāturmās. In Banaras, however, I did not come across any vrats that are currently performed specifically for such purposes. While one can certainly detect "harvest themes"



in some of the vrats, such as the use of the sugar-cane stalk pandāls (called "kosi varṇa") in Ḍala Chaṭh which I was told symbolizes the new harvest, and by extension "fertility" or "fruition," the harvest or the rains themselves are not the object of the vrats. It is probable that the urban environment has made such purposes largely irrelevant.

A reason that is possibly more compelling to many urban Hindus today for the existence of more vrats during Cāturmās has to do with the effects of climate on health. This was emphasized by the same pandit mentioned above. He accentuated the "scientific" (his word) basis of vrats; much of what he said is derived from popularly accepted principles of Ayurvedic medicine. He told me that "Cāturmās is a time of illness" because the "climate becomes polluted, the humours are out of balance and in particular the wind humour [vaṭa] is defective." "When it rains," he continued,

the vaṭa increases. The air is full of moisture and carries diseases - especially infectious ones. The 'fire' of the stomach is dampened and weakened and so the digestive system becomes weak. ... Yāma [the god of death] 'bites' people at this time. ... Thus to maintain health, less food should be eaten and it should be of a purer - sāttvik - variety. Hence all the vrats prescribed at this time;

vrats which, of course, require fasting or the eating of sāttvik and seasonally specific foods (foods that are easier

to digest and which contain the right balance of nutrients).<sup>14</sup>

A number of other Hindus reaffirmed to me that Cāturmās was a time of increased danger to health and that children are especially vulnerable. In fact there are a greater number of vrats (kept predominately by women votaries) which single out children as the primary beneficiary during Cāturmās than at any other season of the year. Examples of these are: Lalahī Chaṭh (Bhādrapad dark 6) for sons; Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhi (Bhādrapad bright 6) for sons, children; Jīvit-putra (Āśvin dark 8) for sons; Aśok Aṣṭamī ("Ahoi Vrat", Kārtik dark 8) for sons; and Ḍala Chaṭh (Kārtik bright 6) also for sons. There are additional observances that parents keep (especially but not exclusively) for children at this time

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<sup>14</sup> Rampratap Tripathi (1984) describes a Cāturmās vrat in his book, reiterating in his prefatory comments some of the points made above. He gives a saṅkalpa for the vrat which includes: "I will also observe a vrat of not eating pulses [dal] in Kārtik, milk in Āśvin, curd in Bhādrapad and green vegetables in Śravaṇa." Tripathi then mentions that, "In the Dharmaśāstra many things to eat have been prohibited during the Cāturmāsa Vrat and amazing results have been recounted. During the Cāturmāsa Vrat:

if these are abandoned	...	these results are obtained:
<u>gur</u> (raw sugar)		melodious voice
<u>tel</u> (oil)		beauty
betel leaf		<u>bhog</u> (physical pleasure),
		a sweet voice, a smooth body
<u>śāk</u> (green, leafy vegetables)		(one becomes) an enjoyer
		of cooked delicacies
curd, milk, buttermilk		Viṣṇu <u>lok</u>

The recommended practices during this vrat are keeping brahmacharya, sleeping on the floor with kuś grass, and pūjā.

(especially but not exclusively) for children at this time that are not vrats as such. For instance, Nāg Pañcāmī (Śravaṇ bright 5) is an ancient observance involving the propitiation of snakes which are forced out of their holes in the monsoon and which often end up in people's homes. There is also "Kajali Tīj" (Bhādrapad dark 3), a ritual in which sisters tie newly sprouted barley behind the ears of their brothers to protect them. Some women told me they also performed a pūjā for the sake of their daughters on this day.

Completing the description of the cycles of vrats in the calendar year in Banaras, mention should be made of the seasonal monthly vrats which include the four Śītalā Saptamīs in the hot/dry season and the four Āśunya Śayanas during the monsoon. Only two women in my survey observed Śītalā Saptamī, a vrata whose main purpose was to avert smallpox. Since smallpox is no longer a threat, it is not surprising that this vrata is apparently losing its place. I could not find anyone who observed the Āśunya Śayana Vrata, a vrata that according to the texts is associated with averting widowhood (for both men and women). It is possible that this vrata has also largely gone out of practice in Banaras. Certainly this is not the only vrata listed in the Hṛṣikeś calendar for which I could not find practitioners. For example, no one I talked to observed Śravaṇ Tuesdays, the

Svarṇ Gauri Sukṛt Vrat, the Kapilā Ṣaṣṭhī Vrat or the Upāṅga Lalit Vrat. There is little doubt that vrats go in and out of practice<sup>and</sup>, that the almanacs and calendars are slow to reflect such trends. In addition, like the Nibandhas, the Hṛṣikeś calendar also tends towards inclusiveness. Thus it contains in its listings some vrats that are performed predominately in other parts of India, such as the Kokila Vrat (which McGee mentions as one which Maharastrian women keep<sup>15</sup>), and the Upāṅga Lalit Vrat which some women characterized as a "south Indian vrat," the Svarṇ Gauri Vrat as a "Rajasthani vrat," and so on. It is clear, then, that referring to a Hṛṣikeś calendar alone is not sufficient for discovering which vrats are current in a particular place at a particular time, and that vrats while astonishingly resilient as a class of religious practice, are individually susceptible (or responsive to) social and environmental changes. In fact, this may be a reason why vrats have proved so resilient.

#### Tithi (Lunar Day) Vratas

In the previous chapter it was pointed out that the Nibandhas usually arrange their description of vratas according to the tithi from the first to fifteenth for each

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<sup>15</sup> McGee, "Feasting and Fasting," 490-2.

"wing" of the month. Modern vernacular vrāt books and calendars, however, usually list vrats following the solar calendar (months), though the lunar tithis remain as an important (and in most cases crucial) reference. Some tithis are much more likely to have vrats associated with them than others,<sup>16</sup> although (with the exception of the pūrṇimās and amāvasyās) it is not the tithi itself so much as its affiliated deity that is relevant to the nature and number of vrats falling on it.

Like certain seasons and times of the year, certain tithis and weekdays (vāra) are associated with certain deities, which in turn may bear upon particular aims and desires of votaries. For example, the third tithi is associated with goddesses like Pārvatī and Lakṣmī who respectively preside over marital and material well-being. The fourth tithi is associated with Gaṇeś, the "remover of obstacles." The sixth tithi is associated with both the god Sūrya and the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī - a goddess linked with human fertility and children who is worshipped during vrats only on particular sixths (and who is especially popular in

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<sup>16</sup> Adding up the number of vrats for each tithi over a year from the Hṛṣikeś calendar, one finds the 4th, 11th, and 12th with the most number of vrats (12-24), followed by the 13th and 15th with 10-12, the 8th with nine, the 6th with seven, the 2d, 3d, 5th, 9th and 14th (variety of deities designated) with two to four, the 1st with one, and the 7th and 10th tithis with none.

Bengal). The eighth tithi is associated with the fearsome Bhairava aspect of Śiva and the "darker" facets of the goddess, e.g., Kali, Durgā and Śītalā. The eleventh is associated all over India with Viṣṇu, and the twelfth conjoined with the thirteenth is associated with Śiva.

#### Days of the Week - Vāra Vratas

Regular solar weekly vrats that can be taken up and left off are not, of course, mentioned by the Hṛṣikeś calendar since it gives listings only for the solar months. Many individuals, men and women of different marital, caste, and educational backgrounds, observe or have observed a weekly vrat. I also met non-Hindus who had kept a weekly vrat. Among the women I interviewed, 62% had done so. Unlike a large portion of the annual or seasonal vrats, weekly vrats are not normally handed down in a package of family traditions. They are usually observed for specific periods of time for specific reasons. I found that astrologers play an important role in the prescribing and dissemination of the weekly vrats.

Two astrologers (jyotiṣi) I interviewed at some length in Banaras gave me more or less the same information (presented in table 3.1) on the ruling planet, and number, colour, character, stone and herb or plant associated with each solar day of the week, plus the "rakṣa grahas" ("demon

TABLE 3.1

<u>Weekdays</u>							
<u>English</u>	<u>Hindi</u>	<u>Ruling Planet</u>	<u>Deity</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Colour</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Effects</u>
Sunday	Ravivār/ Itvār	Sun	Sūrya	1	red or white	warm	blood pressure
Monday	Somvār	moon	Śiva	2	white	cool	nervous system, chest, lungs
Tuesday	Maṅgalvār	Mars	Hanumān Durgā	9	red or orange	hot	lower parts of the body
Wednesday	Budhvār	Mercury	Viṣṇu	5	green	cool	skin diseases
Thursday	Br̥haspativār/ Guruvār	Jupiter	Br̥haspati	3	yellow	cool	liver
Friday	Śukravār	Venus	Devī	6	white	cool	urinary tract, genitals
Saturday	Śanivār	Saturn	Śani	8	black	tepid	abdominal region, nervous system
<u>The rakṣa grahas</u>							
Ketu	(ascending nodes of the moon) "dragon tail" (falling star)			7	ash		susceptibility to accidents
Rāhu	(descending nodes of the moon) "dragon head" (eclipse)			4			abdominal region, head, legs

planets") Rāhu and Ketu.<sup>17</sup> Each ruling planet and Rāhu and Ketu have areas of influence, physical and dispositional, on humans. For example, the sun (Sunday) affects blood pressure and people "dominated" by the sun have hot temperaments; Ketu makes people more susceptible to accidents, Rahu to insanity.

Most Hindus, if they can afford it, will try to have horoscopes or birth charts (janma kuṇḍali) done on their newborn babies. The moment the head appears out of the birth canal the prevailing positions of the stars, moon and planets "imprint" their energy pattern on the person, making him or her susceptible to certain personality traits, behavioural patterns, and physical conditions. Horoscopes are thus consulted for such important decisions as finding a suitable spouse and, for those with the means and opportunity, making a career choice. But they are also consulted when things are not going well - for, one's dominant or ruling planet can have both beneficent and malefic influences. A person may be affected in different ways at any one time according to the current astral configurations combined with the individual's ruling stars and planets.

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<sup>17</sup> Rāhu means "seizer" and is the vedic name of the demon (dānava) responsible for lunar and solar eclipses. Ketu is the personification of any unusual celestial phenomena such as a comet or meteor, and also of the descending node of the moon.



The astrologer's job is to determine which astral configurations are operative, what the effects are, for how long this situation will endure, and what, if anything, can be done to maximize any positive effects, or counteract or neutralize any negative effects.

One way the malefic influences of the planets and stars are neutralized is through the use of specific stones which are associated with each planet and which one must wear on certain fingers touching the skin.<sup>18</sup> There are also herbs which have the same effects as the stones.<sup>19</sup> And finally, there are special vrats which can be prescribed to offset, although not necessarily to eliminate, the negative influence of a planet. As one jyotiṣi put it, "My experience is that what is to happen will happen - but wearing gems or herbs or doing vrats acts like an umbrella."

The two astrologers regularly prescribed vrats to their

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<sup>18</sup> As one astrologer explained to me, "Take for example the ruby - it absorbs the rays coming from the sun [and] the body absorbs these rays through the stone." The stone can lessen or neutralize the effects of the sun. "Now when the stone is touching the skin it may change the frequency of the blood pressure or absorb the rays which are falling on the body. If the stone is not the right size - if it is too small for the level of the affecting planet's rays - it might break. So one has to consider the weight and height of the person and the age."

<sup>19</sup> "The herbs have to be changed every fortnight on the full moon and new moon days," the same astrologer told me. "Men wear the herbs on the right hand or arm, women on the left." He then explained that these herbs are tied with threads of a colour appropriate to the planet.

clients. Because the vrats prescribed (usually weekly ones) were geared to achieving very specific ends, they were labeled "sakām," literally, "with wishes" (in mind). Many aspects of the vrat - the colour(s) the votary is to wear, the colour or kind of food to be consumed or avoided, the sex of the votary are all variously correlated with the characteristics and associations of the planets and/or deities governing the days of the week. Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays are considered auspicious days while Sundays, Tuesdays and Saturdays are ambiguous, or "cruel" as one astrologer put it, because the potential effects of their governing planets are more often than not malefic.<sup>20</sup> Wednesdays seem to be more neutral than other days and vrats are rarely prescribed for this day.

According to these astrologers, Monday, Thursday and Friday are the days particularly suitable for women to observe vrats. "Friday," said one, "is considered to be female." Indeed, Friday vrats in honour of various goddesses (Santoṣī Mā, Annapūrṇā, Sankatā Devī) are

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<sup>20</sup> The VR (p.3) quotes the Ratnamalayam (Nibandha) as saying with respect to the qualities of the solar weekdays: "On Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday all good actions will be fulfilled - therefore these days are called siddhitā (conferring success). On the three days of Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday, only prescribed vratas can be done (will be successful)."

especially popular among women in Banaras.<sup>21</sup> The next most frequently observed weekly vrat (21% of women interviewed) was the Tuesday Vrat, contrary to this same astrologer's comment to me that "only men do Tuesday Vrat to offset the bad influence of Mars - because men are more 'ferocious' [and] aggressive."

Br̥haspati (Jupiter) is generally considered to be the giver of knowledge, prosperity, male offspring and the peace and happiness of the family. The Thursday Vrat, said one astrologer, "is particularly prescribed to married women for the protection of husbands. In marriage the two bodies and souls are tied together with mantras so they will be in a happier condition. Now suppose a malefic influence of a planet is on the husband and the husband's life is in danger - then the Br̥haspati Vrat is prescribed to the wife to help remove the danger." [my emphasis]

I myself was prescribed a Thursday Vrat by an astrologer. The purpose was to help me "get a good husband." I was to avoid salt and eat fruit, milk and (milk-based) sweets each Thursday. I was to garland a banana tree "as if a husband", circle around it with lit earthen lamps seven times and have a Brahman say mantras. I was also to give bananas and money to beggars or Brahmans at a temple. No

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<sup>21</sup> Among the women I interviewed the Friday vrat was the most commonly observed weekly vrat (35% of women).

pūjā to a specific deity was prescribed to me possibly because it was assumed that I would do some sort of pūjā anyway or because I was a non-Hindu, or possibly because the vrat is efficacious without pūjā.

Śani, or Saturn, who rules Saturday, is the most troublesome planet, especially for those whose fortunes fall beneath his shadow.<sup>22</sup> Men and women are equally susceptible, and thus the Saturday Vrat is prescribed to both sexes. "The Śani Vrat is for mental problems" which the planet Saturn (and the figure of Rāhu) can cause. Saturn, like Rāhu and Ketu, is particularly associated with bad luck and difficulties of all kinds. "Rāhu and Ketu are 'shadows' - their effect is like Saturn. When under the influence of Rāhu things are only accomplished with difficulty. [It] affects the body with mental tension and bad dreams - especially full of snakes and demons; and affects the urinary tract," explained one of the astrologers. He then averred that those under the influence of Śani, Rāhu or Ketu "are proud people."

Sūrya, the sun, rules over Sunday. He can be propitiated by men and women for any sort of reason, though one astrologer told me that he usually prescribes the Sunday Vrat in relation to illness. Indeed, in a particularly

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<sup>22</sup> See Eck, Banaras, 256.

telling example illustrating both the short term remedial use so often associated with the weekly vrats and the explicit connection made between the characteristics of a divinized celestial body and human bodies, one woman told me that she had been prescribed a Sunday Vrat to help her with a recurrent eye infection. In propitiating Sūrya with her fast and pūjā, the sun restored her impaired sight.

#### Sources for the Transmission of Vrats

An outsider like myself, or a non-vrat observer, can learn about vrats by reading texts and looking at religious calendars, visiting an astrologer and, of course, talking to those who do perform vrats. But these are not the primary sources for the transmission of vrats to Hindu women. Sarasvati, a fifty year-old matron of a large, extended orthodox brahman family on the outskirts of Banaras explained to me one pleasant February afternoon in the receiving room of her large house, when, why and how she started to observe vrats.

Since I was a little girl I wanted to do pūjā and I used to pick up any stone or leaf and if I had some gur (raw sugar) or offering I would give it and sprinkle water on it. Later, I noticed my mother and grandmother kept a Somvār Vrat. At age sixteen I got married and my mother and grandmother showed me how to do this [and other] vrats during the year before I went

to live with my husband. When I came to my husband's house, there was no house mandir (shrine) and so I started to do Śiva pūjā to a picture... by offering it eleven bel patra (wood apple leaves), and kept the Monday Vrat. ...Now I do pūjā to the Śiva-ling behind the house. When I came to my husband's house I saw that my mother-in-law kept the semi-monthly Pradoṣ ("Theras" - 13th tithi) Vrat to Śiva, plus did daily pūjā to Kṛṣṇa (her own istadevtā). She advised me about other vrats to keep. ...I started to do many more vrats until my husband told me I was doing too many. I then did udyāpan [the formal ending ceremony performed when one leaves a vrat] for several of them and continued with a few. ... I had three daughters. Meanwhile my mother-in-law started to make special prayers to Harṣi-brahm (their kuldevtā) that I may have a son... My fourth child was a son, and when he was born a pandit told me to start keeping the Pradoṣ Vrat. He told me to do this vrat because my son's horoscope revealed that the two planets Maṅgal and Cāndrama were ruling - (so I needed) to offset any ill effects that they might cause. [This] pandit told me to do this vrat but did not tell me anything except that the planets needed to be (counterbalanced). A second pandit examined (my) son's chart in more detail and told me to keep a Maṅgalvār Vrat as well. I decided not to do this - because I had too much work to do and could not go (so often) without food.

Instead, her son was prescribed a silver ring with a coral to wear on his right hand as a protective amulet. He was also instructed to keep the Maṅgalvār Vrat when he got older. He is now seventeen, but Sarasvati has not told him to do it because she wants to wait "until he is older and understands the significance of the pūjā."

In Sarasvati's case, while pandit-astrologers (would) have played a role in the transmission of vrats by prescribing a vrat for Sarasvati and her son, it is clearly her mother, grandmother and mother-in-law who have exerted the

strongest influence both in encouraging Sarasvati to perform vrats and in affecting which ones she has kept. That she chose not to observe the vrat prescribed by the astrologer confirms the fact that vrats are a voluntary observance. The specific vrats that a woman will perform over the course of her lifetime, and the manner in which she will observe them, then, is still determined principally by family traditions - of both her natal and affinal families. In some cases there may be considerable pressure to keep these traditions. In these circumstances the 'voluntariness' of vrats for the woman remains in the realm of theory rather than social reality.

Women often begin observing vrats while children, living in their natal families, as Sarasvati did. They start copying the rituals of older women relatives on their own or are instructed by grandmothers, mothers, aunts and older sisters. They thus learn, through oral transmission and observation, about the names and ostensible purposes of particular vrats and the details of their attendant pūjās and fasting requirements. "In this way," said one woman, "our traditions and practices regarding vrats continue to be passed on. And before doing vrats we learn from a pandit or the family that by observing this vrat one obtains that fruit. For this one doesn't need to learn anything new because for centuries this has been the custom in regard to

vrats. For example, everyone knows that Karva Cauth is for suhāg [well-being of one's husband]..." In the same fashion, girls learn how to make the ritual diagrams (cauk, ālpanā) that accompany many vrats, and they memorize the vrat-kathās. By the time an older, unmarried girl is ready to start observing vrats seriously and on a regular basis she will be well prepared.

Once a new bahu (daughter-in-law) goes to her sāsural (in-law's) she will quickly discover which calendrical festivals and what vrats are part of that family's tradition (samskār, parampara) and the ways in which they are observed. Sometimes there is very little difference and sometimes there is a great deal of difference in which vrats are observed by the families of the bride and groom. There may also be a difference in the manner in which the same vrat is performed. In most cases a bahu will be expected to adapt herself completely to her affinal family's practice for at the time of marriage, she takes on her husband's lineage (gotra). Yet, while she has to change her kuldevtā (family's tutelary deity), she may retain her iṣṭadevta (chosen or preferred deity) and continue her own private worship of that deity, at home or in a temple. In Sarasvati's case, her iṣṭadevta is Durgā, and she continued to worship the goddess while also worshipping Śiva and Harṣi-brahm.



A woman may learn additional vrats from friends, neighbours or colleagues who have found one particular vrat to be especially efficacious for them. This mode of transmission (as well as a popular film rendition of the kathā) has been characteristic of how the relatively new (and decidedly nonpurāṇic) Santoṣī Mā Vrat has been spread throughout India.<sup>23</sup> The elderly unmarried school head mistress, Hardevi, mentioned earlier, told me that she had observed the Santoṣī Mā Vrat for a while: "I started it ... because I had some slight trouble where I was working... there was a staff teacher around and she told me about it." The procedure of this weekly Friday vrat involves rising at dawn, and either at home or in a Santoṣī Mā temple, lighting

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret Robinson, in her paper "Santoshi Ma: The Development of a Goddess (1979) discusses the history of the Santoṣī Mā (the "Mother of Contentment" or "Satisfaction") phenomenon and her vrat in Banaras. According to Robinson (43-4) Santoṣī Mā has been worshipped since around 1965 and that the goddess' mūrti was established in a Mahālakṣmī temple at Scindia Ghāt in Banaras in 1967. Santoṣī Mā, Robinson writes, "is said to be the daughter of Ganesh and his two wives Riddhi and Siddhi. She was created out of Ganesh's sakti at the request of his wives. It was the holiday of Raksa Bandan... Ganesh's sons, Labh and Subh, had no sister with whom to perform this ceremony so Ganesh created a sister to satisfy them and named her Santoshi Ma. As her birth satisfied her brothers so her role is to satisfy the wishes of the beings on earth. ... Santoshi Ma's mothers' names indicate their roles. Riddhi means 'prosperity' and Siddhi is translated as 'acquisition, fulfillment or success'. Ganesh's sons... Labh and Subh, also fit into the same category. Subh means 'auspicious, good, or well-being' and Labh is defined as 'project, gain, benefit'. All of [Santoṣī-Mā's] immediate family members are gods whose purpose is to grant success or gain to their worshippers." (Robinson, 8-9)

a small ghee lamp to the goddess, adorning her with a flower garland, and reading or listening to the vrat-kathā while holding small quantities of unrefined sugar and chickpeas in one's hand. At the end of the kathā, an āratī is performed before the image of the goddess while the votary sings Santoṣī Mā's āratī song. (The words of the song, in praise of the goddess, are painted on the wall of the Santoṣī Mā temple in the Khojwan section of Banaras.) The fast for this vrat requires the votary to abstain from eating anything sour.

I asked Hardevi how she had benefitted by keeping this vrat and she replied: "The benefit is just here - that I received peace of mind and I feel that I have achieved something." When I asked if her troubles had seemed easier to overcome after performing the vrat, she agreed.

Snehalata, a married Brahman woman in her fifties (whose profile follows in chapter four), had also observed the Santoṣī Ma Vrat. Her brother and his family were having some difficulties. A friend of Snehalata's told her about this vrat so she went to the bazaar and bought the kathā pamphlet containing the procedural instructions as well as the story.<sup>24</sup> She said that this vrat can only be kept for

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<sup>24</sup> Religious book sellers stationed outside major temples in Banaras told me that the Santoṣī Mā Vrat-Kathā booklet had been their "best seller" in recent years.

three months or three years, after which time it should be stopped with an udyāpan (formal ending ritual). "I did it for the sake of my brother and his family - to help him get a good job, a good house and for his health. I feel it was successful."<sup>25</sup> Buoyed by her apparent success in assisting her brother she encouraged her son to observe this vrat for his studies. She bought him the kathā pamphlet and he performed the vrat for three months.

A guru may also advise a woman to do a particular vrat, as in the case of Vina discussed in the next chapter. As part of her religious regimen, a guru may prescribe particular vrats to his student or devotee to follow. Apparently a 'shaman' too may fulfill this role. In describing the activities of an Ahir shaman in the village of Senapur (outside Banaras) M.Luschinsky mentions that the shaman told one client,

that evil spirits were troubling her and that she should not eat meat or fish for six months, should fast on Sundays, and should offer water to a god (whom he named) after her Sunday bath. He gave her cloves and ash from his holy fire, telling her to eat the cloves and some of the ash and to rub the ash on her body. "Come back in six months if you are not well", he said.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I found that the most number of "testimonials" regarding the fruit or results of a vrat came within the context of a discussion of the Santoṣī Mā Vrat.

<sup>26</sup> M.Luschinsky, "The Life of Women in a Village of North India" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University 1962), 700.

While Luschinsky does not specifically use the term vrat for this ritual it certainly conforms to a vrat format.

Finally, a woman (or a man) may learn on their own accord how to do a new vrat through the locally published, inexpensive vrat booklets so readily available now in the bazaars and in the bookstalls outside temples.<sup>27</sup> This may happen more frequently in present-day India because of factors such as increased literacy, availability of these published materials, and the breaking up of the large extended families in which older women were able to teach and guide younger women. A woman may purchase a vrat booklet, then, when she has heard about a particular vrat and wants to try it but has not found someone to show her how it is done. Alternatively, a woman may find that her natal and/or affinal family do not do any or very few vrats and she wishes to observe more.

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<sup>27</sup> One of the astrologer-pandits I spoke with viewed the majority of these vrat books that have sprung up in the hundreds in the last two or three decades with disdain. Like many other educated and high caste people, he made a distinction between 'pakka' (from the verb pakna "to cook", meaning "perfected", that is, "proper") and non-pakka ways of doing things (rituals) and texts. He considers most of the vrat books and pamphlets sold in the bazaars and outside temples to be of the latter sort. He said that people who write them are not learned and are just out to make some money. The authors "just put the material together from various sources, add their own ideas and pass the results off as their own (products of scholarship)."

The following chapters will contain many more descriptions of particular circumstances in which women learn or take up vrats, but these will be provided with more background detail and context. To help establish such a context, the next chapter presents the profiles of six vrat-observing women that I interviewed in Uttar Pradesh.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WOMEN'S VRAT OBSERVANCE IN BANARAS

#### PROFILES OF SIX WOMEN

In this chapter we start to look at the place and function of vrats in the lives of Hindu women. Six women from Uttar Pradesh are profiled. Each profile includes information about the woman's family and religious background, her education, and religious activities such her daily worship practices, her visits to temples, her pilgrimages, and, of course, her performance of vrats. In the ensuing chapters, while describing and discussing women's views on various issues - from the question of the difference between a vrat, a fast and a festival to the meaning of vrat - the responses of some or all of these six women will be provided. Material from the remaining interviews will be drawn upon more selectively. Throughout, I have preferred to quote a woman directly rather than paraphrase or construct a summary in order to hear as much as possible from the women themselves, and, in the case of the six "core" interviews, to provide continuity in the remaining chapters.

A number of the topics and themes concerning Hindu

women's religiosity and their performance of vrats which emerge perhaps fleetingly and without comment in this chapter will be pursued in greater depth later. Nevertheless, I have also taken the opportunity in each profile to expatiate on a particular point or issue and, in the process, bring in the voices of other women interviewed.

The criteria for selecting the six women's interviews from among the total full interviews conducted were: that the woman was based in Uttar Pradesh, preferably from Banaras; that the interview was complete or at least contained a large amount of information on vrats and the woman's religious life in general; that the interviews selected represented a range of age, caste, marital status, educational status; and that there was one family (affinal or consanguinal) related pair, such as mother and daughter, for comparative purposes (there were in this case nine sets of interviews to choose from). Also important in the selection of women to profile was the presence of a rapport between myself and the woman interviewed. The establishment of such a rapport or sense of friendship and openness in our relationship was important because it gave me greater confidence to extrapolate later from the material at hand (drawing out implications from what was said or not said), and to form some conclusions. A sense of confidence is

essential when one cannot go back to the field to double check one's findings. At the same time, I am conscious that in one sense I have also "created" these women, even as they "created" themselves to me as they talked about their lives and reflected on my questions. Whatever the "reality" of their lives is, it is refracted through several lenses - their lens, my lens and the lens of the reader. That does not mean, however, that we cannot learn something that approximates a truthful vision of some aspects of their lives, and the significance of vrats to these women.<sup>1</sup> I can only hope that the women profiled here would easily recognize themselves in these chapters.

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### Lakshmi

Lakshmi is a highly educated and religious middle class woman who identified her caste as "Parmar Kshatriya." She

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<sup>1</sup> James Clifford has described how "ethnographic truths" are "inherently partial - committed and incomplete" in his introduction to the book Writing Culture The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (edited by J.Clifford and George Marcus, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). See also T.N. Madan's book Non Renunciation. Themes and interpretations of Hindu culture (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987) in which he notes in his introduction (p.8) that "the interpretive endeavour knows no finality... Each understanding is a preface to yet another, each 'arrival' a 'point of departure'. As the questions change, so do the answers, and the completeness of description is inevitably deferred."



was 38 when I interviewed her, and her main occupation was looking after her household and three children. She was one of the first women I interviewed in Banaras and also one of the most articulate. Her answers to my questions were often expansive and thoughtful. She welcomed me warmly into her home, took a genuine interest in my project and quickly grasped the meaning and intent of my questions. Although she had travelled little outside of Uttar Pradesh, her education and keen sense of sociological observation lent her responses an unusual perspicacity. She was more aware than most women whom I encountered of the possible cultural and ideological differences of our respective backgrounds, and this awareness had an influence on the way she answered some of my questions. She built analogical bridges to 'my world' as I tried often to do with all the women I interviewed. For example, aware that I came from North America - the 'land of science and technology' - she made statements like "in other respects vrats are very scientific," and she proceeded to outline their scientific aspects. With respect to women's roles and gender arrangements, however, Lakshmi expressed conservative views. On the topic of strīdharm (woman's 'duty'), for instance, she explained that:

Strīdharm begins at the point at which we become married. The meaning of this is that one should give support to one's husband and family. She should give all respect to her mother and father, she should run the family, bring up the children and educate them.

Then she must fulfill the duties of arranging marriages. As long as we are in the grhastha āśrama (householder stage) we should fulfill it properly, which is strīdharm. ... [Yet] strīdharm changes according to [one's] stage in life. In old age we do work for society. Now I am fully devoted to my husband and family, but when the children grow up and stand on their own then I will have the time to do a little for my country and society [like Lakṣmibai,<sup>2</sup> one of her heroines].

We met over several days in her white-washed cement bungalow in a relatively new section of Banaras. I interviewed her on my own over biscuits and tea, sitting on a hard sofa, underneath the ubiquitous rotating fan. Since her Hindi was impeccable it was easy to understand her and she graciously offered corrections to my own phrasing of questions, which assisted me in later interviews.

Lakshmi was born in Banaras but her family was originally from Malwa, in northern Madhya Pradesh. Though she was married young - at age sixteen - her husband encouraged her to continue her studies in Hindi which she did, up to the Ph.D. level. Despite her high level of education, there did not seem to be any thought that she should get a job outside the home. It was not financially

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<sup>2</sup> Lakṣmibai (d.1854) was the Brahman-born queen of the princely state of Jhansi. She has been compared to Joan of Arc because some time after her husband died and she became regent, she donned warrior's clothes and led her troops into battle against the British during the disturbances which spread over North India in 1857. She was killed while defending one of the forts and immediately found a permanent place as a heroine in the early history of India's struggle for independence.

necessary and she had the important responsibility of looking after three young children. And, as she intimated above, she was thinking of doing some sort of volunteer social work after her children married. It appeared that both Lakshmi and her husband (who worked in administration at the university) considered education valuable for its own sake. At one point I was shown some of the books on history, religion and philosophy they kept prominently displayed in the living room. Lakshmi's husband was also pleased to have me interview his wife, and on the first afternoon I visited, after showing me the books and sharing tea and formalities, he slipped away to let us 'carry on'.

Lakshmi's parents' kuldevta<sup>3</sup> (family "protective" deity) is Durgā and that of her husband's family is Śiv. She identified herself as a Sanātani, and said that this

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<sup>3</sup> There can be more than one kuldevtā in a family. Among the women I interviewed in Banaras, kuldevtās are invoked, worshipped and propitiated with their "share of blessed food" (as one woman put it) before such occasions as the upanāyana and marriage samskāras, and before such significant events as "house openings" (grha praveś). In some areas like Rajasthan a kuldevtā seems to be both more often a localized deity (or deified personage) and to play a more significant role in the family's worship practice and ancestral/religious identity than I found to be the case in Banaras. (On the significance of kuldevtās in Rajasthan, see Lindsey Harlan, Religion and Rajput Women. The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives. Berkely: University of California Press, 1992.) A person's "chosen" deity (istadevtā) - which may or may not correspond with the kuldevtā - seemed to be more significant than the kuldevtā in the devotional lives of women I interviewed in Uttar Pradesh.

meant belief in and worship of all the deities. But the place where Lakshmi does daily pūjā in her home bears only Hanumān's mūrti, her own iṣṭadevtā. Her husband performs a daily pūjā as well, but separately, as is commonly the case. For spiritual instruction and inspiration Lakshmi tries to read a little from the Gītā, purāṇ, or epics daily, as time permits. She visits various temples on inclination or on some special occasion, but favours the largest Hanumān temple in Banaras, Sankat Mochan. She has been on pilgrimage with her husband's family to Ramesvaram (southern India), Puri (eastern India), and Haridvar (northern India). These three sites are known and venerated across India.<sup>4</sup>

Lakshmi said that she does not believe in the existence of bhut-pret (unhappy ghosts and spirits)<sup>5</sup>, or at least not in

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<sup>4</sup> That is, they are of pan-Indian importance, as opposed to being of regional, local or sectarian importance. Agehananda Bharati has noted that: "Basically there are two types of occasions which mark the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain pilgrimage. One of them is the fulfillment of a vrata [here Bharati mostly means a conditional vow] ..., the other is [for] darśan... The latter is more diffuse and less urgent... Vrata, 'vows', are often highly specific and they usually require a visit to one place only. It is the place where a deity [usually a goddess] specializes, as it were, in repairing damage, or balancing some need of the pilgrim who seeks remedy." "Pilgrimage Sites and Indian Civilization," in Chapters in Indian Civilization, vol.1, ed. J.Elder (Madison: U.of Wisconsin, 1970), 94.

<sup>5</sup> S.Kakar says of these ghosts that: "The malignant spirits... are collectively known as bhuta-preta, though Hindu demonology distinguishes between the various classes of these supernatural beings. The bhuta ... originates from the souls of those who meet an untimely death, while a preta

their capacity to interfere in human affairs. Like the vast majority of Hindus, Lakshmi does accept the doctrines of karma and punarjanma (rebirth).

Lakshmi observes fifteen different vrats and celebrates nine additional annual festivals, so her year is frequently punctuated by religious fasts and feasts, observances and celebrations. We went through a pocket calendar I had listing all the religious holidays, observances and vrats and she briefly explained what she knew about them. Like many women I encountered, she had an impressive storehouse of knowledge about the details of many rites and rituals beyond the ones that she actually observed herself.

Lakshmi started observing the 'family' vrats (that is, those vrats which the whole family observes) - Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī, Śivarātri, Navarātri, Rāmnaumī - when she was very young, "two or three years old." "Haritālikā Vrat I started at the age of eleven ... because mother did them, grandmother also does them - so girls also start to do them." She began most of the other vrats she now keeps after her marriage: Vaṭ Sāvitṛī Vrat, Ṛṣi Pañcāmī, Karva Cauth, Śravaṇ Somvār, Mahālakṣmī, Kārtik Pūrṇimā, and Anant Caturdaśī. After the birth of her children (two boys and a

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is the spirit of a child who has died in infancy or was born deformed." Shamans, Mystics and Doctors (Delhi: Oxford U.Press, 1982), 56.

girl) she began to keep the Halṣaṣṭhī, Gaṇeś Cauth, and Jīvit Putrika Vrats - each of which is traditionally directed to the well-being of children.

Since she observed so many vrats, I asked Lakshmi which ones were the most important to her, and she responded:

All the vrats I do are important. Hartālikā is for one's husband, Gaṇeś Caturthi and Jīvit Putrika are for one's sons. In my view all my vrats are important in their respective places. Therefore I want to do the maximum number of vrats. The effect of each vrat is different. Somvār Vrat is for Śiv, Maṅgalvār is for Hanumān, Ravivār is for Sūrya - so each [vrat's] effect, significance and its results are also different. [Yet] from every vrat the atma receives contentment. Vrats are such that one would not get angry [as one might ordinarily]. One does not bring problems to others. The heart becomes pure. Mere fasting does not constitute a vrat.

In her response, Lakshmi began by saying that she considered all vrats to be important because, as eventually became apparent, it is the effect of observing vrats on herself that is of lasting spiritual and personal significance to her. She next mentioned the conventionally laudable reason for women to keep vrats, that is, for husbands and sons, and stressed that, therefore, one (a woman) should observe as many as possible. Then she stated that the effect of each vrat is different, and by the examples she gave it is clear that she was referring to the weekday vrats - those which are usually taken on or prescribed for specific reasons, including protection from the malefic influence of certain planets. Her final comments returned to the results that

each vrat produces on the person observing it - peace of mind or contentment, restraining negative emotions, cultivating purity of heart - regardless of who is keeping the vrat or why. As I noted earlier, Lakshmi was among the first women I interviewed, and comments such as these on the personal spiritual benefits arising from the performance of vrats alerted me to this dimension of women's relationship to the vrat tradition. Clearly, for some women, it was the self-disciplinary features of the vrat tradition, the ascetic values, that they found most meaningful. Lakshmi went on to articulate these features at greater length, but I will reserve a discussion of her comments for the final chapter.

Towards the end of our second interview I asked Lakshmi if she thought that women are naturally (prakrtik rup se) more religious (dharmik) than men. This question was asked because I had often come across statements to that effect in articles or books written by Indians and I also heard such assertions from both Indian men and women. For example, from A.S. Altekar we hear that, "Women are by nature more religious and devotional than men. They can visit temples with greater regularity, perform sacred rites with higher faith and submit to religious fasts with more alacrity than

men..."<sup>6</sup> I wanted to explore what this meant and wondered what bearing it had on women's performance of vrats.

In my question about women's natural religiosity, the term "dharmik" (for "religion" or "religious") was usually equated by my respondents, including Lakshmi, first with pūjā-path - meaning the multitude of religious rituals and related observances (pūjās to household deities, vrats, bhajan singing, observances of festivals, temple visitation, the sponsoring of kathās) that occupy the religious praxis of many Hindu householders. "Dharmik" was only secondarily equated with "dharm" in its moral dimensions or in its sense as "duty" to god, one's family, jāti, etc. The question I asked women about strīdharm brought out this distinction because in this case "dharm" was understood as the person and gender specific code of morally and socially responsible behaviour.

The question concerning the differential religiosity of men and women was posed to the majority of women interviewed.<sup>7</sup> Among those women who replied that "no, women are not naturally more religious than men," each had male family

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<sup>6</sup> Altekar, The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization from Prehistoric Times to the Present (Banaras: Motilal Banarsidass, 1956), 206.

<sup>7</sup> Of those who responded 76% said "yes, women are naturally more religious than men", 16% said "no", and 8% gave qualified answers.



members who were very pious or observant, or a husband who was a pandit or pūjāri. Thus, as one woman put it: "Women are not necessarily more religious than men. It depends on the individual and (his or her) families. ... My father-in-law is extremely religious." Yet, some women who had told me about observant male relatives nevertheless put personal familial experience aside and reflected on their impressions of the larger social picture. "Yes, women are more religious than men - look all around you," said one. Who stays at home? Who has more time? Who does the vrats? Who goes to the temple to hear religious discourses? Who goes to the bhajans? - "It is women, after all" summarizes the statements of several others. For many, then, being "religious" was a matter of having the time - and of being at home. What does this mean?

It should be noted at the outset that in these responses the "naturally" part of the question was disregarded. Women are viewed as being more religious than men as a matter of social fact. First, for women especially, the locus of their religious praxis is in the home - tending the place of pūjā, worshipping, performing the vrats, celebrating the festivals, and observing the purity/pollution codes. Much of this activity centers in the kitchen - the place one often finds the household shrine, the place where the pūjā items and special fasting and

feasting foods are prepared. The kitchen is the place from where women govern the household. If men (or women for that matter) are not at home - because they are "at work" - then they are not able to "be religious."

Second, do women have more 'time' than men? Certainly that was the perception of the women I talked with, even when women tend to get up before the men and children, are busy all day long, and go to bed after them. Again, what was understood by 'time' (in this urban setting) was that men had the allocation of their time dictated to them by the constraints and demands of their work, whereas women saw themselves as having greater freedom to allocate their own priorities. This meant that they could "take the time" to focus on their religious or ritual activities, if they so desired. But further, as one woman put it, "men go about here and there; women remain in the home - so they follow the rules (niyam)." Some vrats, for example, must begin and end at a certain tithi which may arrive at any time of the day or night. We have seen (in chapter three) that time is by no means homogeneous for Hindus. Women, being at home, can follow the rules; they can attend to the discrete and qualitatively appropriate times or 'moments' when the performing of certain rituals will render them more auspicious and efficacious.

These remarks may help to explain why several women

suggested, as one put it, "though women today are still more religious than men, both (men and women) are less so than in times past." She attributed this fact to a "lack of religious instruction" and the intrusion of "the modern world" with its imposition of an impervious secular time. "There are fewer religious activities and they are less effective," she concluded.

Lakshmi's response to my question about women's natural religiosity, below, reiterates some of the points made by other women, but it also introduces further dimensions. She felt that women are more religious than men because "they are more emotional." She paused and then continued:

From childhood we are socialized [within the home] this way. We have seen that grandmother and mother kept vrats but 'fatherji' did not. The girl remains more in contact with her mother so her influence must be the strongest. So even from childhood the traditions have been created in such a way that girls become religious. But the category of men's activities is mostly outside [the home]. Women's [activities] are mostly linked with the home. ... That is where the major portion of her time is spent. Therefore everything is connected with the home, e.g., vrats, festivals; [women] learn and [they] do [them] all. Thus the influence of religion continues to affect mostly women, [and] so we are more religious than men. Then, in old age - because no work remains - how are we to spend our time? So we turn ourselves towards God.

Initially, I had thought that Lakshmi was going to pursue the theme that women are more "naturally" religious than men because they are inherently (or have a stronger proclivity to be) more emotional - as other women were to tell me.

Instead, Lakshmi suggested that women's "emotionalism," as their greater involvement in dharmik activities, was a result of the way girls are brought up and the socio-cultural reality of women's lives being centered in the home. Women are encouraged to be more religious (than men) in Hindu society, and so women become more religious. Nevertheless, Lakshmi has introduced into the women: home: religion equation the idea that women are more emotional, whatever the source of this difference from men, and that being emotional is significantly relevant to being religious. I shall pursue this dimension in some of the following profiles and chapters.

### Snehalata

Snehalata is a pious middle-class Kanyakubja Brahman housewife. She was 50 when I interviewed her and her widowed, childless older sister-in-law, Rani. The two women are close (or, it seems, dependent on one another) and they visit each other frequently. Over several visits to Snehalata's home I had the opportunity to interview both women. While asking questions to one, the other would interject comments from time to time, although it was usually the elder sister-in-law 'correcting' Snehalata. It was Snehalata, however, who appeared most interested in answering my questions, and who had the most definite

opinions. For example, when I asked her such questions as when a formal saṅkalp was necessary or which vrats required the reading of or listening to a kathā she had quick answers. She also readily distinguished between "men's vrats" and "women's vrats" and between "laukik vrats" and "śāstrik vrats." Certainly not all women I interviewed had such decisive views on these questions.

Snehalata was deferrent to her husband. He was present in the house during my visits "doing pūjā," but I never actually met him because he remained in his study - his pūjā room. Nevertheless, he was frequently making demands on her ("bring tea!"), and did not seem happy or comfortable with the idea of my interviewing his wife and sister-in-law. Our first meeting was cut short because he required his wife's full attention for something. Snehalata told me that "he does eight to ten hours of pūjā a day... mostly in sitting meditation." She characterized her husband's pūjā as "dhyān" and "samādhi" (both terms refer to meditation) oriented. I expressed surprise that he would engage in such a lengthy pūjā every day - but she insisted that this was so. Evidently he could spend his time in this fashion because they received sufficient rental income to keep them comfortable. For all his pūjā, he remained a domineering and cantankerous husband.

Hearing about how much "pūjā-path" her husband per-

formed, I asked Snehalata if she thought that women were more naturally religious than men and she replied in the affirmative, arguing that:

Women are more emotional (bhavuk). They are kind-hearted; women always have compassion in the heart (man). Where there is compassion there there is dharm. In men there is hardness (or severity). If the hardness were not there then a man will not be called a man. For this reason men could not be more religious [than women].

Snehalata did focus on the "naturally" (or inherently) aspect of the question. Though her husband was engaged in religious practice to an unusual degree, this kind of practice did not seem to her to constitute being "religious." For Snehalata, being religious is a quality of the heart, manifested in one's ability to show compassion to others.<sup>8</sup> While Snehalata was not the only woman who expressed the view that women were more religious than men on the grounds that they were more emotional, it was especially poignant to hear it from a woman whose life

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<sup>8</sup> There are parallels between some of Snehalata's comments here about women's natural compassion (softness) contrasted with men's 'hardness' and Margaret Egnore's statements concerning perceptions of Tamil women. She writes: "Bhakti is religion of emotion, of feeling... and without it all religion is empty. ... Women are regarded as inherently more religious than men, because they have naturally this power of feeling, of suffering for others, of love. It is often said that male worshippers who seek union with the deity must 'soften,' that is, they must become like females, before their desires will be consummated." Egnore, "On the Meaning of Sakti to Women in Tamil Nadu," in The Powers of Tamil Women, ed. S.Wadley (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs), 19-20.

experience (and marital experience in particular) apparently so strongly supported this view.

Since Snehalata had said that men can and do keep vrats as well as women, I asked her what the difference was. She answered succinctly: "It is like this. Women take the desires of their husbands and sons (into account) when they do vrats, and men do vrats for God; they do vrats for mokṣa." Why don't men observe vrats for their wives and daughters?, I persisted. "Men are capable of doing what they want," Snehalata answered. "Men are men. [But] it is wives who do vrats for their (men's) own well-being. For men it is not necessary [there is no need] to perform worship for their wives. Men and women are different." This perceived difference in function and duty between the sexes and its manifestation in the performance of vrats was echoed time and again by men and women I encountered in India.

Snehalata was born in Allahabad (about 100 miles west of Banaras) and received her matriculation there. She moved to Banaras when she was married at the age of 24. She has two married sons who live outside of Banaras. Her parents' kuldevtā was Rām; her husband's family's kuldevtā is Śaṅkar (Śiva), to whom her husband directs his pūjā, and for whom he observes a weekly Monday Vrat (fast) - the only vrat he keeps. Snehalata's own iṣṭadevtās are Śaṅkar and Śakti

(Durgā). She also performs a daily pūjā, slotted in before her husband begins his own worship. Her pūjā, done in front of images of the "Sanātan devas," she characterized as "mantrik" oriented, which she explained by saying that she had taken mantra dīkṣa some years earlier from a guru<sup>9</sup> (named Paravajrakacarya) of the Udāsin Akasa. He gave her a śakti mantra, to be kept secret. She uses the mantra in daily prayer and also whenever she feels the need. She affirmed that women can say all mantras.

Snehalata also reads the Rāmāyan every day, and goes to the Sankat Mochan and Durgā temples on special occasions. When I asked her if she had gone on pilgrimage, she was the only one of my respondents who said, "I live in a tīrtha - Kashi ["city of light"]; there is no need to go anywhere else." In fact this is what the Kashi Mahātmyas (texts extolling the city of Kashi - Banaras) insist on. Since Banaras is the pilgrimage centre (tīrtha) par excellence, there is no reason to go anywhere else for those who already live in "the abode of the gods."

Snehalata said that she does not believe in the existence of bhut-pret; and she does accept the doctrines of karma and punarjanma. She consults an astrologer; he had

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<sup>9</sup> We did not pursue her relationship with her guru or the circumstances in which she met him. However, it is not unusual for older women especially to acquire a guru. (See next profile.)



prescribed a vrat for her three years previously, the Maṅgalvār Vrat, because "the planet Maṅgal was too strong in my ruling house." Maṅgal also means "auspiciousness"; but too much of a good thing can become a bad thing, and this, she felt, was the case with her. Auspiciousness in her family life had been replaced by discord and tension. Women see themselves as being responsible for maintaining auspiciousness in the home and the vrats they perform are a means to achieve this end. When Snehalata was told by the astrologer that the planet Maṅgal was exerting a negative influence on her, she felt she had found the source of the discord, the inauspiciousness, in her family life. It was her responsibility to remedy the situation and so she gladly took on the Tuesday Vrat. She observes the vrat in the conventional way - offering a simple pūjā with flowers and so on to a picture of Hanumān at home. (Hanumān is one of the deity's associated with Tuesday.) She then goes to a small Hanumān temple<sup>10</sup> for darśan (auspicious sight of the

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<sup>10</sup> Banaras is teeming with small street shrines, but I saw more Hanumān shrines, with florescent orange-painted reliefs of Hanumān, than those of any other deity. Many of them had been recently erected. Hanumān is in fact a god who is especially popular with young men because of his association with strength and "manliness." However, he was also a "favoured deity" of several women that I interviewed. One middle-aged woman, who had assiduously kept a Tuesday Vrat directed to Hanumān for most of her life, told me that when she first started the vrat as a teenager, her father (and later, when married, her father-in-law) tried to dissuade her from keeping this vrat because, they said,

deity). For her fast she abstains from salt, and eats mostly phalāhar and sweets. The benefits of observing this vrāt, she said, have been that there is more peace in her home; "less argument or problems with my husband."

Altogether Snehalata has observed eleven different vrats, including several before her marriage. As three of these have been weekly vrats and one is a semi-monthly vrāt (Prados), Snehalata's yearly total of vrāt-observing days is fairly high. In addition to some family vrats, she kept the Somvār Vrat before marriage "for the pleasure of Śaṅkarji," her iṣṭadevtā. The Monday Vrat when kept by unmarried girls is usually observed to secure a 'good husband'; but Snehalata did not mention anything about a good husband. The only pre-marriage vrāt which she continues with is Śivarātri. Other regular vrats which she does now (yearly and semi-monthly) were "started all at once right after marriage." Her mother-in-law (now deceased) instructed her. Snehalata said that she had not felt pressured by her mother-in-law to keep vrats for she believed in them already. In answer to a question about the issue of taking permission for observing vrats from one's husband, she

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"Hanumān is a batchelor; he is not attracted towards women. How is he going to listen to your requests?" She said that that is the reasoning that is given to women. "The men-folk worship Hanumān." "But because I had faith in him, I still went ahead."

replied: "I have kept vrats since childhood when I hadn't even seen my husband's face! ... I have followed my own heart."

At several points in our conversations Snehalata stressed the importance of, indeed the necessity of, having viśvās (belief or confidence) in the vrats that one keeps. "It is viśvās itself that is fruitful," she said.

A vrat is... that in the name (of a god) on that (particular) day one lives according to a rule (niyam). For example, assume you did a Monday Vrat - that day is Śaṅkarji's day; you believe in Śaṅkar, you will do his pūjā; you will make a food offering (to him)... Any vrat should be observed with viśvās... Whether you do a pūjā with the vrat, or not [it doesn't matter]... you (make) a saṅkalp that 'today I will give up salt', 'give up grains', 'give up water' - the meaning of this is just this that 'by that name [in the name of such and such a deity] something is given up.

Because the terms viśvās and śraddhā ("faith") came up frequently in my interviews with women about vrats, I want to comment on how these terms are used. Women usually used one or both of the terms viśvās and śraddhā some time in our conversation. Initially, I assumed that the two words were being employed interchangeably (and sometimes they are). But, on closer scrutiny, I realized that there were differences in usage. The word viśvās was used more often than śraddhā and seemed to have the freest meanings. Though the word viśvās is often used in a religious context, this is not always the case. (I heard Hindi speakers use viśvās in relation to "belief" in actions [karya me viśvās], in

science, in a political philosophy, or in oneself. A phrase meaning "self-confidence" is "atma viśvās".) The word śraddhā, on the other hand, was always used by women in a religious context, to indicate relationship to God. Śraddhā is thus "faith" in the sense of piety, veneration, devotion; and viśvās is "belief" in the sense of confidence, trust.<sup>11</sup>

One way in which the distinction became clearer as I examined women's usage of the two words in relation to vrats is that when a few women spoke of stopping particular vrats because they lost 'belief' in them - it was the word viśvās that was used. None spoke of "losing śraddhā" in particular vrats because śraddhā is something larger. If one spoke of losing śraddhā it would mean losing one's religious faith (one's connection to God, and to one's family traditions) altogether. In this case, vrats would also largely lose their meaning; unless, that is, vrats had become a "niyama" only - a form of discipline independent for meaning of its mooring in "Faith."

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the English words "belief" and "faith", as the anthropologist Rodney Needham and the historian of religion W. Cantwell Smith have demonstrated respectively, are probably even more mercurial than their Hindi "equivalents" viśvās and śraddhā. Nevertheless, though I proceed with caution, and would not want to rest any important conclusions solely on this semantic distinction, I think examining a distinction in usage between the two words can help to elucidate aspects of women's relationship to vrats and/or some of the functions that vrats play in Hindu women's lives.

Under what circumstances did women "lose confidence" in particular vrats? "I stopped observing several vrats - Santosī Mā Vrat, Somvār Vrat, Guruvār Vrat, Pūrṇimā - because I lost belief in them," said Savitri, a 43 year-old mother of five, and wife of a pūjāri. "Observing vrats comes from the heart," she continued. "You have to follow your heart." When I asked her why she lost confidence in these vrats (all of which, significantly, were not part of her family tradition, natal or affinal, but were ones that she tried on the advice of friends for various reasons), she said that in one case "something bad" kept happening on the vrat day, and she was afraid to continue it. In the other cases she was not getting "good feelings" about the vrats. As she became 'half-hearted' about them, she realized that she should just drop them. "There are many reasons for keeping vrats," Savitri concluded. "Sometimes without any reason except bhakti people do vrats."

Indeed, for many women, vrats (or, certain vrats) are preeminently an expression of "bhakti" ("devotion") - a demonstration of faith in God, and a means of getting "closer to God." "Vrat is a kind of worship of God," said 29 year-old Archana. "It is like this," explained 57 year-old Siddhesvari. "By keeping a vrat I will be closer to God. On the vrat day meditation on God is heightened, for one eats little, so we remember God more often. The heart

remains pure that day."

Some of Snehalata's remarks about her observance of vrats made it clear that for her too some of the vrats that she performs are an important means of expressing her faith and devotion to God, a faith that in turn provides her a source of solace and strength. When discussing the importance of faith and of adopting the 'right attitude' while keeping a vrat, Snehalata quoted from the Bhagavad Gītā to provide a scriptural explanatory context. While the significance of this will be pursued in chapter eight, it is important to note that such discussions further enlarged the dimensions of Snehalata's vrat observance beyond those circumscribed by a pativrata ideology.

### Vina

Vina, like Snehalata, is a Kanyakubja brahman. Her family originally came from the Lucknow area, but moved to Banaras before she was born. She was married at the age of fifteen. When I met her, Vina was 72 and had been a widow for twenty years. While she was educated up to middle school level, her three children, two boys and a girl, all have university degrees. She lives alone on the second floor of her large, older two-storey house which surrounds an inner courtyard. Vina rents out the first floor and this provides her with sufficient income for her needs. She

employs a sweeper woman, but otherwise looks after herself. She lives simply, always wearing a white sari without any ornamentation, and eats plain food twice a day, which she cooks with care and full consideration of the various purity rules. (She was careful not to let me enter her kitchen.) From all appearances she is a model Brahman widow.

I met with Vina on several occasions. Two of those occasions were spent interviewing her at some length. During another meeting I had the opportunity to interview her daughter, Pratibha, who was visiting from Delhi and whose profile follows. I found Srimati Vina to be somewhat formal and initially a little suspicious of me. The formality remained, but her natural warmth soon emerged. Like most women I met in Banaras, she wanted me to wear a sari which, since it is the conventional dress of Hindu women, seemed to make her feel more at ease with me. Wearing a sari, demonstrating appropriate manners and speaking in Hindi were often met with verbal appreciation by women and helped to dissolve some of the barriers that separated us. Wearing the sari also had the effect of rendering one more invisible to men.

Vina's parents' kuldevta was Katyāyaṇī Devī (Kṛṣṇa's sister) and "Kanyakubja Brahmā." Her husband's kuldevtā was Durgā, and her own iṣṭadevtā is Sītā-Rām. She identified herself as a "mostly Vaiṣṇavite Sanātani." She has thus

retained her natal family's Vaiṣṇavite leanings. Indeed, Vina observes all 24 Ekādaśīs as any devout Vaiṣṇavite (and widow) should. She performs a daily pūjā in her home - in front of pictures of the five sanātani devas (Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Gaṇeśa, and Devī), as well as a picture of Sītā and Rām. The pūjā consists of pranam (salutation) to the deities, decorating them with flowers, lighting incense and meditating briefly. Like Vaiṣṇavites all over India, she keeps a tulsī (basil) plant on her balcony, from which she periodically takes leaves, using them in her pūjā and putting them in her food "to increase its purity." She also celebrates Tulsī Vivāha (the marriage of Tulsī and Viṣṇu) for which occasion she draws an ālpanā under the plant and performs pūjā to it.

Each day, Vina reads from the Rāmcaritmanas - Tulsī Dās' famous version of the Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa, and Hindi translations of the Bhagavatapurāṇa or the Mahābhārata. She visits several temples in Banaras, particularly during festivals celebrating occasions devoted to Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa or Rām. Several times in conversation she emphasized that all the deities are the same. "Any person at all can do pūjā to God and do vrats - whatever jāti or religion they belong to - God is one, but God's forms are many. I give respect to all forms of God - whether [He] be Rām or Kṛṣṇa - whether it be the Muslim's God or the Christian's - why not? These



are all the many forms of the one God." This affirmation of the essential oneness of God underlying a multitude of forms is not particularly unusual among Hindus, and was reiterated by several of the women I interviewed.

Vina accepts the doctrines of karma and punarjanma and has a practical "reap what you sow" understanding of them. "What I do in this life, I will reap in the next; what I did before I reap now." And so, from one point of view, her widowhood was foreordained.

Thirty years previously, while on pilgrimage to Brindavan (the place where Kṛṣṇa supposedly spent his childhood), Vina took mantra dīkṣa (was initiated with a mantra) from a guru there. Her husband, who accompanied her, was not himself initiated - but his permission for her to take dīkṣa was required and he obliged. Vina sees her mantra as a kind of protective amulet. She said that with her mantra (recited in her mind) no bhut-pret, can harm her. This is different from Snehalata who viewed her mantra as a kind of meditative and calming aid. As for the guru who initiated her, Vina said she rarely saw him after her trip to Brindavan, unless he happened to come to Banaras. Because this guru lived far away, Vina did not develop any kind of personal relationship with him. However, she mentioned later in the interview that she went to hear "many famous svāmīs (learned holy men) who came to Banaras." She would

most often go to Malviya Bhavan at Banaras Hindu University to listen to them. She said she received much inspiration from them, but now she is old and weary and does not go much. Based on these statements and on the fact that she was widowed for so many years and lived alone, it seems likely that if she had found a guru with whom she could develop a rapport she would have established a close relationship, even becoming his disciple, as so many older women do.<sup>12</sup>

Besides initiating her with a mantra, Vina's guru gave her general instructions on how she should conduct her life.

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<sup>12</sup> M.Luschinsky ("Life of Women", 731-2) writing about Senapuri women, notes "A man or woman who is very religious-minded can become the disciple of a ...guru. Such a person is then known as a gurumukh. A number of village women become gurumukhs in their later years. Very few young women do so. The procedure is this. A woman chooses a person devoted to religious pursuits, usually a Brahman, whom she would like to have for her personal guru and this person whispers some sacred verses of scriptures in her ear. He cautions her never to repeat these verses to anyone. He also tells her when and how often she should recite these verses, which god she should worship and how, what she can eat and cannot eat, and how she should behave."... "Most of the men whom Senapur women have selected for gurus give their disciples ethical counsel. They tell them not to lie or steal... that it is sinful for them to have sexual relations with anyone except their husbands. They also usually tell them that it is wrong for them to think too much about worldly affairs. Instead they are advised to keep their minds constantly on their tutelary god."

For a description of householder women seeking gurus (in Bengal) and on the emotional and spiritual relationship they often develop with him see Manisha Roy, Bengali Women (Chicago: U.of Chicago Press, 1975), pp.138-145.

He prescribed four vrats for her to follow. Vina had already been observing two of these - Rāmnaumī (Caitra bright 9) and Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī - since childhood. The other two - Vāman Dvādaśī (Bhādrapad bright 12) and Nṛsiṃh Caturdaśī (Vaiśākh bright 14) are currently rarely observed. Vina herself said that "Nṛsiṃh Caturdaśī and Vāman Dvādaśī have almost vanished. Here very few people know about these vrats." The central rite ("pradhān") of Vāman Dvādaśī involves feeding a Brahman boy and giving him gifts. The day of the vrat, the boy represents Viṣṇu in his dwarf avatār. Vina described it this way.

[We fast on that day and then] any young boy, between eight and ten years old, who has gone through the upanāyan saṃskār [from] a Brahman family is called to our home and having cleaned his feet with our own hands we put a sandalwood tīka on his forehead and make him sit on a (handwoven pure cotton or wool) mat - and we do pūjā to him. We put a mālā on him and place in his right hand a kamaṇḍal (brass vessel used by mendicants) and in the left hand a daṇḍa (staff). Then we give him at least 21 rupees. We believe that Vāman god has come (in the form of the young boy). ... One time Lord Viṣṇu went to King Bali and took the form of a dwarf in order to deceive him and went to his palace to ask for dān. To remember that story we do this vrat.

Vina has observed seventeen different vrats during her life, including the ones mentioned above. When I asked her when and how she learned them she said she began to do pūjā when she was very young. Her grandparents told her to go into the house with the older ladies and do pūjā. Thus by observation and practice she learned from her own family the

significance of vrats and how to perform them. She recalls:

I started to do Rāmnaumī in my childhood because when I was very small on the Rāmnaumī day the elders of the house said to the children, 'today you will get a meal only after 12:00 because at noon Rāmendraji took the form of an avatār (on the ninth day of Caitra) so children were given puri and khir to eat - and the older people sustained themselves on just fruit and milk. ... Lord Rāmendraji took the form of an avatār on the earth in Ayodhya because at that time the tyranny of the Rakṣaṣas was excessive. He came in order to protect the Brahmans and the cows. So all the people celebrated happily and did a vrat in Lord Rām's name. People especially go to Ayodhya because it is the birthplace of Rām. They take a bath in the Saryu River there - it is very meritorious. They stay there eating fruit.

Vina went on to recount in more detail the story of Rām, and she ended, "This is our belief. I sometimes go to Ayodhya too."

When she was a little older, her grandmother encouraged Vina to start observing the Sunday Vrat in the month of Māgh for seven consecutive Sundays with the other women in the family. A couple of years before her marriage was arranged, she started the Tīj Vrat, as her socialization into her impending wifhood was augmented. After marriage, she took on several more vrats - "for my husband's welfare; so that he'd be respected, blessed, prosperous and healthy." After her first child was born (when she was sixteen), she began vrats for children: Gaṇeś Cauth, Bahula Cauth and Lalahī Chaṭh. She said that, in her day, all married women observed vrats as a matter of course. She said that widows

usually stop keeping (most) vrats. Their "job is to teach young girls [about pūjā and vrats] - especially with regards to marriage preparation."

Concerning men and vrats Vina said that, "Men aren't involved with the different vrats and pūjās - they only worship God and read religious books." "So are women more religious than men?" I asked. Vina felt that women have more interest in worship than men. She said it is women's nature (to be more religious). God gave it to them. From this worship women gain success (siddhis). Vina explained that a siddhi is the outward manifestation or fruition of a wish expressed in a sincere prayer (literally, "what is prayed for on the inside will appear on the outside").

When I asked Vina on another day about consulting astrologers she replied that she did consult them, but only well-reputed ones. "There are a lot of quacks around," she told me; a sentiment echoed by many of the women I interviewed. Vina explained to me that she consults astrologers when bad circumstances arise. With the astrologer's help she finds out what stone she should wear and what mantra she should say. "But God, after all, knows what my wishes are. I don't need to specifically ask." This last, somewhat gratuitous comment reflected Vina's growing unease or perhaps impatience with astrology, or any elaborate rituals. She puts greater weight now on the efficacy of personal

faith in God expressed in the simplest of devotional rituals - especially since her husband died. "Since the death of my husband I don't have that much belief (in rituals). Now I believe only in God." And yet there was a slight sadness in her voice when she was commenting on the apparent gradual disappearance of vrats in the modern world. "My grandparents did more (vrats) than my parents did; my parents did more than I; I have done more than my daughter - and my daughter-in-law doesn't do any at all."

### Pratibha

Pratibha, the 46 year-old daughter of Vina, lives with her husband and one of her four children in Delhi. She was born in Banaras and married at nineteen but continued with her studies, finishing with two Masters degrees, in philosophy and in music. Her husband is a government servant and his work has taken them to several places in India, including Chandigarh and Madras. Like Lakshmi, despite her education Pratibha did not express a need or a desire to work outside the home. Even with a servant or two, there is plenty to do in the home and she feels that this work is a woman's primary duty. I found Pratibha to be commonsensical in her attitudes towards religion and vrats and something of a 'realist'. For example, she said she does vrats to please her husband and the gods "and because this

is a male-dominated society."

Pratibha told me that she does not have a preferred deity. Nor would she care to identify herself in any sectarian way. She has a shrine in her home with images of Śiv, Rām and Kṛṣṇa, and she performs a simple pūjā daily at this shrine. The rest of her family, Pratibha said, does not take much interest in religion - with the exception of her father-in-law in Lucknow who does a three-hour daily pūjā. Pratibha has been quite impressed with this demonstration of piety and discipline. She tries to read a portion of sacred text every day "but time is sometimes a problem." As for visiting temples, aside from special occasions, she goes to a Hanumān mandir on Tuesdays - often accompanied by her daughter-in-law. She goes to this temple because she has taken on the vrāt that was prescribed to her husband; a vrāt which he had given up observing after a few weeks. He had long days at the office and was getting headaches from the partial fasting required. "Women have more resistance," she explained. As well, although she did not say this, it is typical for women to take up vrats for male family members who are unable to perform them. In several such cases that I encountered, the vrats that the women assumed had been prescribed to their male relatives upon examination of their horoscopes by pandits or astrologers.

With regard to pilgrimage, Pratibha mentioned that she saw many famous temples in the south of India on a tour she took with her mother, brother and daughter.<sup>13</sup> Pratibha has also been to the famous Vaiṣṇo Devī temple near Jammu. Her husband had taken mantra dīkṣa in Haridvar, but Pratibha said that she is still keeping her eyes open for a personal guru with whom she would be inspired to establish a connection.

Pratibha has observed ten different vrats during her life; nine are the same ones her mother has observed and one is new, the Tuesday Vrat, which she has taken over from her husband. There are several factors that help explain the continuity and discontinuity in vrata observance between mother and daughter. First, as I shall be discussing in the next chapter, there is a strong relationship between vrats done by a woman and her natal family tradition. Four of the vrats that both Vina and Pratibha keep (Śivarātri, Rām Naumī, Navarātri, and Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī) are familial vrats that both have celebrated since childhood. Pratibha felt a desire to maintain these family vrata celebrations and

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<sup>13</sup> Such pilgrimage tours are now commonly arranged by travel companies and the former hardship of getting to a distant tīrtha has been considerably reduced for many. As most people in North America would choose a holiday destination based on 'sea, sand and sun', Indians (especially middle class Indians) often choose one or several of hundreds of pilgrimage sites in which to spend their holidays or even "honeymoons."



encountered no resistance from her husband. She and her husband never lived with the rest of his family so she did not have to contend with competing traditions. Three other vrats that both mother and daughter keep are well-known vrats observed for the sake of a woman's husband; the Sāvitṛī Vrat, the Tīj Vrat and the Karva Cauth Vrat. The first two are known in the texts and are popular in many parts of central and northern India. Karva Cauth is widely observed in U.P., Haryana, Rajasthan, and the Panjab.<sup>14</sup> When she was still living in northern India, particularly in Delhi and Chandigarh, Pratibha experienced general reinforcement from neighbours, friends, and others to continue with these vrats.<sup>15</sup> The Gaṇeś Cauth Vrat (in Māgh) is also well-known and observed by many women for their children.

The final vrat that both mother and daughter keep in common is the sixteen-day Mahālakṣmī Vrat. Pratibha said, however, that she only keeps this vrat "sometimes." This too is a woman's vrat, and keeping it alone - that is,

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<sup>14</sup> For descriptions of Karva Cauth in U.P. see: M.Marriot (Village India, 203-6); S.Wadley (Shakti); R.S. Khare (Hindu Hearth and Home, chap.6). A Banaras bangle seller that I got to know told me that every Karva Cauth day his shop was thronged by women from western U.P. and the Panjab, buying bangles for the vrat day.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., The Times of India (Oct.20, p.1 1984) newspaper reports about the celebration of Karva Cauth by huge numbers of women in the capital and its environs.

without the company of other female relatives - would require a strong commitment. Clearly Pratibha was not so sure about her commitment and she admitted that she might leave it in the near future.

As for the other vrats that her mother has performed which Pratibha herself has not taken up, two, Vāman Dvādaśī and Nṛṣiṁh Caturdaśī, are "out of fashion," as Pratibha put it. Indeed, I did not meet anyone else who kept these two vrats, though they both can be found in some modern vrat kathā books and in the Nibandhas. One may recall, however, that these vrats were prescribed by Vina's guru and so had no family tradition behind them. Three of the remaining vrats observed by Vina, Lalahī Chāṭh, Anant Caturdaśī, and Śravaṇ Somvār, do not appear to be as widely observed by women as the Sāvitṛī, Tīj, and Karva Cauth vrats. While Lalahī Chāṭh is kept by women for the sake of children, the other two (directed to Viṣṇu and Śiva respectively) are performed by both men and women for generalized purposes. So again, without close relatives nearby to share in the performance of these vrats, there was less incentive for Pratibha to keep them. Finally, there is Ekādaśī - a vrat Vina keeps assiduously twice a month, but for which Pratibha feels no inclination nor does she feel she has the time right now to take it up.

Pratibha's mother, Vina, had consulted a pañcāṅga as

had her mother and grandmother. However, Pratibha has not done so. She gets information about vrat and tyauhār days and times from weekly magazines such as Dharm Yug and Saptahi Hindustan. In 1984, she bought her first vrat kathā book to refamiliarize herself with the procedures and stories of vrats - since she does vrats mostly alone in Delhi and felt that she could not always rely on her own memory to do them properly.

At one point in our discussions, Pratibha began to tell me what she thought most women gained from observing vrats:

Vrat and tyauhār are connected. In the villages there isn't any 'entertainment', isn't any 'picture-hall', no 'club'. So these vrats and festivals are also a form of entertainment. One vrat, which comes in the cold season, goes [like this]: [women] would go to a garden, sit under an ānvla tree<sup>16</sup>, prepare food and eat it. Normally everybody's life was so busy they wouldn't go [and do that sort of thing], but because of that day [a vrat/tyauhār specially marked] they would cook food under the ānvla tree and by eating there it became a kind of 'picnic'; so in this way festival and vrat were 'mixed'. For 'ladies' especially it became an amusement. Men could listen to music, they could watch dance or folk theatre (nautanki); other 'entertainments' were also allowed; but 'ladies' could not go out, they were in parda (seclusion). So whatever entertainment they got was by doing this vrat or that festival.

In certain festivals there is a stipulation that until you bathe in the Gaṅgāji or in some river you can't finish the vrat. So a whole group of women will go, bathe and come back. 'It was a big change for them'. Thus on the one side ... it was monotonous to daily make food, [look after] children - and in the middle of this came a break. A festival came and in

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<sup>16</sup> "emblic myrobalan"; a tree which produces small, plum-like, green, very sour fruits, full of iron and vitamin c.

the festival there was also a vrat with it; so in that they obtained some 'change' [got a break from daily routine].

Lakshmi expressed a similar view about one of the important functions that vrat observances have among village women; that is, these rites provide the opportunity for women to socialize and escape from the monotony of daily routines.

Pratibha also mentioned the benefit she perceived for herself in observing a vrat: "It is good for self-discipline. It is good for one's health - both mental and physical." Although Pratibha had felt obliged to take on the vrat that her husband had left, Pratibha never spoke of keeping vrats "for suhāg." Rather, it was a combination of wanting to keep a connection with her mother's tradition and, as in Lakshmi's case, the value Pratibha found in the self-disciplinary features of vrats that appeared to be the strongest source of motivation for observing the vrats she keeps. Here again, my evidence contradicts the argument that all women's vrats are directed toward domestic and familial concerns.

### Shyamdevi

There was once a woman who made urad dāl ki kacauri (fried cakes made out of split peas) on a festival day and sat down to eat it. Nearby a crow was cawing; it kept circling around hoping that she would give him some. She ate but did not give any to the crow. She went inside the house. While cleaning the kacauri (pan) whatever could not be removed (to eat) she threw

out (into the courtyard). The poor crow searched and took out only one grain. Up to the end of her life the woman didn't offer food. When she went to the other world she was very hungry; everyone received food except for her. She reported to Yāmrāj (the lord of the underworld) that she was hungry. So he said, "go, go. In that nala (ditch) many seedlings may be found - you eat that." She went there and found black gram sprouts. She thought that she would husk them and eat a lot of dāl. But when she husked them she got only one grain. She ate it and then returned. Then she said, "Oh Lord, when I husked all the grains I only got one." He replied - "Alright, have you not taken it? You gave one grain to the crow when you were eating kacauri - that was written in the 'file', so you got what you gave. You didn't give more so you didn't get more."

This story was offered as part of a response to a question I asked Shyamdevi (a Camar [Harijan] widow, aged around 55) about giving dān. It also clearly illustrates the 'reap what you sow' theme characteristic of the doctrine of karma. Like Vina, Shyamdevi accepts that the reaping of karma takes place in the next world or life rather than in this world. She said, "Everyone wants to think that 'I have acted rightly'- but justice is [actually] meted out in the other world; here nothing happens. When God takes out your 'file' - on there itself will be seen that your actions were such and such; you have given this and that... You can't fool around (interpolate the file) there." Shyamdevi's mentioning of Yāmrāj (or later, Brahmaji's) "file" was, incidentally, the only time that she used an English word in her Hindi-Bhojpuri dialect. She went on to explain further about how the act of giving is related to one's karma:

... say today in our house it is a festival so I will make puri and cooked foods; but we are very poor so it is not possible to give much. If there are four people I will have to give two (puris) to each (person); so there will have to be eight puris, no? My child will eat, I will eat, so how many blessings will you get? for, I don't have anything [much] - so whatever I can give I will give. ... Suppose you give your old dal - you give one but it will be written as two.. (in your file). You will certainly receive that. (And), to whoever I have given, he too will have a contented atma. So here (in this world) it (my action) may not be noted, (but) it is written there (in the next world). When one goes from here then Brahmāji takes out one's 'file' and (sees that) such and such has been noted. Whatever I gave that will be noted and if I didn't give - that also will be noted. ... Suppose here I said to others, "I gave that much" - but there it will be shown precisely who has given (and how much).

The duty to give to others - dān to Brahmans, feeding guests, giving alms to beggars - and the merit that can be acquired thereby is powerfully reinforced in India by narratives such as these told by Shyamdevi. In this case, miserliness - especially on festive occasions - is condemned.

Shyamdevi is illiterate. She is also gifted in story-telling and has a large repertoire of narratives which children and other women flock to hear when an occasion arises. Yet, (perhaps because of her illiteracy) she is self-deprecating when it comes to her own years of accumulated wisdom which in fact she passes on through her stories.

There are very great texts (literally rāmāyanas), and very great sayings (kavita). Old people know. You and I, what do we know? (We) are ignorants... (My brother)

has so many books, and he also studies a variety of things. Hearing all these things - so much has entered my own mind. Otherwise, how would I know this much? ... At this advanced age I use my mind (buddhi) to learn.

Shyamdevi lives in the Harijan village of Cittapur, adjacent to Banaras Hindu University. She was born in Shukulpura in the west of Banaras, and was married at the age of twelve. She had three children, one of whom died, and was widowed in her early thirties. She has had a hard life exacerbated by the early death of her husband. "I had three small children when my husband died, therefore I had much trouble. Daily the whole day I did work in someone's field, (worrying), 'can I earn 50 paise a day doing fieldwork? With 50 paise, can I feed three children?'... At home I also kept (grew) vegetables and going to the bazaar I used to sell them. By this means we lived." Her life is now somewhat easier since she makes a decent wage as a cook/housekeeper for foreign residents and her two surviving children have married. However, her work is still precarious, since her employers never stay in Banaras for more than a year or two. She also complained that the prices of basic groceries have risen dramatically in recent years making it still difficult to make ends meet.

My interview with Shyamdevi was incomplete because of several interruptions and the limited spare time available to her during the day. Nevertheless I chose to include her

as a core interview because many of her responses were rich with feeling, anecdotes, stories and practical common sense. Also, I wanted to give an example of a low caste woman's vrat activities and reflections. Certainly Shyamdevi, and her niece whom I interviewed as well, gave me the impression that most women in their village did at least a few vrats.<sup>17</sup> The occasional sweeper, dhobi and fruit-seller woman I asked also told me she did vrats, and Tīj and Jiutiya were specifically mentioned.

Shyamdevi's iṣṭadevtā is Vindyaṅcal Durgā Devī, a local form of Durgā whose worship is centered in a well-known temple about an hour's bus ride away. But it is to Gaṅgā Māī - "Mother Ganges" - that she seems to turn to frequently for help, judging by the many references Shyamdevi made to her. For example, she said at one point that sometimes when she is beset by some problem or other she goes to the river (a 15-20 minute walk away) and in Gaṅgā Māī's presence she prays: "O Gaṅgā Māī! May you cut loose this trouble (kaṣṭ), may my children live well. And then I will offer you

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<sup>17</sup> According to Shyamdevi and her niece, many women in Cittapur observed the vrats they followed. When I asked if (the new) Santoṣī Mā Vrat was popular among these women, they said "no, very few women do that one." M. Robinson (1979, 71) also found that few low-caste women observed Santoṣī Mā Vrat, and she suggested this is due to the problem of literacy. Since the reading of the kathā is so important to this particular vrat's pūjā, if one cannot read and there is no pūjārī around to read it for women, then the vrat cannot be properly executed.



lighted lamps or I will offer a kalaś (pot)..." She does pūjā (to Devī) every Monday. If she has time she goes to the temple; if not she offers water and flowers to a tree outside her home. Each month, on the Pūrṇamāsī (full moon) day, she "takes a vrāt," bathes in the Ganges, listens with other women and men to a formal recitation of the Satyanārāyan Kathā, and gives dān to the Brahman pandit who reads the kathā.<sup>18</sup> She has done the Pañcakroś pilgrimage around Banaras four times and will do it one more time.<sup>19</sup> She does both the monthly observances and the pilgrimage as a form of spiritual discipline, to acquire religious merit, and because, as she said, she enjoys it. She has a strong belief in the existence of bhut-pret and recounted vivid stories about her own and others' experience with them.

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<sup>18</sup> The Satyanārāyan Vrat has become quite popular in north India. It can be undertaken at any time, although the full moon day, because of its natural auspiciousness, seems to be the favoured day for it. The Satyanārāyan Vrat is often a sponsored occasion marking for the sponsor a time of special difficulty or special prosperity (as G. Raheja and M. Marriott have noted in their translation of the kathās for this vrāt for use in courses at the University of Chicago). This vrāt is always officiated by a priest who performs or guides the puja and recites the kathā. In Shyamdevi's case, she liked to fast on the full moon day and then go down, often with her niece, to the Ganges to bathe and to sit on the ghāṭs with others as a local pūjārī read out the story.

<sup>19</sup> This is a very well-known pilgrimage circuit around Banaras. As Eck notes (Banaras, 42): "To follow the Panchakroshi Road around Kashi [Banaras] is, they say, to circle the world. The pilgrims who circumambulate Kashi on this sacred way take five days for the trip and visit 108 shrines along the way."

Shyamdevi has kept nine different vrats in her life.<sup>20</sup> However, she stopped all but two: Jiutiya and the Pūrṇamāsī, when her husband died. She said one did not have to discontinue vrats when one became a widow, but now as the principal breadwinner, she had little time and energy for vrats. She said that she still does pūjā "sometimes" on the vrat-festival days - such as on Rāmnaumī and Naurātri. She said that she had performed an udyāpan for the vrats that she left, "otherwise I couldn't leave them because having kept vrats it is difficult to leave them." In other words, it seems she had grown attached to keeping these vrats, and only left them reluctantly.

As for Jiutiya - which she considers the most important and efficacious vrat "because it is the most difficult" - she said that she would keep it for as long as she remains alive, or as long as it is possible for her to do. She has kept it, as is the custom, for the sake of her children. She learned this vrat and its stories from her mother, and is passing it on to her daughter-in-law. "Sometimes my bahu will keep [this] vrat, so on that day, after doing the pūjā, I take out (the Jiutiya threads) from my neck and put them

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<sup>20</sup> She has observed: Jyesth and Kārtik (Nirjala) Ekādaśī, Mahāśivarātri, the first and last day of Naurātra, Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī, Tīj, Lalahī Chath (which she kept for only a couple of years, and performed it the same way as Jiutiya), Jiutiya, Karva Cauth, and Pūrṇimā.

on hers. My bahu will take it over fully when I can't do it anymore." Unlike some others, Shyamdevi had no sense that vrats as a whole were going out of practice. She was confident that these traditions would continue.

Like Snehalata, Shyamdevi said that the most important element in a vrat observance, the "first thing," is viśvās (belief/confidence). For her, the observance of vrats, which in her descriptions amounts to a kind of bartering with the gods, is one way, and an important one, of trying to alleviate or keep at bay the difficulties thrown in one's path. By pleasing the gods and attracting their attention, one compels them to respond to one's acts of worship and self-sacrifice.

(When I keep vrats I say) 'O God, I am keeping a vrat - I have to endure some difficulties for a little while,' so the one who is above (God) will solve my problems - 'because this woman underwent some hardship, let us help, give some assistance'. Whichever goddess or god we may do a special pūjā to or keep a vrat for, they will come to our aid - and they will help our children too. Suppose some trouble afflicts us - 'Are bapre! My life will leave me!' [During] whatever pūjā I do I will [recite in my mind]: 'I am daily remembering you, I am doing your vrat - so make my troubles go far.' I don't know who (which god) stands up and answers my call, makes my troubles go away.

[In our village] children, after taking a bath, daily give one loṭa of water to Sūrya Nārāyaṇ. So he also then blesses our children, wherever they may be, (saying) 'May you remain happy, may no enemy kill you, may no confrontation take place, may you not be cheated, may you come and go peacefully.' For that itself everyone does pūjā, gives water; for that itself they keep vrats too - to cut off sorrows.

### Neerja

Neerja, aged 22 when I met her, was an unmarried Pahari Brahman living at home in the hill town of Mussoorie, north of Delhi. She has a Master's degree in English and was teaching Hindi at a private school while her parents sought to find her a suitable husband. Neerja was one of my Hindi teachers during a summer I spent in Mussoorie. She helped correct the translations of vrata kathā books that I was working on at the time. Inevitably there transpired discussions about vrats and eventually I undertook formal interviews with both Neerja and her mother. Neerja's profile is the only non-Banarsi one among my "core" interviews. I have included her profile because among the young, unmarried vrata-observing women I interviewed, she was the one I got to know the best and so I have a stronger sense of her life history and her views on various topics.

Neerja and her mother described themselves as "Sanātani." Her own istadevtas are Śiv and Rām (while her mother said that she had no favoured deity). Her family has a shrine in their home - to "all the gods" (Rām, Kṛṣṇa and Radhā, Śiv and Pārvatī, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, Brahmā, Gaṇeś, Devī (Durgā), and Sarasvatī). She does not perform a regular pūjā at home because both her parents, separately, do a pūjā for between 15 and 40 minutes morning and evening. She says the Gāyatrī mantra occasionally, "when tired, tense

or when having problems - but not often." She said that this mantra brings her inspiration and peace of mind. Neerja learned the mantra from her mother and neither of these women subscribed to the orthodox view that women do not have the authority to say a vedic mantra, like the Gāyatrī mantra. Neerja goes to the closest Hindu temple on Tuesdays and festival days. When she was younger she went on pilgrimage with her parents to the nearby towns of Rishikesh and Haridvar. Both towns are the site of many temples and ashrams, and both have attracted numerous pandits and ascetics. When I asked Neerja if she had or wanted to have a guru she replied that her parents were her guru - and so were books.

Neerja said that she believes in the existence of prets, bhuts, and brahms and "very much" in the doctrine of karma and punarjanma. She and her family also believe in astrology; "I'd like to consult an astrologer to know about my future," she said. But she did not think that there were any 'good' astrologers in the area and she asked me to refer her to one in Banaras. Neerja's family was especially concerned about her slightly mentally-retarded sister and they wanted some good advice about how to help her and forecasts for her future. Their family pandit of ten years had not proved to be sufficiently helpful to them in solving this daughter's problems.

Neerja has observed four different vrats: Śivarātri, Navarātri, and Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī on a regular basis since childhood, and Śravaṇ Somvār from time to time. At the moment, Neerja rates all the vrats she has kept as equally important. After she gets married, she will take up more vrats for her husband and any children she might have.

Since I was interested in the perceptions that women had of any correlation, positive or negative, of frequency of vrāt observance and age, I asked Neerja (and other women) if they thought older women observe more vrats than younger women. Neerja thought that older women probably do keep more vrats, "widows especially." While certainly not uniformly the case, the general perception of younger women, both married and unmarried, is that older women perform more vrats than younger women. However, this is not borne out by the responses of older women.<sup>21</sup> For example, Nirmala (65) and Gulab (66) both widows, and Sartarji (71), still married, said that they had observed more vrats when they were younger. Gulab explained that she is weaker now; "most vrats I keep nowadays are for my sons." In analyzing the comments of women on this issue I found that many of the

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<sup>21</sup> Among the 21 women who answered this question, seven felt that older women observe more vrats, nine said that younger women keep more vrats than older women, and five women thought that the number of vrats observed stays essentially constant throughout a woman's life.

younger women, still in the midst of caring for children and managing a household, experience the relentless limitations on their time and look to the future when some leisure time may reemerge and they can focus on the pursuit of self-directed religious activity. Besides this, their own deaths seem remote. Other women, especially the older ones, understand that as a woman ages and begins to experience physical infirmities, activities like fasting become more difficult. Observing vrats is no longer within the realm of their abilities, even if the time is there. While widows are expected to concern themselves primarily with such religious practices, those I knew had turned more to prayer and meditation. Some women, however, spoke not about older or younger women observing more or less vrats, but about the importance of persevering with those vrats that for women (married and widowed) are felt to be reflective of their responsibilities as women.

Neerja gave me a detailed description of Śivarātri, a vrat which she said had always been observed in her family. She started when she was very young - watching her parents do it and then gradually beginning to participate. Neerja saw that "it was part of dharm, and that it brought a different kind of peace and satisfaction" to her parents. On the morning of Śivarātri, when they get up, each family member takes a bath and puts on clean clothes. Then each

person does his or her own pūjā (Neerja initially sat with her mother, and then when she became a teenager she started to do it herself). The pūjā involves lighting incense and sometimes dīp, and then sprinkling a little water, milk, sandal, red tumeric, flowers, fruit, bel patra (basil) and sweets on the mūrti. This is followed by an āratī accompanied by the uttering of verses in praise of Śiva. Neerja learned some of the verses from her mother, and others she learned from a book. After the āratī Neerja goes to the temple in the morning or afternoon with her family. One person brings a thali filled with the pūjā offerings and a copper loṭa of water. They are not supposed to eat anything before going to the temple. They do exactly the same pūjā at the temple. The reason they go to the temple and repeat the pūjā, she said, is because the food and money that is offered can then be redistributed by the temple committee to poorer people. The family receives some prasād and goes home. At home they can drink tea and milk and in the evening, after saying a few more prayers, they can eat only fruit, potato, coconut, and caulai (a green leafy vegetable). The main food restriction for any vrāt, Neerja affirmed, was that one could not eat anāj (literally "grain," but in the context of vrats usually understood to include a wider array of foods). She provided a rational reason for not eating anāj, explaining that "it is good for



the stomach to have a break from these harsher foods."

When I asked Neerja how she would define a vrat she said that it was for santos (satisfaction, happiness). "It involves sacrifice, which is connected to dharm." "Yes, it is following dharm," she concluded.

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Each of the six women profiled in this chapter takes the vrat tradition seriously and has confidence in the efficacy of these rituals. Vrats form a significant part of their cultural (as Indians and Hindus) and social (as women) identity. Lakshmi is well-educated and perceptive. While her experience of the non-Hindu and non-Indian world is limited, she is aware of other possibilities; other ways of life and points of view. She is firmly committed to the traditions of her ancestors, which includes the observance of many calendrical vrats and festivals. Yet, that commitment is not "blind" for she tries to find explanatory models from within Hinduism that give a rational basis for the various rituals and religious practices. She has thought deeply about the meaning of the vrat tradition, and has found their self-disciplinary features to be of great significance to her own spiritual development.

Vina's spiritual formation and self-understanding is shaped by centuries of brahmanic traditions which she does

not seriously question, even if, as she has aged, she has begun to feel some unease with these traditions. She adopted her performance of vrats as a matter of course; these rituals were expected of married women, so she performed them. However, Vina sees, through her daughter and daughters-in-law, that drastic changes are occurring in the "way of life" for women, and she is not certain that rituals such as vrats will survive such changes.

Vina's daughter, Pratibha, educated in a large national university, speaking some English, living with a relatively secular husband in a nuclear family, and in several different urban localities, is between two worlds - but seems comfortably so. The environment of her childhood undoubtedly continues to exert a strong influence on her so that she still feels an attachment to rituals like vrats, and feels respect for genuine piety. Yet, unlike her mother, Pratibha has had to make an effort to relearn some of the vrats and for the most part has to perform them on her own, without the support and companionship of other women. Thus, while she observes fewer vrats than her mother did, she probably keeps them with greater conviction.

Snehalata is probably the most pious woman among the women profiled. Since her mother-in-law died and her children have now left home, there is no longer a buffer between herself and her difficult husband. In drawing on

her own resources to cope with the strained marriage and the demands of her husband, Snehalata has turned to her faith as a source of strength and consolation. While she claimed that women do not perform vrats for their own desires, it became clear that the vrats she keeps have come to be predominately an expression of her faith in Durgā and Śiva; and that such faith is rewarded with feelings of peace and satisfaction.

Shyamdevi is illiterate, poor, and has been confronted with continual hardship; but, her sense of humour, the support of kin and the esteem in which she is held in her village community have helped to develop her self-confidence. She has a clear sense of herself and her place in the religiously defined cosmos. Shyamdevi is impelled neither by a particularly strong sense of tradition or of piety or faith in God. Rather, it is the practical and instrumental nature of vrats that she emphasized: vrats are a means to solve, lessen or prevent various problems that arise in one's life, due in large measure to the workings of karma and fate. The point of vrats is to please the gods so that in turn they will feel inclined to help one out.

Neerja is, in some ways, a young version of Lakshmi. She is well-educated though, unlike Lakshmi, she has had extensive contact with foreigners. She comes from a religious and fairly orthodox Brahman family. Neerja does not

now question that her primary role will be that of wife and mother, and she sees vrats as very much a part of that role. But with her rationalistic mind, vrats will have to prove themselves a 'good' thing in various ways for her to assume more of them, and to continue performing vrats down the years. That is, Neerja will have to find an intellectually and personally satisfying meaning in the vrat tradition for her to follow through their performance.

We will learn more about these women in the ensuing chapters as I go on explore their reflective self-understanding of how vrats are situated for them within the continuum of related Hindu religious practices. In particular, it will be apparent that these women are not merely motivated to observe vrats for suhāg or from a sense of duty, but that vrats provide the opportunity for women to achieve individual spiritual development and peace of mind.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WOMEN AND VRATS IN BANARAS II

#### SETTING THE PARAMETERS

This chapter explores the "parameters" of the vrat tradition from the points of view of the women I interviewed in Banaras by presenting women's responses to such questions as the difference between a vrat and a festival, a vrat and a fast, and one vrat and another. I also examine women's views on the issue of entitlement to perform a vrat and the circumstances under which women discontinue the vows. The chapter following then describes the components that make up the procedure of a vrat. In both chapters (dharmaśāstric) precept and (Banarsi women's) practice are juxtaposed so that we can see points of convergence and divergence.

#### Vrats and Festivals

In one of her comments quoted in chapter four, Pratibha emphasized the "interconnectedness" of vrat and tyauhār (festival), describing vrats as a form of "entertainment for the ladies." But she also later affirmed that they were "different"; "a tyauhār is a 'festival' - one puts on nice

clothes, makes nice food. But there may be a vrāt on the tyauhār day, or the other way around." Modern vernacular literature on vrats, just like its Dharmaśāstra antecedents, often groups together festivals and vrats under the same descriptive rubric ("vrāt, parv aur tyauhār"). In many instances, the actual descriptions of either rite are virtually indistinguishable. Since men and women I met, like Pratibha, also often spoke of them together, I wanted to know how the women I interviewed would explain the difference and/or relationship between vrāt and tyauhār. "There is a strong connection between vrāt and dharm,"

Lakshmi began;

Vrāt is a personal thing. Look, what worshipping is done, what fasting is done - these are all for one's own life. But festivals are more social - we celebrate [festivals] by mingling together. ... The primary difference is this - vrats are personal, festivals are social ("sāmājik"). And then some [vrats and festivals] are together. Take, for example, Śivarātri - it is celebrated on the occasion of Lord Śiva's wedding, so everyone celebrates with joy. The birthday of Kṛṣṇa is also a (major) event, so everyone celebrates it. But, for instance, Tij, Karva Cauth, Jivit Putra, Gaṇeś Caturthī - all these are [observed] out of one's desire for [specific] wishes. There is no compulsory rule that everyone should observe a vrāt on Janmāṣṭamī and Śivarātri ... everyone gets together and celebrates [these occasions] joyfully.

Lakshmi opened by associating vrāt with dharm and emphasizing the personal nature of vrats: "for one's own life" (even while the ostensible beneficiary is someone else). In other words, vrats are an extension of one's personal reli-

gious obligations, and/or an expression of one's personal faith. By contrast, festivals are social; an expression, perhaps, of collective faith. They are occasions to celebrate together with one's family and larger community. Some of these occasions, however, are both vrats and festivals. Lakshmi mentions Śivarātrī and Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī - both of which are usually called vrats because observing some sort of fast on these days is traditional. (The texts consider fasting on these occasions obligatory for Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas respectively, but optional for others). The tone of the day is one of joy and festivity. Together with one's family one honours and celebrates the deity whose birthday or special day it is. As Neerja's family does, one often goes to the temple on these occasions to give dān, participate in another pūjā and receive prasād. This prasād may then be distributed to guests invited to one's home that day and/or evening for a meal and for all night bhajan singing. These acts underscore the "sāmājīk" dimension of these vrats/festivals. Through such voluntary acts and also by fasting, one may hope to receive general (or specific) blessings from the deity so honoured; or, one may simply perform these acts as offerings of praise without any expectation of return. On the other hand, vrats such as those which are primarily observed by women (Karva Cauth, Jīvit-putrika) are often understood to be performed with an

expectation of return; a positive outcome to specific wishes. These may involve festivity and group participation in some of their aspects, but they are not considered festivals as such.

For Vina, the main difference between a vrāt and a festival centred on food. "In a festival we make attractive meals - special meals. In a vrāt there is a fast. For instance, on the day of the Nāgpañcāmī festival we must eat khīr and pūrīs, and we must do Nāgdevtā pūjā."<sup>1</sup> While some vrāts do not require particularly difficult fasting, and some vrāt fasts are broken with sumptuous feasts, it is generally the case that vrāts are most obviously characterized by a complete or partial restriction in one's food intake. This is the one behavioural change that is most readily noticeable. The vrāts that Vina was now observing - like Ekādaśī - were ones in which complete abstention was required.

Such comments on the relationship between vrāt and tyauhār, and others I received, may be summarized as follows. Vrāts are connected to dharm; they are "dharmik

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<sup>1</sup> Nāgpañcāmī (Śravan bright 5) is an old festival, still popular in Banaras, celebrated for the purpose of appeasing snakes. Vina said: "By doing Nāgdevtā pūjā the benefit is that a snake won't bite us. He (the snake) knows that 'these people have done pūjā to us'; we won't disturb the snake and he will protect us." See Kane (124-127) for textual references to and descriptions of Nāgapañcāmī.



karm." Women did not mention dharm with respect to tyauhār. Vrats are voluntary and personal; they are performed for some thing or some desire. Festivals are familial; observed for generalized purposes. Vrats are mainly kept by women; festivals are celebrated by everyone, "celebrated all over India by all people." In contrast, as one woman pointed out, "Only those who have belief in vrats observe them." They may be kept alone or with others. Festivals are always celebrated with others. Festivals are marked by "cleaning and decorating the house." Vrats involve fasting - "less or no eating." Festivals involve eating, "making attractive meals," and festivity; everyone "celebrates joyfully," "visits one another." Vrats involve performing pūjā; in festivals, pūjā may be performed or viewed at the temple, but it is not always a part of a festival.

#### Vrats and Fasts (upavās)

Just as vrats and festivals are seen to be interconnected, so are vrats and fasts, but to an even greater extent. Among English-speaking Hindus that I encountered, the terms vrat and fast tended to be used interchangeably. This is true in the literature on vrats published in English in India as well. One woman I spoke with invoked Gandhi as an authority on this matter: "Gandhiji used the word vrat usually to mean fast," she said. I wondered then whether

the Hindi word "upavās" conjured a different image from the word "vrāt," and so I asked women about the difference. Just under a quarter of the women simply declared that there was no difference between vrāt and upavās. Neerja and Shyamdevi were in this group. The answers of other women tended to fall into three categories:

(i) religion as opposed to health

Again, performing a vrāt is seen to be a religious activity. Vrats are viewed as a part of dharm while fasts are related to health. Some said vrats involves a "special" pūjā (one that may be longer and/or more directed to achieving certain ends than the quotidian pūjā). A fast, on the other hand, is connected to health and healing: "An upavās is for health (svāst); vrāt has specific niyams (ritual and self-disciplinary rules) - it is also a religious observance." "Upavās is for purification of the body - especially if there is a disease; a vrāt is observed because of belief in God." "Vrāt is religious stuff," one woman said in English, "upavās is unreligious - you can keep a fast when you are sick. Upavās is to purify the body," as opposed to a vrāt which is primarily to "purify the mind."

(ii) food

Responses in this category centred on the restricted consumption as opposed to the non-consumption of food as the essential difference between the two activities. "Upavās is

complete abstention from food; in a vrat there are different kinds of food restrictions"; "upavās is fasting, no food; in vrat one can usually eat fruit, etc." Some women also suggested that a fast, being complete abstention, is more difficult than a vrat (where some food may be allowed) - so its result will be greater. That is, total fasting was seen to be more powerful, even outside of a 'religious' context.

(iii) part and whole

In this category I include the responses that affirmed that the relationship between a fast and a vrat was that of part to whole; that is, a fast is included in a vrat. One woman, after remarking that "on a vrat day there is special pūjā-path and one also fasts. This is a dharmik thing," went on to explain special circumstances that require fasting: "when an accident happens in the house - such as someone dies or someone becomes terribly ill or some other terrible mishap occurs - then on that day one doesn't eat or drink anything. That is called upavās."

Finally, I present Pratibha's somewhat eclectic comment on this issue:

Generally a vrat is observed as a fast, but a vrat is not like a fast, not the same as a fast. Some say, 'on this day we don't eat' - that may be a vrat; or some say, 'we don't put on colourful clothes' - that too is a vrat; or some time having [first] fed food to some poor [person] one will [then] eat food - that too is a vrat. ...[So vrat] has extended meanings. ... for instance, you may take a vrat [resolve] of anything - but a fast is 'purely' your own decision on any day not

to eat food. This is upavās.

Pratibha began by attending to the fact that in the usual understanding of the term vrāt, a major and obvious component of the rite is the (variously qualified) fast that one undertakes during its course. She immediately moved on to suggest that the term vrāt understood in the wider sense as a declared resolve (to modify one's behaviour in any number of ways, for any number of reasons, connected or not to dharm) may result in, but often does not result in, fasting. Thus a vrāt has "extended meanings" or describes several sorts of activities. As the particular religious observance that we have been discussing, it includes the taking on of a fast. A fast, on the other hand, unqualified by religious contexts, is the specific action of abstaining from taking food, and there may be any number of reasons for this.

#### Differences Among Vrats

Women I interviewed sometimes informally distinguished among their vrats in various ways. Particular vrats were categorized according to whether they were difficult or easy, simple or expensive, or observed alone or with others. However, I also formally asked women specifically what differentiated one vrāt from another. Most of the answers that this question provoked can be separated into the three

categories of deity, time (length or date), and purpose or motive. Some of the responses, of course, included combinations of these three, and some women, while suggesting that differences did exist, insisted that these differences were in fact negligible. The various deities to whom vrats are directed was the most commonly suggested source of difference among the vrats. Neerja, for example, stated that "One vrat is for Devī, another for Śiv, another for Kṛṣṇa - they are different that way." One woman indicated the implications of the worship of one god as opposed to another on different vrat days: "For instance, on Br̥haspativār [for the Thursday Vrat]," she explained, "one should wear yellow clothes, use yellow flowers [in the pūjā], eat yellow foods." Lakshmi extended the implications that the worship of specific deities had on the observance procedures of particular vrats. She was speaking in the context of a general discussion on fasting and vrats, when she began to point out varying fasting requirements:

There are several differences between one vrat and another. Take Ṛṣi Pañcāmī.<sup>2</sup> This occurs after Nāg

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<sup>2</sup> The Ṛṣi Pañcāmī Vrat takes place on Bhādrapad bright 5. This is a very interesting vrat with respect to women because it is specifically for eliminating or mitigating the 'sin' (of brahmanicide that women 'agreed' to take on with trees, rivers, etc., committed by Indra) represented by women's menstruation. See McGee (368), Kane (149-51), and L. Bennett's descriptive analysis of this vrat as observed by high-caste women in Nepal in her Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters, pp.215 ff.

Pañcāmī and Pañcya Tīj. In this there is a special leafy green vegetable that one must eat and one special kind of rice and curd; only these are to be eaten. In Haritālikā nothing is eaten. In Gaṇeś Caturthī sesame, curd and fruit are eaten. In Janmāṣṭamī one also can take but little. ... In Ekādaśī, and Jīvit-putra there is a waterless fast. In each vrāt the importance [=difficulty and requirements] of fasting is different. So the manner of celebration is also variant. Their aims and purposes are also different; and which deity we believe in [worship at that time] [is different]. Each vrāt has its own presiding deity to be worshipped - so one has to see what that deity likes. For example, we offer belpatra to Śiv, tulsi [basil] to Viṣṇu, and ladḍu [sweet chickpea flour balls] to Gaṇeś. We offer Kṛṣṇā milk products. So in a vrāt we eat that which the deities like. (Also), in the waterless vrats there are different timings. For example, in Gaṇeś Caturthī from morning time until the moon appears one keeps a fast, then, having done pūjā, one can eat phalāhar.

Snehalata, among many others, also mentioned that the pūjā and fasting requirements of some vrats were tailored to the particular 'likes' of the presiding deity and she also gave as an example the Brhaspati Vrat in which "everything is yellow." I asked her why only yellow things are used and she explained:

Brhaspati especially likes yellow. For instance, say you like white. If you were given black or yellow clothes to wear then you will take them but you won't be as happy as if you got white. Whichever god is there one acts accordingly [pleases that god with appropriate colours, etc.]. Santoṣī Mātā is pleased only by chickpeas and gur - so these things are offered (to her), and red flowers and red clothes too. Hanumānji is also pleased with red flowers and red clothes, but not with sindūr [which is only appropriate for goddesses, since it is a symbol of femininity and saubhāgya] ... You perform the pūjā of whichever god or goddess according to their different interests (ruci).

According to Snehalata and other women, then, an important

way to enhance the possibility of achieving a favourable outcome to one's desires is by pleasing the deity to whom one is directing one's vrāt in this way - paying attention to their "ruci."

Time, or a combination of time and deities, was mentioned the next most often as the central feature distinguishing one vrāt from another. Kalyani exemplifies such a response: "Vrats are prescribed according to the dates - time, day, month - this is what differentiates them." Significantly, Kalyani was the wife of the Hṛṣīkeś Pañcāṅga publisher, who was himself an astrologer. As we pointed out in chapter two, time-date categories are the primary basis upon which vrats are distinguished and presented in the Nibandhas. Some women focussed on a different aspect or measure of time, length rather than date. That is, certain vrats are supposed to be performed for particular periods of time. For example, the Santoṣī Mā Vrat is supposed to be kept for three months or three years; the Sola Somvār Vrat for sixteen consecutive Mondays. Usha, aged 29, however, came from a different angle. She explained that "length of time (of the vrāt) is an important factor that separates vrats. For Pradoṣ, Gaṇeś Cauth, Tīj - these one should perform for as long as possible or necessary. Others one may choose to do for a specific purpose and limited period of time." While the Dharmaśāstras might

consider the last two examples Usha gave as kāmya ("desire-born") because they are explicitly for the well-being of sons and husbands respectively, Usha considered all three of these vrats to be long term; as a regular, and to a significant degree, obligatory and necessary practice. These three vrats were contrasted with "other" vrats which were evidently optional - that is, were taken on to address a particular problem or situation.

Vrats are also differentiated according to their aims and purposes. Under this last umbrella category can be placed responses that variously referred to the purpose, motive or intention of the vrat or of the votary. The category can encompass a wide range of possibilities. Since this is a complicated topic, women's motives and purposes or intentions for keeping vrats will be discussed further in the following chapters. For the moment, it may be noted that some women discussed the difference between one vrat and another principally by distinguishing among the intended recipients of the benefits of the vrat. One such response came from Rekha, a Brahman mother of two teenage sons. Her response describes what has been typified as "women's vrats" because of the nature of their (women's and their vrats') concerns.

There is a lot of difference between one vrat and another; some are Śiv vrats, some are Gaṇeś vrats, some are Pradoṣ, some are Chāth - all are different. The



Chath vrat is for the God Sūrya and one does it keeping the desire of sons in one's mind. There are only two kinds of vrats - one is for suhāg and saubhāgya, the second [kind] is for one's sons. Worship of Śivji is done for one's husband; Tīj vrat is also for one's husband. Gaṇeś Cauth in Māgh, Vaiśākh and in Bhādrapad - these (three) are all for desires of sons.

Rekha was married to a well known pandit in Banaras and, while not afraid to forcefully express her opinions, was strongly influenced in those opinions by her observant and orthodox husband. My impression was that her entire identity was bound up, to an unusual degree, by the ideology of traditionally construed strīdharm. Thus many of her responses to my questions were shaped by what she considered to be the appropriate answer within the framework of the "good wife" ideal. In other words, as she herself so succinctly put it: there are two kinds of vrats that women observe: those which serve the well-being of sons and those which serve the well-being of husbands. For Rekha, these stated reasons were exhaustive. We might recall here Snehalata's comment (quoted in chapter four) that "Our vrats are for husband and sons; there aren't any for our own desires." These kinds of statements (which were made to me by a number of women) bear loud testimony to the power of an ideology which instructs the 'good wife' to submerge her desires under those of her husbands. Women are not supposed to express personal desires. Of course, women do have personal desires, though early on they learn to express them

obliquely. In Rekha's case, she was much younger than her husband and different in temperament and interests. To capture her husband's attention and respect, she had learned Sanskrit and enjoyed showing off to me the many ślokas she could quote to illustrate a point. But the many vrats she chose to perform had also captured his attention and respect, for he admired the fact that she could fast so often (for him and their sons), and I observed that Rekha always found ways to make it known to him when she was keeping a vrat. Thus, Rekha had found in vrats a means to achieve some of the regard from her husband that she apparently craved.

#### Perceived Differences in Methods of Vrat Observance Between Jatis and Communities

Vrat is just one thing - but the Ahirs [milk-sellers] do it this way, the Brahmans do it that way... The manner of observing all the vrats is different - different in the hill areas, different in Gujarat, in U.P... in each 'province' everyone does the pūjā according to their own way. ... For instance, I do the Mahālakṣmī Vrat with ālpanā [wet rice paste]; some do it with dry flour; some don't do [these designs] at all... This is a 'vast country'. Before there wasn't the means for going here and there [travelling]; everyone was on their own [whatever they thought correct, they did].

Almost all the women to whom I asked the question of whether they thought there were differences in the way they observed vrats from the way people of other jātis or communities did,

had ready opinions to offer like Bina's, above.<sup>3</sup> As an educated woman who had travelled a little and who lived in a cosmopolitan city, Bina had noticed differences in methods of vrāt observance not only from one caste or jāti to another, but from one province to another. She speculated that this variation was due to the huge size of India and the historical fact of centuries of relative isolation at the local level. Other women also suggested that there were regional differences but insisted that there were not inter-caste differences at the local level.<sup>4</sup>

Pratibha felt that "people in the south observe vrats in a more 'pure' original way." Although she did not elaborate, I believe she meant that 'southerners' followed the textual descriptions and guidelines more closely than 'northern' women did; and in fact two other respondents, whose families came from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, also believed this to be the case. In my own experience speaking with women in Kerala, it seemed that they were more aware of

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<sup>3</sup> About one third of the women that I asked agreed with Bina that there was a difference in the way one community observed vrats from another; more than half of the respondents said there was no difference or no significant difference. Only two women out of 38 said they did not know.

<sup>4</sup> Neerja, for example, felt that around Mussoorie there is little difference in the way her family observes some vrats compared to the way other people do. "Even Harijan vrats are not significantly different - they all follow the same basic Hindu philosophy," she asserted.

the 'correct' (read textual) rules for the observance of vrats, even if they did not always adhere to them.<sup>5</sup>

Lakshmi had also noticed some regional and caste differences:

... in Tīj women [observe] a waterless fast while others take water. Some people conclude the vrat at night but we don't do that; we observe the vrat for a full 24 hours. We conclude it on the next day. In northern India, in southern India, there are of course vrats, but the manner in which they are observed is different. The method is different. Women from the Ahir jāti and those who sell vegetables do so even during the (Tīj) day so they take water (during Tīj). There is a difference in the manner of keeping vrats among Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Some don't do certain vrats, for instance, Shudras don't do Ekādaśī, etc. They mostly do laukik vrats. They don't do śāstrik vrats. Śāstrik vrats are observed mostly by Brahmans and Kshatriyas.

In response to my suggestion that Shudras do not do śāstrik vrats because they have not studied the śāstras, Lakshmi replied that this was not the case.

Now anyone can read the śāstras but the traditions are such that they don't do them. One feeling is that, 'we don't observe these vrats; for us they are not necessary. There isn't any benefit.' In ancient times Shudras could not undertake the study of the Veda; but now it is not like that.

Later in our discussion, Lakshmi explained that "laukik vrats are related to people and society" while śāstrik vrats are "concerned with spiritual things - with the Self (atman)

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<sup>5</sup> This also may be true in Maharashtra (or at least among high caste women in Pune) according to my reading of Mary McGee's thesis. Further research would have to corroborate these impressions as well as discern what happens at lower caste levels.

and the Supreme Spirit (paramīśvar)."<sup>6</sup> While Lakshmi was trying to say that it is custom and tradition that dictate which vrats a person will observe, rather than any intrinsic limitation based on caste specified by the texts (or the keepers of the texts, Brahmins), her explanations of the meaning of the terms śāstric and laukik, transposed on her earlier comments, suggest that she thought that lower castes tend to be more interested in mundane rather than 'spiritual' aims.<sup>7</sup> Lakshmi implied that one (family or jāti group) should not take on new vrats that are not part of one's tradition (samskāra) because "there is no benefit." In her view it seems that a vrata's usefulness relates to its 'suitability' to the person observing it.

Apart from asserting the existence of some differences in which vrats are observed among different caste or jāti groups, Lakshmi pinpointed differences in the fasting practices. Deriving their knowledge from personal experi-

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<sup>6</sup> I will be discussing the "śāstric"/"laukik" distinction with respect to vrats in the next section. For now, it is interesting to note that Lakshmi's explanation of the term laukik came closest (among women interviewed) to the Chaturvedi and Tiwari Hindi-English dictionary's definition (p.684): laukik means "secular; earthly; worldly, mundane."

<sup>7</sup> While there is no śāstric restriction on a Shudra's observing such a vrata as Ekādaśī (see Kane, 99), it may well be possible that they were not in fact encouraged to keep it because of the association of Ekādaśī with the higher castes. The necessity of time and expense, employing a Brahman pandit, and so on, may also have discouraged poor lower castes from keeping this semi-monthly vrata.

ence, other women who positively identified differences among castes also focussed on the varying fasting practices as the basis for these differences. For example, 26 year-old Sandhya, a well-to-do married Brahman, said:

Yes, there are differences. Others might eat prasād on the vrāt day, then later take a meal, but I will eat prasād only with the meal after the upavās is over. There are differences between jātis - within each caste there are certain traditions of observing vrats; the rules (niyam) are different. ... The vrats I keep were done by my mother; there is little difference in the method of observing - however, each person gives a personal stamp to them.

And Shanti, the illiterate wife of an indigent pūjāri, commented that 'other' communities do differ in the way of observing vrats from her own:

They do (vrats) according to their own methods and we do (them) according to our methods. Sometimes people take grains once [a day]; sometimes people take only fruit. Some want to really purify their body, mind and thoughts so they take only Gaṅgā jal. One time I saw a woman taking only cloves for eight or nine days.<sup>8</sup> It depends on their strength; how much stamina one has to bear it.

In both responses, caste or jāti custom is acknowledged, but so is individual inclination and ability. Thus, some differences in vrāt observance are due to the modifications an individual will make to any vrāt (or fast). In some cases the modifications are made out of necessity, as in the case of the Ahir women described by Lakshmi who drink water

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<sup>8</sup> Lusichinsky (Life of Women, 700) also mentions that she saw several women fasting on cloves during certain vrats.

during Tīj because they are outside in the hot sun all day selling vegetables. In other cases a woman may choose to be even more self restrictive than required in order to demonstrate her devotion, or maximize the efficacy of the rite, proving her impressive stamina in the process.<sup>9</sup> Nowadays, women may be making more and more modifications out of convenience - to accommodate the practice of vrats to the exigencies of the modern world.

#### Women's Views on the Origin of Vrats

Toward the end of chapter two, two sets of views on the origin of the mass of Purāṇa and Nibandha vratas were surveyed, one set arguing that these textual vratas were essentially constructed from Brahmanical literature, the other claiming that the texts borrowed rites from popular practices and 'brahmanized' them (with some of these rites remaining both current and 'unbrahmanized' to the present day). These views are largely reflected in the variety of opinions expressed by women I spoke with concerning the origin of vrats currently performed.

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<sup>9</sup> One woman, Kamala, told me about her mother who, at age 75, still fasts completely (nirjala) for each of the two dozen vrats that she performs each year. She has maintained this rigorous practice since she first started observing vrats as a young woman. Though Kamala had a rather complicated relationship with her mother, she spoke of her mother's 'religiousness' and stamina with a mixture of pride and awe.

All women were agreed that the vrāt tradition was very old, transmitted through countless generations. "Vrats were originally given by the gods," Sandhya asserted. "One finds them even in the epics." Vina said that "all vrats have been made on the basis of the Purāṇs," but their forms have deteriorated. Her daughter, Pratibha, agreed, explaining: "all vrats were originally śāstric - but many have become corrupted over the centuries. Those with the original stories (found in the śāstras) are more in their pure form." Gita, on the other hand, held the contrary view that all vrats "began from lokācar (popular practices) - they are not śāstric." While many women felt that all or most of the vrats that people observe are śāstric (as Sarasvati, from an orthodox Brahman family put it, "because a pandit has to tell you how to observe it properly anyway, and he got that from the śāstras"), others expressed a different viewpoint. A number of women said that certain vrats are definitely "laukik" and others definitely "śāstric," and examples of both were provided.<sup>10</sup> Most women understood "śāstric" to

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<sup>10</sup> Altogether, women listed 24 different vrats (or kinds of vrats, like "weekly") as being either śāstric or laukik. Among these, five vrats ended up on both sides (i.e., different women named these five vrats as either śāstric or laukik). Those that were designated most often as śāstric tended to be the pan-Indian and annual 'family' vrats; e.g., Ekādaśī, Pūrṇimā, Janmāṣṭamī, Śivarātri and Rāmnaumī. Those that were named laukik tended to be ones that are traditionally associated with women; e.g., Karva Cauth, Jīvit-putrika, Har Chauth and Bahula Cauth. Bina said laukik vrats



mean "based on the śāstras"; "given by the śāstras," and many took laukik to mean "created out of someone's imagination." Snehalata explained laukik vrats this way:

Sankat Cauth, Har Chath, Bahula Cauth, Karva Cauth - these are concocted. These depend on our successes. ...How they get concocted is that somebody does a vrat and it is successful; (the person) gets what she wants. Then she says (to others), 'this is what you should do' - and the vrat is made popular. If I come on a Wednesday to Gaṇeśji and do a vrat, and I am successful in what I am asking for, then I will tell you how to perform the vrat and you may be successful too.

Sarasvati felt that this process is exactly how the Santoṣī Mā Vrat (the only vrat which she labeled "laukik") caught on. The Santoṣī Mā Vrat, she exclaimed, "came up like the wind and people caught on to it." Sarasvati does not give much credence to the kind of observances practised for the following kind of reasons, 'you have to do this (rite) otherwise something bad will happen to you.' "This sort of thing usually comes up when someone gets possessed by the Devī; the person who gets possessed utters the threat (literally, fear) that if you don't do such and such, a bad thing will happen to you."<sup>11</sup>

Finally, several women, like 24 year-old Sudha, felt that any vrat can be observed in a laukik way or a śāstric

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are those which are local to the area, whereas śāstric vrats "are those vrats observed all over India, like Mahālakṣmī."

<sup>11</sup> However, Sarasvati was not finally certain about the status of the Santoṣī Mā Vrat because she heard that some people had received good results from observing this vrat.

way. "All vrats can be śāstric or laukik," Archana explained, "because there are the descriptions of them in the śāstras, then family tradition and personal variations which add the laukik content." In śāstric vrats, Anjali reflected, "the pandit does the pūjā and recites the kathā, etc. In laukik vrats people perform (their own) pūjā-path following their heart, and recite kahānis (stories) themselves." Anjali's comments summarize my own reading of the vrat landscape, as I shall discuss further in chapter six.

#### Women's Views on the Issue of Entitlement

In chapter two I discussed the issue of adhikhāra (right or entitlement) to observe vrats; a topic that always concerned the Dharmaśāstra writers. While it was not a problematic issue for the women with whom I spoke in the same way that it is in the śāstras, there are several points of convergence between text and practice here. Most women readily asserted that anyone can observe a vrat, as the texts suggest. To this many added further comments such as: "even non-Hindus do," or, alternatively, "if you are a Hindu," again coinciding with the different opinions of the Dharmaśāstras.

Other women qualified their affirmations that anyone can perform a vrat in one of three ways. In the first way the "can" was understood as "should," as in: "if you have

belief (viśvās) in them"; "if you have the feeling in your heart"; "if there is a desire inside." Or, as Snehalata put it: "To me it doesn't matter. Anyone may do a vrāt. God is one for everybody. Whoever has belief in these (vrats)... whether they be a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian... it is no problem." In the view of these women, genuine faith in the deity to whom the vrāt is directed, or belief in the efficacy of the ritual, is an essential prerequisite to the performance of a vrāt. Otherwise the ritual would be meaningless, mere imitation. Anyone, then, who has such faith or conviction may perform a vrāt. As noted in chapter four, Shyamdevi emphasized this, as did many other women. These sorts of statements again underscore the bhakti or devotional orientation of vrats, an orientation which, while present in the texts, has been particularly embraced by women.

Still other women interpreted the question of entitlement to refer to the ability of specific individuals to perform vrats. Pratibha's comment reflects this view:

Yes, anyone in the Hindu Dharm; people of all jātis and anyone can observe. This depends on one's śakti and how much 'ability' [one has] in that. For example, in the Tīj Vrat one starts the vrāt without taking any water, but it depends on how much ability you have [to carry the vrāt through to its conclusion].

Looking at the experience of her husband, and perhaps others, Pratibha saw that not all people who wanted to do

vrats or who started them were in fact able to carry them through to their conclusion. Although this is not strictly an issue of entitlement, the Dharmaśāstras in other places also acknowledge the varying "ability" that individuals may have to undertake fasts, and they stipulate acceptable concessions in the fasting requirements. Significantly, many men and women with whom I spoke seemed to think that women were more able to fast than men on a regular basis.

The third way in which women I interviewed reflected on the issue of entitlement was in terms of the question "can anyone observe any vrat?" It was from this angle that Lakshmi commented that:

Ekādaśī, Pradoṣ, Amāvasyā, Pūrṇimā, Janmāṣṭamī, Śivarātri, Rāmnaumi - these vrats can be observed by all. But Karva Cauth, Jīvit-putra and Sāvitṛī Vrat - all these are observed by women. And all other vrats anyone can do, whether they are male or female. For these there isn't any stricture against sex, age, etc.

And Neerja, making even finer distinctions among the women's vrats, said:

... only women can observe Karva Cauth, Vaṭ Sāvitṛī; girls do Candṛa Vrat (and) Surāj Cauth. Some vrats can only be done by women with sons, for the sake of their sons, like Ahoi Vrat [Aśok Aṣṭamī]. Widows with sons can observe these, but not others.

As we have seen elsewhere, women themselves often readily make a firm (and usually consistent) distinction between what I have termed "familial vrats" which the whole family can observe (and some of which are also festivals often

connected to visits to temples and larger community celebrations), and then the "women's vrats," some of which are only for unmarried girls, some for married women, and some for mothers of sons.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, I present Vina's response to my question; a response that anecdotally expressed her self-consciousness of 'outside perceptions' of Hindu women's rites:

Anyone [can observe a vrat]. Believers in Hindu dharm keep vrats. They (vrats) won't catch on to the hearts of other people; it has come through the family traditions of Hindus (who) do (these things) with faith and devotion. Other people will think that all these things are useless. 'Outside' people will not do (these things). For example, on the second day of Dipavali we worship the Govardhan mountain (which we make out of cowdung) and in that we tuck in many small pieces of cotton and plant a small tree. When my daughter-in-law who is a reader at B.H.U. Medical College saw all this she was astonished and began saying, "What foolishness is all this? Can anyone really worship cowdung too?" When my daughter-in-law who is an Indian says such things then what will others and foreign people say? They won't believe it!

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Before leaving this section on "entitlement," I want to touch on the related question of "permission." Did women feel that they had to ask permission from their husband, other male relatives, or a pandit in order to observe a vrat as the śāstras stipulate? Most women felt that it was not necessary to ask permission, and they gave a variety of

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<sup>12</sup> We will be examining the relationship of vrats to women's (maritally-defined) life cycle in chapter seven.

comments and explanations as to why this was so.<sup>13</sup> "I never had to ask permission," exclaimed the elderly school mistress, Hardevi; "In my [natal] family we were all free." Dulari, a 56 year-old widowed Brahman, stated that "vrats are performed from personal inclination; it comes from the heart," (so permission from someone else is not needed). And Sudha, a 24 year-old well-educated single Brahman whose father had died a few years previously, explained that there are days for every god and so "it is not necessary to ask (permission or get instruction) from the pandit. For instance, I observe the Durgā Vrat [every Tuesday] for myself alone; it comes from the heart." Kiran, aged nineteen and newly married, said much the same thing as Sudha, adding that one could ask a pandit if one needed to know how to observe a particular vrāt, "about the details of the vrāt." But later, Kiran told me that her father had urged her to stop the few vrats she kept when she got married so as not to weaken her body (and possibly compromise her ability to get pregnant, which would reflect negatively on him).

Kiran's grandmother, whom I interviewed separately,

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<sup>13</sup> Two thirds of the women I asked said "no," less than a third said "yes," and a couple of women said that it depended. McGee, who asked the same question of her respondents in Pune with the same intent, received virtually the same range of responses that I did in Banaras. [see McGee 83-87]

told me that if the vrats follow the family tradition, it is not necessary to ask permission from one's husband or elders, but if (a woman) wanted to start a new vrat, she would have to ask first. This is probably because performing a vrat takes up a woman's time and energy and may incur expenses that draw from the joint family's shared resources. For a young daughter-in-law in particular, the use of her valuable time and energy is usually strictly controlled by her elders. Even if the new vrat the woman wished to take up was to be directed to benefit others in the family, the time, energy and resources needed to observe the vrat would require that senior members of the family give their assent. As she got older and established her authority, permission would become perfunctory. And obviously, with respect to the vrats that members of the extended family are already keeping, permission is assumed. Indeed, as I discuss in chapter seven, the new daughter-in-law will be expected to take on the family's regularly kept vrats as a matter of course.

An elderly Brahman woman, Sartarji, whose husband had beat her and from whom she is presently estranged said that she used to ask his permission to keep vrats "so that later he won't get angry and possibly upset the vrat." Here it was clear that Sartarji was not simply conforming to a traditional rule, but was trying to avoid the possible

negative practical consequences to herself and to her vrāt if she acted alone or without his agreement.

Finally, Premlata, who comes from a fairly traditional and well-to-do Brahman family, revealed something of her manipulative strategy with respect to her (late) husband when she answered: "From a pandit I don't believe it is necessary, but from my husband I certainly used to ask (permission to keep a vrāt). And when he forbade it then I said that the Lord of lords [i.e. husbands] is God. He was religious minded so in the end he would agree with me. I kept some vrāts even without asking him...", she ended with a smile.

#### Vrats and Male Family Members

I did not normally ask women specifically what vrāts their fathers or husbands or brothers performed. Instead I asked the general question; "who in your family observes vrāts?" Typically the reply was "all do," or "all the women do," but not infrequently a male family member was mentioned as well as the particular vrāt(s) he did. Here, Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī and Mahāśivarātri were cited most often; and among the weekly vrāts the Tuesday Vrat was named the most frequently, with the occasional mention of other weekday vrāts, excepting Friday and Wednesday ones. Neerja, for example, said that all family members observe Janmāṣṭamī and



Śivarātri, and that "father also sometimes does Śravaṇ Somvār. My oldest brother always keeps the Mangalvār Vrat; and second oldest brother sometimes does the Somvār Vrat." She then went on to the much lengthier list of the vrats that her female family members kept.

Lakshmi commented that everyone observes vrats in her family, but some keep one vrat, and others keep another.

For example, my son observed Hanumānji Vrat on Tuesdays [for his studies]. When he started to (leave home) then I said, 'son, now you must give up the vrat because alone it will be difficult for you to do the vrat properly.

Keeper of the hearth and the vrat tradition in her household, Lakshmi was anxious that her son in his juvenile (and perhaps masculine) ignorance of these matters would compromise the vrat, at the very least by not knowing how to prepare the requisite fasting foods. He said he would stop. This attitude towards men's performance of vrats is not unusual. As we saw in chapter three, Sarasvati was also concerned about her son's ability to keep a weekly vrat. Even though he was already seventeen at the time of our meeting, she was still not prepared to pass the vrat on to him, submitting that he may still not "understand its significance." It is clear that women view the performance of a vrat as a very serious matter. A vrat must be done properly or not at all. Pratibha, too, felt obliged to take on the vrat that had been prescribed for her husband when he

began to be delinquent in its performance. Since the vrat had been prescribed, she feared the consequences of its not being continued to its conclusion.

Aside from a certain possessiveness that Hindu women seem to feel about the vrat tradition, these examples demonstrate women's pressing sense of responsibility for the mental and physical health and safety of family members. As Veena, a 22 year-old woman married to one of the sons of a large joint family, positively and succinctly put it: "women do the protection of their families." When vrats are prescribed to husbands (as in Pratibha's case) or to sons (Lakshmi and Sarasvati) it is the wife or mother who takes it upon herself to ensure that the vrat is properly performed (or not prematurely abandoned) so that it will help bring about the desired state of affairs.<sup>14</sup>

When I asked Annapurna, a 40 year-old and illiterate married Brahman, if men could observe women's vrats, she replied that men could observe all the vrats that women do if they had time or were inclined to. She then cited as proof some of the men (mostly relatives) she knew who observed vrats. The conversation continued:

(Anne) So men can observe vrats in the same way that

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<sup>14</sup> The vrat, however, may be just one element, albeit an important one, in an arsenal of remedies. Such an arsenal may include the use of amulets, herbs, stones, and other remedies of which women avail themselves.

women do?

(Annapurna) Yes, they can. For instance women have their monthly 'dharm' [period], so men can do the vrat. ... My maternal grandfather and maternal uncle observed Prados Vrat. My father-in-law used to do the Monday Vrat. Any man or woman can do a vrat. My grandfather and uncle both also used to observe Dvitiya Vrat, Gaṇeś Cauth, Lalahi Chath. If a child has no mother than a man can do the vrats. He should do them.

The Lalahī Vrat is in fact normally a woman's vrat done for the sake of children; but in this woman's maternal family some of the men had conjointly observed vrats with their wives for the sake of their children. Among the women I spoke with about this matter, this practice was considered unusual, but not strange or preposterous. Some vrat observances require the joint participation of husband and wife. For example, Lolark Chaṭh (Bhādrapad bright 6), considered by many Banarsis I spoke with to be a "country-folk" (deśi-log) vrat, requires that husband and wife together make the pilgrimage to Lolarka Kund in Banaras, bathe together in the kund with sari tied to dhoti, make offerings to Sūrya, and fast for the sake of obtaining sons. Alternatively, these things may be performed in gratitude for having obtained a son in the previous year and to seek such blessings for the son's continued well-being.

Nevertheless, as Shyamdevi emphasized, men simply do not do many vrats, and certainly not many in comparison to women. "Menfolk keep Śivarātri," she explained, "and when they do 'kanyā-dān' [gifting their daughter the bride] then

men keep vrats. The father does it. If the father does not keep it then the brother can do it or the father's brother can." She continued:

If a child is born womenfolk are in bed for a full twelve days, if not for about a month and a half - so men can observe their [the women's] vrat(s) [during this time]. They are eligible, but they don't usually do it.

[Anne] But if some man is in trouble, what does he do?

[Shyamdevi] Well, men may also keep doing [rites]. Are! they are growing a beard? some trouble is there; they decide they have some problem; they will do some pūjā. When the problem is solved then they will shave; or, if men have problems, they will do pūjā in the temple.

[Anne] So the wife does the vrat for him.

[Shyamdevi] Yes, it is like that (yah hai).

Snehalata agreed that men can and do keep vrats, but the difference was that men keep vrats "for God," "for mokṣa," not for the sake of their families as women do. According to Snehalata, this is not their role and is not expected of them, "though they are capable."

### Leaving Vrats

Women offered a number of reasons for giving up certain or even all vrats that they had been keeping. One woman stopped her weekly vrat when she got married because she knew she would have to begin several others in her new home and she did not want to overburden herself. Another said that she had been observing the Pūrṇimā Vrat for her own

benefit, but stopped it when she had children, because she needed to start new vrats for their sake. In both these cases vrats that were kept for the benefit of the women themselves (for personal reasons) were given up in favour of taking on vrats for the sake of others. Some women said they had to end certain of their vrats because there was too much household work to do. Other women said the objective or desire (kāmana) of the particular vrat had been fulfilled and so the vrat could be formally ended. Responses that pinpointed the fulfillment of a specific objective as the reason for stopping a vrat were offered almost exclusively in the context of the discussion of a weekday vrat or the Santoṣī Mā Vrat. Several widows said they stopped some of their vrats (those specifically slated for saubhāgya) when their husbands died. The most frequently mentioned reason for giving up vrats, however, was poor health.

There are also circumstances under which a vrat should not be observed. Bajanti told me that she had to leave the Gaṇeś Cauth Vrat (for sons) because she had inadvertently eaten on the day the vrat was to be observed. She explained that once her mother was in hospital and (while staying with her) Bajanti could not find out when the vrat was, and so she ate food, thereby breaking the fast. She felt that she could not start this vrat again because it would be

inauspicious. Usha stated that, "When someone in the family dies on a tyauhār or vrāt day then the family will cease to observe the festival or vrāt for the rest of their lives, unless a son happens to be born on that very day." The birth of a son is such an auspicious occasion that it will reverse any misfortune associated with a particular day previously so tarnished. In corroboration, Bimla mentioned that "around here no one can observe a vrāt on the fifth (tithi) ... because my brother-in-law's son died on that day." Other women spoke about being unable to observe vrats for varying numbers of days immediately following childbirth, or following a death ("for thirteen days"). These periods of impurity, referred to in Sanskrit as sutaka aśauca and śava aśauca respectively, do not break the vrāt, but they do postpone its performance.

#### Vrats, Menses, Illness, and Proxies

The injunctions regarding women performing any ritual during times of "impurity" (i.e., menses or childbirth) are elaborated at length in the Dharmaśāstras, as are the stipulations regarding the use of and the authority to be a proxy (pratinidhi). Generally, if a vrāt that a woman has been keeping comes during the time of her menses, she may observe the fast and other self-restraints, but must refrain from performing a pūjā, going near the place of pūjā, or

giving dāna. In short, a woman is to avoid any part of the vrata in which her polluted state can be adversely transferred.<sup>15</sup>

A few women said they could not do the vrata at all if menstruating; they would take it up again later. Most said they would continue with the fast, but they could not do the pūjā, some adding: nor touch the mūrti or any religious book, or the tulsī plant, or go to the temple. "But you would still receive the full merit," Sandhya affirmed. Shyamdevi's niece, Lakshmi, was the only woman who thought menstruation should not make any difference: "We can do pūjā during menstruation time - after all, these things are given by the gods and the goddesses are women, aren't they?"<sup>16</sup>

For most women sickness did not seem to compromise the vrata either. "If (I was) really sick," said 26 year-old

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<sup>15</sup> See McGee (110-120) for a discussion of these textual stipulations. With reference to the texts McGee concludes that (115) "Thus states of unavoidable impurity caused by such events as birth, death and menstruation do not break a vrata." And she adds: "This opinion supports my belief that the efficacy of a vrata is not based merely on the fulfillment of ritual actions (ex opere operato), but is largely credited to the right intentions of the votary." Nevertheless, it is clear that ritual purity is still a prerequisite at least for the performance of the vrata pūjā.

<sup>16</sup> McGee (see her chapter six) found that most of the women she interviewed in Pune kept the fast when menstruating, but did not perform the pūjā, and other actions potentially capable of transferring pollution.

Sandhya, "I will leave the vrāt and start again later, no problem." "If sick, and I needed to drink medicine (during the vrāt) that would be allright," Chandralekha, aged 35, reflected. And indeed, the texts do allow "auṣadha" (medicine) during a vrāt. Lastly, nineteen year-old Kiran who, like many women, was not familiar with the detailed injunctions of the texts, nor in her case was she particularly concerned about what the pandits might say, stated matter-of-factly: "If one is sick and can't finish or do the vrāt properly, Bhagwan will not get angry, he will understand."

According to the Dharmaśāstras, vrātas (though not prāyaścittas) may be practised through a proxy. "The performance of a vrata," the Agnipurāṇa (chap.128) says, "may be delegated to one's son in the case of ill health." Other texts say that a substitute for a vrata could be a wife, husband, elder sister, brother, pupil, purohita, and a friend.<sup>17</sup> Some texts insist that the proxy be a Brahman. But whoever the proxy, the votary still reaps the fruit or merit of the vrata, if the vrata is nitya or naimittika.

While women generally agreed that a votary could use a proxy to complete the worship portion of a vrāt if she was

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<sup>17</sup> See Kane (54); also McGee (chap.6). In my sample, husbands were mentioned most often as substitutes, followed by Brahman women or girls, and then by other male family members.



menstruating or was otherwise incapacitated, most seemed to think that this was unnecessary.<sup>18</sup> Forty-one year-old Bajanti, from an orthodox Brahman family, informed me that: "You can't leave the vrata (if sick); you may use (your) husband as a substitute; if he can't, then a kanyā (prepubescent girl) will do."<sup>19</sup> Annapurna, a middle-aged poor Brahman woman commented that, "A husband should be the first substitute. If not then another Brahman woman who is more respected than me, or girl (kumari or virgin) can do it. (But) I have not done this; despite illness I always keep a vrata. Once started I don't want it to stop." Whether one uses a substitute or completes the fast and pūjā even when sick, the majority of women interviewed asserted that "not completing a vrata [when one can] is very inauspicious."

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In this chapter, we have seen that there are many points of convergence between the dharmaśāstric presentation of the vrata tradition and women's practice of vrats. Women view vrats as strongly connected to dharm; both as an expression of personal religious obligations and of faith.

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<sup>18</sup> Less than a third of the women I questioned had actually used a proxy.

<sup>19</sup> Prepubescent girls are ritually equivalent to Brahmins; as pre-menarche virgins, they are "pure" and so not likely to sully the vrata in any way.

Because of their ritual and spiritual context, vrats are distinguished from mere fasting (upavās), and because of the self-sacrifice (principally in the form of non-eating) and discipline required in vrats, they are distinguished from festivals. Some women located differences among vrats principally in their differential fasting requirements, and differences among individuals or group vrat observers in terms of their varying ability to fast. Indeed, many women and men I spoke with felt that women as a group were more able to fast than men as a group.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the Dharmaśāstras, women made a point of associating vrats with women; this was contrasted with the situation obtained in festivals, which do not have gender-exclusive associations.

Coincident with the Dharmaśāstras, women felt that anyone could perform a vrat (even non-Hindus) provided that he or she did so with genuine conviction. But, contrary to the stipulation of the texts, most women felt that taking permission to observe vrats from pandits or husbands was not necessary. Women usually followed their own heart on this matter, assuming that husbands would not forbid it. In

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<sup>20</sup> As the anthropologist, R.S. Khare, admitted: "Actually, women pursue more varied forms of fasting and practice greater austerity on more occasions in feeding themselves than men under the spiritual fasts. They go without salt, without ghee, without oil, without 'plough-grown'...rice, without milk and milk-products, and sometimes without any food or drink for twenty-four hours or even more." (The Hindu Hearth and Home, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1976, 149.)

fact, if anyone were to be asked, it would be the mother-in-law, the person with the real authority over the daughter-in-law. The vast majority of women I spoke with did take the guidelines governing their worship practices during periods of impurity very seriously: avoiding pūjā while menstruating, for example. A number of reasons were offered by women for giving up all or certain of the vrats they had been keeping. Fulfillment of the vrat's purpose, overwork and especially ill-health were prominent among these reasons. Many married women expressed a marked sense of obligation to continue with their regular vrats whenever possible; especially those specifically related to the maintenance of familial well-being.

The social and ideological background contributing to this sense of obligation that many women apparently feel for the vrats directed to husbands and children will be examined in chapter seven. First, in our efforts to understand the form and workings of a vrat, I turn to the individual components that constitute this rite.

## CHAPTER SIX

### PRECEPT AND PRACTICE: FEATURES IN THE PERFORMANCE OF A VRAT

Preceding chapters have included a number of brief descriptions of various vrats that women perform in Banaras. This chapter examines the mechanics of vrat procedure in greater detail. Eight features, at least some of which are common to all vrats, will be discussed with reference both to the precepts laid out in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas, and to women's actions in their performance of vrats (the practice).<sup>1</sup> The chapter will conclude with a fairly detailed description and analysis of two of the most commonly performed women's vrats in Banaras: Haritālīkā or "Tīj," conventionally observed by women for saubhāgya (marital felicity and the long life of husbands); and Jīvit-putrika Vrat or "Jiutiya," observed by married women for the sake of their children.

Before discussing individual features, I want briefly to address two related issues. The first issue concerns the

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<sup>1</sup> Each of these 'features' can be elaborated at length, both from textual sources and from anthropological research. I indicate through footnotes where some of this work has already been done.

possibility of inventing a vrāt or significantly modifying its procedure; the second issue concerns what is essential to the content of a vrāt.

In order to get a sense of the malleability of vrāt procedures in the eyes of the women votaries, I asked women whether they thought one could invent a vrāt or modify its procedures. The great majority of women emphatically responded that one cannot simply "make up" a vrāt. "Those rules (niyam) which have been made," Lakshmi explained, "to those we must give respect." Vina agreed that one cannot perform a pūjā to a method made up in one's own mind. "The rules which have been made in olden times through the Dharmaśāstras - by those very rules (vidhi) [vrats] are observed; otherwise it will be fruitless." Vina then added, "Sometimes there will be bad effects [from not doing vrāt pūjā in the proper manner]. There won't be any merit." "You can choose which vrats you want to observe or a pandit will advise, but you can't make up new rules," said Premlata. "... one has to follow established rules and śudh (proper or pure) practice."

The few women, like Pratibha, who felt that one could change a vrāt understood the question in terms of modification. "One can modify existing [rules] to our 'convenience'." Since Pratibha had lived in different parts of the country she could not always do things the way she

had done them before, and she did not have her extended family around with whom she could consult. She felt less strongly about the fixedness of the Dharmaśāstra rules than most other women I interviewed. Usha, a married Brahman in her twenties, also initially responded, "Yes, why not?" to which my research assistant, Kalpana, queried: "If you were to offer vegetables instead of sweets, could this be done?" "No," Usha replied, "that can't be done. No, according to our own hearts, no; but we do what is both in the śāstras and in our families." Then she went on to elaborate how one vrāt observed in her maike (natal family) differed in procedure from the way she encountered the same vrāt being observed in her sāsurā (husband's family's home). Usha's response stemmed from her awareness of the possible differences between one family and another, between village and city, and between less orthodox and more orthodox practices.

I believe that these women, both those who felt that one could not change a vrāt and those who accepted varying degrees of procedural modification, were responding to dual messages from the textual tradition that have permeated conventional practice. One message comes from the late vedic and early Smṛti literature and says that the efficaciousness of a ritual depends precisely on the exactitude with which one follows every detail of established method, with possible perilous consequences ensuing from any

mistakes made. The other message emerges in the Purāṇa and Nibandha literature and it says flexibility in ritual implements and procedures is permissible when taking into account the votary's circumstances, resources and intentions. Such substitutions and modifications, of course, are usually carefully prescribed, and the texts would seem to assume that a specialist (priest or pandit) would be overseeing the ritual. In the Sanskrit textual vrata descriptions the formula, "if not that (e.g., gold mūrti) than this (silver or clay mūrti)" is often given at the end of the vidhi (rubrics) description for each item or action for which substitution is permitted.

Neither in the textual tradition nor in practice, then, is there a standard method strictly defined for the correct observance of a vrata. The authors of the Sanskrit and vernacular texts on vratas reflect their own regional practices; but, aware of other possibilities, they sometimes furnished alternative methods. Women were also aware, as we saw in chapter five, that the same vrata could be performed in different ways.

In her dissertation, McGee has noted the difficulty in generalizing about the basic ritual components and form of vratas and her solution is to single out a "vrata pradhāna" (central feature) for each vrata she describes. She observes that each vrata seems to have one, sometimes two procedural

elements which stand out as the central characteristic of that vrata. In one case it is the upavāsa (the fast); in another it is the pūjā; in another it is the kathā or a special snāna (ritual bath) which is the foremost (or the distinctive) feature of that vrata.

When looking at the textual vrata descriptions one can often pick out the pradhāna as that which the text pays most attention to in its description. In practice, the pradhāna is not always obvious from observation. One must ask the votary what she considers to be the most important feature of that particular vrata. Although I did not in fact ask this specific question of the women I interviewed, some women offered statements that seem to support the idea of a vrata pradhāna for at least some of the vrats which are observed. One woman, for example, told me that, "on the Somvati Amāvasyā day the snāna (ritual bath) is the most important" (element of the vrata).

Possibly because there are different vrata pradhānas for different vrats, the women I interviewed found my question, "what is the central feature of a vrata?" too general. Even when I prompted "the saṅkalpa?, the pūjā?, the fast?," the responses were usually short or simply affirmative of whatever I suggested. Several women refused to say of vrats in general that one feature was of central importance, or more important than another. However, in analyzing the



longer responses, "faith" or "belief" emerged as pivotal because it provided the impetus for or made sense of all the other ritual components. Several women also singled out the pūjā as being very important, which is understandable as the vrat pūjā is the primary ritual form of the votary's devotional expression. I now turn to an examination of the saṅkalp, the pūjā and other features that may be included in the performance of a vrat.

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#### (1) The Vrat Saṅkalp

One of the first ritual components of the vrat is the saṅkalpa.<sup>2</sup> A saṅkalpa is the formalized rite of self-identification - uttering the full details of one's lineage - and the statement of intention. The historian of religion C. Diehl, in his important work on Hindu ritual, explained that the saṅkalpa "preserves to the karma (ritual act) a character of efficient instrument (the formulation of the 'intention' comprises also the result the worshipper has in mind), even if surrendered to the will and pleasure of [the deity]."<sup>3</sup> According to the nibandhakāra Devala, "If no saṅkalpa is made the person secures very little benefit

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<sup>2</sup> Technically, it is preceded by the svastivācana (the "benediction"), the karmārambha (the "commencement of the rite"), and the snāna (the ritual bath).

<sup>3</sup> C. Diehl, Instrument and Purpose (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1956), 85.

from the vrata and half the merit is lost."<sup>4</sup>

Ordinarily, the votary is to perform the saṅkalpa on the morning of the first day of the vrata, after bathing. The Vratarāja (p.8) quotes the method of vrata saṅkalpa as described in the Mahābhārata as follows: "After observing a fast [i.e., before breakfast] the wise should make a saṅkalpa facing north and holding a copper vessel full of water [with the right hand. But,] Those who have no copper vessel may make a saṅkalpa with just cupped hands full of water." The saṅkalpa is to be declared before the sun, other deities or a Brahman priest. "In the morning before taking food, and after bathing and acamāna (ritually sipping water three times), one should offer water to Surya and other gods, and then one may start the vrata."<sup>5</sup>

Most of the Purana vrata descriptions do not actually state the contents of the saṅkalpa for a particular vrata, probably because there were regular formulas used. Under-scoring their devotional orientation, some of the Purāṇa saṅkalpas found in the context of particular vrata descriptions require the votary to express his or her realization that the desired results are ultimately dependent on the beneficence or grace of the deity. For example:

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<sup>4</sup> Devala quoted in Kane, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Devala, cited in the Vratarāja, p.9.

I salute Nārāyaṇa, I throw myself under your protection. On the Ekādaśī day, I shall keep a fast and worship Nārāyaṇa and keep a vigil at night, have a bath early in the morning (i.e. on the dvādaśī day) and make an oblation of [ghee] to [Agni]. Pundarikakṣa, I shall, with mind controlled, eat rice cooked with milk, with a few good Brahmans. May that be fulfilled by thy grace, without any obstruction.

Among the women I interviewed, I soon discovered that the term saṅkalp as a ritual was usually understood in one or the other of two general ways: (1) as just described in the texts - the formal statement of self-identification and/or intent made by the votary at the commencement of the vrāt; or (2) as a rite connected with dān (gifting) performed either at the end of the vrāt, or (as a separate ritual) during Gaṅgā-snān, or during a sponsored kathā (as in the Satyanārāyaṇ-Kathā).<sup>7</sup> Both forms usually involve the presence of a Brahman priest or pandit, but not necessarily.

Before I give examples of these two practices of the ritual saṅkalp, it is worth noting what Lakshmi said about the whole point of the saṅkalp as resolve. She emphasized that making a saṅkalp was important for all vrats. "For the saṅkalp, before doing any vrāt, I take the decision in my mind that, 'I must do this work/action (karm). Today, by

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<sup>6</sup> Because Ekādaśī is usually a nitya rite for Vaiṣṇavas, no references to particular desires are made in this saṅkalpa.

<sup>7</sup> This is the second meaning given for "saṅkalp" in the Chaturvedi and Tiwari Hindi-English dictionary (1978, p.756), viz. "saṅkalp karna - to resolve; to gift away".

performing the vrāt, I should worship this god.' When we have made the decision in our own mind then we do the puja." Lakshmi further explained that it is not necessary to make the resolve in front of a deity (mūrti):

one does it in one's mind. This much is enough. After observing the vrāt when the udyāpan [final ending ceremony] is being done then it is because of the resolve that one has completed it. For example [take] the Haritālikā Vrat - in this one fasts, performs pūjā, and then breaks the vrāt - all these one does successfully because of the resolve. When our resolve is carried out then we will fast as long as 24 hours. We won't drink water for 24 hours, so the resolve for each vrāt is essential.

For Lakshmi, the formal śāstric saṅkalpa had no place in her vrāt observance. Clearly, however, she viewed the making of a mental resolve as psychologically crucial to the successful completion of the rite, though not, of course, a guarantor of its fruition.

Rani, an elderly Brahman, summarizes the current uses and meanings of the term saṅkalp:

In this (one says) one's name, gotra, and one says: 'O Lord Viṣṇu - I am keeping your vrāt.' Taking (some) Gaṅgā-jāl, aksat, and flowers (in the hand) one releases them while saying the name of God. For all vrats the saṅkalp is necessary. (It) solemnizes the vrāt - because of that (vow) you are bound to fulfill it. (But,) we also do saṅkalp with dān-daksina; in feeding Brahmans (during some special occasion) there is also saṅkalp. And, if in the name of your (deceased) grandmother you serve a meal - in that there is saṅkalp too. In the fortnight of śrāddh [first half of the month of Āśvin] one remembers the names of one's ancestors - and then do dan. All these (practices) are called saṅkalp.

Rani did not say whether a Brahman priest had to be present

in the first 'traditional' example of saṅkalp; but certainly for others who described saṅkalp in this form a priest was required. For instance, Bina said:

For those vrats in which a pandit must come - e.g., Pūrṇimā, Mahālakṣmī, Ṛṣi Pañcamī, Satyanārāyaṇ - a saṅkalp is done. It is said by the pandit and I repeat some of it (when told). Water and flowers are put in the right hand and offered (to the deity); one's name, family and gotra are said, as well as the name of the vrata and the reason for doing it, plus mantras.

Another elderly woman, Sartarji, who had kept some seventeen vrats in her life wanted to explain to me why she had not done a formal saṅkalp: "You need a pakka [proper] Brahman to do formal saṅkalp and one was not easily available to do these things in my village (Azamgarh)." So, she had not bothered to engage a Brahman priest for such a purpose even when she moved to Banaras, and simply kept a mental resolve for her votive rites.

The following accounts exemplify the second main understanding of the ritual saṅkalp; i.e., sankalp connected with dān-dakṣina at the end of a vrata or part of a ritual like Gaṅgā-snān. Lelauti described her performance of saṅkalp this way:

...after doing the Tīj vrata (I go) to the bank of the Gaṅgā (and offer) flour, rice, dāl, vegetables, spicy salt, sweets and money - following my own peace [=whatever it takes to make me feel satisfied], and perform the saṅkalp. Then I return home and eat and drink a little. One can do a saṅkalp every day after (taking) Gaṅgā-snān (as a spiritually meritorious act).

Shyamdevi offered these comments on saṅkalp:

During Naurātri we people perform the saṅkalp in the house. We bring pure, good ghee and light a fire. We mix ghee, barley, black sesame and rice, (offer it) and ask (the goddess) for blessings. The pandit community do a lot of saṅkalp [for their clients], but we do it at home... We will offer a garland for Gaṅgā Māī to one very poor Brahman. I gave one sari, and a petticoat [for the wife of a Brahman] on the bank of the Gaṅgā.... In Satyanārāyaṇ [kathā] too there is saṅkalp. When the puja takes place then at the (specified) time for offering the saṅkalp (we) straight away give to the pandit rice, dal, wheat flour, and money - half a rupee. In Pūrṇimā it is necessary to give to the pandit - (no matter) how rich he may be and how poor we may be - still we have to give something.

Shyamdevi's niece also said that she will take saṅkalp at the time of going for Gaṅgā-snān. She will give the priest some paise (coins), he will say some mantras and put water in her hand. She will bathe and afterwards he will put sandalwood paste on her forehead (as a blessing). This action is necessary she said on the Rāmnaumi, Śivarātri, Tīj and Ekādaśī Vrat days, but optional for other vrats.

Some women felt that making a formal saṅkalp was not necessary for any vrat, while others made distinctions among those vrats which required such a saṅkalp and those which did not. Among those who made distinctions, the most commonly held opinion was that 'regular' or 'family' vrats (one woman referred to them as "nitya") did not require a saṅkalp because these are to be performed for one's whole life. Those vrats which one took up to achieve a specific and personal end, and which were perhaps time limited, however, did require a ritual resolve - to formalize the

pact, as it were, between votary and deity. Snehalata referred to these latter as the "kāmana vrats." "Those which are family vrats," she continued, "don't require a saṅkalp. We just know that this is the 'fruit-bearing' day for this particular vrat."

In the end, women were agreed on the point that by taking a saṅkalp, one's determination to follow through on the rite is strengthened; that if a saṅkalp is made, the vrat has to be finished; and that making a formal or even informal resolve, binds one to follow the rite to its conclusion, at the risk of inviting serious negative consequences to oneself or to others if one intentionally breaks the vow.

## (2) The Vrat Pūjā

As the central ritual expression of worship and devotion, deva-pūjā is at the heart of theistic Hinduism. "The purpose of pūjā," explained the thoughtful and pious Brahman patriarch of a family I was visiting, "is to bring us closer to God - by purifying ourselves and creating an atmosphere of good feeling (bhāvanā).... God is not himself affected by pūjā - we are. Its purpose is to transform us." He went on to say that there are different pūjās for different occasions, and while the method may vary from pūjā to pūjā and person to person, all pūjās have certain elements

in common, namely, the upacāras ("attendances," see below).

A pūjā of some sort to the deity(ies) is mentioned either specifically or vaguely in virtually all the Purāṇa and Nibandha vrata descriptions. The pūjā can be elaborate and expensive and comprise a major part of the vrata or it may involve a simple procedure like offering flowers to an image of the deity. The practice of devapūjā (the worship of images kept in the home) was first recognized and described by Smṛti texts in the first few centuries of the Common Era. Devapūjā gradually took over the vedic homa ritual - offering ghee into the consecrated home fire as an oblation to the gods.<sup>8</sup> Whereas by this period homa with vedic mantras could not be performed by women and Shudras, devapūjā could be performed by all. Gonda argues that "the Hindu devapūjā originally and essentially is an invocation, reception and entertainment of God as a royal guest. In its full form it normally consists of sixteen 'attendances' (upacāra)."<sup>9</sup> Many of these upacāras were originally offered to Brahmins who had been invited to officiate at a

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<sup>8</sup> Homa is one of the five daily yajñas to be performed by a Brahmana. On devapūjā see Kane, Vol.II, 705-712. For one of the earliest descriptions of devapūjā (from the Viṣṇudharmasūtra) see Kane, II:726-27.

<sup>9</sup> Gonda, Viṣṇuism and Śivaism, 77.



vedic ceremony such as a śrāddha (funeral rite).<sup>10</sup>

### The upacāras

There are various opinions among the Smṛti-Nibandha authors concerning the number of upacāras and their order of offering.<sup>11</sup> The following describes some of the most common upacāras. In footnotes I have included explanatory comments which I received from "panditji" (a middle-aged Brahman preceptor from Lucknow). The first upacāra is usually āvāhana (invocation) or svāgat (reception) of the deity, signalled by ringing a bell, blowing a conch or beating a drum. Next comes āsana - providing a cushion for the deity to sit on and padya - washing the deity's (mūrti's) feet. Water is used throughout a pūjā. "It is the symbol and means of purification, physical and mental," said panditji. It is used in the rite of arghya: sprinkling pure water on the deity/mūrti; and for ācamana: sipping water three times, and for snāna: bath/ablution.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kane, Vol.II, 730. Down through the centuries the formal honouring of any guest (atithi pūjā) was (and is) considered a sacred duty incumbent on all householders.

<sup>11</sup> Anything from one to 38 are mentioned, though five and sixteen are the most common numbers cited.

<sup>12</sup> Panditji also said this, among other things, about the significance of water: "Water cools, calms and refreshes - so should we be to ourselves and to others. And water always returns to its source - so it is the natural path from the self to God."

Following this, the deity is clothed (vāstra); and anointed with unguents (anulepana) or perfumes (sugandha). Also pleasing in fragrance, dhūpa (incense) and candan (sandalwood) may be offered, followed by puspa: flowers or mālās (garlands). Earthen lamps with ghee and cotton wicks (dīpa) are lit<sup>13</sup>, and naivedya: cooked or uncooked food, usually sweets, are offered.<sup>14</sup> Rice is frequently used in the pūjā and is thought to have a number of symbolic meanings. It is considered the basic food; "an essential part of life;" as anna or "grain" it has "the power to satisfy a human being." Aksat, or "not destroyable" (unhusked) rice, is the most commonly used kind of rice in pūjās. Important among the last upacāras are pradaksina: circumambulation of the image; āratī: circling lamps in front of the mūrti,<sup>15</sup> and namāskara: salutation. Some

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<sup>13</sup> "A lamp emits light all around, giving clarity while destroying itself. We too should sacrifice ourselves while giving light to others. The thoughts, especially desires, are the oil which is burned up to 'free' us to give to others."

<sup>14</sup> "God should be offered the best foods - foods that are beautifully cooked and beautifully presented in the best vessels - as symbols of our devotion. Sweet things are especially appropriate because they represent the quality of madhu (honey) - the sweetest bhāvanā." "God does not actually eat the foods, but in the act of offering, they are infused with God's blessings."

<sup>15</sup> "Three rounds are offered to Lord Śiva, and five rounds to Lord Viṣṇu. When performing āratī one should trace (in the air with the lamps) the figure of aum in front of the mūrti - between its chest and head.

texts suggest that if only one upacāra can be offered by the devotee, he may use flowers alone.<sup>16</sup>

Only a few of these upacāras are normally named in individual Purāṇa vrata descriptions. Bathing the deity (with ghee, water, milk, pañcagavyam and/or pañcamṛta<sup>17</sup>), anointing the image with sandalpaste or perfumes, and offering the deity flowers, incense, sandalwood and food (milk, ghee, sesame, rice, fruits, sweets) are the most commonly mentioned items in connection with the devapūjā. They are also the "attendances" which women most commonly offer in their daily pūjās and during their vrata observances.

In current practice vrata pūjās are not normally complicated, though again, there is a range from the exceedingly simple procedure of dripping water from a lota (small pot) on to a tulsi plant with a few prayers, to far more detailed

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<sup>16</sup> Kane, Vol.II, 730. There are, however, detailed rules about the use of flowers, as with other upacāra items. The Viṣṇudharmasūtra (66.5-9) "prescribes that flowers emitting an overpowering smell or having no smell whatever are not to be used, nor flowers of thorny plants unless the flowers are white and sweetly fragrant..." (Quoted in Kane, *ibid.*, 732-3). There are different grades in the merit of offering certain flowers, and these grades depend on the deity to whom they are offered.

<sup>17</sup> The pandit (above) referred to pañcagavyam (cow urine and dung, ghee, milk, curd) as the "soap" used to bathe the deity and pañcamṛt (ghee, curd, milk, honey, sugar) as the "rinse". Each item of these two mixtures is separately added and "charged" by mantras.

and time-consuming pūjās. These more complicated pūjās may be ones over which a pandit presides, complete with upacāras, homa (dripping ghee into the sacred fire) or havan (pouring a mixture of herbs into the fire - both rites accompanied by vedic mantras); complex pūjās may also be presided over by women themselves and have little to do with sastric prescriptions.

Essentially, the pūjās that women do both on a regular basis in their homes or during their vrāt observances are considered by themselves or by the orthodox as "devotional" or "purāṇic," that is, as non-vedic. When Mataji, the 65 year-old wife of a local pūjāri, and other women (usually, but not only, from observant Brahman families) told me such things as "ladies are not allowed to do pūjā" nor "touch the pūjā place," or "women can't do āratī nor touch the mūrtis," or "women ordinarily do not have the authority for havan," or "women can't say mantras," they are referring to the strictures governing women's involvement in vedic rituals laid down by conservative pandits many centuries ago. Some women, like Mataji, take these strictures seriously.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mataji's husband is the priest of a small Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇ temple. He performs the twice daily pūjā to the temple's mūrtis and Mataji helps him out by, for instance, holding the pot as he sprinkles water on the images. She prepares all the pūjā items and later carefully cleans the pots, sweeps the floor, and so on. She said that assisting her husband in his religious duties was her religious duty, and she took pride in the fact that they performed these

Others pay them lip service or openly disregard them. Of course, these same women do perform pūjās all the time, but without the homa and the vedic mantras, they are not 'official' pūjās. The clay images which they often make or buy for their vrats are not official mūrtis. The mantras that they say are purāṇic, or they are not really mantras, but prayers (expressing both praise of the deity and the votary's wishes for herself). In these ways, by distinguishing between 'official' (my word) ritual procedures and unofficial (or non-vedic) ones, women from orthodox families do not see any contradiction between what they say and what they do.

There are elements which distinguish women's pūjās from those of men during vrata observances. These include women's use of household items or symbols of them (winowing baskets, combs, bangles, toys), their far greater use than men of roli (lime and tumeric paste), haldi (tumeric) and especially that preeminently married women's symbol - sindur or kuṁ-kuṁ (red powder, only applied by women and offered only to goddesses). Accompanying many women's vrata pūjās are the creation and use of ritual designs (ālpanā) - as I shall discuss below - and the singing of songs, telling of kahānīs

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important religious ceremonies together.

(folk stories).<sup>19</sup>

### (3) Pandits, Pūjaris and Vrats

In the Purāṇas and Nibandhas the role of the Brahman priests with respect to the vratas is rarely spelled out except as recipients of (often lavishly prescribed) gifts, food and honour. Occasionally the Brahman is to be honoured and worshipped as a god - but always he is to be fed and is to receive gifts (dāna). The expression of the idea of Brahmans as gods can be found in some of the earliest texts of vedic Hinduism.<sup>20</sup> In the Purāṇas, Brahmans are frequently eulogized and divine powers ascribed to them. As Hazra says, Brahmans are called the "visible gods on earth and are identified with Viṣṇu or some other prominent deity [e.g. Varāhapurāṇa 125,169:37,34], so that any ill treatment

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<sup>19</sup> Besides my own descriptions, women's pūjās in the context of vrats and other calendrical rites are described by Luschinsky ("Life of Women," pp.644-718); Wadley (see bibliography); Eva Maria Gupta (Brata und Ālpanā), and S. Robinson ("Paradigms").

<sup>20</sup> Kane (Vol.II, 134ff.), J.Gonda (Change and Continuity, 203-4), and R.C.Hazra (Studies in the Purāṇic Records, 257-259) cite a number of passages which describe Brahmans as gods in vedic and sūtra literature. Gonda also notes the following in his discussion of the position of Brahmans: "In the Rgveda the brahman is the mighty figure who by the ritual word he pronounces and the ritual acts he performs is able to achieve supernormal and highly important objects... He is moreover the seat par excellence of speech (1.164.35), the expert in the knowledge of ritual texts (2,39,1) and of important facts, events, phenomena, or connections (164,45;10,85,3,16)..." (p.202)

of them means the same to these deities. The Brahmins are also often directed to be utilized as one of the mediums of worship."<sup>21</sup> Examples of the worship of Brahmins in purāṇic vratas include the Sarasvata Vrata (MP ch.66) and the Anaṅyadau Vrata (MP ch.70).

In practice, learned Brahmins are certainly accorded much respect and their inherited ritual status and authoritative knowledge of 'correct' ritual procedures is recognized in its place. I did not, however, encounter Brahmins being 'divinized' or worshipped the way the texts suggest (though Brahmins - men, women and children - more than any other category of people are fed, honoured and given gifts in many, if not most, of the vrata ending ceremonies observed by the women I interviewed). Nor have I come across contemporary evidence of Brahmins worshipped by women in vratas as is sometimes the case for husbands or brothers.<sup>22</sup>

I met no woman who either always used a priest or pandit in her vrata rituals, or never did.<sup>23</sup> Some women

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<sup>21</sup> Hazra, Studies in the Purāṇic Records, 258. Hazra also notes that the "later the purāṇa the greater the claim to their divinity." (259)

<sup>22</sup> See S.Wadley's article, "Brothers, Husbands and Sometimes Sons."

<sup>23</sup> This is with the exception of my research assistant who for complicated reasons (her influential father being a Marxist and atheist, her being unmarried at the age of 32)

among those I interviewed, like Shyamdevi and her niece, said that they could not afford the services of a priest very often. Besides, claimed Shyamdevi, "it doesn't matter... they (priests) aren't necessary" [for the majority of vrats that women keep].

Almost all women regularly called on a priest to be present at some vrats, but not for others.<sup>24</sup> As indicated, most women agreed that when one was ready to end any vrat, the pandit should be called to preside over the udyāpan ceremony, formalizing its completion. Weekly vrats do not usually involve a priest coming to the home, but women often go to the temple associated with the particular deity worshipped on that day, to take darśan, watch a pūjā being performed, be involved in a pūjā presided over by the temple pūjāri, or to give money to the temple. On the whole, calling the pandit to the home to perform the pūjā, recite the kathā, and so on, renders that vrat more 'śāstric,' that is, more like the Purāṇa and Nibandha descriptions. But, in many vrats performed only by women, women preside over the whole rite themselves, acting as both

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felt ambivalent about Brahman priests and about her vrat observances in general.

<sup>24</sup> The Satyanārāyaṇ Kathā (Vrat) was specifically mentioned by several women as an occasion when the pandit needed to be called in order to say the katha, the 'pradhāna' of this particular observance.



officiant and participant, as in the Jiutiya Vrat described at the end of this chapter.

Some researchers have suggested that women always have acted as their own ritual officiants for the vrat rites performed exclusively by women. Sandra Robinson, for example, has argued this position and noted further in regard to the Itu Vrata that the situation is beginning to change as priests are starting to offer their services to women clients. She writes: "The traditional priestly disdain for vratas as a collection of trivial women's customs has recently given way to priestly appropriation of the practices."<sup>25</sup> In contrast, McGee says that women are starting to be their own priests because of the availability of vrat pamphlets. Vrat pamphlets "are enabling more men and women to act as their own ritual priests, and are thus opening up new possibilities and ritual roles, especially for women."<sup>26</sup> The comments of Robinson and McGee quoted here act as correctives to one another. Robinson seems to be unaware of the long Sanskrit textual tradition on vrata where vratas are anything but disdained. Further, if one accepts Tagore's thesis about the origin of vratas, one could say that "priestly appropriation" of these rites began

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<sup>25</sup> S. Robinson, "Hindu Paradigms of Women", 209.

<sup>26</sup> M. McGee, "Feasting and Fasting," 379.

many hundreds of years ago. McGee, on the other hand, seems unaware of the plethora of vrats (or vrat-like rites) that women have been observing on their own for generations (described by Tagore, Gupta, Luschinsky and others) which bear only superficial resemblances to the vratas depicted in the Śāstras and where women clearly play "priestly roles."

#### (4) The Vrat Dān-Dakṣina

Dān is the practice of giving of gifts (prestation) to one's ritual equivalents or superiors, such as priests, usually for services rendered. The practice of dān has a long history in the religious traditions of India.<sup>27</sup> There seems little doubt, however, that the range and number of gifts prescribed in the Purāṇas (often in the contexts of vrats) are significantly higher than that prescribed in earlier texts.<sup>28</sup> The later Smṛti and Nibandha writers go into much more detail than earlier writers concerning the qualifications of the donor and donee, the kind of gifts that were appropriate and inappropriate according to various

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<sup>27</sup> On the history of dāna consult Kane, Vol.II, 837-888; J.Gonda Change and Continuity, 222-226.

<sup>28</sup> The multiplication of gifts in the purāṇic vrats, Hazra contends, "stands in striking contrast to the simple priestly fee prescribed in the ṣaṣṭhi-kalpa of the Manava-gr̥hya-sūtra... This ṣaṣṭhi-kalpa, which is almost a regular vrata... is meant for the attainment of progeny and wealth, and in it the priestly fee is only a cow and a bull." (Studies in the Purāṇic Records, 256)

circumstances, the place and time that were suitable, and the merits that could be accrued.<sup>29</sup> Some of the mahādānas (great or major gifting rites) described in the Purāṇas themselves sound like vratas.<sup>30</sup>

The making of donations was considered an important way of leading a religious life in the present Kali age (see Kurmapurāṇa, 1,28,17). The recipients of dāna were often mathas (monasteries) or temples, and donors were kings, queens, landowners or merchants who wished to patronize a certain matha or sect or who simply desired to acquire the merit associated with generous donations. However, in the purāṇic vratas it is the Brahmans who are the most frequently cited recipients of the gifts and often the word brāhmaṇa is qualified by "good" or "free from hypocrisy" or "learned in the vedas."

In the Purāṇa and Nibandha texts the votary is warned

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<sup>29</sup> Devala quoted by Hemādri (see Kane, Vol.II, 847) classifies gifts into three groups: (i) "best" - food (ghee, sesame, curds, honey), protection, cows, land, gold, horses and elephants; (ii) "middling" - learning, house for shelter, domestic paraphernalia (like cots), and medicine; and (iii) "inferior" - shoes, swings, carts, umbrellas, vessels, seats, lamps, wood, and fruit.

<sup>30</sup> For example the Gosahasra-Mahādāna involves a three day fast on milk, the donation of ten painted and ornamented cows, the making of a golden image of Nandi and the uttering of mantras glorifying the cow. The merit of performing this mahādāna is that the donor "would dwell in the world of Śiva and would save his pitṛs and his maternal grandfather and other maternal relatives." (see Kane, Vol.II, 871-877)

not to be miserly in his giving. One resorting to vitta śāthya (spending less money than what is allowed by one's income) "with regards to gifts is doomed to hell."<sup>31</sup> Yet some leeway is allowed for many of the descriptions of the gifts are appended with a statement of the sort "or according to his means," or "unless the votary is poor, then one (e.g., cow) is enough."

All the women I spoke with indicated that the giving of dān was an important feature of one's religious life (a dharmik karm) in the context of vrāt rites as well as on other occasions. Several women referred to the act of giving dān as "dān puṇya" - meritorious giving. Vina told me that there are certain days on which the giving of dān (in the general sense of donation) is especially meritorious, and she listed Makar Saṅkranti (the winter solstice festival), Acala Saptamī, Vāman Dvādaśī, and Rāmanavmī. She said that on Rāmanavmī some wealthy people give dān for decorating the temple and for prasād, to be distributed after the pūjā. Other women also mentioned Makar Saṅkranti and the period of an eclipse as occasions [other than vrats] for "dān puṇya."

The majority of women expressed the view that it was necessary to give dān for all one's vrats, but especially

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<sup>31</sup> Banerjee, "Purāṇic Basis of the Vratas", 37.

such vrats as Ekādaśī, Pūrṇimā, Tīj and Karva Cauth. Other women felt that one should give dān in some vrats, but it was not necessary in others, such as Jiutiya and Ḍala Chaṭh (both women's vrats performed for the sake of children). One woman said that it was not "mandatory" though the "straight" (i.e., orthodox) always give it during vrats. Sandhya was of the opinion that what was really necessary in a vrat was for the richer votary to help the less fortunate. She herself gave cooked meals to the needy on most Thursdays when she kept the Bṛhaspati Vrat.

In discussing a particular vrat that they observed women would tell me specifically what they would give as dan (and to whom). Common items were grain, lentils, ghee, fruit, sweets, cooked food (either as a meal - bhojan - or to take away), and money. Nothing more elaborate was usually given during the regularly occurring vrats. For the udyāpan ceremony, of course, more expensive and imperishable as well as perishable items are given. With respect to the kind and amount of vrat dān in general, a few women said that there were specific rules to follow, while others said that what was important was to "follow your feelings," to "follow one's heart's desire."

Most women gave the dān to "the pandit" or to "a Brahman," although one woman remarked that "but nobody is brahman these days... [so] one should give to the poor,

disabled and worthy Brahmins." Others also added that one should (or that they did) give to the poor or disadvantaged. Twenty-two year old Veena expressed the view that "we should give dān to the blind, the disabled, the lame, and to poor Brahmins too. In this way (the giving of) dān is fruitful. If you give alms to such people you will be benefitted by their blessings. There won't be any benefit from giving dan to rich people." Finally, Savitrī emphasized that while it is necessary to give dan, "to me what is more important and satisfying is that one derives satisfaction from it and that the giving is sincere."

(5) Pāraṇ and Udyāpan - the vrat-ending ceremony

The vrat pāraṇ is the ritual that marks the conclusion to the fast. The ceremony usually involves the feeding and giving of gifts to Brahmins. The Vratarāja suggests that "At the end of a vrata one may feed fourteen, twelve, five or three Brahmins according to one's means and offer dakṣina." Other recipients are possible, depending on the vrata, such as neighbours, poor people, Brahmin boys, unmarried girls (kanyā). The udyāpana is a more elaborate ceremony when one has completed a cycle of a vrata that one has vowed to undertake, or when one no longer has the ability to carry on the vrata.

Again, virtually all the women that I interviewed

agreed that in order to leave a vrāt one must perform an udyāpan ceremony. Many of the younger women had not yet performed one because they were still keeping the same vrats which they had started. They were thus somewhat vague about the details and said that when the time came they would call the pandit and he would direct them; "whatever things will be required I will collect, and I will have the ceremony performed through him." Women who had performed an udyāpan gave general or specific descriptions for particular vrats. One woman who had stopped all her vrats said: "There is a big pūjā in which having brought together all of the vrāt things one performs hom-havan, ... and one gives clothes and dakṣina to a Brahman, feeds him and in front of the fire one says to the Brahman, 'now I am not (continuing) this vrāt.' Then the Brahman gives you permission to stop doing it. This itself is the udyāpan." For her Santoṣī Mā Vrat udyāpan one woman said that she fed seven Brahman boys with puri, curried chick peas, rice pudding and bananas. She said that no money is given for dakṣina because the boys may go to the bazaar and eat sour foods and therefore ruin the effect of the udyāpan. Her comment about sour food refers to the central fasting requirement of this vrāt - the avoidance of all 'sour' foods, because, as she said, Santoṣī Mā does not like sour foods. In another example, Gulab told me that for the Karva Cauth udyāpan, which she performed at

the first Karva Cauth day after her husband's death, she gave paise in a karva (pot) to fourteen Brahman women. To one of these women she also gave earrings, a nosering, anklets, a sari, blouse and petticoat.

(6) The Vrat Upavās

The term "upavās" is conventionally translated as "fast," but it has always had an additional ritual or religious significance. The word is made up of the verbal root vās meaning "to dwell" plus the prefix upa meaning "near." It originally referred to certain actions of the yajamāna (the sponsor of the sacrifice) during the performance of the sacrifice. Specifically, it referred to the requirements that he stay near the sacrificial fire at night and fast.<sup>32</sup> However, the fast did not only mean refraining from food and drink - it also meant refraining from sensual gratification in general. This more general sense of fasting was reinforced and amplified in the context of vratas by the Smṛti writers, such that by the time of the Vratarāja one finds a section called the "dharma of upavāsa" with the same sorts of ethical injunctions governing the faster's behaviour that one finds under the "dharma of the vratin." (Indeed the words are often used interchangeably in

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<sup>32</sup> M.Monier Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, s.v. "upavāsa" (206); and McGee, 189, n.113.



the VR.) For example, the Vratarāja (p.12) says, "Now we will explain the dharma of upavāsa according to Kātyāyana and Vasiṣṭha: [he] who avoids bad actions and lives by good qualities (guṇa), [who] is not attached to worldly things is called upavāsah." The author then explains what is meant by guṇa according to various sources before adding that "living without eating" (nirahārā- vāsthānamātram) is also the meaning of upavāsa. The Vratrāja (pp.12-13) also discusses the sorts of people the faster should avoid (liars, depraved people, and so forth); more or less the same list as that for the votary.

The Nibandha (pp.13-14) describes the actions and items that break and do not break a fast according to various Smṛti writers' opinions. For instance: "According to Devala an [upavāsa] is broken if one takes water many times, chews pan once, sleeps in the day and engages in sexual intercourse. But if feeling very weak one can drink water once, because otherwise one might risk death...." (The Dharmaśāstras never encourage extreme asceticism in the context of householder vratas.) And, "These eight things do not break a vrata [fast]: water, root vegetables, fruit, milk, ghee from havan, the request of a Brahman, the words of a guru and medicine." "According to the Viṣṇurahasya one should not 'remember' [think about] food, nor look at it, nor smell it, nor talk about it, nor have the desire to eat.

One should refrain from putting on oil after the bath, [from using] fragrant powder and oil in the hair, [from] chewing pan, and one should avoid all that leads to energy (bal) or lust (rag)."

There are specific kinds of fasts that are detailed in the Dharmaśāstras such as nakta (eating only at night), or ekabhakta (eating only one meal a day, usually at noon), and sometimes vrata descriptions will specify one of these sorts of fasts as the requirement for the particular vrata under discussion.<sup>33</sup> Other times such details concerning the nature of the fast to be undertaken are left out entirely, especially among the Purāṇa vrata descriptions.

When I asked women to tell me about the relationship of vrats to fasting requirements they would often resort to giving me a list of vrats and then specifying their particular fasting foods. "Take the Ṛṣi Pañcamī Vrat," said Bimla, "in this (vrat) there is a special green leafy vegetable that one must eat, and one special kind of rice and curd; only these are to be eaten. In Hartālikā Vrat nothing is eaten, not even saliva is swallowed. Janmāṣṭamī also requires a strict fast. So for each vrat the manner of fasting is different." Others described kinds of fasts

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<sup>33</sup> On nakta and ekabhakta, see Kane, 100-103.

first, and then gave examples. "There are several ways of fasting," explained Lelauti.

In some vrats we keep a 24 hour fast, as in Tīj or Jiutiya. In other vrats we keep a waterless fast (nirjala upavās) during the day and in the evening after performing the pūjā we eat some fruit or items prepared with grain (ann), as in Karva Cauth. In some vrats we eat fruit but not grain, as in Ekādaśī and a few other vrats. In some vrats we don't take any salt, such as in Ekādaśī, Pūrṇimā, Sunday Vrat, Tuesday Vrat.

In some cases women were not able to tell me the meaning or significance of particular fasting requirements. Others did offer explanations: "In Bahula Cauth," Sitadevi commented, "we can eat besan laddu (sweet balls made from gram), banana and other fruit, plums, sugarcane, black sesame, and halva prepared from water chestnuts. Water chestnuts grow in water, so they are very pure." She continued:

Observing a vrat is religious, ethical action. Therefore one doesn't eat grain on Ekādaśī, so that (during this period) no sentient being should be killed [because of the insects or their eggs]... During Ekādaśī life comes in the grain. If you eat grain you will incur sin (pap). ...You should eat fruit and give gifts of grain to a Brahman. That way you will get benefit, spiritual merit.

Neerja offered the medical-health view that "the reason for not eating anaj (grains) [during certain vrats] is that it is good for the stomach to have a break from the harsher foods." Others too, like Lakshmi and Hardevi, made similar claims about the health benefits of regularly refraining from certain "harsh" (difficult to digest) foods. The most

frequently mentioned food to be avoided in vrats besides grains was salt. "In whatever vrat one does one should abstain from salt. In this place (Banaras), people eat rock salt (instead)." Vindhya explained that avoiding salt was "for the peace of blood."

In sum, the most common fasting requirement among the women I spoke with is for the votary to avoid salt and/or ann or anaj (wheat, barley, rice and lentils) or, put differently, to take only phalāhar. The anthropologist J.Parry has noted that phalāhar is "the food par excellence of the ascetic" which

typically consists of fruit, as the term itself suggests; but the category also includes wild rice (teni caval) and wild vegetables, as well as preparations made from the flour of water chestnuts (which are rated as a kind of cereal), or to which naturally occurring rock salt (sendha namak) has been added. The crux of the matter is that phalāhar excludes all crops cultivated by the plough.<sup>34</sup>

There are at least four reasons for the votary to avoid foods cultivated by the plough: (1) the act of ploughing kills insects, and, as Parry suggests, is an act of violence against the earth; (2) grains can contain insect eggs; (3) the traditional requirement of the ascetic, once he had

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<sup>34</sup> Parry, "Death and Digestion: The Symbolism of Food and Eating in North Indian Mortuary Rites," Man (20:4, 1985) p.613, ft.1. Parry's article contains much interesting information on Indian food categories and codes, as do the books by R.S.Khare: The Hindu Hearth and Home and Culture and Reality.

renounced the domestic hearth, was to forage for food - to subsist on the wild roots and fruits that could be gathered in the forests. This was one way in which the votary was to imitate the ascetic life-style. Finally, as Parry puts it, "Cultivated grain (and more especially rice) is the prototypical food, and abstention from food is above all an abstention from grain."<sup>35</sup>

Hindus interviewed in Banaras also considered fresh milk and milk products, ghee, sugar, potato, and caulai (grain from the amrinthus plant) as phalāhar. Phalāhar is preeminently sāttvik food and is therefore also conducive (in a substantial way)<sup>36</sup> to the spiritually attuned state appropriate to the votary. These foods are considered "cool" foods that "dampen" the passions and the appetites. Altogether, then, fasting foods serve to purify, pacify, and clarify the mind and body of the votary. As Hardevi said to me: "I never take anaj on vrāt days, only fruit and milk. It keeps the stomach healthy, it purifies the body, and mentally too we get peace of mind, we can concentrate better and our thoughts become pure."

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<sup>35</sup> Parry, "Death and Digestion," 613.

<sup>36</sup> "One who eats not only absorbs the qualities of the cook, but also the intrinsic properties of the food itself. In Hindu culture, a man is what he eats. Not only is his bodily substance created out of food, but so is his moral disposition..." Parry, "Death and Digestion," 613.

Many vrats are ended with special festive preparations which will usually have been offered during the vrat pūjā and which are then distributed to family members as prasād. These commonly include puri (fried bread), and one or more of such sweet preparations as halva and khir. A votary who breaks her fast with prasād will still retain her state of purity and even enhance it because any food that is offered to the gods and returned as prasād is "solidified grace" and transcends the usual cultural categories.

#### (7) The Vrat Kathā

A good deal of the Purāṇa vrata literature actually rests in the form of the kathā, the "story" of the vrata. This is true of some Nibandhas as well, including the Vratarāja. Some of the recent vrat-katha literature, printed in vernaculars, is closely based on the Purāṇa-Nibandha vrata-kathās. The Hindi books of this type that I have examined employ a Sanskritic Hindi with periodic references made to Purāṇas and other "authoritative" works. It represents an extension of the Smṛti-Nibandha literature into vernacular language, and it maintains a certain stiffness in presentation of the ritual, dāna and kathā. Other paper-back books reveal a folksy, simple and parochial Hindi presumably aimed at a less literate audience. It sets in writing and captures the flavour of localized vrat rites

that have been orally transmitted from one generation of women to another. These booklets may contain both local variants of the Purāṇa vrata-kathās and folk stories that do not have such Sanskrit textual referents.<sup>37</sup>

The vrata-kathās, which in these texts may run to several pages or be no more than a paragraph, serve a number of functions. In the first place they may provide the details for the procedure of the vrata in the context of the narrative; details such as when to begin the vrata, how and to whom to perform the pūjā and ancilliary rites, which are not otherwise given. Second, the kathā may provide an etiology for the vrata. The transmission of the vrata may be traced back circuitously from one god or goddess and set of events to another, finally reaching its source. In the process familiar myths are explained in a new way, and the elements of the vrata given mythological significance. The divine bona fides of the vrata is established and the votary

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<sup>37</sup> Several of Susan Wadley's articles describe the vernacular (Hindi) vrata-kathā books and pamphlets that have been published with increasing abundance since the early sixties by many small presses specializing in religious books. Her article, "Popular Hinduism and Mass Literature in North India: A Preliminary Analysis" (1983) describes and compares the contents of nine vrata books. Wadley concludes in this article that "the variety of ritual behaviour presented in these guides far outweighs any apparent concern for standardization, or we must assume, any consensus on 'correct' ritual behaviour." (p.100)

On vrata-kathās see also Wadley 1975 (chap.4), 1983. McGee 1987 (appendix B) and L.Tewari (1991) both have translations of numerous vrata-kathās.

presumably made to feel confident of its divine origin.

Third, vrata-kathās often recount one example or episode of the particular vrata's performance which serves to demonstrate the efficacy and even more, the potential "transformative power" of the vrata.<sup>38</sup> Frequently, it also serves to eulogize the god to whom the vrata is directed. Here the stories almost read like fairy tales.<sup>39</sup> The time is vaguely in the past, the setting "some village" or forest or kingdom. The story may illustrate the great merit obtainable by performing a particular vrata, or the calamity that befalls one who ignores or breaks it, even if inadvertently. Through the (regular) performance of such and such vrata, a simple householder, a courtesan or king wins (or, in some cases, gains back) power, prestige and wealth; a mistreated daughter-in-law (the Hindu Cinderella) wins merit and good fortune for the family as well as the permanent affection of her husband. Underscoring the efficaciousness of the vrata itself, sometimes the protagonist of the kathā is described as performing the rite by accident and despite

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<sup>38</sup> S. Wadley describes how vrats are depicted as being able to transform the votary's karmic destiny in her article "Vrats: Transformers of Destiny," in Karma An Anthropological Inquiry, ed. Keyes and Daniel (1983). McGee uses the phrase "transformative power" in her thesis, p.382.

<sup>39</sup> Wadley formally situates the vrata-kathā in the genre of "myth" in her article, "The Kathā of Śakaṭ: Two Tellings" (1986), 200.



the lack of intention, the (inadvertent) votary reaps all the benefits of the vrata anyway.

In some cases the general story line and its protagonists are taken directly from the epics (or other well-known story literature). Though there may be no mention of a vrata in the older story, the vrata-kathā version places the vow into the center of the plot, where it becomes the solution to overcoming a seemingly insurmountable problem. One such example is the "Rukminī vrata-kathā" which can be found in the Kalkipurāṇa (chap.31). This vrata kathā is based on the story of two women - Devayānī and Śarmiṣṭhā - found in the Adiparvan of the Mahābhārata (chaps.71-78). In the epic version of the story the two women are portrayed as educated, feisty and independent-minded. Through a series of events and circumstances, they are moved from friendship to rivalry, and they become alternately disadvantaged one to the other. Both women refuse to acquiesce submissively to their disadvantaged state, and they find ways to overcome it, notably by quoting religious law in their favour. Like Sāvitrī, they use logical reasoning and a knowledge of tradition to get what they want. When the story turns up in the Kalkipurāṇa, the forcefulness of the women's personalities is toned down, and their place as hapless victims of circumstance is underscored. The Rukminī vrata-kathā focusses on Śarmiṣṭhā, the

underdog, and it shows how she who was sonless because of events beyond her control, was able to bear sons and achieve happiness and fulfillment through observing the vrata, taught to her by some village women. Observing the Rukminī Vrata saves Śarmiṣṭhā from "unrighteousness." The didactic function of the Purāṇa-Nibandhas is particularly apparent in the vrata-kathās whose main purpose was to show how a prescribed ritual like a vrata serves to help women (or householders in general) fulfill their dharmically-mandated duties, while at the same time modelling the form and proper attitude towards these duties.

Whatever its place in the past, today, among the vrats that women observe in Banaras and U.P., vrata-kathās are almost as central to the performance of a vrata as are the pūjā and the fast. Under the rubric "vrata-kathā" women included the type of purāṇic story described above, folk tales (kaḥānī - literally, "that which is heard") which, while recounted regularly for certain vows, may have nothing directly to do with those vows, as well as the formal Sanskrit text-based stotra (eulogistic) genre (e.g., the Śivastuti Calīsa, the Hanumān Calīsa, and the Durgā-saptaśati). The reading or telling of the kathā usually takes place during or immediately following the pūjā.

Many women made a distinction between those vrats in

which a pandit had to be called to recite the kathā (and perform the pūjā) and those in which women themselves told the stories. Examples of the former included Tīj, the Satyanārāyaṇ Vrat Kathā and Mahālakṣmī Vrat. In these cases the pandit reads the kathā in Sanskrit (often, as I saw, from one of the rectangular booklets which feature one vrat), and then translates the story into Hindi for the benefit of the women present. In other cases women either read the story out loud themselves from a similar booklet or, if they are illiterate, have someone else read it. Or, again, the story(ies) will be recounted from memory, perhaps by the senior vrat observing woman in the family, as often happens in the Karva Cauth, Bahula Cauth, Jiutiya, and Ḍala Chaṭh Vrats. Here the story line remains consistent and recognizable to everyone present. As one woman put it, "when some story is being told then the saying of 'yes, yes' is necessary" [there must be agreement between story-teller and listeners]. Nevertheless, the kathā giver may add her own flourishes and embellishments consonant with her story-telling talents.

Among the women's vrats there is usually more than one story connected with each particular vrat, and women, if celebrating the vrat together, may take turns telling the stories. The oral stories women tell are often very short - a few minutes in duration. Again, they may be versions of

Sanskrit purāṇic stories, or more local tales.

When I asked some women to explain to me the difference between a vrat kathā and a vrat kahānī, some designated the oral tales that they themselves tell as "kahānīs" and the stories that the pandit tells as "kathās," irrespective of the story's source. The act of reading from a printed text, whether in Sanskrit or Hindi, seems to give the story a more authoritative stamp. And the pandit, of course, is also a transmitter of authority. The elderly Sitadevi, whose own son was a pandit, conveyed the following reflection:

"Whether you call it kathā or kahānī there is no difference when you listen." [It is the act of hearing or telling a vrat story that is the important thing.] She then continued, "in a kahānī it is like this: 'there was some daughter-in-law' or 'there was some girl'... then they did such and such and that happened. A kathā is about God. It is a religious story, [about] belief in God."

One could say, following Geertz' terminology with respect to religion and religious symbols, that vrat-kathās provide both "models of" problematic realities of Hindu culture, and in their resolutions, "models for" orientations towards those realities.<sup>40</sup> The problematic realities described in the kathās include individual and collective

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<sup>40</sup> See C.Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" (1973).

lack of control over disease, infertility, death, the workings of karma and 'fate'. When women are featured as the protagonist, the problematic realities are often set in the context of the partriarchal and patrilineal social structure - e.g., the traumatic move from natal to affinal home; the necessity of producing heirs; a young wife's general lack of autonomy and authority along with the problems presented by her greater impurity and lower ritual status (than male and older female kin). In the śāstric vratas (like the Rukminī Vrata) the immediate solution to the particular predicament (e.g., sonlessness) is the performance of the vrata; the strategic orientation toward the problem is embodied in the behaviour the female protagonist (votary) demonstrates: dutifulness, obedience, perseverance and devotion. In the face of injustice or 'cruel fate', the heroine of the vrata kathā models the appropriate female/wifely behaviour and her dutifulness, through the agency of the vrata, is rewarded. In other scenerios, a woman is shown to be 'sinful' (rebellious, or self-centred, or one who has caused trouble through carelessness in ritual procedure) and she reaps the results of those sins by losing her husband and all her belongings, or by turning into a leprous, tortured creature. Then, through the performance of the particular vrata, she is transformed into a virtuous wife and daughter-in-law and she

recovers her husband and his wealth.

In the hands of the women votaries who tell the kathā or kahānī, without the mediation of a priest or printed text, the problematic realities depicted in the stories are similar, but 'homier' (often limited to acts of domestic life), and sometimes more patently moralistic: acts of genuine piety are rewarded; false piety/material greed are punished. In addition, these stories told by women are also less conservatively ideological in their 'models for' orientation to the problems women face. S. Robinson has pointed out in her analysis of the Itu Vrata kathā that "values taught through this story include sororal loyalty, bravery, commitment and faithfulness."<sup>41</sup> To these more woman-affirming values one could add resourcefulness, cleverness and a certain amount of defiance. Such attributes are characteristic of some of the women found in the epics, like Sāvritī, Devayānī and Śarmiṣṭhā. These stories can serve as sources of empowerment for women in the sense that they offer models of women who have confidently achieved ends of their own choosing.

#### (8) Ālpanās

One element that appears to be distinctive of women's

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<sup>41</sup> Robinson, "Hindu Paradigms of Women", 208.

vrat traditions is the making of decorative and symbolic designs out of such ephemeral substances as powdered rice, wheat flour, rust- coloured chalk and tumeric. In different regions of India such designs are called ālpanā (in Bengal and Bihar), mandna (in Rajasthan), cauk-purṇa (in U.P.), rangoli (in Maharashtra and Karnataka), and kolam (in Tamil Nadu). This art, of course, is not only connected with vrats. In southern states, for example, such designs ("threshold paintings") are made by women daily on the doorstep to invite auspiciousness. Maithili women (from eastern Bihar) are well known for the quality of the designs they create on their walls and floors for such occasions as weddings. Nevertheless, many of the vrats that women perform on their own all over the country are accompanied by some sort of ritual art even if of the most simple and fleeting sort.

There are very few references to such forms of art in the Purāṇa-Nibandha vrata descriptions. When we do find directives to make a ritual diagram<sup>42</sup> the instructions

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<sup>42</sup> For example, in the Kalyāṇīni Vrata, a thirteen month vrata to Sūrya to be observed every seventh tithi, described in the Matsyapurāṇa, chap.74, an eight-petalled lotus with eight suns around it is to be drawn. The eight suns around the lotus probably signify the "eight directions": the four cardinal points and the four intermediate points over each one which presides a lokapāla or guardian. In many vrata descriptions, the votary is to worship or pay homage to the lokapāla of each direction, beginning with the eastern direction, then south-eastern, etc.

resemble (or are of) a tantric mandala<sup>43</sup> or yantra rather than the vrata ālpanā that we see today. Tantric religious rites have used ritual diagrams for worship and meditational purposes for many centuries. Though the mandalas and yantras are generally more complex and esoteric in their symbolism and use than the vrata ālpanā, they do have certain characteristics in common. They both demarcate 'sacred space'. They are both often drawn with rice powder, and feature an intricate geometry of line and space. They share such symbols as the lotus to represent the deity. Over mandala or alpana the adept or votary utters mantras or prayers to invoke the deity.

S.K. Ray, in his study of the ritual art of vratas in Bengal, notes that "...in the religion of brata, art is an indispensable means of communication between the devotees

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<sup>43</sup> M. Eliade describes a mandala as a "circular border and one or more concentric circles enclosing a square divided into four triangles; in the center of each triangle, and in the center of the mandala itself, are other circles containing images of divinities or their emblems." The mandala is both an image of the universe and a theophany. It also serves as a 'receptical' for the gods who are invoked to enter the sacred area and are contemplated and interiorized by the initiate. There are also 'psychic' mandalas wherein the ritual diagram is constructed mentally by the adept. (Eliade, Yoga, Immortality and Freedom, 219-20) One vrata (GP 126) prescribes such a psychic diagram to be meditated upon as "over the mystic nerve plexus of the heart". Only the very beginning and the ending of this vrata description fall into the usual pattern of Purāṇic vratas, suggesting that these sections were appended to a Tantric ritual already in practice.



and the gods."<sup>44</sup> Each brata, he says, "has its own ālpanā, which at the time of its performance, is drawn with finger tips on the ground... The ālpanā related to a brata must clearly depict the object the bratee [votary] desires to have, otherwise its performance will be meaningless and impossible."<sup>45</sup> He suggests that "the purpose of these ālpanās was originally to keep dwelling place, city, or village safe and prosperous, and to make the cultivated land fertile and fruitful, by magical performance."<sup>46</sup>

Most of the women that I interviewed had drawn ālpanās for at least some of the vrats they kept and/or for other occasions such as on Dīvalī, Annakut and Bhaiya Dūj ("Brother's Second"). "Only women do ālpanās," said Gita, "they always have." "All the girls know," Rani, an elderly Brahman explained. They had all learned them from mothers or other female relatives. Other women I spoke with felt that ālpanās are not so common in Banaras as in other areas "like Bengal." "My grandparents did many ālpanās - for all tyauhārs - but nowadays fewer are done" said Sudha. I certainly did not see as many of these ritual designs in Banaras as I expected to, and those that I did see were not

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<sup>44</sup> S.K.Ray, The Ritual Art of the Bratas of Bengal (Calcutta: Firma K.L.Mukhopadya, 1961), iv.

<sup>45</sup> Ray, Ritual Art of Bratas, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Ray, Ritual Art of the Bratas, 42.

as elaborate as ones I had seen in Bihar and in the south.

Materials used for the ālpānās are ground rice, wheat flour (aṭa), roli, plain tumeric, and geru (red ochre). They may be used in a dry form or mixed with water to make a paste. A sindur bindi (red spot) is sometimes applied (by a married woman) to the ālpānā after it is made, to bless it with the auspiciousness of a married woman. Though white and red are the traditional colours used, nowadays other colours are being introduced. The designs are most commonly drawn on the ground, but also may be done on the wall "near a pūjā place," or on the door. Women were in agreement that there are a few standard ālpānā patterns (or "traditional forms") for different vrats that one could then improvise upon or embellish as one pleased. Some ālpānās are wholly abstract in form, others contain specific symbols representing the deity, auspiciousness, the married woman, children, and so on. Now one can also buy lithographs of "ready made" ālpānās in the bazaar, a situation which will serve to further homogenize vrats in India in a way that vrat-kathā booklets are doing. A few women I interviewed had bought these lithographs, others disdained them because of their "cheap quality."

According to the women who make them, ālpānās serve several purposes. Decoration is always a concern. In addition, ālpānās may promote auspiciousness, "benefit the

outcome of the vrat," "for example for children," "for sons." Some ālpanās are also specifically "for the pūjā." Karva Cauth was mentioned most often as the vrat during which one "had" to draw an ālpanā, on top of which the karva (pot) would be placed for the pūjā. One woman explained that for her Karva Cauth ālpanā she drew an image of Cand-Surāj (the moon and sun) signifying "the world," then stick figures of men and women signifying "the continuation of life", images of mountains and trees signifying "nature," and a svastik, the symbol of auspiciousness. "We apply a tika of sindur, and on top of that we place the karva. Then we perform the pūjā when the (full) moon is up."

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Having examined eight features common to the performance of a vrat, we are now ready to see (i) how these features fit together in two currently observed vrats and (ii) how they orchestrate the goals of these vrats. The two vrats which I have selected for a detailed description are both annual vrats observed by women in Banaras: Haritālikā (Tij) and Jīvit-putrika. Of the annual vrats performed by women in Banaras, these two stand out for their difficulty (a 24 hour waterless fast is required), and for their popularity (in terms of the sheer number of women who keep these vows). Large groups of women can be seen bathing and

performing pūjā on the banks of the Ganges in the early hours of the morning, when it can be quite cool, as well as at sunset during the days on which these vrats occur.

Conventionally, Tīj is performed by married women for the sake of their husband's long life, and Jiutiya for the sake of a woman's children, in particular, sons. The cultural-ideological significance of husbands and sons in the life of a Hindu woman will be discussed further in chapter seven. For now, it may be said that while vrats for husbands may have the full weight of cultural (gender-ideology) sanction behind them, I found that vrats for children carry the strongest emotional commitment for women.

### The Haritālīkā (Tij) Vrat

The Haritālīkā Vrat is described not only in most of the modern Hindi vrata-kathā books but also in many Sanskrit sources.<sup>47</sup> The vrata is observed on the third (hence "tīj") of the waxing fortnight of Bhādrapad (Aug./Sept.), and the texts say it is incumbent on all married women to keep the fast. However, young unmarried girls can keep it to get a "good husband," or, as Lakshmi put it, "to try to guarantee a long-lived groom," and in practice a few widows continue

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<sup>47</sup> For example, in the Uttara Khanda of the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa, the Nirnayasindhu (p.133), the Vratarāja (pp.103-110). See Kane's description of the vrata from digest sources, 144-5.

to observe it ("so that in the next life one won't become a widow").

One Brahman family invited me to attend their Tīj Vrat pūjā. This family consisted of a husband who worked in an office at Banaras Hindu University and is a son of the publisher of the Hṛṣikeś Pañcāṅga, his wife, Usha, who was 29 at the time and their three year-old daughter. Usha had an Master's degree in Sanskrit and was working at home. They were both relatively orthodox and firm believers in the efficacy and importance of vrats. The husband was particularly enthusiastic about my interest in the vrat tradition and seemed proud that his wife was involved in it. Usha told me that the Tīj Vrat was observed in her birth family and in her village (in Ghorakpur district) but that it was done differently there from the way her husband's family performed it. There was no priest involved in this vrat as observed by the women in her village, and the pūjā was very simple. Since it received so much attention in her husband's family she learned how to do it the "śāstric" way. The way in which this family observes the Tīj Vrat corresponds fairly closely to textual descriptions (though the pūjā described in some Sanskrit texts is more elaborate).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Vratarāja gives the Tīj Vrat saṅkalpa as follows: 'I perform the Haritālīkā Vrat so that my sins will be removed for seven births and (so that) my saubhāgya will remain unbroken and increase, and for (the sake of) love [or

I arrived at their home in the early evening. Usha and her newly-married sister who had come for the day from another part of the city were keeping the vrāt. They had bathed in the river in the early morning, at which time they prayed to Pārvatī stating that they were undertaking this vrāt and asking that it be fulfilled with her help and blessings (their informal saṅkalp). After, they returned home to wash and oil their hair. Their last meal had been the evening before and they would not eat again until the next morning. In the late afternoon the two women started to decorate themselves with the "sixteen srṅgār" - the prescribed sixteen "adornments," including items of jewelry and clothing, that represent the auspicious signs of the married women. They put red lac (alta) on their feet and elaborate henna designs (mehndi) on their hands. They put on gold earrings and a nosering, toe rings, new glass bangles, and new saris of yellow and red which had been given to them by their in-laws for the occasion, according

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devotion] of Uma-Maheśvara.' The Nibandha instructs the votary to first perform a pūjā to Gaṇeśa, then to Gaurī and Maheśvara (Pārvatī and Śiva). The pūjā described is very formal, involving all the upacāras. Each upacāra is to be done with mantras which are mostly verses of praise to the goddess and prayers soliciting her blessings for saubhāgya. All the items associated with saubhāgya are to be offered to the goddess: e.g., tumeric, kumkum, sindur, kājjal (collyrium). Each part of her body is to be worshipped. The description of the pūjā ends with the statement to be recited by the votary asking the goddess to fulfill all her desires.

to the usual custom.

Around seven in the evening the family pandit came and sat on the floor of the puja room, near a small wood table (piri) upon which stood an unpainted clay image of Śiva and Pārvatī which had been purchased in the bazaar the day before. The pandit began reciting Sanskrit mantras and ślokas and paused periodically to tell the two women to sprinkle first Gaṅgā-jal on themselves and on the mūrti, and then sprinkle flowers and akṣat on the image. Incense was lit and they each took a lit stick and circled it around the mūrti. Then the pandit put the sticks in an incense burner while continuing to recite ślokas from memory. Each woman then presented the mūrti with offerings of fruit (apples, bananas, and cucumber), sweets, a mirror, comb, kum-kum, bindis, hair pins, bangles, and cloth; and they each performed āratī in front of the image.

Next the pandit started to read the Haritālikā vyat-kathā from one of the flimsy rectangular pamphlets one finds in the bazaar. He first recited a few sentences of the Sanskrit story (taken from the Śivapurāṇa), and then explained the story in Hindi to the seated women. This lasted about twenty minutes. Afterwards, all stood up and a last āratī was performed with concluding Sanskrit mantras. The women remained silent throughout. The pandit left after being given some of the food that had been offered to Śiva

and Pārvatī. The women kept an all-night vigil (jagaran) typical of certain vrats like Tīj and Śivarātri. They sang bhajans (songs of praise) about Śiva and Pārvatī, accompanying themselves on a drum. The songs they had learned from their own mother. At around five in the morning the vrat pāraṇa (ending ceremony) began. The pandit returned and the women presented him with dān-dakṣina consisting of a kilo or two of dāl and rice, and some money. The pandit blessed them, giving the women permission to break their fast. The women then took another bath, offered soaked chickpeas to Śiva and Pārvatī and broke their fast by eating some of this cana-prasād.

### The Tīj Vrat-kathā

The kathā which the pandit narrated to the two women is the version which is to be found in many sources, Sanskrit and Hindi, with few variations. It is a well-known story which highlights the extreme asceticism Pārvatī underwent in order to win Śiva as her husband. The fasting women listening to the story are presumably meant to identify with Pārvatī's grueling austerities. Despite his matted hair and indifferent behaviour (of which Pārvatī's father Himāvan thoroughly disapproved), Śiva is considered an ideal husband because of his faithfulness and, though this is not usually stated explicitly, because of his virility. Similarly,



Pārvatī often figures prominently as a protagonist in the vrat-kathā literature because, among other things, she is an exemplary pativratā and saubhāgyavatī - "auspicious married woman." The story starts with Pārvatī asking Śiva to recount to her how she won him as a husband. Śiva proceeds to remind her of the very difficult tapasya (practice of austerities) that she underwent on the banks of the river Ganges for many years with the object of gaining his favourable attention.<sup>49</sup>

Pārvatī's austerities included living on 'smoke' for twelve years, 'dry leaves' for another 24 years, staying in water in the cold month of Māgh and surrounding herself by fire in the hot month of Vaiśākh. Eventually, Pārvatī's father, Himāchal, gets very worried about her and when the sage Nārad comes to him with an offer from Viṣṇu for Pārvatī's hand, he readily accepts. But Viṣṇu backs off when he realizes that Pārvatī was connected to Śiva in a past life as Satī and that she is intent on again marrying only Śiva. Partly to test her resolve, Nārad tries various means to dissuade Pārvatī from her terrible austerities, but she remains firm. Her father also has no luck in dissuading

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<sup>49</sup> The version of the story I summarize below is from Rampratap Tripathi's Hinduon ke vrat, parv aur tyauhār (pp.141-145), which follows fairly closely the Vratarāja version. (The full story and other variants are found in appendix B.)

her. After some time, when Pārvatī begins to feel she is no closer to her object of desire, she complains to a friend, "If I don't obtain Śivji as my husband then I will give up my life." Her friend advises her to continue her austerities in another forest where Śiva will certainly take notice and be pleased. She does this and also performs a full pūjā to Śiva after making a Śiva-linga out of sand. This day happens to be the third of the bright half of Bhādrapad. Śiva at last notices Pārvatī and decides to oblige her by offering her a boon. She asks him to accept her as wife. He does so. All the gods are relieved that she has finally ended her powerful asceticism. A joyous wedding ensues.

The lesson for women observing this vrat is clear: steadfastly adhering to the difficult fasting requirement will eventually result in the fruition of one's desire - for young girls, to get a good husband like Śiva, and for married women, to win or better preserve their saubhāgyavatī state. Indeed, this is made explicit in one vrat-kathā text which states at the end of the narration that, "By observing this vrat the saubhāgya of women remains permanent." And women are warned that: "The saubhāgyavatī women who do not observe this vrat or do not continue after having observed it for a few years, or eat and drink during the fast - will

suffer severe troubles in this life and in the next life."<sup>50</sup> But another lesson for women from this vrat-kathā is that by observing austerities one gets power not only to achieve one's goals but also to control one's own life, rather than be controlled by others (notably by men). While some versions of the story play up the element of destiny (i.e., Pārvatī was Satī, Śiva's first wife, and so was destined to be his wife again), all versions capture Pārvatī's defiance of her father's and Nārada's attempt to direct her life and her strong sense of self-determination. The ascetic power she accumulates through her terrible austerities becomes a source of fear and anxiety to the gods who, in Tripathi's version, importune Śiva to take notice of Pārvatī and stop her.<sup>51</sup>

Most women I talked with affirmed that this is one vrat that once started one should try to keep all one's married life as long as one is physically able. Moreover, once one decides to stop it, then certainly a formal ending ceremony

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<sup>50</sup> Tripathi, Hinduon ke vrat, parv aur tyauhār, 145. One woman quoted a saying about the Tīj Vrat to the effect: "If you drink water you will be born as a fish; eat sweets you'll be born as a fly..."

<sup>51</sup> It is significant that several women told me that it was male relatives (fathers and husbands) who at certain times told them to stop keeping vrats because they were "worried" about the effects of the vrats on the women. No woman I spoke with ever mentioned a female relative telling them to stop performing vrats that they were already keeping.

(udyapān) should be done with a priest officiating. Vina told me that following the ending pūjā one is to give "colourful" saris to three married women. The texts suggest that one should give saris, dhotis, food, and dakṣina to a Brahman and his wife, but again, in practice, the details of the udyāpan depend on what the family pandit prescribes and/or on what is normally done in the woman's family. In any case, the giving of gifts (saris, jewelry) to one or some married women at the time of the udyāpan is essential as is the giving of gifts from mother or mother-in-law or sometimes the husband of items representing the auspicious married state to the daughter, daughter-in-law or wife at the time that she observes Tīj each year.<sup>52</sup> Mildred Lusichinsky, who described this vrāt as it was done in a village fifty kilometers north of Banaras in the 1950's, suggested that the giving of gifts from mother or in-law's to daughter or bahu allowed ties between families and

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<sup>52</sup> Lelauti, a well-to-do Thakur in her forties, the matron of a small nuclear family, emphasized that husbands "must certainly bring a new sari for their wives on Tīj, because it is necessary to wear a new sari on this day." She then related a "Tīj story" which she said was current: "It is said that at one time Śaṅkar used to do battle with a certain rakṣas (demon). That rakṣas used to fight regularly with Śiv. On the Tīj day Pārvatī said 'having (brought) for me my half-sari and bangles, you please come - I will do a vrāt.' For some reason Śivji could not bring the half-sari for her - (so) then Śivji cut one of his limbs and with the blood (made) a half-sari of the same colour. He gave it to mother Pārvatī who, having put it on, did pūjā."

villages represented by marriage to be regularly strengthened. She says further that, "Any family which fails to send Tij gifts when it can afford to do so is loudly criticized by all who hear about it."<sup>53</sup> I would add that the giving of these particular gifts to married women reinforces among women the value of the wife in the family as suhāgin - the bearer and potential dispenser of auspiciousness. Although the wife is performing the vrat for her husband's well-being and long life it is she who is being celebrated. Her fast for his sake is an actualization of her protective and life-enhancing power. Interestingly, Luschinsky has noted in regard to the village of the Senapur version of Tīj that, "Women fast on Tij for the welfare of their husbands. The act of fasting in itself is thought to

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<sup>53</sup> M.Luschinsky ("Life of Women," 657-58) describes the Tīj Vrat as it is done in Senapur this way: "Women who married into Senapur fast and bathe in their homes. Daughters of the village assemble and go to a tank where they brush their teeth, bathe, dress in clean clothes. After the dressing, each girl is expected to sing the name of her husband...[a ritually charged event because women in most parts of India do not normally ever speak their husbands' names.] In the evening, those who have fasted eat some sweet preparation so they will not feel faint, but they do not regard the fasting period as over until the next morning when they swallow some soaked chickpeas... Women receive many gifts on Tij or just prior to Tij. The gift parcels usually include one or more saris, blouse pieces, glass bangles, some vermillion and perhaps a comb, mirror and other beauty aids. If a woman happens to be in her parents' village on Tij, her in-laws send the gifts. If she is in her in-laws' home her parents assume the responsibility for the gift-giving..."

serve this end. No gods are worshipped."<sup>54</sup> [my emphasis]  
 In other words, recalling the discussion of tapas (the  
 'heat' arising from ascetic practice) in chapter one, the  
 fasting women undertake in the Tīj Vrat can be understood to  
 produce its own creative, transformational power that can  
 effect the wishes of the votary.

### The Jīvit-Putra Vrat (Jiutiya)

The Jīvit-putrika Vrat (literally, "living son" vow) or  
 Jiutiya (a contraction of jīvit-putra) takes place on the  
 eighth of the waning fortnight of the month of Āśvin  
 (Sept./Oct.). It is primarily women who have sons who  
 observe this vrat and they do so to promote and protect  
 their (male) children's life and well-being. In his Hindi  
 book describing vrats, Tripathi notes that, "the Purāṇas say  
 that women who observe this vrat never suffer on account of  
 their sons."<sup>55</sup> As we saw in chapter one, vrats for sons  
 are described as early as the Mahābhārata. They are also  
 found in Purāṇas and Nibandhas, though I have not found any  
 description which corresponds to the way women actually

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<sup>54</sup> Luschinsky, 658.

<sup>55</sup> Tripathi, Hinduon ke vrat, parv aur tyauhār, 188.  
 Tripathi does not specify which Purāṇas mention this story,  
 but, versions of this vrat's kathā and other stories about its  
 hero, King Jīmutavāhan, may be found in the Kathāsarit-sāgara,  
 among other Sanskrit medieval story collections.

perform this vrat today. Tripathi goes on to say that, "It is an extremely popular vrat among the women of U.P., Bihar, and M.P., and women having limitless love and affection for their children observe this vrat with great faith and loyalty. If someone's son is freed from troubles, then women praise the 'jiutiya' of his mother." The word jiutiya commonly refers to the red and yellow wool threads women wear on their necks as part of this vrat, but in this context it also represents the protective power the votary has garnered by faithfully keeping the vrat.

Tripathi (whose book I here use as the śāstric model since his descriptions are usually based on Sanskrit sources) describes the method in this way:

Having cheerfully arisen in the early morning and after completing the daily chores women (should) purify themselves in a tīrth or pool and make their saṅkalp out of a desire for the well-being of sons. Having observed a waterless fast the whole day, in the evening time women put on the jiutiya made of cotton or wool and listen to the kathā. Then in the night they 'do' (recite) the meritorious story and perform kīrtan, and on the second day, after bathing, etc., they give some dān-daksina to a Brahman woman whose husband is living and who is blessed with sons, and then (the votary) takes food.<sup>56</sup>

After this, Tripathi gives the story about noble king Jīmutavāhan and his self-sacrifice to Garuḍa, the half man, half vulture king of the birds, for the sake of a Nāg

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<sup>56</sup> Tripathi, 189. See Appendix B for a full translation of Tripathi's account of the vrat and the kathā.

(snake) and his mother. The story bears no obvious relevance to the vrat other than that (a) the happy ending occurs on the eighth of the dark half of Āśvin and, (b) the king may represent the sort of model son whom women hope to have. Tripathi then gives a short "folk-story" about a female jackal and a female eagle who both try to keep the Jiutiya fast. The jackal fails and her children die at birth, while the eagle succeeds, and her children flourish. The stories which women tell one another among those I interviewed in Banaras did not include the Jīmutavāhan narrative, but did include a version of the jackal and eagle story. Women's Jiutiya stories always featured an appearance by Śiv and Pārvatī, who give blessings or help to ensure retributive justice. (See appendix B.)

What is significant about Tripathi's description is his omission of the pūjā that women do on this day and which is apparently central to the vrat. I watched it being performed by hundreds of women at Lakshmi Kund (a rectangular water reservoir adjoining an old Lakṣmī temple off Luxa road), and on the banks of the Ganges. Groups of six to twelve women - neighbours, friends, relatives and strangers - would form a circle near the water and begin the ceremony. They first cleaned the ground with water and then put some tumeric paste (called lepan) in a simple swirling ālpanā design on the cleaned ground. In the centre of each swirl was put a



dab of red kum-kum powder. Then the gathered women started unpacking the contents (pūjā samāgri) of their thalis (metal plates), cloth bundles or baskets on top of the designs, directly in front of them, into heaps. The items included cucumbers, bananas, apples, coconuts, white radishes, limes, flowers (including marigold and hisbiscus), puris, kacauris, sweets, incense sticks and ghee lamps. There were also neatly folded saris, mirrors, bundles of yellow and orange wool and some plastic children's toys. The women's piles were of various sizes - perhaps depending on what they could afford. Remaining on their thalis were chickpeas, mung dal and flower tops. When all were ready the women took a handful of the legumes and flowers and one woman began to lead the kathā while the other women listened and periodically threw their handfuls on top of their piles. After about ten minutes another woman began a second kathā, and after another ten minutes a third woman took over. This lasted another five minutes. The story tellers were the older women in the group (late 40's to mid 50's). Which woman told a story appeared to be a spontaneous decision; I saw no discussion among the women about it. After the third story the women sprinkled water on their piles; hands touched the items, then their forehead and back in an action of self-blessing. After taking blessings from the prasād (which I assumed their piles now to be) each woman

carefully picked up all the items, every grain, and put them back in the thali, basket or cloth she had brought. Before leaving the site the women 'tikka-ed' themselves with some of the kuṁ-kuṁ on the ground, again in an act of self-blessing. A new group would then form, clear the ground and proceed in the same manner.<sup>57</sup>

When I asked to what deity the pūjā was directed I got various responses: Lakṣmī, Sūrya-Nārāyaṇ, and "Jiutiya-Mā" (also identified as Pārvatī). Votaries normally worshipped one or the other of these deities during Jiutiya. The fact that several deities are associated with this vrāt is interesting and somewhat unusual. The particular deity's association with the vow can be accounted for in various ways. Sūrya-Dev or Sūrya-Nārāyaṇ, the Sun god, is worshipped morning and evening during the Ḍala Chaṭh Vrat, an extremely popular vrāt in Bihar which has spilled over into Banaras. The vrāt bears many similarities to Jiutiya: it is for sons; women perform a similar pūjā on the banks of the Ganges; and they tell each other stories. In some vrāt kathā books it is said that in the Jīvit-putrika Vrat one is to "do Sūrya-Nārāyaṇ pūjā." Jiutiya-Mā is clearly the

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<sup>57</sup> I was told that if a woman has children she does the pūjā sitting, if not, she will do it standing. Men are not involved at all, though I saw a few standing around looking on. Children of various ages hung behind their mothers or scampered about waiting for the proceedings to end.

personification of the Jīvit-putrika Vrat. She has no iconic form and is said to live in wells or other watery places like kund and rivers. She has no other function apart from this vrat. In Senapur "Jiut Baba" and "Jiutia Mai" are worshipped on Jiutiya. Luschinsky noted that, "Although women say that they cannot identify many of the gods who are personifications of ceremonies, they do identify Jiut Baba as Siv...and Jiutia Mai as Parvati."<sup>58</sup> (Lakṣmī's connection with the vrat will be discussed below.)

As for the pūjā offerings, the fruit, flowers, cooked food, sweets, incense, and lamps are, as we have seen, typical items used to feed and honour the deity in any standard pūjā.<sup>59</sup> The saris, mirrors and kum-kum represent saubhāgya. The children's toys represent the children for whom the vrat is being observed. The legumes (and sugarcane stalks which I saw among women performing the pūjā along the Ganges) represent the new harvest, fecundity, and may symbolize the material well-being of the family.<sup>60</sup>

After the pūjā women go home as they came - singing

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<sup>58</sup> Luschinsky, "Life of Women," 662.

<sup>59</sup> Most of these offerings - including packages of the smaller items: combs, toys, threads, red powder - can be purchased from street vendors in the lanes leading to Lakṣmī Kund and on the banks of the Ganges.

<sup>60</sup> If an ālpanā were part of this vrat all these items except the things offered to feed and honour the deity would be represented in the drawing.

songs with their baskets on their heads or held in their arms. At home all the fresh edible things that were offered in the pūjā are cut up into small pieces and given as prasād to those not keeping the vrāt (e.g., male family members and children). The women remain fasting. The next morning before dawn they get up, bathe, and break their long fast (in which, Chandravati pointed out, even spittle should not be swallowed). Some women said they simply ate some of the left-over prasād. Shyamdevi's niece, Lakshmi, told me that she prepared puris, sweet rice, parāṭhas stuffed with chickpeas and laddus. She invoked Jiutiya-Mā and touched fingers to food and forehead and back several times to bless herself. Some of this food was taken to the well (beside which she had done the pūjā and listened to stories the previous day) and thrown in as an offering. Then she went back to her home and broke her fast by swallowing seven uncooked chickpeas. Finally, she and her family ate the food she had prepared.

Lakshmi also told me that the sixteen red and yellow threads are "worn as prasād" after they have been offered to Jiutiya-Mā. Women will wear these threads around their necks for a few weeks or months, she said. One woman, Candravati, said that she had silver 'charms' representing the goddess Jiutiya made for both of her sons. To these she performed a pūjā and then tied them to the strings which she then wears

each year for two weeks (during pitr pakṣa).<sup>61</sup> The threads (and charms) are believed to provide blessings and protection for the woman's sons (and indeed daughters, if the woman has no sons or has a daughter that she is concerned about).<sup>62</sup> The tying and wearing of knotted threads is not confined to this vrat as the practice is also associated with, e.g., the Ananta Caturdaśī Vrat, where one wears fourteen (caturdaśī) threads. The sixteen Jiutiya threads are also evidently connected with the sixteen-day Mahālakṣmī Vrat immediately preceding this vrat. During the "Sorahia Mela" (the colloquial name for Mahālakṣmī Vrat), a vow also observed almost exclusively by women for the sake of children and for promoting prosperity, the votary wears red and yellow threads with sixteen knots in it. The knots are tied by one of the priests at the Lakṣmī temple with

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<sup>61</sup> Scholars have suggested that there is a link between ancestor worship and the obtaining of progeny. Veena Das has noted that while ancestors "have the power to cause great harm, they also have the potential and the interest to bestow wealth and progeny on their descendants." [quoted in Marglin, Wives of the God-King, 78.]

<sup>62</sup> In reference to the Senapur version of Jiutiya Lusichinsky also found that "The word Jiutia refers to strands of red cotton thread on which small metal charms are strung. Each woman has as many charms on her cord as she has sons." And in a footnote she comments, "A woman who has strong affectionate feelings for her daughters may celebrate Jiutia for her daughters as well as for her sons. In this case she will string on her Jiutia metal charms representing each of her daughters. This is not a common practice, however." ("Life of Women," 663)

accompanying mantras. Because Jiutiya falls on the last day of the Mahālakṣmī Vrat and women observing this vrāt daily go to the Lakṣmī temple adjoining the same kunḍ where many women who are keeping the Jiutiya Vrat go for performing their pūjā, it is natural to associate the Jiutiya Vrat with the goddess Lakṣmī. It is because these two vrats intersect in time that certain features of one - the threads and identification of the deity (Lakṣmī) - have passed into the other.<sup>63</sup> In the Jiutiya Vrat a priest is not involved at all. Women perform the pūjā, women bless themselves and women tell the stories. All these aspects distinguish it from the Mahālakṣmī Vrat and the Tīj Vrat where all the pūjā rituals, kathā telling, and blessing are usually presided over by a priest. Even the all-night vigil, the women's bhajan singing and the wearing of the sixteen srṅgār is prescribed in the texts. However, in the Tīj Vrat laukik elements also can be and are added. For example, one woman told me that she made an ālpanā on the Tīj day, even though it was "not necessary as it is in Karva Cauth." She made it, she said, for auspiciousness. The simple design which she drew for me prominently featured the svastik, the quintessential symbol of benediction or auspiciousness.

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<sup>63</sup> This may be a current example of the movement that has been taking place between śāstric rites that are overseen by a priest and women's own rites.

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To end this chapter, I want to make a few summary comments on the significance for women of certain features of a vrat. The saṅkalp, stated formally in front of a priest or informally by the woman to herself, reminds the woman of the overall intent of the vrat, articulates a commitment to see it through to its conclusion, and beseeches the deity to remove impediments to its fulfillment or to grant the wishes of the votary. Many women emphasized that their resolve gave them added psychological impetus to carry out the vrat, especially in the case of the more difficult waterless fasts.

Most of the women I interviewed performed some sort of regular pūjā alone at home. But on a vrat day, the pūjā assumes a special importance because it provides both a social and a devotional context for the vrat; the woman's acts of austerity are linked with those of other women and with their acts of devotion to the deity associated with the vrat. Pleased by the votary's acts of austerity and by her acts of solicitous devotion in the pūjā, the deity to whom the vrat is directed (if there is one) may feel inclined, if not compelled, to respond to the votary's desires. If the desires are not expressed in the saṅkalp or in the act of pūjā itself, they may be represented in the ālpanās the woman creates for the occasion (featuring symbols of

children, the husband-wife pair, or auspiciousness in general). Or, the wishes of participants may be expressed more obliquely in the kathās following the pūjā. That is, the woman listening to the story may identify her wishes and hopes with those expressed by the protagonist.

When a male pandit or pūjāri oversees the pūjā, women undoubtedly assume a more passive role in the proceedings. Yet, this passive role may be relatively short-lived. In the case of Usha and her sister, the twenty minute pūjā performed by the family pandit was the only point during the 24 hour vrāt when the women were passive. More often, as in my description of the Jiutiya Vrat, women act as their own officiants during the pūjās.

The positive social environment provided by vrāt pūjās is empowering for women. It was striking to see streams of women carrying pūjā articles in baskets, moving slowly or briskly, talking quietly or with animation, gathering numbers as they moved through the narrow streets to the ghāṭs or to Lakshmi Kund on several vrāt days in Banaras. As women form small groups with family, friends and strangers to perform the pūjā and tell or listen to the stories, the bonds of solidarity between women as women (strī-jāti: the 'class of women') are reinforced. Women do not have to tell each other their own personal tales because their stories are told for them in the ritualized setting of



the kathās. In these stories, during the pūjās, women in their togetherness find meanings that may be comforting, supportive and empowering. For if they stick to their resolve like Sāvitṛī, are as self-disciplined as Pārvatī, and express feelings of true devotion to the gods as other protagonists of the kathās do, then any objective may be achieved, anything is possible. As Sāvitṛī says in the Mahābhārata: "My course shall remain unobstructed through the power of my austerities, my conduct towards my elders, my love for my husband, my vow, and by thy [Yāma's] grace."

What do women aim to achieve in their vrats and why? While we have already begun to see answers to these questions, I will address them more specifically in the remainder of the thesis. In the next chapter I examine the ideological and social contexts which both constrain and give meaning to Hindu women's lives and to their performance of vrats.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"I do vrats for suhāg"

### VRATA AND PATIVRATĀ: IDEOLOGY AND NORM IN WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE OF VRATS

"Why don't men do vrats for women?" I asked 38 year-old Mira one humid afternoon in Banaras. The thick turbulent monsoon clouds darkened further the already gloomy front room of her second-storey decaying flat adjacent to the Ganges. "Well," she responded while nursing her youngest daughter (and sixth living child of the ten children she has borne), "for women the first (husband) is the divine marriage blessed by the gods. If a man loses his wife he can get another without too much problem; if a woman loses her husband it is much more difficult. If she does get another husband she might be called a concubine - he might have other women. ... Women perform vrats for suhāg (to preserve the auspicious married state)."

Mira's response brings to focus the social reality shaping the lives of at least high caste Hindu women, and the continued force of a gender ideology which informs that reality: wives must keep vrats to preserve the longevity of their husbands. The early death of a husband means hardship

and varying degrees of societal opprobrium for the widow. Men are not under such constraints. Ideologically and socially, it does not matter how many times a man is widowed.<sup>1</sup> He is not stigmatized by the death of a wife; nor is the widower put under permanent suspicion because of his status, as is the widow, even (or especially) if she remarries. It is not difficult for a man to obtain a new, 'untainted' wife, as well as mistresses. Thus men do not need to observe vrats for the well-being of their wives simply because they are not expected to - "there is no need for them," as Snehalata put it - and practically there is much less at stake.

Earlier chapters have touched on the relationship of women's performance of vrats to gender ideology in Hindu India. Now I will explore this relationship more systematically. To situate women's performance of vrats in the framework of the dominant cultural construction of gender,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vanaja Dhruvarajan in her book, Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology (p.96), quotes two Kannada folk sayings which are pertinent: "If the son dies, the family is destroyed but if the daughter-in-law dies there will be a wedding;" and "we cry the day a woman is born and the day she is married but we heave a sigh of relief on the day she dies."

<sup>2</sup> What I refer to here as the "dominant cultural construction of gender" is the ideology concerning women's nature, roles and functions formulated over two millenia by the orthodox Brahman elite. While this gender ideology may be found expressed most succinctly in those texts - the Dharmaśāstras - that this elite is responsible for producing, it turns up in varied forms in other literary genres (e.g.,

I will first review the orthodox conception of strīsvabhāva (the "inherent nature of woman"), the development of the pativrata ideal and the practical elucidation of both concepts into strīdharmā (the "duties of women"). Since vrats can be construed as one of the central ritual expressions of strīdharm and the means of fulfilling strīdharm alters somewhat according to a woman's marital status and stage in life, I then examine the practice of vrats against the scheme of the life cycle of women.<sup>3</sup> In the process I look at such questions as how vrats function as agents of socialization for Hindu women and conveyers of normative values; and why, on one level, vrats suit the vision of the role of women articulated by the dominant male brahmanical culture.

While much of the theoretical ground covered in this chapter has been laid out by other scholars, both anthropologists and historians of Hinduism, it is important to review this material for several reasons. First, it sets my data within a conventional ideological context. Setting the material within this context helps to explain levels of meaning which (a) society gives to women's religious

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the epics, Purāṇas, and vrata-kathā literature), and appears in folk sayings, films and other media.

<sup>3</sup> Women's "life cycle," insofar as it is defined as the stages of her life marked by her marital status, is itself, of course, an androcentric scheme.

activities (vrats) and (b) women themselves, socialized by these ideologies, then attribute to their religious activities. Second, a review of this material provides a backdrop to my last chapter which will explore other meanings and functions of vrats expressed to me by the individual women I interviewed.

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In a 2000 year period from approximately 600 B.C.E. to 1400 C.E., orthodox brahmanical religion gradually excluded women from significant or independent participation in virtually all (vedic) ritual activity.<sup>4</sup> Though it would be naive if not incorrect to say that women originally enjoyed equal status with men in some early vedic "golden age," scholarship has fairly conclusively shown that (at least some) "twice-born" women received vedic instruction and as wives were considered essential and even honoured participants in the prescribed duties of sacrifice, feeding and propitiating the ancestors, and producing sons, all of which

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<sup>4</sup> See I. Julia Leslie, The Perfect Wife - the orthodox Hindu woman according to the Strīdharmapaddhati of Tryambakajvan (Delhi: Oxford U. Press, 1989), p. 107 ff. for a description of women's role, historically, in the sacrifice, and p. 36ff. for an excellent summary of the process by which women were disenfranchised from vedic education.

took place in the home.<sup>5</sup> Such terms for women as sahadharmanī truly meant "partner in dharma" rather than merely "ritual assistant" as it came to mean later on. Other terms which appear in vedic literature such as yagñopavitinī (a woman who has undergone the sacred thread ceremony), brahmavādinī (a woman learned in scripture) and panditā (a female pandit) posed explanatory problems for later Smṛti writers who could no longer tolerate or perhaps even fathom the obvious implications of these terms.

Though debates about women's need for vedic education and hence about their ritual authority to receive upanāyana, say mantras, and offer independent sacrifice long preceded the infamous Manusmṛti, it is in this text that the more conservative view regarding women found its most influential champion. Here women are not only relegated to the ritual status of Shudras, but now the first reasons given are that they are "weak" and "impure" and only secondarily that they are ignorant of vedic literature.<sup>6</sup> According to Leslie the logic went like this: "Since being born a woman or a śūdra

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<sup>5</sup> Besides the work of J.Leslie, see: A.S.Altekar, The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [reprint] 1973); M.A.Indra, The Status of Women in Ancient India, 2d rev. ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1955); B.S.Upadhyaya, Women in Rigveda (Bombay: S.Chand, 1974.)

<sup>6</sup> Manu IX.18; also Baudh.I.11,7 and Mbh.XII.40, 11-12. Quoted in J. Leslie, The Perfect Wife, 38.

is the result of particular sins in a previous birth [cf. Mbh. XIII.120.9; Manu XII.3.9], the mere fact of femaleness is seen as proof of sin. Being sinful, a woman is amantravat; being amantravat, she cannot purify herself of sin; she therefore remains sinful all her life."<sup>7</sup> With this sort of thinking, then, the view of strīsvabhāva that tended to prevail was one that stereotyped women in general as inherently sinful, fickle, untruthful, promiscuous and, of course, weak and impure.

Yet, at the same time, women in their roles of wife and mother continue to be praised (as they were in vedic texts) as bringers of good fortune; the very embodiments of the goddess Śrī (or Lakṣmī)<sup>8</sup> in the household. They are also

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<sup>7</sup> Leslie, The Perfect Wife, 246.

<sup>8</sup> While several of my informants (male and female) proclaimed that "woman is Śrī," Leslie (The Perfect Wife, 62) points out that, "It is quite obvious that 'fortune' [śrī, lakṣmī] is personified as female quite simply because it is held to possess such 'female qualities' as fickleness and instability." On the other hand, K.Young ("Women in Hinduism," in Women in the World Religions, ed. A.Sharma, S.U.N.Y., 1987, 63) has argued that the direct point of transmission of many of the (positive) values and images of women's role (etc.) contributed by the vedic Samhitas to traditional Hindu women even today "was the marriage ceremony itself, which was based on Rg-Veda 10:85ff. Through the centuries, woman as maiden, wife, and mother was esteemed as fortunate (sumangali; subhaga) and auspicious (siva). Her association with wealth, prosperity, beauty, grace, charm, and splendor became enshrined in a later age by the idea that she was Lakṣmī, goddess incarnate. Moreover, the visible expression of these qualities in the aesthetics of feminine form, clothing, jewelry, sweet-smelling unguents, and flowers continued to

called ardhāṅgī - "half the body" (of the male) - because, among other reasons, the fulfillment of two of man's three primary debts - to the gods, ancestors and society - depend on his having a wife; and the trivarga, the triple goal of the householder (dharma, artha and kāma), can only be met through the cooperation of the wife.<sup>9</sup> Thus the wife is essential to the well-being and to the dharmic responsibilities of the male householder.<sup>10</sup>

While not true in the wider Hindu tradition, which associates the mother with the powerful and pervasive mother goddesses, the Dharmasastras tend to pay little attention to the category of woman as mother. They concentrate instead on the woman as wife. The reason for this is essentially that from the religio-legalists' point of view the category of mother is relatively unambiguous and unproblematic. In general, the mother is eulogized; she is to be honoured and respected by her children for she is the "guru of gurus."

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conote the well-being of the family as a whole, which in turn was a reflection of the fact that the deities had blessed the family."

<sup>9</sup> Leslie, The Perfect Wife, 267; e.g., Smṛticandrika of Devanna Bhatta, III.ii, 582; Mbh.I.68.40).

<sup>10</sup> Unlike Hindu men, however, a Hindu female's varṇa (caste) becomes relevant only at the time of marriage - to ensure a same caste or anuloma marriage ("following the grain"; includes lower caste women marrying upper caste men) and avoid a pratiloma marriage. Otherwise, it is her sex that determines her dharma - hence women as a class are to follow strīdharmā (rather than varṇāśramadharmā).



The wife, on the other hand, can wreak havoc on the purity of her husband's ancestral line (gotra and jāti) and possibly deprive him of the son which he needs to fulfill his own ritual obligations by sexual indiscretions and transgressions. The wife, then, must be carefully selected and guarded (controlled). To make this task easier, among other reasons, women as wives are exhorted to be pativrātās. The pativrātā is the "Perfect Wife," as Julia Leslie has cogently demonstrated in her book of the same name. In the most conservative view, to rigorously follow strīdharmā and to strive to become a true pativrātā should be a Hindu woman's only goal; it is her only legitimate aspiration; the only option that can result in spiritual merit, and the only means by which she can save herself from her womanly nature.<sup>11</sup>

Though, as was mentioned in chapter one, such goddess/women as Satī/Pārvatī, Sītā, and Sāvitṛī - insofar as they

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<sup>11</sup> In the remarks that women offered to me in answer to my question about what they considered strīdharm to be, there was a remarkable degree of consensus (and accord with McGee's findings), suggesting that women are well familiar with conventional notions of what women as wives ought to do or how they ought to see their role. For example, Lelauti said: "Strīdharm is - one accepts the orders of one's husband, one follows dharm. One should bring up one's children in a good way; one should serve one's husband. One should give respect to one's elders." She ended by asserting that "strīdharm is very significant (lit. "big" - bara) dharm." Others, like Shyamdevi, stressed sexual fidelity, or, like Snehalata and Vina, conflated serving one's husband with housework.

exemplify pativrata behaviour - continue to be held up as role models for women today, these are not role models that ordinary women can easily follow (as women I interviewed told me). Furthermore, the very existence of these model women does not challenge the orthodox view of strisvabhāva, for the texts make it clear that these women were exceptions to the general class of women.<sup>12</sup>

There are dozens of didactic passages in the epics and Purāṇas, often placed in the mouths of goddesses or important male or female characters, describing how the perfect wife is to comport herself. For example, in the Mahābhārata (III.38, 15-35) Draupadī explains to Satyabhama how she manages to be the "perfect wife" to her five husbands; and in another place (Anu.134.6,10.30-55) Pārvatī is asked by her husband Śaṅkara to explain what constitutes ideal womanhood and the duties of the faithful wife. Similar in tone and wording, but without the background colour of characters and stories, one finds the pativrata ideal detailed in sections of the Dharmaśāstras and Nibandhas under some such heading as "strīdharm."<sup>13</sup> What is

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<sup>12</sup> See Leslie, The Perfect Wife, 262, 272.

<sup>13</sup> S.A.Dange in his Encyclopaedia of Purāṇic Beliefs and Practices lists numerous puranic references to the pativrata under his section on 'women' (vol.V). For example, from the Brahmavaivartapurāṇa he quotes passages about how the "excellent wife" is to behave, behaviour which underscores her structurally inferior position as devotee to god: "Getting up

interesting is that many of the qualities of mind and the self-restrictive behaviour that are required of a pativrata are precisely the ones required of the votary as described by the Purana-Nibandhas under the "dharma of vratin." But this should not be surprising because a woman's (a pati-vrata's) behaviour towards her husband-god is patterned on the worshipper's ritually prescribed behaviour before his kul or istadevatā.<sup>14</sup>

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early in the morning ... she should bow to her husband with joy and greet him with praise. Thence she should start her household duties. After bath, wearing [clean] clothes, she should worship her husband with a white flower ... She should attend to the bath of her husband, wash his feet and give him [clean] clothes. After arranging a seat for him, and asking him to sit there, she should apply sandal paste to his forehead and the whole body; she should place a wreath [mala] in [sic] his neck ... [And then, interestingly, contradicting women's supposed amantravat status:] With mantras from the Sāmaveda, she should worship him and bow down to him with these words 'Om, obeisance to the lustrous one, the calm one, the resort of all the gods; hail!'...; after this she should offer him a flower and sandal-paste, place offerings at his feet; wave incense and a lamp with a wick; she should also offer to him water made fragrant with ingredients and read (or mutter) a ...(stotra) in front of him..." (BVP 83.110-142) An earlier passage in this same Purāṇa makes explicit that the wife is to see Viṣṇu in her husband as she worships him. Similarly, she is to eat his leftover food and to drink the water in which his feet were bathed. (BVP 84.15-17) The practice of a wife eating her husband's leftovers (or at least eating whatever is left after everyone else has eaten) is still common in India.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one could imagine that the ideal woman herself, as depicted, for instance in Manu V.165-6, where the virtuous woman is described as one who restrains her mind, speech and body, could have been the model for the nibandhakāra's description of the dharma of the votary. Pativratas would have been the ideal candidates for the performance of vratas since they were already trained in all the appropriate

Mira's comments quoted at the beginning of the chapter - "For women the first husband is the divine marriage" ending with "I do vrats for suhāg" - demonstrates how inextricably the concept of the pativratā has become intertwined with the vrata tradition for women. Ritual and gender ideology have been powerfully blended in the vrata tradition, each reinforcing the other. A woman's primary vrata is the vow of service and fidelity to her husband/god which she assumes at marriage. Particular vrats that she performs are to promote his well-being, and secondly, that of his sons. Though perhaps not initially the case or the intention, women's vrata observance, then, has come to be seen by both men and women as a ritual extension of their "pativratāness." The more vrats a woman does, the more devoted (to husband and family) she is seen to appear. Hence the pride and satisfaction that some husbands expressed to me in the number of vrats that their wives performed, even when they were not really sure what exactly the women did during these rituals.

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It is not difficult to see how vrats suit the vision of the role of women articulated by the dominant male Brahmanical culture. While some women's rituals, perhaps

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women's versions of votive rites, may have been appropriated by Purāṇa-Nibandha author-compilers, the new transformed Dharmaśāstric vratas were moulded to serve Brahmanical visions of the proper ordering and functioning of society. In this ideal society, women's place and function are made plain. The view of woman's nature as tending towards weakness, sensuality, distraction, idleness and disorder and the need therefore to control women would lend itself to the recommendation of vratas to women. That is, pandits and high caste men in general may have felt inclined to encourage women to perform vratas because they saw these rites as a way of providing a regular means to instil in women not only the values associated with the pativrata, but also a mechanism of self-control. The particular forms of moderate self-restraint, the ritual care for maintaining purity, and the moral behaviour prescribed in the Dharmaśāstric vratas would all have been seen as contributing to the aims and welfare of men, and by extension, women themselves. Taking the viewpoint of a conservative pandit, then, vratas could be seen to be ideally suitable for women to observe. As vratas are supposed to be voluntary or optional meritorious rites, women who do 'choose' to perform vrats for the benefit of her family act as self-regulators. Men can indirectly control women by 'allowing' women to control themselves; and to control themselves in a way that

promotes the interests of a patriarchal social structure.

Now we must turn our attention to examining how the pativratā ideology and various social forces combine to inform and affect the number and type of vrats that women observe today in Banaras, and the reasons that women give for performing these rites at different (maritally-defined) stages of their lives.

#### VRATS AND THE LIFE CYCLE OF HINDU WOMEN

When the Dharmaśāstras discuss women they frequently do so according to a tripartite division of her life defined by her relationship to men: the before-marriage phase (kaumārikā), the marriage phase (vivāha) and widowhood (vaidhavya) - which includes the (preferred) option of committing sati. As we have seen, these texts were interested in women primarily from the point of view of how they ought to support and accommodate the prescribed 'life cycle' of men - the four stages and duties (or aims), the samskāras, and so on. Purāṇa and Nibandha literature sometimes designates particular vrats as suitable for (or more explicitly peculiar to) unmarried girls, married women and widows. There is no parallel division for men. Men are

rather categorized according to other criteria (e.g., caste or occupation) and so certain vrats are singled out as appropriate for kings, others for mendicants, and so on. The only occupation singled out for women in which a particular vrat is deemed suitable, that I could discover, is prostitution.

Several authors writing on Bengali brat have discussed "women's vrats" according to this tripartite division of a woman's marital status.<sup>15</sup> In Bengal there are clearly vrats specific to unmarried girls (kumārī brata) and then to married women (nārī brata). In Orissa, Freeman has described a vrat specific to post-menopausal women, the Habisha Vrat.<sup>16</sup> When I went to the field I also planned to divide Hindu women's lives into the three general phases of her life cycle, for analytic and descriptive purposes. The intention was to determine whether there were vrats peculiar to each stage, if so which ones, and the reasons for observing these vrats among women in Banaras. However, while a few women I spoke with from other part of Uttar Pradesh told me about vrats which only unmarried (pre-

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., S.R.Das (1952), E.M.Gupta (1984).

<sup>16</sup> James Freeman, "The Ladies of Lord Krishna: Rituals of Middle-aged Women in Eastern India," in Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures, ed. N.Falk and R.Gross (Harper & Row, 1980), 110-126.

menarche) girls keep, in Banaras, perhaps because of its urban and cosmopolitan nature, I did not discover such strictly segregated marital or age-specific vrats. Instead, I found that among the women I interviewed there was a variety of opinion and practice about who does (or should or should not do) which vrats, on what occasions and for what reasons they may be performed. Nevertheless, I feel it is instructive to organize and present data on vrats according to stages in a woman's life in order to again contrast Dharmaśāstra precepts and ideology with material from researchers who have written about women in northern India (from a sociological perspective), and with women's views and personal narratives. Once more, this format allows us to get a sense of the relationship between gender ideology, social norms and actual behaviour in the context of women's performance of vrats.

Before we begin, it is worth noting that if one looks at the life cycle from the Hindu woman's point of view, it becomes apparent that while a woman's relations with a man may define her status and set her path, it is the world of women she moves through. On this point, Sylvia Vatuk, in writing about women in an "urbanized village" in Delhi, has argued that women do not necessarily, or only, perceive their own position according to the model of Manu's (infamous) dictum: "In childhood a female must be subject to



her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons..."<sup>17</sup>

They clearly see their lives as tightly constrained by the wishes and needs of other persons in their immediate family - as well as by more general social forces emanating from the wider community and public opinion. But they do not see these constraints as being imposed specifically by men; in fact, while ultimate authority may indeed be explicitly invested in male figures in the family, it tends... during most of the life cycle to be administered instead by other females, acting either on their own initiative or at the behest of men or women who in turn hold positions of authority over them. It is interesting ... to note that the typical feminine version of Manu's injunction speaks of a woman's life in terms of three stages of subordination to other women, namely mā ki rāj, sās ki rāj, and bahu ki rāj (mother, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law's rule or kingdom).<sup>18</sup>

An effect of this feature of the social structure is that women by and large are the most rigorous defenders of "tradition"; especially those who assume the position of matriarch in the family.

#### Kaumārikā - the unmarried girl

In his book, Women in Manu and His Seven Commentators, R.M.Das writes: "Manu regards the daughter as an object of highest tenderness... She is to be brought up with as much affection and care as is bestowed upon the male child;

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<sup>17</sup> Manusmṛti V.148 (also, IX.3), Bühler, trans.

<sup>18</sup> S.Vatuk, "Authority, Power and Autonomy in the Life Cycle of the North Indian Woman," paper for a symposium entitled "Women in North India: Not Such Dutiful Wives", (AAS, Toronto, 1981), 5.

rather greater kindness is to be shown to her as she is physically more tender and her emotions too are more delicate."<sup>19</sup> The whole tone of Das' book is similarly apologetic, patronizing, and revealing more of Das' attitudes than of the author of the Manusmṛti. For, in fact, the Dharmaśāstra (and the Manusmṛti's) interest in the unmarried girl is minimal. It is centered primarily on ensuring that the girl's virtue is safeguarded under the authority of the paterfamilias, until her transfer, through a properly arranged marriage at the appropriate time, to the authority of her husband.

From a sociological view, researchers (e.g. Vatuk 1980, M.Roy 1972, S.Kakar 1978) have shown that, in general, a young girl in north India has no authority and little power, but does have a measure of autonomy while residing in her parents' house.<sup>20</sup> The amount and quality of her autonomy

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<sup>19</sup> R.M.Das, Women in Manu (Varanasi: Kanchana Pub., 1962), 49. Das goes on: "Manu makes every effort to see the position of the daughter exalted to its highest. According to him no householder should pick any quarrel with her.[...IV.180] Medhatithi and Kulluka say that no sort of unpleasant dealing, ... is to be entered into with her. This, they think, will tell upon her tender emotions. It is probably for this reason that they are not allowed to undergo the strenuous exertions of the Vedic studies."

<sup>20</sup> Vatuk defines "power" as "the ability to influence or control the actions of others"; "authority" as "socially legitimated power"; and "autonomy" as "the ability to fully control one's own activities and actions". ("Authority, Power and Autonomy", 2) For a description of the socialization process that takes place among girls and boys in one South

depend on myriad factors, bearing on such things as her parents' attitudes towards her, how many and what sex siblings she has, and her economic status, among others. In most cases the daughter's autonomy will begin to be circumscribed between ages six to ten, and she will be more explicitly socialized into her feminine roles, in contrast to her brother who will retain and augment his already greater degree of autonomy. The means of explicit socialization of the daughter include: being given responsibility over younger children; being asked to help older female relatives in household duties, including religious activities like preparing pūjā items; not being allowed to go beyond certain boundaries or interact informally with strange men, and then even known men outside the immediate family. The role of vrats in the gender socialization of young girls has been noted by some researchers (e.g., S.Mazumdar 1981; M.Roy 1972; A.Kayal in Sankar Sen Gupta 1969). A vivid example is the Bengali Daśaputtal Brata, observed by unmarried daughters. Here I quote Mazumdar's

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Indian village (in Karnataka), see V.Dhruvarajan, Hindu Women and the Power of Ideology. Dhruvarajan's book on the whole is a rather bleak evocation of the lives of women. She emphasizes women's lack of self-development, maturity, autonomy and power, and their co-option with their own subordination. She explains how through songs and sayings and parental instruction girls are taught that "the qualities of docility, shyness, patience and tolerance are stressed as being the most important qualities of a woman." (p.66)

description of it:

The puja and vrata more directly involved with the socialization of girls are typically conducted at home - either in a room set aside by the family for worship... or in an area designated as the altar. The dasaputtalika (ten dolls) vrata, though no longer as popular as it used to be 30 to 40 years ago, ... is in many ways the quintessential vrata designed for unmarried girls. This is carried out in the first month of the Hindu Bengali calendar. Ten figures, primarily from the epics, are drawn on the ground, and prayers are offered to them in turn, embodying an appropriate wish. These include: a wish for a husband like Rama, a father-in-law like Dasaratha, a brother-in-law like Lakshmana, a mother-in-law like Kausalya; to be chaste like Sita, an efficient cook like Draupadi, to be blessed with children like Kunti (all sons and no daughters); to achieve true womanhood like Durga, tranquillity like the river goddess Ganga, and forbearance like Mother Earth.<sup>21</sup>

We have already mentioned some of the role models for women in the epics held up all over India and repeatedly reinforced by the observance of vrats which bear their name, and in imitation of whom they are performed. The Dasaputtal Brata fills out models for the other significant personae in the life of the young wife. Since the girl can expect to marry, she might as well pray for the 'best' husband and in-laws; those who will be considerate and fair. The brata also makes explicit those qualities that the young woman should aim to achieve in herself: chastity, efficiency, fecundity,

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<sup>21</sup> Sucheta Mazumdar, "Socialization of Hindu Middle-Class Bengali Women," U.C.L.A. South Asia Bulletin (1: 1981), 34. A close variant of this brata is described in A.Kayal, "Women in the Folklore of West Bengal," in Women In Indian Folklore, ed. S. Sen Gupta (Calcutta, 1969), 190.

strength, tranquillity, forbearance.

Kamala, a middle-aged Brahman woman who had been born near Merut and then had lived in various parts of Uttar Pradesh, told me about two vrats that she had observed at the behest of her mother when she was a young girl: Surāj Aṣṭī and Cāndra Chaṭh Vrat ("sun" and "moon" vrats).<sup>22</sup> These are vrats only for pre-menarche girls, she said, and she kept them from the age of four to eight, completing them with an udyāpan. In the Surāj Vrat one eats one meal before the sun goes down, and in the Cāndra Vrat one eats only after the moon has come up. These are rather difficult fasting requirements for such a young child, and Kamala said that she was the only one among her four sisters who had been able to complete these two annual vrats. The Cāndra Vrat is marked by a special bath, administered by her mother, in which the turai leaf is rubbed on five parts of the body. At the time of breaking the fast, the family pandit came to read the vrat-kathā, the details of which Kamala could not remember except that it explained the importance of the special bath. While she could not recall the details very clearly (and did not know anyone who kept

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<sup>22</sup> These are the same two vrats which Neerja had mentioned as vrats for young girls, though she had only heard about them. Kamala could not recall in which months these vrats were performed, and I have been unable to identify them in my collection of Hindi vrat books.

these vrats today), the ritual and fasting had made a deep impression on her and she took on many more vrats with enthusiasm when she got older.

In Banaras, I found that in practice and common opinion, apart from vrats for children, unmarried girls could do virtually any vrat they wished. In addition to the general familial vrats, the girls I met who performed extra vrats tended to take on a weekday vrat and/or, among the annual women's vrats, Tīj. The weekday vrats that were popular were the Monday, Thursday and Friday (including Santoṣī Mā) vrats. These were observed by teenagers and women in their twenties for assistance in school studies or work, or for securing a 'good' husband. Obtaining a good husband was the only reason given for observing Tīj, and the most frequent reason given for observing the Monday Vrat.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Both M.Roy (1975) and S.Mazumdar (1981) mention the (Monday) Śiva Brata as being especially popular among young, unmarried girls in urban Bengal. Roy (pp.37-38) provides a long first-hand account of a college girl performing the Śiva brata with about fourteen other girls from her dorm "to get a Śiva-like husband." At the end of her account this young woman told Roy: "If you ask me whether I believed in the whole things, I have no answer. I liked doing it and, unlike my friend who jeered about it, I felt good in doing it. I always like Śiva, and knowing the story of Śiva and Umā I thought a marriage like that would not be bad." (38)

Among the women I interviewed in Kerala, the Monday Vrat was the most commonly observed short-term vrat. (Half of the sixteen women I interviewed had kept this vrat before they married, and several continued after. For example, Radha, 39, told me she kept the Somvār Vrat every week for two years

Other vrats, of course, can serve the purpose of obtaining a good husband too. Fifty-six year-old Krishna, who came from an observant Brahman family, told me that she started the Śravaṇ Somvār Vrat when she was ten years old for this reason. She said that she saw her mother observing it and was inspired to do so herself. Her mother guided her in the details, but she did not have to spell out to Krishna the purpose for which she should perform the vrat. Krishna had already absorbed this lesson in watching her older sisters get married off.

Sudha, 24, keeps the Tuesday Vrat. She is unmarried and living at home with her mother while she pursues graduate studies in music at Banaras Hindu University. She observes only two vrats: Navarātri, in honour of her favoured deity Durgā, and the Tuesday Vrat, also directed to Durgā. In Sudha's case, unlike most of the other women I interviewed who kept this weekly vrat, the planet Maṅgal did not have any bearing on the reasons for her observance, and no one had prescribed it for her. She had been observing the vrat for one and a half years when I met her and had

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because she wanted a good husband and on the advice of her mother (who had also kept it). Initially Radha told me that she thought this vrat did help her to get a good husband, but then she confided that she has doubts about whether the vrat was really responsible or whether her ability to adjust to her husband is more responsible (for the satisfactory marriage).

started it "because I felt a desire to do it." Underlying this desire, it later emerged, was her hope to find a good husband. This hope was all the more poignant because two of her well-educated sisters had burned to death in the homes of their in-laws; victims of so called "dowry deaths."

Sudha's mother, a widow as well as a bereaved parent, supported Sudha in her decision to take up this vrāt as well as Sudha's desire to carry on with her studies. Despite her marriageable age, no efforts were being made at the time to find Sudha a husband. For her vrāt Sudha fasts by avoiding grains, onions, masala and mustard oil. She reads ślokas from the Durgāsaptaśati (in a Hindi translation) and offers flowers, lights (dīp) and incense to her mūrti of Durgā while silently praying to her. Sudha asserted that she will try to do the Maṅgalvār Vrat "all my life."

Thirty-four year-old Chitra said that she started Navaratri - her first vrāt - some eighteen years previously when she was in tenth standard. Chitra wanted help with her exams, which, at this stage, were very important because they were the "board exams" similar to the British "O" levels. In expressing her concern to her teacher, Chitra's teacher suggested that she try observing the Navarātri Vrat (and thereby secure the goddess' assistance). Chitra agreed to do this and, though her mother and grandparents observed Navarātri, Chitra was the only one in her family to observe



all nine days of the vrat. Her mother also taught her the details of the ritual. Clearly, obtaining help to pass exams is not a traditional reason for women to keep Navarātri (or any other vrat). However, as women's education becomes more highly valued (even if only to render a girl more marriageable), doing well in school becomes an important goal and is added to the list of socially acceptable reasons for a young woman to perform vrats.

The above example also reveals the perceived nature of vrats (especially 'all-purpose' vrats like Navarātri) as potential problem solvers. Again we may note that this adaptability is one factor that explains the tenaciousness of these rites.

During several Friday morning visits to a small but busy Santoṣī Mā temple in Khojvan (section of Banaras) I saw teenage girls among the women who came to the temple for Santoṣī Mā's pūjā and/or darśan, and for listening to the reading of the kathā as part of their vrat. I stopped to talk with some of these fourteen to seventeen year-old girls and the majority told me they were keeping the vrat to help them in their school studies. Yet even while they were performing the vrat "for school," they could not help but assimilate the messages of this kathā - the messages that underscore the traditional roles, duties, perogatives (even abilities) of the daughter/wife/mother to help her (male)

kin.

As a final example from my own data to illustrate the place of (or attitudes toward) vrats in the kaumārikā stage, I offer part of the conversation I had with seventeen year-old Anita, the daughter of a well-to-do army officer:

Anne: Do you consider yourself a religious person?

Anita: No.

Anne: Why would you want to start a vrat?

Anita: I would want to give a rest to my digestive system.

Anne: Mainly for health reasons?

Anita: Yes, I like to take a vrat on Monday because it is a common belief that if one keeps a vrat on Monday then Lord Śiva gives praise and happiness (to the observer of the vrat).

Anne: If you are not religious then why should it matter what day it was?

Anita: Yes, (but) I don't much believe in others (other gods), because God is one.

Anne: What kind of fast is required for the Monday Vrat?

Anita: My mum told me - I just ask her. Now I don't know.

Anne: Is it phalāhar?

Anita: Yes, phalāhar.

Anne: What about your friends, do they also do a Monday fast, or...

Anita: Some of them take a Monday or Tuesday or Saturday Vrat; whatever day they are told by their mothers. They also can ask their family astrologer what day they should fast.

Anne: How many of your friends at school observe vrats?

Anita: Most of them - except the daughters of brigadiers and colonels.<sup>24</sup>

Anne: So vrats are quite popular among your friends then...

Anita: Yes, quite popular.

Anne: Do they want to keep them or (is it) because their mothers or astrologers told them to?

Anita: They also want to keep them. They have some wishes and ambitions, some kāmna [wish or desire]. Mothers also

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<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, I did not ask her why the daughters of brigadiers and colonels did not keep vrats because we were interrupted, and I did not return to this point.

say - if you want to keep then keep (them). And astrologers also told them (to do vrats) according to their horoscopes. 'You have to keep this vrat to please this god because this god according to the nakṣatra is angry with you'.

Anita starts off by offering a non-religious reason for keeping a vrat - "giving rest to the digestive system." She then appeals to "common belief" - i.e., her religious heritage imbibed through her mother - to explain the significance of keeping a vrat on Monday, Śiva's special day. Śiva rewards those who devotedly keep his vrat. Anita was unclear about the details of the vrat because she relied on her mother to guide her through it and prepare the appropriate fasting foods. Undoubtedly, for Anita and all her friends who kept a vrat, the mother was the primary guide. Yet, as Anita insisted, there was some autonomy in the girls' choice of whether or not to perform the vrat in the first place, and why. This is both consonant with the nature of vrats as optional observances, and with this stage in a woman's life: the time before marriage while she still resides in the normally comfortable and supportive atmosphere of home. While traditionally this is the formative period in a Hindu girl's training to be wife and mother, she is at the same time often indulged within the confines of a benevolent if strictly supervised environment.

Most women I interviewed said that they did not observe many vrats at this stage in their lives, nor did many take

them very seriously. Lapses in fasting or procedural requirements were more easily passed over or excused. Some girls kept them irregularly; they could enjoy imitating their older female relatives and pretending to be grown up. Pratibha said that she started the Tīj Vrat when she was around twelve because other girls were doing it and because one could buy (or have one's parents buy) new clothes and bangles for the ritual. Moreover, "it was fun." At that time, she explained, she did not know the significance of the vrat. Mothers or grandmothers were usually the key persons involved in transmitting the details of the procedure, though others - teachers, films, school friends, or a family astrologer - could be instrumental in providing the impetus to begin observing a vrat. Some girls, like Anita, performed vrats even though they did not consider themselves to be 'religious'; it was something to do (which their friends did, and, of course, which their mothers encouraged); it was a way to keep the body healthy or figures slim. Others had more specific goals: doing well in school; getting a good husband (when marriage itself was seen to be inevitable). Clearly, however, aside from actually learning how to perform vrats, what was (and is) imparted to young girls as they grow up in observant Hindu families is that these rites constitute an important, if not crucial, element of what it means to be a Hindu woman and a

supplementary (because they are supposed to be optional) way of fulfilling one's strīdharm. Further, the kathās which the young woman hears from the time she is a small child provide vivid models for the wifely behaviour toward which she should strive.

#### Vivāha - The Married Woman

Once a woman marries, her primary vrata, the texts say, is pativrata - her vow of service and fidelity to her husband-god. But as a married woman, she is also now a saubhāgayvatī (or suhāgin, or in southern India, sumaṅgali) - all terms signifying "an auspicious married woman" - and it is both her duty and in her interest to take the performance of vrats more seriously than she did before marriage. Since she now has a real husband upon whose welfare depends in large measure her own welfare, she must strive to enhance and protect it, and vrats provide a means by which this can be accomplished. Before I explain how this works, it is necessary to consider the significance of auspiciousness in Hindu thought and women's special relationship to it.

By examining its semantic field in day to day usage, the anthropologist T.N. Madan has demonstrated that auspiciousness (maṅgala, śubha) is associated with particular events and configurations of time and place which

together promote or ensure well-being, happiness, and fruitfulness for individuals and their endeavours.<sup>25</sup> The scholar F. Marglin, in her landmark study of the devadasis (temple dancers) of Puri, describes auspiciousness as "a state which unlike purity does not speak of states of moral uprightness but of well-being and health or more generally all that creates, promotes and maintains life."<sup>26</sup> She says further that, "Status seems to be associated on the whole with masculinity and auspiciousness on the whole with femininity, the two intimately intermingling in marriage"; and she calls women "the harbingers of auspiciousness."<sup>27</sup> Neither men nor women are born with auspiciousness, then, but women are called auspicious when they become married (as long as they remain married and preferably chaste) because as feeders and potential (or realized) providers of children they are a source of pleasure and benefit to the family, clan and society. As caretakers of the home and embodiments

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<sup>25</sup> T.N.Madan, "Concerning the Categories Śubha and Śuddha in Hindu Culture" in Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society, ed. J.Carman and F.Marglin (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1985), 11-29. Madan notes that "The agency which ensures this [state of] well-being may be divine grace, the configurations of circumstances and/or human effort." (12)

<sup>26</sup> Frédérique Marglin, Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri (Delhi: Oxford U.Press, 1985), 19.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Marglin also characterizes the role of the wife as the "feeder of the household"; she is the "life-maintainer par excellence" on whose proper behaviour depends the welfare of the group (both the living and the ancestors). (53)

of the goddess Lakṣmī - the divine ultimate source of auspiciousness - women can mediate the ebb and flow of maṅgal in the family. The performance of vrats is an important part of this process because it involves bringing together special time, place, and items considered favourable to the creation of an environment 'charged with auspiciousness'. Thus it was that several women told me that "vrats are for auspiciousness," and that "vrats give peace and happiness to the family"; or, as Lelauti put it: "By keeping vrats in the home, happiness and calm will prevail... Troubles are kept far away and one's wealth increases. In every way vrats are beneficial."

Furthermore, as one woman told me, "women share in Durgā śakti"; or, as the husband of another woman I interviewed put it, "women are the śakti principle of men." That is, women are perceived to be born with an "enabling," "energizing" force; a force or power which, when channeled through a husband and marriage, becomes a 'tamed' creative power. Śakti has been described as a kind of natural energy or dynamic power; "a psychophysiological energy that may or may not be used by a person to assist him in controlling another person."<sup>28</sup> Its source is the goddess Śakti.<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> Sheryl Daniel, "Marriage in Tamil Culture: The Problem of Conflicting Models" in ed. S.Wadley, The Powers of Tamil Women (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1980), 89, n.3.

power of śakti is both transformative and transferable to another person or object. One's measure of śakti can be increased through chastity and any form of tapas (acts of austerity and self-denial, especially of food), or through suffering and servitude - both associated with women's lot.<sup>30</sup> Vrats that women perform for the sake of others in the family further harness and direct their "śakti" to auspicious ends.

When newly married Veena said that, "through vrats women do the protection of their husbands" (echoed by other women in so many words), she meant that: (i) the merit a woman accumulates through performing vrats can be

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The anthropologist M.Egnore, who contributed an article to the same volume, above, explained that "śakti, like our own word 'power' is often defined as the ability to act, to make others act, to make things happen, and as action itself." ("On the Meaning of Śakti to Women in Tamil Nadu", 22.) Additionally, Daniel reports that the villagers in Tamil Nadu she interviewed held that "although males also possess a measure of śakti, it is believed that this is because they embody a small portion of the female principle." (78)

<sup>29</sup> Just as Śrī/Lakṣmī is the divinized form of fortune, luck, auspiciousness, so Śakti is the divinized philosophical principle of "enabling energy" (from the verbal root śak - "to be able to"). Śrī/Lakṣmī is the consort of Viṣṇu who is usually depicted as the preserver and ruler. Together they represent kingship, wealth, abundance and stability. Śakti is often associated with Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva (which also means "auspiciousness"). Together, Śiva and Śakti create; alone, in their terrible aspects - as Bhairava and Kali - they destroy. But, of course, as Marglin has shown, death as a prelude to life is not necessarily inauspicious.

<sup>30</sup> See M. Egnore, "On the Meaning of Śakti", pp.15-17.



transferred to her husband - i.e., the gods, pleased by the devotion of the votary, answer her prayers by protecting those for the sake of whom the votary acts (the usual vratkathā scenerio); (ii) fasting and self-control increase a woman's śakti - her transformative, creative energy which either translates her wishes into reality or is somehow transferred to her husband. (I will discuss the relationship between vrats, tapas, and śakti further in the next chapter.)

On the one hand, then, the young bahu's (daughter-in-law) performance of votive rites symbolizes her acknowledgement of and acquiescence to her new role as wife and would-be mother of sons (as well as new member of the family, as I will explain below); but on the other hand, it also signifies that her actions have a potentially transformative power insofar as through her regular performance of vrats her husband's life may be protected, fertility of the land and crops, as well as her own reproductive fertility may be ensured, the family wealth and well-being enhanced, and so on. Married women's observance of vrats, unlike men's or widows', is intrinsically connected to and is a public expression of, their special relationship to auspiciousness.

It is important to note that the women scholars I have made reference to in the foregoing (Egnore, Daniels, Marglin and McGee) have made insightful contributions to our under-

standing of the nature and significance of Hindu women's religiosity. These contributions balance the orthodox gender ideology against other, more positive conceptions of women as "harbingers of auspiciousness," "dispensers of saubhāgya," and so on, expressed, implicitly or explicitly, in the Hindu tradition. Sandra Robinson sums up the stance of this perspective towards the end of her article "Hindu Paradigms of Women" (p.209). She says that in both the "brahmanic paradigms" (orthodox gender ideology) and in the "Hindu devotionalism configuration," which allows for a more positive conception of women's role,

women are powerful but subordinate, but in the women's traditions their powers are used directly and resourcefully and their subordination is reduced, in effect, to a symbolic level. Instead of consigning their powers and efficacy to male agents as brahmanic consort goddesses do, women in devotional Hinduism exercise their powers themselves for purposes they themselves choose. The purposes in the end do reflect values of self-sacrifice, but the selflessness involved in performing rites for one's family welfare proceeds from a posture of efficacy and confidence...

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Let us return to the new bahu from a sociological perspective. In northern India where arranged marriages and exogamy are still the norm, the newly-married woman leaves her natal home and family to join her husband's family, often as a complete stranger. As she enters the "sās ki rāj," she will find herself on the lowest rung in terms of

her (lack of) authority, power and autonomy.<sup>31</sup> In short, her own volition must now, more than at any other stage in her life, be made to bend and adjust to the needs and demands of those around her. One of the most important ways in which she can gain acceptance and status within her new family is to bear a child, especially a son, for her affinal line.<sup>32</sup> So, a newly married woman is expected both to adopt the vrats observed in her sāsural (in-laws' family), and to direct her intention for observing those vrats to achieving the auspicious ends which serve the well-being of her new family.

There are several factors which can determine how many and which vrats a woman will actually perform during her married life. One factor is her own piety. A second factor is pressure from female family members of her sāsural to conform to their practices. A third factor is her personal situation with respect to fulfilling her duties as a wife and provider of healthy male offspring for her husband's family. A woman may feel impelled to resort to keeping new vrats or more vrats if she is having trouble conceiving, or she had not yet produced a boy. Sushila represents such a

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<sup>31</sup> See Vatuk, "Authority, Power and Autonomy", 30.

<sup>32</sup> On this topic see, e.g., S. Wadley and D. Jacobson, Women in India: Two Perspectives (New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1977).

situation.

After giving birth to three girls Sushila, originally from Rajasthan, very much wanted a son. However, on account of a heart condition, she was advised by doctors against becoming pregnant again. Her husband, while wanting a son, did not overtly pressure her either (they both claimed) as he was very concerned about her health. Nevertheless, and not surprisingly given the tremendous value placed on male children in Indian culture, her desire persisted. While visiting her maike (birth family), relatives told her to pray to the image of the woman who had been a satī (burned herself on her husband's funeral pyre) in their family. "She also has power due to her sati (truth)," Sushila said, "and all the women in her family turn to her in times of want or trouble." Sushila went to her family Satī-Mātā shrine and drew an inverted svastik with cowdung and prayed to Satī-Mā for a son. She made a manauti (conditional vow) saying that if she were so blessed she would return from Banaras to do Satī-Mā's puja and revert the svastik. The inverted svastik, she explained, represents an incomplete or unsatisfactory state of things (in a woman's life) - and to draw it properly represents a "saphal" (literally, "fruitful") situation. Clearly, the inverted svastik symbolized the unsatisfactory situation in Sushila's life. Within a couple of months she was pregnant with her son. In

addition to this vow, made to her familial Satī-Mā, Sushila also kept the Sunday Vrat in order to obtain a son, on the advice of a friend in Banaras. She did this weekly vrat until she became pregnant, at which time she ended it with a simple "havan-pūjā" ceremony. While pregnant she went to the Durgā mandir near her house and prayed to Durga (her iṣṭadevtā): "If my foetus is a son, keep him safe; if a daughter, take her away." Sushila attributes the birth of her son to the combined blessings of all the deities that she propitiated by vrat and prayer and from whom she had sought help.<sup>33</sup>

A married woman will also start a new vrat if one of her children (especially a male child) is ill or failing to thrive. Chandrakala Devi, age 50, and originally from western Bihar, told me this story:

Several years after marriage my one son became quite ill. Later he was diagnosed as having tetanus, and I had no hope of saving him. At that time I made a conditional vow to God that I would keep the Dala Chaṭh Vrat if my son became well. That son of mine did recover so since then I have been observing the Dala Chaṭh Vrat. Now my son is twenty-two years old.

I asked Chandrakala how she had learned about this vrat. She replied, "In Bihar this vrat is a major celebration - people observe it with great pomp. Everyone learns about

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<sup>33</sup> When I met her, her three year-old son was a healthy cherished child, but Sushila's heart condition has seriously worsened and she was awaiting surgery.

this vrat just by watching everyone else do it." Thus, though she had not previously kept this vrat she knew when and how to observe it.

Both Sushila and Candrakala had inverted the usual format of a vrat by transforming the vrat into a "manauti" - a conditional vow. That is, instead of performing the vrat first and hoping for a reward, the vow is undertaken only on condition that the deity propitiated fulfills the supplicant's desire. In my experience (confirmed by McGee's data<sup>34</sup>) conditional vows are most often made when a woman is confronted with an urgent and specific problem for which she seeks an immediate solution. In all cases among the women I interviewed, when a manauti-vrat had been undertaken, the reason had to do with the woman's children. In some cases, the woman wanted to conceive a child of a specific sex.<sup>35</sup> In other cases, a child is very ill and medical treatments have not had the desired effect. The mother (and/or grandmother) look to other means to help the child. Appealing to one or several deities (or deified persons - e.g., Satī-Mātās and brahms) and offering to

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<sup>34</sup> See McGee, 348-9.

<sup>35</sup> Lakshmi, Shyamdevi's niece, gave a similar account to Sushila's. In her case she had three boys and strongly desired a girl, even when "people told me that I should stop having children". She prayed to Jiutiya Mā saying, "If you will grant me a girl then I will do your vrat." Lakshmi too was successful.

perform a self-sacrificing ritual act on condition of a positive outcome is one option. Luschinsky wrote this about such manauti vows in Senapur:

Some village women also turn to Goraya Baba [Senapur village protector spirit] in times of trouble. They vow that they will perform a ceremony for him if he frees them of their difficulties. This kind of mutual give and take arrangement with the gods is very common in the village. Women seldom trust one god to fulfill their request. They usually make their vows to a number of gods, assuming that at least one will be tempted by the promise of offerings and worship. If their demands are satisfied, they worship all the gods to whom they made vows, saying that they have no way of knowing which gods helped them.<sup>36</sup>

So it was that Sushila, not knowing which deity had helped her, attributed her successful outcome to all the gods, and fulfilled her promises to each.

### The older saubhāgyavatī

Older, post-menopausal women, whose husbands are still alive and who are not required to earn independent incomes, are in a position to observe vrats more diligently and frequently than women at other stages in the life cycle. For post-menopausal women, the restrictions relating to menstruation and childbirth imposed on younger women no longer impede ritual acts such as a pūjā. Older married women are usually at the peak of their authority, power and autonomy in the family, and this brings increased freedom to

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<sup>36</sup> Luschinsky, "Life of Women," 656.

determine their own activities. Those who are financially secure, that is, those whose families can afford a servant to help look after grandchildren, also have considerably more time at their disposal to engage in such activities as bhajan groups, pilgrimage, local temple visitation, kathā recitations, and the longer (e.g., month-long) vrats, such as the Kārtik "snān-dān-vrat."<sup>37</sup> These are all socially-approved pastimes for a proper Hindu wife. While all women can engage in these activities, older women predominated in the bhajan groups and kathā recitations that I attended in Banaras.

Ideologically, the important point in regard to older married women and vrats is that as long as she remains saubhāgyavatī, she can observe all vrats as a pativrata. If she has children and they are married off, and if her husband is still alive and well - she has indeed proved herself an 'auspicious married woman.' Younger women will seek her blessings during such occasions as marriages, festivals and during vrats in which women gather together to perform the pūjā, tell stories and perform other ritual

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<sup>37</sup> As Freeman ("The Ladies of Lord Krishna" 124-25) has described in relation to the Habisha Vrat, longer vrats may involve pilgrimage, as well as story-telling, singing and dancing or dramatic re-enactments of scenes from the kathās in cases where the vrat is performed by a group of women. Pre-menopausal women cannot observe the month-long Habisha Vrat because their period might come in the middle and compromise the vrat.



activities.

### Vaidhavya - Widowhood

When a woman is widowed, her situation changes dramatically. "Widows are not supposed to wear makeup," said Vina, "or put on any of the sr̥ṅgar (auspicious items, such as bangles, sindur [red powder in the part of her hair], signifying that a woman is married); (they are to) eat food without spices and stay in cool places, so that their minds can remain fixed on God." Vina has succinctly summed up the traditional expectations regarding a Hindu widow; expectations which are still very much alive among the higher castes in much of India.<sup>38</sup>

From a dharmaśāstric point of view, the woman who becomes widowed ideally ought to commit sati as that would not only prove the quality of her pativrata-ness in a final act of heroic loyalty to her husband, but practically it

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<sup>38</sup> The respected national news magazine, "India Today", featured an in-depth report on the plight of widows in India which starkly revealed that the terrible social and economic conditions for (many) high-caste widows have not significantly changed in recent years. Unless financially independent and either educated or very determined, the widow's fate largely depends on the attitudes of her in-laws and/or her birth family. (India Today, "Widows: Wrecks of Humanity", Nov.15, 1987, 68-75.)

would solve the problem of what to do with her.<sup>39</sup> Failing that, the texts variously specify who is responsible for her and how she is to behave. She is most problematic if she is young and has produced no heir. Though disagreeing on details (e.g., should she be tonsured or not), the Dharmaśāstras are fairly consistent in advocating a life of extreme simplicity in diet and dress, and relative seclusion. She is to focus on 'spiritual matters'. In short, she is to render herself asexual by acting like an ascetic - without the benefits (and attendant admiration) of having made that choice herself.

Both the texts and more recent observers of Hindu culture never fail to mention the widow's association with inauspiciousness. "It is said that a widow is the most inauspicious. Even a glance at her should be avoided, much less her touch [Skanda Purāṇa II.9.22]... The blessing of widows is said to be like the hissings of poisonous serpents...A widow is ordained to spend her time in the worship of Viṣṇu. Decoration or looking into a mirror is

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<sup>39</sup> In the famous story of Śakuntalā in the Mahābhārata, there is a passage where Śakuntalā lectures Duḥśanta when he has refused to recognize her and their son (Adiparvan 68.39-46). She eloquently speaks of the pativrata, and among other things, says: "... Only a faithful wife follows even a man who has died and is transmigrating, sharing a common lot in adversities, for he is forever her husband. A wife who has died before stands still and waits for her husband; and a good wife follows after her husband if he has died before." [van Buitenen tr.]

forbidden for a widow [Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa II.83.94 ff.]."<sup>40</sup> The widow is inauspicious essentially because she is no longer (legitimately) sexually active, and so can no longer produce sons and can no longer be a transmitter of well-being to the family. Though in theory she can continue to strive to be the pativrata by focussing all her prayers on helping her husband in the next life and on joining him there, she is certainly no longer saubhāgyavati. On the contrary, she bears some measure of responsibility for her husband's death, and so is a potential transmitter of inauspiciousness. In consequence, one is to avoid contact with her as much as possible.

Nevertheless, though widows may be the bearers of inauspiciousness, older (post-menopausal) widows can be 'pure'. Certainly Vina conformed in many ways to the expectations of a widow, but she also seemed very concerned about maximizing purity in whatever way possible. Many such widows end up cultivating this quality perforce because of their ascetic regimen.<sup>41</sup> Of course, as we have seen, vrats

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Dange, Encyclopedia of Purāṇic Beliefs and Practices, 1615.

<sup>41</sup> Marglin has noted this too (Wives of the God-King, 54): "Old widows - i.e. after the child-bearing age - are pure. They fast all the time; they never eat fish, meat and other 'hot' food, they wear white (colour of purity) garments and in general live an austere life. It is only by disassociating inauspiciousness from impurity that one can understand why it is only old widows who can become temple attendants."

are ideally suited not just to the promotion of auspiciousness, but to the ascetic life and to the cultivation of purity.

According to Vindhya, an elderly Vaiṣṇava Brahman estranged from her husband, widows should keep vrats so that their husbands can achieve mukti, "and for their own chastity and their own next [lives]." Once more (despite Vindhya's personal circumstances)<sup>42</sup> her response is an ideologically predictable one. The first concern should be for the welfare of the husband. The performance of vrats remains a vehicle through which this can be achieved. By extension, a widow must protect her own chastity since chastity remains a key to her pativrata status. Again, vrats serve the purpose by their focus on sensual abstinence and self-control. Finally, the widow, through her vrats, may supplicate a god to ensure that she is not widowed in her next life, and/or that she may be reunited with her husband.<sup>43</sup>

Usha, the 33 year-old married woman whose observance of

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<sup>42</sup> I will discuss Vindhya's situation shortly. It is worth noting, however, that Vindhya often first gave a conventional response to particular questions, but then, as we talked, more personal reflections would emerge and perhaps contradict earlier statements.

<sup>43</sup> There is another possibility. Annapurna, married to a poor and domineering pandit, told me bluntly that she prayed to be reborn as a man. For her, life was hard enough without the added burden of being a woman.

Tīj I described in the previous chapter, expressed the view that if a widow was keeping vrats before her husband had died then she could continue to observe them for her children. If she had no children, then observing vrats was still necessary.

Some vrats are such that they have to be kept for one's whole life; and if a widow prefers to leave [them] then she has to do the udyāpan (for those vrats). If a widow has no children then she should observe vrats for her next birth. If she will do pūjā-path [this includes vrats] then in the next birth there won't be such a bad life (as this one was). How it was in the previous birth, what deeds were done that (caused her) to become a widow, who knows? ... (in short) widows can observe any vrats, but they cannot offer saubhāgya items in a pūjā...

Usha's comments by and large reinforce Vindhya's. What is again impressive is the sense of commitment to vrats that these (and other) women express. Once started one ought to keep performing vrats despite being widowed. Like Shyamdevi, who gave up most of the vrats she observed with reluctance (because she felt physically exhausted by the work involved in making a living and caring for her children), many women seem to feel attached to these rituals, rituals that are so closely linked with Hindu women's identity and so expressive of their religiosity.

Gulab is a 66 year-old widowed Brahman who has kept fourteen different vrats in her life-time. When she became widowed in her mid fifties, she left all vrats except the semi-monthly Ekādaśī (the quintessential "widow's vrats") and

the four yearly Gaṇeś Cauth Vrats which she keeps for her sons, the youngest with whom she currently lives. Unlike Vina, she does not wear only white saris and she does not stay away from all auspicious occasions; she goes to the Viswanath temple every day and she likes to participate in bhajan groups. Rani (Snehalata's older sister-in-law), now 62, was widowed when she was 32, and she is childless. Much of her life centres on religious activities. For example, she performs a daily morning pūjā and an evening āratī to the "sanātan devatās," and every day she bathes in the Ganges and visits the temple. After she was widowed, a iyotiṣi prescribed the Pūrṇamāsi and Ekādaśī vrats for her to keep, and she still performs these vrats, totalling four per month. She also still keeps Śivarātri, Janmāṣṭamī and Tīj. About Tīj she said: "You don't stop Tīj even if your husband dies;" such is the tradition in Rani's family. The vrats she did discontinue when her husband died, because a widow is supposed to, are Karva Cauth and the Sāvitṛī Vrat. (Later she also discontinued Pradoṣ and Śravaṇ Somvār when the astrologer prescribed the other vrats for her to take up.) Rani feels that the Ekādaśī and Pūrṇamāsi vrats are the most important vrats which she now keeps. As she explained: "I have belief in them (vrats). One does vrats out of ārādhana (devotion); it is good karm (action); out of that comes punya (spiritual merit); and it is maṅgal

(auspicious)." Rani never spoke of her husband, and I gather that the fact of her childlessness, and the disappointment, constant worry and sense of failure that this situation precipitated never allowed her to get accepted by or form any bonds with her husband's family. (She currently lives with natal relatives.) Clearly, the early death of her husband contributed to her alienation from her affinal family. Though she continues to perform the Tij Vrat because of a sense of obligation, it is to the other vrats that she attributes the most significance, because they are for herself, for nurturing her relationship to God; and, "anything to do with God is maṅgal." Like Snehalata, it is Rani's faith (shaped in particular by the teachings of the Bhagavadgītā) that has provided her a source of strength, and perhaps a sense of worth and purpose beyond that prescribed by her low and marginal status as a widow.

### mokṣa and vrats

Reflecting on the relation of vrats to the stages in a woman's life, Snehalata commented:

Before marriage, vrats are performed out of a desire for specific things and for bhakti. Just after marriage, nitya and laukik vrats are done, especially laukik [i.e., manauti-type vrats and those for children]. If widowed, then the laukik vrats stop and one concentrates mostly on śāstrik, mokṣa-centred vrats.

Mokṣa ("liberation" from the cycle of rebirth) is often

included in the Purāṇa-Nibandha vrata descriptions as one of the possible rewards or fruits for the performance of a vrata.<sup>44</sup> However, there are debates in the Dharma Smṛtis and Nibandhas about women's capacity to achieve mokṣa, and these debates were never consensually resolved. Some texts state that women cannot ever obtain mokṣa because of their svabhāva, their inherent nature. They must wait to be reborn as a male. Others suggest that women can in theory, but this is not an appropriate goal for women as wives. Strīdharmā dictates that women's goals must always be in relation to their husbands. If such duties are supremely well carried out, then mokṣa may be a reward.

Most women I spoke with did not mention mokṣa at all when discussing vrats. When mokṣa was mentioned, it was usually casually, along with other fruits of vrats, just as we find in the Purāṇas. Or, it was mentioned in the context of widows' performance of vrats, as in Snehalata's comments (above). In general, my impression is that mokṣa was not a goal that women thought about very much; not because of an acceptance of strictures against their capacity or its

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<sup>44</sup> Actually, instead of mokṣa or mukti, the Purāṇas often specify a, one could say, "pre-final liberation" state as the reward. As McGee notes (63-4), philosophical schools recognized different levels of mokṣa (that is, leading up to mokṣa): salokya (reaching one of the gods' heavens); samlīpya (nearness to God); sarupya (identical form with God); and sayujya (absorption in God).



inappropriateness for them as women, but because of its abstraction and remoteness from their immediate lives. As dharmic acts, vrats are spiritually and socially meritorious; and that is enough, for all dharmic acts eventually contribute to mokṣa. Yāma and Brahmā will decide how well their "good" actions balance against their "bad" actions, and mete out the karmik results.

However, I would suggest that when Snehalata, and other women, commented that widows could or should focus on mokṣa-centred vrats, they are saying that this is the time in a woman's life when she can more explicitly or publicly acknowledge that she is performing religious rituals for her own welfare. Further, married women tend to express sympathy for widows, and allow that a widow should be able to engage in religious activities that will not only help her to secure a better rebirth, or mokṣa, but that will provide some solace for her present life.

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How often, how many, and which vrats may be observed during a woman's lifetime, then, depends on diverse factors. Family tradition, both natal and affinal, is probably the most important factor; but also important is a woman's own inclination or attitude towards vrats. Thus, if a woman's mother, grandmother or mother-in-law observed many vrats,

she may keep many too. Nevertheless, usually this practice must be sustained, especially when tested by circumstance, by her belief or trust in their efficacy or purpose. Such a belief or trust in vrats, however, is often understood reflexively, as giving her back something such as "good feelings," "peace of mind," detachment, or a stronger relationship to God. Among those interviewed, I found that in a time of crisis or chronic difficulty one woman will give up vrats altogether as being useless while another may observe vrats with increased ardour as a source of strength, hope or consolation; or as an outlet for frustration. I will be discussing the spiritual significance of vrats for women at greater length in the next chapter. For the moment, I will give two examples of women whose lives have been deeply tried, and how their experiences have affected their performance of vrats.

Dulari, 56 year-old Brahman widow, is an example of a woman who gave up on vrats. Dulari had finished high school and had been married to a man who became a professor at the University in Banaras. She gave birth to eight children, one boy who is mentally handicapped, and seven girls, two of whom died shortly after birth because they were premature. Two of her daughters are married and one, Sudha, still lives at home. The other two daughters, as I have mentioned before, burned to death at the homes of their in-laws.

While formal accusations of negligence and murder were lodged with the police, no charges have been laid, and the two husbands have remarried. These tragedies happened a few years after her husband's death. Dulari used to keep five vrats; now she keeps none. She used to keep these vrats, she said, "for mental peace"; now the idea of achieving such a state seems to her hopeless. Though she had supported her daughter Sudha's decision to take on the Tuesday Vrat, she has lost interest in performing vrats herself. Dulari's only religious activity involves the occasional reading of the Rāmāyaṇ.

Vindhya, a Vaiṣṇava Brahman aged 72 and estranged from her husband, has also experienced serious difficulties. Her humour and liveliness could not always mask her emotional suffering at the hands of an apparently callous family. At times, she was loquacious in a cheerful way, telling stories, giving anecdotes and reciting verses from the Gītā or Purāṇ. At other times, she would suddenly become tearful, her voice dropping to a whisper as she talked about the difficulties she has endured. One of her two sons died of fever in adolescence, and her husband used to beat her before he finally left the home, when her remaining son and daughter were married. She was left without financial support and now lives with her elderly widowed sister. Vindhya has also been in poor health for some years. She

has kept twelve different vrats in her life. But, some years ago, after her husband left and when she was about 60, she gave up all vrats except Gaṇeś Cauth (for her children). Then she took up the semi-monthly Ekādaśī Vrat with a renewed sense of religious conviction, and despite ill-health and advanced age, she remains strongly attached to this vrat.

Vindhya has derived much consolation from the Gītā, and her reading of the text (much of which she has memorized) seems to have influenced her understanding of vrats. Early in our conversation she made a distinction between two kinds of vrats: the "Ekādaśī kind" and the "Śiva-pūjā kind." She suggested that in the latter one asks for things in return, whereas "Lord Kṛṣṇa says if you ask for something in return then you are forcing him to give by not eating. Kṛṣṇa says not to ask for anything in return when you perform a vrat; ask only for his bhakti."<sup>45</sup> Vindhya explained that the Ekādaśī Vrat was especially important to her because "that is the only way to obtain God. People who read the Gītā do the Ekādaśī pūjā to achieve mokṣa. These are the things I

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<sup>45</sup> Vindhya apparently associated Śiva-pūjā with animal sacrifices, which she felt were wrong. "People who do this kind of pūjā are blind in their mind and heart... It won't work if I sacrifice my finger to strengthen yours!"

want - closeness to God."<sup>46</sup> But, she reflected, "it is up to God to decide what He will give."

Vindhya made a number of interesting comments about the correct attitude one should adopt while performing vrats, and about the meaning, significance and benefits of these rites. But it is more appropriate to place some of these comments in the context of discussions in the following chapter as I move on to examine and summarize meanings and functions of vrats in the religious lives of Hindu women.

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<sup>46</sup> Vindhya's understanding of the term mokṣa seems to correspond to the concept of saṁīpya (nearness to God); one of the 'levels' of mokṣa.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### "BECAUSE IT GIVES ME PEACE OF MIND"

#### Meanings and Functions of Vrats in Hindu Women's Religious Lives

While the women I spoke with were quick to explain why husbands do not need to perform vrats for their wives, and why wives and mothers do keep vrats for husbands and children, they often hesitated to say that they performed vrats for themselves as well. Some women, like Snehalata and Rekha, denied that they ever kept vrats for their own benefit. Yet, in their comments about the meaning and purpose of vrats and the benefits that observing vrats gives, it is clear that women do get something back for themselves. Indeed, it is apparent that women use vrats to express profound spiritual yearnings, and that performing vrats gives them "peace of mind," a sense of accomplishment, and even more, a sense of empowerment and control over their bodies and over certain aspects of their lives.

This final chapter draws ideas and material from earlier chapters together with new material to reflect on the functions of vrats in Hindu women's religious lives and to draw some conclusions about the various factors that can

account for the pervasiveness and apparent popularity of the vrat tradition among women in India. Specifically, this chapter looks beyond the ostensible reasons for which women perform vrats (encapsulated in the phrase "I do vrats for suhāg) to investigate more systematically other explanations of the meaning and significance of vrats. That is, I examine what else vrats mean to women besides being a means to maintain or enhance their suhāg. I review what women get out of vrats for themselves, how women use vrats to express their spirituality or their religious goals, and I examine what women mean by the phrase "peace of mind." I also consider the relation of vrats to the concepts of purity, tapas and śakti. And, finally, I explore the ways in which vrats empower women. As in previous chapters, women's comments and narratives constitute my primary data, and while I have constructed the framework, I have allowed their words to set the agenda and direction of analysis.

Let me first turn to the specific query which usually marked the beginning of my interview with a woman; what is a vrat? Asking women to define the term vrat at the start of our discussion set the subject matter immediately into focus. As an open-ended question (and one that was generally received as innocuous and non-threatening), it

allowed women to say whatever came to their minds.<sup>1</sup> Some women initially responded with a simple statement such as, "a vrāt is a fast." Or, the purpose of vrats would be stated: "We do vrats for kalyān (well-being)," "for maṅgal (auspiciousness)," or, "for suhāg." At other times the procedures of particular vrats would be outlined to show what a vrāt is. Not infrequently, several explanations would be given at once, as in: "A vrāt is performed for peace; to get rid of problems. It is also 'duty' and (it is) tradition (saṃskār)." Later in the interview (or on another day), I would go back to this question or ask it in a different way. Now there had been time for more reflection on the subject. In the following sections, I present my attempt to sort out and collate the material I received which bears on this question. It is interesting to see how the whole (historical) spectrum of the vrata tradition as shaped and recorded in the texts is reflected in women's responses.<sup>2</sup> What is also noteworthy is how many of the

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<sup>1</sup> Some women, like Lakshmi, seemed to have thought about the nature and meaning of vrats before and their comments came easily. Others were hesitant and seemed to be struggling to articulate ideas that had previously been largely inchoate. However, another reason for women's hesitation, I believe, can be attributed to the fact that the concept of vrāt is complex and cannot be readily encapsulated.

<sup>2</sup> As a modern representative of the Sanskrit Dharma śāstra tradition, it may be useful to record here for purposes of comparison the words of the Hindi author R. Tripathi on the meaning of vrāt and the reasons for observing vrats. At the



"ten niyamas" listed in the Agni Purāṇa and other sources as constitutive of the "dharma of vrata" have been singled out by women as central to the meaning or purpose of vrats.<sup>3</sup>

### Meanings of Vrat

#### Vrat as "ordinance" or duty

Amma is an elderly Tamil Brahman who had lived in Banaras for many years, and who, through her husband, had experienced much contact with westerners. She spoke in a mixture of Hindi, English, and Tamil. I begin with her reflections on the meaning of vrata because of their resonance with the Rgvedic sense of vrata as (socio-

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beginning of his long introduction to his book, Vrat, parv aur tyauhār, Tripathi writes (p.1): "The reasons for observing vrats are, usually: for obtaining spiritual (adhyatimik) or mental power (mānsik śakti); for purification of mind and soul (ātma), and for the firmness [or power] of determination; for the development of devotion (bhakti) to God and for the development of faith; for the purification of atmosphere (vaṭavarān); for influencing (or leaving an impression on) others; to make the thoughts pure and elevated and so on; and it is done for physical health." At the end of his introduction he concludes that "The meaning of vrata is to bind good actions (bandhanyukt satkarm), that is, the fruit from the doer's karm (actions) is tied to him. Though humans have to suffer the result of their good and bad deeds, [yet] the reward of solemnly-vowed vrats is unerring." (p.21)

<sup>3</sup> To remind readers, the ten niyamas are: kṣama (forebearance); satya (truth); daya (compassion); dāna (charity); śauca (purity); indriyanigraha (control of the six senses); deva pūjā; homa; santoṣa (contentment); and asteya (not stealing).

religiously defined) "function."

Vrata means mostly fasting followed by pūjā and offerings (naivedya) to the gods. But, vrata is also this - my whole life has been a vrata. [pause] The Hindu religion is very broad and tolerant. I think it mainly comes under three headings: Smarta, Vaiṣṇava and Vira-Śaiva. The daily way of life according to these (groups) is itself a vrata. For example, a housewife (a "sumāṅgali") has to look after her household, to the comforts of her husband, children, relatives, etc. (She has) to be truthful and dutiful. Reciprocally, the husband also has to look after the comforts of all family members, earn for the family and so on. This is his vrata. By being like this [truthfully dutiful] (one) may have mukti in this life itself - jivan-mukti. Some say (one) has to be generous, feed the poor and the downtrodden also. ...

I have not read the scriptures. The family being big - a half dozen children, my husband and myself, people coming and going - I could not find time for extra vratas or anything. Whatever I have done is in the routine of family life, side by side with our daily way of life. I was very particular that all our children should study well. In fact, I taught them myself up to the tenth standard - I engaged no tuition. This was also part of my vrata. ...

A Hindu living his daily life is itself an observance of a vrata. For instance, a housewife looks after the comforts of her husband, children, and also if there are elders in the family. In the same way a brahma-carya keeps his own vratas.

While Amma spoke in great detail about the particular vrats that she observes (seven altogether), she sees these vrats as part of a larger "vrata" whose content and form is determined by her identity as a Smarta Brahman married woman and mother. For Amma, the only choice involved in performing her vrata is how well she carries it out. Otherwise her vrata is ordained by the circumstances of her birth (sex, religion, status) and life (wife, daughter-in-law, mother,

mother-in-law). Every Hindu, man or woman, has such a vrata; and if they carry out their vrata dutifully, truthfully, and conscientiously they may achieve mukti.

#### Vrat as saṅkalp (resolve)

A few days later, across town near the Ganges in a two-storey flat off one of old Banaras' innumerable allies, a scholarly conservative pandit informed me that

vrata is derived from the verbal root vr, meaning 'to choose', with the affix ta, giving one the noun vrataṁ. If you recite something in the mind and accept it, you have made a saṅkalp. That is a vrata. Upavās came later. It was something different, and later merged with vrata. ... Vratas are for mukti, and for getting rid of sins and also diseases" (by fasting and so on).

Most men I interviewed, especially pandits, similarly spoke of vratas as saṅkalpa, emphasizing their voluntary, optional nature. A vrata is a vow one chooses to undertake for a specified length of time and for a variety of 'religious' or 'non-religious' reasons, including both mundane (bhukti) and ultra-mundane/soteriological (mukti) goals.<sup>4</sup> Such an understanding of the word "vrata" is essentially no different from the meaning given to it by the earliest lexicographers of Sanskrit and carried through by the Nibandhas treating of vrata.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, one gentleman gave this example for a "non-religious" vrata - "Say you wanted to stop smoking or stop chewing pan - then you can take a vrata to accomplish that goal."

### Vrat as ethical action

Some of the comments of Premlata, a 56 year-old Brahman widow, on the meaning of vrat fit in with vrat as resolve. However, in her description (of her mother's usage) vrat meant not just a resolve to undertake a course of action for a temporary reason or to achieve a particular goal, but rather to make a choice to alter one's behaviour along a certain ethical path.

My mother used to say, 'to be a vratanī (fem. for the Sanskrit term for votary) means to have an attitude of service to people. Serve all, feed and give drink, give dān. Take the vrat of renouncing lying; take the vrat of speaking truth - this is the greatest vrat.' What she did not do was the cycle of rituals, pūjā. ... I did not see my mother doing puja for such reasons as her marriage, lack of food, personal desires. She did not have any son; she had four daughters. The only vrat she kept was Ahoi-Mā Vrat. (A vrat for children.)

Premlata's mother had separated 'vrat' from its 'ritual' context and had chosen to focus on the larger ethical principles that have been articulated in the Hindu tradition (and which are clearly not gender-specific). These are some of the injunctions included in the "dharma of vrata" which, as I discussed in chapter two, the Purāṇas and Nibandhas had already superimposed on the developing vrata "tradition" as a whole. While Premlata is more "devotional" than her mother - she performs regular pūjā and keeps many more vrats - she was clearly impressed by her mother's counsel and she tries to be a "vratanī" not only when she performs a vrat,

but during other occasions as well.

Kamala, a thoughtful upper-middle class Brahman housewife in her fifties (and one of the few women I interviewed who was fluent in English) also described one meaning of vrat as saṅkalp in a manner similar to Premlata. Though she herself took fasting very seriously, she commented that "it is not really necessary that you should go without food; you take a saṅkalp that you are going to perform one good thing today - that is also a vrat." Vindhya made it clear that ethical action must accompany the performance of a vrat in order for it to be fruitful. "Look," she explained,

it amounts to nothing if you are keeping a vrat and it (involves) the most difficult fast if at the same time you cheat or kill someone or do bad things... That is what the Gītā and Purāṇ all say. Doing vrat alone won't get you punya (merit); you have to (accompany the vrat) with good actions.

#### Vrat as sādhanā (spiritual discipline) and niyama

Kamala also made the observation that many vrats that women keep today are a form of 'ritualized saṅkalp'. What she meant was that long ago (at some early point in Hindu religious history) women's intentions (saṅkalp) for the welfare of their families, shaped and reinforced generation after generation, became surrounded by form, by traditions, by 'rituals'. By contrast, the Tuesday Vrat, which Kamala has kept assiduously for several decades in honour of her

iṣṭadevtā, Hanumān, she called "my kind of vrāt. This is my day off; (it is my) disciplining, my sādhana. It has nothing to do with my ritual. But the rest of the vrats, like Karva Cauth, Ahoi, Śarad Pūrṇimā are my rituals, because I do these vrats with rituals."<sup>5</sup>

When I asked Kamala what she meant by "sādhana" she explained that "the worst part of me is my tantrums. I have a bad temper, and I try to get over that aspect of myself through vrats. Because vrāt means that you not only deny yourself food, but also you establish a good routine for yourself, to have good habits." Keeping the weekly Tuesday Vrat, which, for Kamala, involves a long pūjā and meditation in the morning and eating one phalāhar meal in the evening, helps her to establish a disciplined routine, to inculcate "good habits," and to work on controlling her temper. In this way, the vrāt is her sādhana. "In the beginning," Kamala said later,

when I first did vrats, it was mostly because I was told to do it, so I did it, but without any feeling attached... But gradually, I learned (to use) vrats to overcome my shortcomings; then there was some meaning to this. My attitude changed. ... Anything you are doing concerning God or about disciplining yourself is very maṅgal (auspicious). If you are happy then you are making everyone else happy too. Happiness promotes goodness.

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<sup>5</sup> By "rituals" she meant the special clothes worn, the fasting and fast-breaking foods, the stories told, songs sung, ritual art made, that are dictated by family tradition, and which are not an important part of her Tuesday Vrat.

As we talked it became clear that Kamala viewed her Tuesday Vrat in particular, the one vrat she has never forgotten to keep, or missed due to illness, as a means of self-transformation. The control of her short-temperedness led to a feeling of peace and satisfaction with herself. When you master yourself, this then "affects those around you, especially as you direct your thoughts and hopes and prayers towards them."

Lakshmi too spoke of vrats as a means to control and discipline the body and mind. But, aware of the multiple angles by which one could explain the significance of a vrat and the vrat tradition, she had many other things to say as well and she gave a characteristically comprehensive definition of a vrat, including a summary of what it can achieve for the votary and what benefits can accrue.

One does vrats for purifying the mind, for steadying it, and to prevent the oscillating mind from becoming less strong. The meaning of vrat is: for whatever work we do our mind and senses should be firm and steady. So for as long as we are keeping the vrat, we must try to keep our minds fixed. We behave according to the rules of the vrat. Do pūjā, concentrate - these are the primary meanings of vrat. A vrat is for giving peace of mind. It also gives peace to the senses, heart and intellect. It is for keeping away defilements of the mind. Through vrats we get assistance in regulating ourselves. We learn to control hunger, thirst and sleep. In this way we control our desires; for desires, while fluctuating, always increase [unless regulated or checked].

Vrat is linked to dharm. For example, we may circumambulate some goddess 108 times, and to this dharm one may add that God will become pleased; and [because of God's pleasure] one will receive this boon

or get that benefit. So we will do such vrats.

Therefore, we Hindus have related vrats to dharm so that in the name of God we can observe them easily. We have in our minds and belief so linked vrat and dharm that to think 'vrat is separate from dharm' is very difficult. This has become our tradition.

In other respects, vrats are very scientific. If you observe a vrat once each week the stomach will get a rest. It is very good for one's health; sleep will come easily.

Some vrats are like this - they are observed for one's husband; some are observed for one's sons. Jīvit-putra, for instance, is observed when someone's child has not continued to live, or when a child dies immediately after childbirth. By performing this vrat their children will continue to live - good health will be maintained. Those who have none will get [offspring]. This, of course, is a matter of belief (viśvās).

The first half of Lakshmi's explanation of the meaning of a vrat, or rather, of the functions that vrats serve, concentrates on the physical and mental or spiritual discipline involved in performing vrats and the results or benefits of this discipline to the votary. Lakshmi's preliminary focus, in other words, is on vrata as niyama. This emphasis is striking in its articulation. If one did not know the author of these words to be a middle-class Hindu housewife and mother, one might attribute them to an older widow or to a brahmacārinī (celibate student ascetic).

It is interesting to compare Lakshmi's comments on the mental or spiritual ends (or effects) of vrats with a statement made by a Banaras sannyāsinī (female renunciate) to an anthropologist: "In the householder life, you know great pleasure and sorrow (sukh-dukḥ), but you cannot know



peace. That life is in a state of constant change (parivartī, 'unsteady') and so your mind cannot become still (sthīr, 'fixed', 'constant'). In the ascetic life, you are singleminded and so you can achieve salvation."<sup>6</sup>

Does the "peace" that the sannyāsinī speaks of have anything to do with the "peace of mind" that Lakshmi referred to? I believe it does. What is this "peace of mind" that is apparently so desirable? On one level, as the English rendering would suggest, peace of mind is simply a state of calmness, or of finding quietude amid the hustle and bustle of daily life (an aim for which anyone who has lived in the extraordinarily and relentlessly noisy city of Banaras would find sympathy). One woman described how mundane matters are always diverting a (householder) woman's attention from spiritual concerns this way: "I close my eyes and imagine the figure of God, but then the dal is on the stove and my mind goes there because it starts to burn..." Vrats provide opportunities for concentration and a more sustained devotional focus. (You may still think of the dal on the stove, but then you are reminded of your hunger, and remember the reason for your fast.)

However, in Lakshmi's (and other Hindus') usage of the

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn Teskey Denton, "Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism," in Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women, ed. J. Leslie (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), 215.

phrase, peace of mind is more than moments of peace or quiet reflection.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, peace of mind is a state of equanimity, achieved by sustained effort through "purifying," "steadying" and strengthening the "oscillating" mind; by "concentrating" in one's pūjā and by meditation (dhyān). The sannyāsinī (above) would go further; such a state can only be truly achieved by renouncing the (values and constructs of the Hindu) social world altogether, freeing oneself to pursue mokṣa; (presumably, the 'Great Peace of Mind'). Nevertheless, even for a householder like Lakshmi, some degree of equanimity in the midst of the duties and responsibilities of family life is clearly desirable. It can prevent one from falling too deeply into the depths of despair, sorrow, anger, frustration - the kaṣṭ (suffering, hardship) and pareśani (worries, problems) of which Shyamdevi and others spoke - that life tosses in one's path; and all the more, it would seem, in the path of women. A level of disciplined equanimity can also prevent one from getting caught up in pleasure or in a happiness whose source

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<sup>7</sup> S. Wadley has pointed out that for Hindus śānti (which she translates as "calmness") is one of the prerequisites or indicators of good psychological health. She writes: "Physically, a person is in good condition if he is in good health (tanurustī) and not in ill-health (bīmarī, rog). Psychologically, a person's condition is good if he has happiness (sukh), calmness (śānti) or contentment (santoṣ)." Wadley, "The Rains of Estrangement," Contributions to Indian Sociology 17, no.1 (1983), 58.

may be fleeting - snatched away at any time by the unpredictable forces of bhāgya (fate) or the workings of karma. A number of women that I met had suffered a great deal because of poverty, children dying in childhood (or in "dowry deaths"), the premature death of a husband, or husbands who had beaten or abandoned them. While women often perform vrats to prevent such occurrences, the regular performance of vrats can also build up the inner strength, the feeling of personal ability and confidence and the 'presence of mind' needed to better cope with such events.

L. Teskey Denton has demonstrated that women ascetics see themselves in opposition to householder life (saṁsar, the ritually constructed 'world' of human relations).<sup>8</sup> Yet, a number of householder women I spoke with have taken seriously values associated with and demonstrably espoused by certain groups of Hindu ascetics - notably the theistic brahmacārinīs (celibate student ascetic women). In fact, Denton has described householder women as openly admiring the brahmacārinīs.<sup>9</sup> In other words, while brahmacārinīs in

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<sup>8</sup> A world "which, from the ascetic perspective, is the foremost social expression" of the cycle of life, death and rebirth. (See L. Teskey Denton, "Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism", 215.)

<sup>9</sup> Denton writes: "... householders regard [the brahmacārinīs] highly: when they see the women celibate students of their neighbourhood (on the occasion of a religious festival, for example), they point them out with a mixture of pride and awe." (ibid., 230.)

particular seek to disassociate themselves from the life of the householder, some householder women seek periodically through the observance of vrats to imitate aspects of the brahmacāriṇīs' lifestyle.

### A note on purity

It is axiomatic that the idea of purity is a central concept in Hinduism and one that has been highly elaborated in that tradition. In Indian thought, mental and physical purity are closely allied.<sup>10</sup> This becomes evident in the Dharmaśāstra discussion of the dharma of vrata where the votary is instructed to adopt a physical regimen which aims to maximize purity, but also to adopt a frame of mind conducive to (morally) pure thought. One can observe this free association between bodily and mental purity quite clearly in Tripathi's book on vrats where he says:

There is a special importance of mental and spiritual purification for performing vrats. If a man's body and clothing, etc. are unclean, the mind is oscillating and contaminated (by bad thoughts), then he will not receive even a small reward. Therefore, in the first place, our ancestors have given much attention to the

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<sup>10</sup> T.N. Madan, in his article "Concerning the Categories Śubha and Śuddha," (in Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society, ed. J.Carman and F.Marglin, Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1985) writes (p.17): "The connotation of [the word śuddha] is conveyed by invoking images of fullness or completeness in the specific sense of perfection. It thus refers to the most desired condition of the human body or, more comprehensively, the most desired state of being."

purification of bodies, clothing, etc.<sup>11</sup>

Lakshmi's first statement concerned the relationship of vrats to mental purity: "One does vrats for purifying the mind." Later, she adds: "It [the vrat] is for keeping away defilements of the mind." A significant number of other women spoke of vrats in terms of "purifying the mind." The effect of vrats in promoting physical purity was certainly mentioned as well, but not as often as the purity of mind and purity of heart. One reason that women may emphasize mental purity is that Hindu women have traditionally repeatedly received the message that their bodies are more impure (due to menstrual and birth pollution) than those of men. There is little that pre-menopausal women can do about this impurity. On the other hand, they can do whatever they like with their thoughts. Thoughts, words, and emotions are within their control, so they put an emphasis on the significance of vrats in the promotion of 'mental purity.' In addition, the various "bhakti cults" that have been so influential to modern Hindu religiosity have often stressed mental purity over bodily purity. In order to come close to God, one has to cultivate a proper devotional attitude, and this means overcoming any negative thoughts and emotions that are obstructive of one's

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<sup>11</sup> Tripathi, Vrat, parv aur tyauhār, 6.

relationship to God.

According to the women I spoke with the form of a vrat helps one to achieve such objectives as purity, self-control, auspiciousness and peace of mind. Lakshmi had made a brief but pertinent comment, reiterated later by other women: "We behave according to the rules of the vrat" (niyam se). A vrat is rule-governed. There are certain procedures that one must follow with, as we have seen in chapter six, flexibility built in to each procedure. Bathing, anointing the body with sandalpaste, wearing new or fresh clothes, fasting or eating śuddh or sattvik foods, avoiding "polluted" persons and things, refraining from negative thoughts and actions, and concentrating the mind on God contribute to inner and outward purity (pavitra). Using tumeric or roli (limed tumeric), sindur, the "sixteen śr̥ṅgar," and making ālpanās contribute to auspiciousness. Pūjā, japa, kirtan, and visits to the temple enhance and exemplify one's devotional attitude. Finally, fasting and other forms of self-restraint, meditation and other "mental niyams like not lying," keeping the vrat regularly and carrying through one's resolve contribute to one's self-discipline (as well as purity).

### Vrats and Dharm

"Hindus," Lakshmi said above, "have related vrats to dharm so that in the name of God we can observe them more easily. We have in our minds and belief so linked vrat and dharm that to think 'vrat is separate from dharm' is very difficult." Vrats (in particular, the fasting requirements) are often not easy to perform and the results of one's efforts are not immediately evident. What incentives are there to pursue them then? I believe that Lakshmi, having just talked to me about the difficult self-discipline involved in a vrat, anticipated that I might be asking such questions. To help explain the attraction or interest of the votive rites, she next situates vrats in the "religious" context: "vrat is linked to dharm," and whether they were always linked or not, they have now become so connected that Hindus cannot think of vrats apart from dharm. This connection makes vrats easier to observe. As I discussed in her profile, for Lakshmi dharm primarily means "pūjā-path" and samskāra or parampara (tradition). I will briefly discuss these two meanings of dharm with reference to the comments of other women.

#### (i) vrat as samskāra/parampara

Several women started to define vrats by explaining

that they are "samskār"<sup>12</sup> - "a traditional thing, handed down from our ancestors. Parents observe vrats for their children, then (those) children keep them (for their) own children, and so on." "It is family practice (that has come down) from very ancient times." Premlata (who, like Lakshmi, was unusually perceptive and self-conscious) described samskār as, in so many words, 'blind':

One meaning of vrat is that it is our samskār. ...In Hindustan we say, 'one sheep will go and all will follow'. Do they know where they go? No. ... Take those village people; just for name's sake someone puts a stone in a certain spot and then all start worshipping. Who is it? What is it? Nobody knows. One person drops a flower just there, so another person will go to offer a flower at the same place. One person does a vrat so everyone starts to do that vrat. This especially happens among the women of Hindustan.

(ii) vrat and pūjā-path

"Pūjā-path" refers to the plethora of "religious acts" like performing daily pūjās, giving dān, and going on tīrtha-yatra (pilgrimage) that constitute the core religious practice of most Hindus and whose particular forms are largely determined by family tradition - parampara. Most of these religious acts, including vrats, are performed within a devotional context. By this I mean that these acts are dedicated to a god or goddess and, while they may be offered as expressions of personal piety and faith alone, such acts

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<sup>12</sup> Samskār as it is used here does not refer to the specific Hindu "sacraments," but rather, as I indicate, to the body of rituals inherited from one's family.



may also include (and frequently do include) petitions for help. The relationship between devotee and deity is expected to be in some evident fashion reciprocal. As Lakshmi said, "we may circumambulate some goddess 108 times - and to this dharm [act of pūjā-path] one may add that God will become pleased; and one will receive this boon or get that benefit. So we will do such vrats." This way of viewing vrats - as a form of bartering with higher powers - is one Shyamdevi described. "When we keep a vrat," she remarked, "we ask for blessings from the goddess (or god) - may our children be healthy, may they outlive us, may our troubles go far away... for that itself we keep vrats."

According to Lakshmi, then, in addition to the reasons she put forward for herself, the general incentives for Hindus to observe vrats are (1) they are part of tradition, (2) they are part of dharm, and (3) as devotional acts, they are a means to petition the gods for boons or assistance. I will again discuss the relation of faith and belief to vrats shortly. First, I want to conclude my examination of Lakshmi's comments on the nature of vrats.

### Vrats and health

Moving away from the "traditions" that a non-Hindu may

not fully appreciate, Lakshmi mentions the "scientific"<sup>13</sup> aspect of the vrat. "If you observe a vrat each week, the stomach will get a rest. It is very good for one's health. Sleep will come easily."<sup>14</sup> Just over a third of the women I interviewed cited the "health" (svāst) benefits of vrats in a similar fashion. As we mentioned in chapter three, Ayurvedic ideas concerning the health and medicinal properties of food and fasting have permeated Hindu culture at many levels and no doubt inform the popular understanding of the vrat tradition as well. In some cases, however, women were probably responding to me as a foreigner for whom, it was assumed, references to "science" would lend their explanations credibility. As 22 year-old Veena said: "There is a real scientific basis to vrats which the ṛsis knew and gave to us... so I do them."

The use of the word "scientific" (with its implications of objectivity, verifiability and rationality) to further justify or condemn various traditional practices is probably

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<sup>13</sup> Lakshmi used both the English word "scientific" and the Hindi word "vaijñānik" which, according to the Chaturvedi & Tiwari Hindi-English dictionary, means "scientific," and in Apte's Sanskrit-English dictionary means "clever, skillful, proficient."

<sup>14</sup> One of my astrologer informants explained in more detail: "Observing, say, four vrats per month reduces blood pressure, balances the humours in the body. [This is] especially [the case] when one avoids eating salt and eats only when the sun goes down."

a recent trend among urban, educated Indians. When the term is used as another explanation for the existence and merit of such a popular religious practice as vrats, it is not seen as threatening to the basic premise of the rite - which is viśvās ("belief") in their efficacy. The belief, which is not itself scientific, is not questioned. Rather, the observable effects of the rite - such as more efficient digestion produced by regular fasting - are called scientific. In other words, the ṛsis knew what they were doing when "they gave us these vrats to observe," and, even if one does not seem to get one's desires fulfilled, one will at least reap other observable benefits - such as a healthier body.

The use of such terms as scientific need not be viewed as apologetic.<sup>15</sup> Someone like Lakshmi, who is both highly educated and traditional, is able to make all kinds of

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<sup>15</sup> The Hindu author R. Tripathi, however, does get a trifle defensive about the depiction of vrats in the Sanskrit literature against possible criticisms based on logic and science. He writes: "The importance (given to) vrats [in the Dharmaśāstras] seems so exaggerated, unnatural and absurd that it cannot be stuffed in any way into today's logical mind; but, on these occasions we need sympathy and little profoundness. ... As it is ridiculous to set about researching the beautiful poetical fancies and similes of some poems in today's science labs, in the same way we should also say that it is improper to test the spiritual thoughts and religion on the touchstone of logic and scientific criticism." Tripathi goes on in similar words to argue the point that science cannot render vrats, festivals or the gods irrelevant. (Tripathi, Vrat, parv aur tyauhār, 4-5.)

adjustments in her mind to accommodate what others might find conflicting points of view. Further, she is able to articulate and blend those varying points of view most persuasively.

Only at the end of her explanation of vrat does Lakshmi mention the conventional reasons that women keep vrats - for husbands and sons. Yet, it is not a vrat for husbands which she illustrates by example, it is a vrat women observe for the benefit of one's children: Jīvit-putra. Lakshmi explains that such a vrat is undertaken by women when a child is ill or has died, or to help prevent such circumstances. Vrats are a means by which Hindu mothers can positively influence the fate of their children - and this provides an emotionally powerful and sustaining reason for women to keep vrats.<sup>16</sup> Vrats performed for the welfare of children are usually the last vrats women are willing to give up as they age (or after they are widowed). Candravati, for example, a mother of two sons, talked about how a mother's vrats can help her child:

Vrats alone can't stop (the effects of past) karma; can't prevent what is destined to happen. But it can lessen its effects. Say in your karma (or son's karma) it is written that your son will get a very severe

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<sup>16</sup> Though I had no children of my own at the time, I think Lakshmi felt that I could appreciate the universal concern that parents have for their children's welfare.

injury, but with this kind of ritual, by the vrat you are keeping you will definitely make that injury less - he may only suffer a minor cut. But something will happen to him.

She went on to explain that an astrologer can predict what kaṣṭ (problems) one will get, and can prescribe measures to lessen the intensity of those kaṣṭ.

### Vrats, viśvās and śraddhā

I return now to elaborate the relation between vrats, belief and faith. Lakshmi's last comment is, "This, of course, is a matter of belief." (Ye viśvās hi to hai) That is, this is what most Hindu women who perform vrats for their children and families accept (believe to be true); vrats will help them prevent or solve familial problems, that is why they perform them. "Viśvās," said Shyamdevi and many others, "is necessary to performing a vrat." Simply stated, one has to have confidence that there will be some benefit, that something will arise out of one's observance of vrats, otherwise there is no point in keeping them.

For some women, belief or confidence in the efficacy of vrats is sustained by an acceptance of the rightness, wisdom or authority of tradition alone. As Kamala put it: "[Women think that] because this has been done (for generations) and we have been told that this vrat is for the safety and well-being of our children, then we might as well do it." This

is essentially the sort of idea that Lakshmi was referring to when she said that it was a matter of belief.

"You do, so you do; you shouldn't break [with your traditional] beliefs" the elderly female head of a large, extended Brahman family declared, at the end of series of comments on why she kept vrats.

Sitadevi: It is just this, that there is a benefit (got) through observing a vrat; one's family remains happy. Here itself is the belief in vrats.

Anne: What do you mean?

Sitadevi: What I meant was that (it is a matter) of viśvās; you believe, that is why you do; so that our work will be fruitful... It is this, by observing vrats we (enhance) auspiciousness in the family and home. This is a matter of belief. ...and (keeping a vrat) gives me peace of mind. What else? In small words I am saying it is God's pūjā; it is one meritorious act.

For many women, however, like Snehalata, vrats (or, certain vrats) are preeminently an expression of "bhakti" ("devotion"); both a demonstration of faith in God and a means of getting "closer to God." Lelauti, a Thakur married woman in her forties, for example, after first describing vrats as saṃskār, and mentioning the positive effects that she felt her observance of vrats had on the family, ended with: "All vrats have this very object - that one worships God."

Jaya, a Brahman woman in her early thirties, felt that having both faith (śraddhā) and belief (viśvās) in one's heart were "very necessary" in order to keep a vrat.

We people believe that by observing vrats our desires

(manokāmana) will be fulfilled. ... In our Hindu religion we are taught that if I will do this vrāt then my kam (task, work) will be completed. In such a manner we think. Also, by observing vrats our health will remain good. In our hearts we feel happy observing vrats because for the sake of God we have refrained from ann (grain) for one day; we have sustained ourselves only on fruit. We will receive peace in our atma (soul) and in our heart (man)."

Likewise, Kamala, in addition to talking about her Tuesday Vrat as her "sāadhanā" also talked about this vrāt in terms of it expressing her devotion to Hanuman, her iṣṭadevtā, and in strengthening her relationship to him. She said that Hanuman "wanted" her to keep his vrāt. She never asked him for anything specific, as that would in some sense diminish the authenticity of her devotion.

#### Vrats, devotion and desireless action

The pandit I quoted earlier on the etymology of vrāt went on to say that "vratas are for mukṭi and for getting rid of sins and also diseases; [but] only niṣkāma vratas, when there are no kāmanas, 'wishes', will lead to mukṭi." "Most women's vratas," he proclaimed, "are sakāma; especially those relating to desire for 'issue', or for their (children's) protection, or their (women's) marriage." Later he reflected that some vrats can be both sakāma and niṣkāma, depending on what one intended when one observed it. Nevertheless, it is interesting that, like the texts of which he is an exponent, he immediately identified "most"

women's vrats with material, worldly, in short, "kāmya" goals. He assumed that these were women's primary (perhaps even only legitimate) interests. On one level, this is a fair, or at least explicable, characterization since women's concerns for their families are evidently manifested in their vrat performances. However, I want to pursue this kind of classification in light of our discussion on faith and vrats.

The kāmya/nitya/naimittika classification of vedic ritual applied occasionally and sometimes awkwardly by the nibandhakārins to vratas, was not a classification normally used by women I interviewed, nor one that was readily understood by them. Women rather applied the terms "kāmana" or "sakām" and "niṣkāṁ" to particular vrats, or to the votary's attitudes towards vrats in general. A few women said that all vrats are kāmana because there is always something that one wants, even if simply wanting to worship God. Others, like Snehalata and her sister-in-law Rani, felt that any vrat can be observed in a niṣkāṁ way or in a sakām way. She explained it this way:

Some people do the vrat to fulfill some wishes; some keep it out of faith. The one who does the vrat with wishes takes the saṅkalp that 'if my wish is fulfilled, then I will leave the vrat'. (So), there are two (ways of performing a) vrat. One way is with wishes, the other without wishes (niṣkāmana se). Those who keep a vrat without any (attached) desires, (who) keep the vrat only out of devotion, they say this very saṅkalp that 'I keep this vrat only out of devotion; for this



(worship) I don't want anything in return.'

At this point Rani interjected:

One should do niṣkāma vrat because kāmana vrats are not good, because you are saying give and take is equal. For example, in the Monday Vrat the specific wish (may be) 'may I become rich; may I get sons' - so these things will be obtained, but then whatever worship you did is gone [because it was exchanged for something concrete]. But for the person who keeps the vrat out of a feeling of desirelessness ... no thing is wanted, s/he is following the yog of niṣkāmakarma. Then even God starts thinking, 'what should be given to this person who isn't asking for anything?' So God will always remain near the devotee and God gives her/him a place at his feet. This is all written in the Gītā, about the yog of niṣkāmakarma, the yog of bhakti, etc.

Rani then went on to describe the first chapter of the Bhagavadgītā about Arjuna's predicament (to fight or not to fight) and Kṛṣṇa's teachings. "Then Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna things in order to make him fight (because it is his dharma) - and gives him the teachings about niṣkāmakarma." I am not certain if Rani had thought through the implications of the teachings of the Gītā with respect to the practice of vrats. For, if vratas are a necessary part of strīdharmā, and the dharma of women is as incumbent upon them as the dharma of the warrior is upon the Kshatriya, then vratas must be performed - they must be seen as nityakarma (obligatory acts), rather than kāmyakarma (optional acts). Yet, insofar as vratas contribute to the goals of strīdharmā (service to husband and family), then they need necessarily be accompanied by desires, albeit altruistic ones. But the

Gītā would seem to say that any (worldly) desires are detrimental to the attainment of God, or of mokṣa. True renunciation, "says the Gītā, consists in abandoning the desire for the results (phala) of one's actions, while continuing to engage in activity" and "Action without desire is true non-action, for it does not lead to bondage, while non-action tainted with longing is equivalent to action that binds."<sup>17</sup> If women's duty-ordained (and no doubt usually genuine) longings for the safety and well-being of families are still classified as desires, then women have no hope of cutting the bonds of samsara; no hope of spiritual maturity (or "enlightenment"). The same situation obtains here as it does in the later Nibandhas wherein, as McGee pointed out, in labeling all vratas performed with wishes attached as kāmya, the nibandhakārins failed to take into account the situation of women and their (to a large degree socially mandated) altruistic desires.

Nonetheless, I think the message from the Gītā which women have taken to heart (for Rani was not alone in quoting or mentioning the Gītā in a similar way to me) is that

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<sup>17</sup> Bhagavadgītā 18.11, quoted in Patrick Olivelle, "The Integration of Renunciation by Orthodox Hinduism", Journal of the Oriental Institute 28:1 (Sept.1978), 31. My discussion on the implication for women's performance of vrats from the teachings of the Gītā are to some extent in dialogue with Olivelle's article, though he mentions neither women nor vratas.

insofar as vrats are acts of devotion to God - they ought to be observed with feelings of nonattachment ("niskāma bhav" as the elderly widow Sartarji put it), or in Kamala's words: "as an offering to God." It is significant to remember that Rani had been widowed early in her life and she was childless. Thus from her point of view, keeping vrats in a niskam way is the only legitimate way to observe vrats because it is her relationship to God alone which she seeks to nurture; there are no sons, grandchildren or husband whose welfare she needs to protect.<sup>18</sup> Other women, like Kamala, who were married and had children, felt that both sakam vrats and niskam vrats were necessary and each way of keeping a vrat had its place in the religious lives of women.

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<sup>18</sup> Vindhya shared Rani's perspective, but expressed it more poignantly. She said that people who keep niskām vrats (as she tries now to do) are "without refuge." "When one is not respected by anyone, when one has been kicked around - then one will keep niskām vrats; when one is lonely and alone." At this point, in tears, Vindhya told me that when she was younger, she always kept vrats and asked God that her sons do well at school, that they won't cheat, and will grow up as good people so that in her old age she could lean on them. But then, after one son died, her other son and daughter moved away, and her husband rejected her, she thought to herself "Is this what I was asking for? This is all a lie. I can't depend on anyone." Now, she said, she is happier because "I don't ask anything from God. I just do pūjā and hope that God will help."

### Vrats and tapasya

Sarasvati, the middle-aged Brahman matron of an extended family whom I introduced in chapter three, gave a distinctive response to my question, "what is a vrata?":

Vrats are the answer in the Kaliyug to what saints and ṛṣis did in olden times. We don't have the power to do tapasya as they did in the past. If one has genuine belief in the vrats the gods will certainly listen to you. The gods test people's strength of belief. Purity of motive and strength of belief is very important in the success of the vrata. If one starts a vrata and then stops because nothing has happened then one has failed the test of faith... Women don't have so much śakti in the Kaliyug as they did previously. [Anne] Like Śītā, Sāvitrī and Anasuyā? [Sarasvati] Yes. It is very difficult to be so single-minded as these women were. But, some women, a few, can and do gain spiritual powers. One woman in Pandepur, a householder, has so pleased Mātāji (Devī) that she can give ashes to people as blessings and they will get better.

Some of Sarasvati's comments relate to the discussion on vrats and faith. She underscores the importance of performing vrats with an attitude of genuine piety for it is the "purity of motive" and "strength of belief" that the gods not only reward, but, according to Sarasvati, test. Thus one must complete or carry on the vrats that one has started if one is to have any hope of success. The necessity of the submissive attitude of devotion and constancy is contrasted with what "the saints and ṛṣis did in olden times" - before the present (degenerate) Kaliyug. In the "past" the practice of tapasya, as exemplified in the stories of the famous ṛṣis and munis found in the epics and popular mythology, could in and of itself accomplish

whatever ends the practitioner desired. But, as Sarasvati at first decides, "we don't have the power to do tapasya as they did in the past." So, instead, "we have vrats" - a sort of modified tapasya, dependent for its success on expressions of piety and piety rewarded by the gods.

Almost all the women I interviewed felt that vrats are "a form of tapasya."<sup>19</sup> In their comments on vrats and tapasya (and siddhis), a number of women used phrases almost identical to Lakshmi's statements about purifying, steady-ing, and controlling the mind (and senses). "Yes, there is tapasya," Snehalata affirmed. "By doing vrats the body and mind become one. The mind is bound, (so that say) today I have done this vrat - so my mind ought not to go here and there. Through tapasya we increase our śakti." Similarly, nineteen year-old Kiran said: "Yes, vrats are a form of tapasya. Through observing a vrat our mind won't wander about; from this śakti grows." In other words, one gets mental (and spiritual) power from concentration; which is precisely what Tripathi named first as one of the reasons that people keep vrats, viz., "for obtaining spiritual or

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<sup>19</sup> Of the 25 Banarasi women to whom I specifically asked the question whether they thought vrats were a form of tapasya, 24 replied in the affirmative.

mental power" (mansik śakti).<sup>20</sup>

What did women mean by "tapasya"? Lakshmi said that "the meaning of tapasya is restraint of the six senses." Likewise, Sudha felt that vrats are a form of tapasya "because they involve niyams." Her mother, present during much of the interview, agreed, adding: "because (vrat) is a kind of sacrifice." Sartarji, whose life in recent years had been difficult and emotionally painful, commented that "The path of religion is itself tapasya."

Shyamdevi's remarks on vrats and tapasya reminded me of the principles of homeopathic medicine (indeed modern vaccinations). That is, limited exposure to the disease is held to prevent the worst case of it, if not to cure it; you take on hardship to lessen (present) or to prevent (future) hardship. "Tapasya is this, that I do tapasya. I keep on reciting (the name of God); I remain hungry - so that my hardships will go far away, my well-being (kalyān) will be there. If my children are in distress, let it be removed soon. That is why it is called tapasya. ... The meaning of vrat is also this - no matter which vrat."

Annapurna explained the meaning of tapasya simply, but graphically: "If I am thirsty, I would not take water; I would burn my own body - that is tapasya." Such a descrip-

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<sup>20</sup> See this chapter, note 3.

tion of tapas is arresting for its consonance with the ancient meanings of tapas - meanings which metamorphosized from "heat" in the Rgveda to the powerful and creative heat generated in the body/mind through self-sacrifice. While heat transforms that with which it comes in contact, it also is understood to act as an agent of purification. Thus it is not surprising that several other women, after affirming that vrats are a form of tapasya, returned to the theme of purification, describing self-purification as the purpose of the acts of tapasya. Hardevi, for example, asked rhetorically, "So what is tapasya? It is for purification of the mind and thought." She then explained further: "One remains restrained and (achieves) 'self-control of the mind'."

In the epic literature in particular, an individual's acts of austerity often result in supernormal powers - "siddhis." Hardevi's comment suggests that women think that they can obtain such siddhis by performing vrats.

### Vrats and siddhis

"In the Mahābhārata," I said to Hardevi, "Sāvitṛī is able to save her husband from Yāma because of her siddhi from vrats..." Hardevi interrupted with "aur kya?" (lit., "what else?," meaning, "of course"). "Can other women do this with the same result?" "Not everyone can do this," she

replied. "That which Sāvitṛī did, not all people can do... Her heart and mind were very pure. ...Women may obtain siddhi or not in that way [like Sāvitṛī]. There are all kinds of siddhi. [The point is] vrāt at least makes one strong - here itself is the biggest siddhi. 'Self-control'; it makes one's character strong."<sup>21</sup>

When I first asked women about obtaining "siddhis" from vrats, I was thinking of the term as it is used in the epics and other Sanskrit literature (meaning "magical" powers that accrue to the performer of strenuous ascetic practice). While this sense is retained in the modern Hindi usage, it is usually a secondary meaning. First, siddhi means simply "accomplishment," "fulfillment," or "success." Thus Candravati exclaimed "Why not? Women can get siddhis. It means, you get what you want from keeping these vrats." Annapurna, in a separate interview, concurred: "Siddhi is

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<sup>21</sup> I also asked Lakshmi about Sāvitṛī when we were discussing tapas and siddhi and she quickly replied: "Yāmrāj was tempting Sāvitṛī [by offering many things], but she had made her own resolve that she only wants the life of her husband. So then she obtained that siddhi. Her father had no son but she was not tempted by that offer. She remained firm in her goal. She did not get angry. The kingdom, etc., all these she contemptuously rejected. She only wanted (the return of) Satyavan's life. So if everyone could act like that (then) it is possible that (all) could obtain siddhis. But that is not how it can be. This is a matter of great self-discipline. To be able to control the mind is very difficult. Concentration is most necessary. Complete restraint is essential for obtaining siddhis."



the fulfillment of one's desires... When we observe a vrata, we say that 'we will do it for five Sundays, or eleven Sundays', and if it is successful [i.e., one's wishes are answered], this is the siddhi." And lastly, Snehalata put it this way:

Yes, certainly, one can obtain any siddhi. For whichever god you do tapasya (s/he) will give you (his or her) siddhi. You may receive Devī's siddhi, Hanumān's siddhi, Śaṅkar's siddhi - but you have to do [the pūjā or tapasya] from the heart. Whoever you worship - if you are able to please him - he will become happy and give you siddhi.

Trying to determine more clearly what she meant by "siddhi," I asked Snehalata if women could gain "yogic siddhis" by this means. She first suggested that one could get yogic siddhis too - since there are female yogis as well as male yogis. But, Snehalata explained, "I'm just a householder."

In order to obtain (yogic) siddhi you have to renounce (being a householder). By not renouncing, my mind will run about here and there (thinking) 'I have to get my husband food, I have to do kitchen work'. If the mind (man) runs about in all directions, it can't adhere to God. Therefore, first I will have to renounce the 'husband-son-householder' stage; then my mind can concentrate on God, and then through doing tapasya I will receive siddhis. (But right now) I am a gr̥hastha. I don't have these guṇ (qualities). We must first serve (the family); then I can do vrats, meditate on God... this isn't enough to obtain siddhi.

However, not all women agreed with Snehalata. In Sitadevi's view, "with viśvās and bhakti all is possible," including supernormal powers. Many women that I interviewed, in fact, did interpret the word "siddhi" as

"special power." But, while some were of the opinion that people could and did obtain siddhis through vrats, others, like Sarasvati, were doubtful that it was possible today as it had been in the past because today women's "śakti is less strong," they are less "single-minded," or they "have less ability to do difficult tapasya, or do such long vrats - as Parvati did." By and large, "women and men just don't do really difficult vrats these days - but if they did," Premlata suggested, "they could certainly obtain siddhis."

On reflection, Sarasvati remembered a woman who had gained "special powers" through her devotion to the goddess; and other women related similar stories. Sudha, for instance, who at the start felt more assured than some others that "it is possible to gain siddhis from vrats or (from) any kind of tapasya," told me about the unusual abilities of her mother's brother's wife. She was able to anticipate questions that people were about to ask and to provide a response "before they had even opened their mouth." Sudha attributed this ability to her aunt's religious practice and to her powers of concentration.

Like Sudha, Rekha affirmed that

certainly (women) can obtain siddhis. All things are obtained when one controls oneself, has determination. If a the sādhak (spiritual aspirant) loses (her) concentration/resolve, then (she) won't achieve anything. The meaning of sādhak is (she) who does spiritual practice for (her) balance to such an extent that for whatever has been determined, there should not

be even the smallest wavering from that. ... One becomes a true sādhū when one has control over oneself.

The significance of women's repeated mention of "self-control" in the context of vrats is worth considering. I suggest that Lakshmi, Rekha, Kamala and other women I interviewed have appropriated elements of the pervasive ideology of abstinence, self-control and self-purification, articulated in the Yoga tradition and elsewhere, to lend their observance of vrats a wider meaning and more significance for the development of self and individual spirituality than the pativrata ideology alone would permit. Aligning themselves with the essentially self-centred values of the ascetic tradition is not an obvious act of defiance for women because, as we have seen, the Dharmaśāstras incorporated self-control and mental and physical self-discipline as integral to the "dharma of vrata." But, given the texts' proscription of any kind of formal asceticism for women, one would expect that women were not supposed to place an emphasis on the niyama aspect of vrata dharma as ends in themselves. Yet, this is where women have seen value and esteem placed by the Hindu tradition at large and so this is where women have chosen to place an emphasis as well.

Further, women's alignment with ascetic practices should not be surprising because it represents an extension

of the training in self-denial, self-restraint and self-sacrifice that many women receive as they grow up. That is, women are culturally expected to practice self-denial in order to serve the interests of male kin. Yet, by choosing to identify the significance of their performance of vrats more with the non-gender-specific niyamas and less with the values surrounding saubhāgya and auspiciousness, Hindu women can dissociate themselves from their gender. The responsibilities of family and some of the negative associations with femaleness can feel like burdens and barriers to the development of autonomy and a positive self-image. Through the asceticism involved in the performance of vrats, which can be as rigorous as the votary desires, women can transcend their sexuality and limit their degree of pollution, which is already greater than that of men. Both eating and sex are polluting, and these are curtailed in a vrata. Abstinence is physically purifying and powerful because of the internal heat it creates. As a form of tapasya, vrats increase one's śakti to achieve ends of one's own choosing. "Vrats make one strong," as Hardevi put it. Strength is manifested in the ability to will into being what one wants. When the body is under control, the mind fixed (steadied), "all things are obtained."

Insofar as the regular performance of vrats gives women opportunities to develop control of their own minds

and bodies and to take charge of their spiritual destinies, vrats are sources of empowerment to Hindu women. Women are empowered both in the culturally understood sense of tapas and śakti and in the sense that women feel a measure of autonomy because they can decide how many vrats to perform, how rigorously they will keep them, and to what ends. If anyone in a woman's family is experiencing difficulties, including herself, she can take matters into her own hands and try to solve the problem through vrats.

For certain women, like Snehalata, Vindhya and Rani, vrats are empowering in a different way. Each of these women focussed more on the devotional aspects of vrats, rather than on the self-disciplinary features. For these women, vrats present opportunities to submerge themselves in God, to invest their emotional energy and spiritual longings in regular acts of worship and self-sacrifice. Such an investment of emotional and spiritual energy in the Divine allows them to detach or escape from the draining pressures and difficulties of their unhappy familial situations. For them also, vrats can bring peace of mind.

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I now conclude this thesis with a restatement of its contribution to our understanding of the significance of vrats in Hindu women's religious lives. To this end, I want

to refer to a discussion of vrats by the anthropologist R.S. Khare. In Khare's book called The Hindu Hearth and Home (1976), there is a chapter entitled "Fasts and Festivals - Fruits and Grains" which contains descriptions and analyses of several vrats in terms of their practitioners and aims, and the symbolic significance of food and other elements of the vrats' procedure. In this chapter, Khare distinguishes between "spiritual fasts" (vrats) which he suggests mainly men perform, and "women's fasts and festivals" or "familial fasts." He bases this distinction on a conceptual separation of the purity-impurity axis and the auspiciousness/ inauspiciousness axis. "Spiritual fasts" are directed toward augmenting purity in the individual for the ultimate purpose or aim of pursuing mokṣa. "Familial fasts," on the other hand, are intended to maximize auspiciousness for the social collective, as a way of maintaining dharma. The dominant values of the spiritual fast, he says, are austerity, self-control, spiritual merit and devotion; whereas women's "fasts-cum-festivals" underscore social and domestic values and a "collective morality."<sup>22</sup> He continues:

Thus though one practices to observe the rules of purity in his [sic] social world, it is worthless if it cannot be ultimately related to the construct of individual moral and spiritual existence. Observances of

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<sup>22</sup> Khare, The Hindu Hearth and Home, 132, 138.

ritual purity are a network of techniques that, if correctly pursued by the individual, accrue the desired religious or spiritual merit in relation to his own existence. ...

In contrast come the fasts of women which are meant to be different in morality. Here non-eating or restrictive eating (for a specified period) is directed towards the benefit of those who are near and dear to the woman who is fasting. Here the principle is just the reverse - collective familial and social life and its quality are brought into sharp focus. ... These women through their households manage and regulate those links with the wider social system that their husbands and brothers try to give up in the hope of reaching their spiritual self. Women in this domain have remained dominant for a long time...; they invent and carry on their body of ritual, generation after generation, overruling priests if they stand in the way. What shastric texts do not say these women do with impunity and make it run on a social system that men ostensibly dominate and differentiate. If these women care for ritual rules<sup>23</sup> of purity it is by imitation of their menfolk.

As Frédérique Marglin has pointed out, Khare was the first researcher since Srinivas (1952) to bring out once again the importance of the value of auspiciousness as a major cultural category among Hindus, distinct from the value of purity.<sup>24</sup> Khare's work on auspiciousness served as a counterpoint to the dominant attention given to the purity-impurity axis following the influential work of Louis Dumont (1970). His work also directed attention to women's

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<sup>23</sup> Khare, The Hindu Hearth and Home, 143-4.

<sup>24</sup> F.Marglin, "Introduction," in Purity and Auspiciousness, ed. J.Carman and F.Marglin, (1985) p.2.

special interest in and manipulation of auspiciousness.<sup>25</sup> Khare's description of the role of women's vrats in the promotion of auspiciousness has been elaborated in McGee's analysis of the relation of the value of saubhāgya to auspiciousness and women's performance of vrats. Khare further rightly emphasized women's interest in the "social collective"; and pointed to the fact that women's rites, like vrats, often work to overcome barriers which men (by and large) have set up.

However, my work stands as a statement of caution against the trend, particularly in the context of vrats (exemplified by Khare and less simplistically by McGee), towards what I see as an over-identification of the religious lives of Hindu women with the "domestic sphere" and the value of auspiciousness. First, I would hope that the material presented in this thesis would make readers dubious about drawing a hard distinction between so-called "spiritual fasts" and "women's familial fasts." As I have observed, and as women often indicated to me, most individual vrats are associated with a particular deity and

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<sup>25</sup> As I mentioned in chapter seven, a number of scholars have since written about the special relationship between Hindu women and the value of auspiciousness, as well as further investigated and conceptually refined the relationship between auspiciousness and inauspiciousness and purity and impurity. (See especially Marglin, Wives of the God-King, 1985.)



with an ostensible or *prima facie* purpose, and together these two factors contribute to the form of the vrāt. However, as even the texts acknowledge in various ways, any vrāt can be observed for any purpose(s), and many women observe most or all of their vrāts with several underlying aims in mind. Prominent among these aims are the expression of personal devotion and piety, and the achievement of spiritual self-development. Thus, to separate, as Khare does, women's fasts from men's on the basis that women's vrāts are exclusively concerned with familial/ collective interests and men's vrāts with spiritual/ self-directed aims is misleading. It would be more accurate to say that auspiciousness and familial well-being are values included among the aims and purposes of the vrāts that women perform.

Second, as long as a person is a householder, there can be no rigid individualism. One could say that men are 'allowed' to be outwardly more concerned about their own spiritual welfare and their own salvation than are women because men have the support structure to pursue these goals (including the cooperation of women in the family who will prepare the necessary foods and pūjā items, in the right utensils, at the right times, and who will "give men the time"). Women, on the other hand, are expected to pursue this concern more indirectly through their actions vis-à-vis

others. This does not mean that women are less interested in their own spiritual welfare. Rather, the forms in which they express this interest are circumscribed by the ideologically-prescribed roles in which the allocation of spiritual merit is proportionate to the degree to which women adhere to strīdharm (of which vrats form a part). In other words, while it is true that Hindu women's performance of vrats is expressive of a religiosity that is framed within an androcentric gender ideology and patriarchal social structure, I would argue that out of the richness of the vrata tradition, women have culled meanings and significance that are supportive of spiritual goals for themselves; that contribute both to a positive self-understanding and to a sense of empowerment.

Even if some of the rituals accompanying particular vrats begin to lose their symbolic force because they no longer speak meaningfully to votaries; or if particular ends such as the prevention or amelioration of droughts and diseases become irrelevant; or, finally, if the necessity of having sons, and protecting the life of a husband for fear of widowhood - in short, the conservative ideology underlying gender arrangements - become less compelling, vrats will continue to be observed by women. These rites will be observed because they serve so many functions. In

addition to the important social interaction with other women - relatives, friends and strangers - that many women enjoy when they perform vrats collectively, vrats provide opportunities for the preparation of special foods, for the creation of ritual art which many women painstakingly fashion, and for the telling of stories expressive of women's concerns and dilemmas. Then, vrats function as problem solvers - for such traditional but always compelling reasons as the need to secure aid and blessings from the gods for children, as well as for more 'modern' reasons such as securing help for settling a court case, finding a job and performing well in school. For many women, however, vrats primarily serve as a means of expressing their faith in God, demonstrating their piety and love through acts of self-sacrifice; of leading a more moral, disciplined and spiritual life. For other women, vrats provide the opportunity periodically to imitate the values and life style of the ascetic. In performing acts of asceticism they can tap into the potent realm of tapas and so enhance their purity and power. The women of Banaras have shown me that it is precisely because they derive a great deal of spiritual significance for themselves from their performance of vrats - apart from any concern with duty - that the vrat tradition is as vigorous and lively among Hindu women as it is in India today.

## APPENDIX A

TABLE 1

North Indian Pūrṇimanta\* System

<u>Lunar Months</u>			<u>Gregorian Equivalents</u>
<u>Sanskrit</u>	<u>Standard Hindi</u>	<u>Variant</u>	
Caitra**	Caitra	(Cait)	March/April
Vaiśākha	Vaiśākh	(Baiśākh)	April/May
Jyeṣṭha	Jyeṣṭh	(Jeth)	May/June
Āsādhā	Āsāḍh	(Āsārḥ)	June/July
Śravaṇa	Śraṇ	(Savan)	July/August
Bhādrapada	Bhādrapad	(Bhādon)	August/September
Āśvina	Āśvin	(Kvar)	September/October
Kārtika	Kārtik	(Kārtik)	October/November
Mārgaśīrṣa	Mārgaśīrṣ	(Aghan)	November/December
Pauṣa	Pauṣ	(Pus)	December/January
Māgha	Māgh	(Māgh)	January/February
Phālguna	Phālgun	(Phāgun)	February/March

\* In the pūrṇimanta system, each month begins with the day after the new moon.

\*\* New Year

TABLE 2

Names of Tithi-s

	<u>Standard Hindi</u>	<u>Variant</u>	<u>Deity Associations*</u>
First	Pratipad	(piruva)	
Second	dvitiya	(dūj)	
Third	tritiya	(tīj)	(goddess)
Fourth	caturthī	(cauth)	Gaṇeś
Fifth	pañcamī		R̥ṣis, snakes
Sixth	ṣaṣṭhī	(cchaṭ)	Lākṣmi, Sūrya
Seventh	saptamī	(sat)	
Eighth	aṣṭamī		goddesses - Durgā
Ninth	nāvamī	(naumi)	Rām, Sītā
Tenth	daśamī	(dasehra)	
Eleventh	ekādaśī	(gyas)	Viṣṇu
Twelfth	dvadaśī		
Thirteenth	trayodaśī	(teras)	Śiva
Fourteenth	caturdaśī		
Fifteenth	pūrṇimā	(Full moon)	-usually auspicious
	amāvasā	(New moon)	-usually inauspicious

\* From Banaras field data and local texts.

## APPENDIX B

## HARITĀLIKĀ (TĪJ) AND JĪVIT PUTRIKA (JIUTIYA) STORIES

In the following I present translations of procedures and stories (vrāt-kathā) for the Tīj and Jiutiya vrats from Hindi printed and oral sources. I have chosen two printed sources representing two styles of readily available paperback "vrāt and festival procedure and story" books. One style employs a Sanskritic Hindi and draws primarily from the Sanskrit tradition (Purāṇas and Nibandhas); the other employs a more parochial style of Hindi, capturing current local language, practices and tales (normally orally transmitted from woman to woman). For the Jiutiya Vrat, I also include two stories told to me by an illiterate woman I interviewed which she said women recounted for this vrāt.

Tīj procedures and stories

- (1) source: Rāmpratāp Tripathī, Hinduon ke Vrat, Parv aur Tyauhār (Allahabad: Lokbharati Prakasan), 1978.

On the third of the bright half of the month of Bhādrapad, the Haritālikā or Tīj Vrat is observed. This is a vrāt which increases saubhāgya and its tradition is being carried on among Hindu women. On this tithi married women keep a fast, wear new clothes and give new clothes to daughters, sisters, etc. Among women this vrāt has great importance. Months beforehand they eagerly await and prepare for this festival.

### Procedure:

Haritālikā is Pārvatī's vrāt. Its śāstric rules go as follows. In the Hasta Nakṣatra of the third of the bright half of Bhādrapad one should keep a waterless fast the whole day. Usually, after rising at three or four o'clock in the morning women take food, etc. and clean the home and after applying ubtan [a cosmetic paste rubbed over the body for cleaning and softening the skin] of sesame and āmala [emblic myrobalan] they take a bath. After that, the mūrtis of Śiv and Pārvatī are placed in a special enclosure and they are established with the correct utterance of mantras; and saṅkalp for following this vrāt is taken. At the time of making the resolve, having prayed for the destruction of all her sins [a woman] should perform the correct pūjān for Gaṇeś. [And] after the Gaṇeś pūjān, one should perform pūjā to Śiva and Pārvatī (with) the sixteen upacāras: invocation, seat, washing feet, water libation, sipping water, bath, clothes, upavīt, beetle leaf, brassiers (kuñcukī), one more small cloth, and ornaments etc., according to one's capacity (śakti). Upon completion of the pūjā one should make an offering of flowers with folded hands, circumambulate them and greet them. Then one should listen to this story and at the end, after putting sweets, clothes, saubhāgya items, dakṣina, etc. in a vessel or bamboo basket, one should give this to the acārya or priest as dān. For the whole day and night of the third one should keep a waterless fast and at night keep awake singing. Then on the morning of the second day, on completing the pūjā one should perform the ending ceremony. In the night one should also tell other stories of Siva and Parvati, sing their praises and perform kīrtan.

### Kathā:

Pārvatīji asked Lord Śaṅkar who was seated on the crystal rock of Kailāś mountain (which was) well-adorned with charming peakes - 'Dev, please tell me about some such vrāt which is the best among vrats and may be achieved with little effort. Please also tell me, by your kindness, about that great dharm by doing which I got you.' Mahādevji said - 'Devī! Just as among nakṣatras the moon is best, among planets the sun, among varṇas the Brahmans, among gods Viṣṇu, among rivers Ganga, among ancient writings the Mahābhārat, among Vedas the Sāmaveda and among the senses the mind; in the same way the Haritālikā Vrat is the best among all vrats for women. You have obtained me by following the ritual of this vrāt.'

Pārvatī said - 'Lord! In what manner did I do the

ritual of that vrat - please tell me this also.' Upon Pārvatī's asking this question Śivji said: "Pārvatī! There is a great mountain called Himālaya in the north of India. All around there are many rivers, pools, ascetic groves and ashramas of risis. You performed hard tapasya for several years while living on that mountain. For many days you lived by eating only leaves, therefore people called you by the name 'aparnā'. Facing downwards you inhaled fire for twelve years. In the [hot] month of Vaiśākh you served Agni [god of fire], and during the cold days of Māgh you lived in water. Your father Himālaya started to become very worried because of your hard tapasya. One day in the middle of this, the Devarṣi Nārad<sup>1</sup> approached Himālaya and said - 'O King of Mountains! I have come to you to ask your daughter to be married to Lord Viṣṇu.'

Himālaya became very pleased with what Devarṣi Nārad had to say. In an overwhelmed voice he said - 'Devarṣi! If the Lord himself wants to marry my daughter then there is nothing more fortunate (saubhāgya) for me than this. I give my approval.' After receiving Himālaya's approval Nāradji set out for Viṣṇu's abode and told (him) the whole story. Lord Viṣṇu kept on thinking for some time. Then, in a serious tone, he said - 'Devarṣi, the daughter of Himālaya is in the past of Lord Śiva. She had the name Dākṣāyanī Satī in her previous life. In this life too she is performing difficult tapasya to obtain Śivji. My marriage with her will not be proper. But also her tapasya is not completed yet. She has to perform more difficult tapasya.'

Devarṣi Nārad went to Pārvatī and said to her - 'your beautiful body is not for all this tapasya. What is the use of making your body emaciated? As the daughter of the king of mountains, what is the meaning of doing such extreme tap?' Pārvatī said to Nārad - 'I am performing this hard tap only to obtain Lord Śaṅkar as my husband.' Devarṣi Nārad made extreme efforts to mislead her, thereby testing her so that he could see how deep Pārvatī's loyalty for Śiv was. But Pārvatī held her own in Nārad's test. This was her pledge - 'Either I will be able to get Śivji as my husband or I will remain unmarried throughout my life.'

After Devarṣi Nāradji had gone, Himālaya himself came to take Pārvatī back home in order to talk her into marrying

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<sup>1</sup> Nārad is the notorious celestial 'busy-body' who is always involving himself in the affairs of the gods and humans.



Lord Viṣṇu, but Pārvatī remained steadfast to her purpose. When Himālaya returned without hope, Pārvatī related her agony to her friend - 'If I don't obtain Śivji as my husband, then I will give up my life.' The friend reassured Pārvatī and said - 'If it is like this then you go to another forest to do tapasya. One day or other Śaṅkarji will become pleased by your hard tap and (he) will certainly come to take you.'

Going to another forest, Pārvatī again engaged in hard tapasya. There, she made a Śiv-ling out of sand, (and) she performed pūjā according to the rules on this date, the third of the bright half of Bhādrapad. Pārvatī's hard tapasya had become a matter of concern to all the gods. Through the inspiration of the gods, Śaṅkarji felt compelled to decide to oblige Pārvatī. He asked Pārvatī to request a boon. Pārvatī said - 'O Master (nath), if you are pleased with me then accept me as a wife.' Śivji said to Pārvatī obligingly - 'Devī, your sādhana has become completed. I accept you to be my wife (ardhāṅgaṇī).'

Upon Lord Śiva's acceptance of Pārvatī's request, the gods showered flowers of parijit<sup>2</sup> from heaven. The apsaras (female celestial dancers) danced and the gandharvas (male celestial musicians) sang songs. When Himālaya heard about Pārvatī's success he became overjoyed. For many days he had been worried and searched for Pārvatī, but there had been no trace of her.

Then the marriage of Pārvatī with Śaṅkarji took place with great pomp and show. All the gods were members of the wedding party. The residents of the Himālayas were awed on seeing the various appearances of Śiv's gaṇa (horrific retinue).

The day on which the friends of Pārvatī carried her from the residence of Himālaya and took her to the grove and the day when Śivji conferred a boon on her was the day that became famous by the name haritālikā - due to being 'harita' (kidnapped) and 'alibhiḥ' (by the friends).

There is a special glory to hearing the Haritālikā story as well. By observing this vrāt the saubhāgya of women remains permanent. The saubhāgyavatī women who do not observe this vrāt, or who do not continue after having

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<sup>2</sup> parijat - the coral tree (erythrina Indica); the name of one of the five trees said to exist in paradise.

observed it for a few years, or who eat or drink during the fast - they will suffer severe troubles in this life and in the next life; this is also said in the mahātmya. If for some reason some saubhāgyavatī does not manage to keep this vrāt, then she could have the vrāt complete by some Brahman woman or by her husband.

- (2) source:<sup>3</sup> Āśa Bahañ and Lado Bahañ. Hinduoñ ke vrat aur tyauhār (vidhi, vidhān, kahāniyoñ aur citroñ sahit) ["Hindu vrats and festivals; with rules, procedures, stories and pictures"]. Haridvar: Randhir Book Sales, n.d.

### "The Hartālikā Tīj Vrat"

This vrāt is to be performed on the third of the bright half of Bhādra. On this day the women who want suhāg should make an image of Śaṅkar and Pārvatī out of sand and should perform pūjā to them. Women should decorate their homes with beautiful cloth placed around pillars, and should keep an all-night vigil, singing auspicious songs. Those women who perform this vrāt become happy and dear to their husbands, like Pārvatī, and go to the abode of Śiv [after death].

kathā: [Śiva narrating to Pārvatī]

One time you went to the Himālaya mountains because you wanted me as your husband, you started to undertake very severe tapasya on the bank of the Gaṅgā. During your tapasya Naradji came to Himālaya and said to him - 'Viṣṇu Bhagwan wants to marry your daughter. Viṣṇu sent me for this task (bearing this proposal).' Your father accepted this false-talking of Nārad. After this Nārad went to Viṣṇu and said - 'Himālaya has decided to arrange your marriage with his daughter Pārvatī. You give your consent for this.' After Nārad left, your father Himālaya told you about your marriage with Lord Viṣṇu. When you heard this unexpected talk you became very sorrowful and cried out loudly. When you started to cry loudly one friend came and asked you what happened and you told her the problem. 'Here I have started very hard tapasya to get Śaṅkar as my husband, but my father wants to arrange a marriage with Viṣṇu. If you can help me

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<sup>3</sup> The last name of these two women authors is a Gujarati name; but the authors employ different dialects of Hindi found in U.P., Bihar and M.P.

then you save me. Otherwise I will committ suicide.'

That friend consoled you and said - 'I will go with you in one forest where your father will not find you.' This time you took your friend's advice and went to a dense forest. Your father Himālaya searched for you here and there in the house but he did not find you. He became very worried because he was ready to arrange your marriage with Viṣṇu according to Nārada's (advice). When incoherent worried talk lead to him fainting, then all the mountains came to know about this matter; they started to search you out. There in a cave on the bank of the Gaṅgā, with your friend, you started to perform hard tapasya in my name. On the third of the bright half of Bhādrapad you kept a fast, made a Śiv-ling out of sand, performed pūjā and also kept an all-night vigil. Due to this difficult tap vrat I was not able to remain sitting [in an ascetic posture] and I immediately had to come to your place of pūjā. According to your request and desire I had to accept you in the form of my ardhāṅganī [as my wife]. After that I went at once to Kailāś mountain. In the morning time, when you were throwing out the pūjā material in the river, King Himālaya arrived at that place. He saw both of you and began tearfully to ask - 'Daughter! How did you come here?' Then you told the story about Viṣṇu's [proposed] marriage. Your resolve being fulfilled, he (Himalāya) called you back to your home, and then you were married to me according to the procedure of the śāstras.

I will also tell you about the reason for the name Haritālīkā Vrat. Because of the friend you were kept away [in the forest] (harat - friend + alika - kept away). Śaṅkarjī also told Pārvatī that whichever woman will do this vrat with great devotion will get endless suhāg just like you.

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### Jīvit Putrika Procedures and Stories

(1) source: Rāmpratap Tripaṭhi

Jīvit-putrika Vrat is observed on the eighth of the dark half of Āśvin. It is primarily women with sons who observe this vrat. This vrat is performed for the long life of sons and for their well-being. The Purāṇas say that

women who observe this vrat never suffer (on account of) their sons. It is an extremely popular vrat among the women of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, etc., and women having limitless love and affection for their children observe this vrat with great faith and loyalty. If someone's son is rid of dangers then women will praise his mother's 'jiutiya'.

#### procedure:

Having cheerfully arisen in the early morning and after completing the daily chores women (should) purify themselves in a tīrth or pool and make the saṅkalp (expressing) their desire for the well-being of sons. In the evening time, having kept a waterless fast all day, women put on the 'jiutiya' made of cotton and listen to the kathā. Some rich women wear a jiutiya made of gold or silver. Then in the night they tell the meritorious story and perform kīrtan and on the second day after bathing, etc., they give some dān-daksina to a Brahman woman whose husband is living and who is blessed with sons, and they take food.

In connection with Jiutiya there are many folk stories current among women, but this following story has been given in the Purāṇas.

#### kathā:

In olden times there was a king named Jīmutavāhan. He was extremely religious, beneficent, kind, just and loved his subjects as if they were sons. One time, he went to the valley of Malayagiri to hunt deer and there he met a very beautiful princess named Malayavatī who had come to a dev-temple to do pūjā. As soon as they met their eyes locked and they became spell-bound with each other. The brother of Malayavatī had also come there. For a long time Malayavatī's father had thought about marrying his daughter with Jīmutavāhan, so, when Malayavatī's brother came to know that Jīmutavāhan had come there and that he had also fallen in love with her, he became very happy. Jīmutavāhan and Malayavatī did not lapse in their duties to protect the royal glory, even after feeling the pains of extreme love. The princess returned to her father's residence with her friends, and in vain Jīmutavāhan kept on making efforts to console his heart while he wandered around in search of deer.

After some time, while wandering on the peakes of Malayagiri, king Jīmutavāhan heard in the far distance the

sound of a pathetic cry of some woman. His compassionate heart become overwhelmed. He followed the sound of the crying and came to the vicinity of the woman. Upon humbly asking, he found out that according to a previously-made promise, her only son Śaṅkhacurṇ had to go this day as food for Garuḍ.<sup>4</sup> According to the compromise agreement that had been made between the Nagas (snakes) and Garuḍ, one snake was to regularly present himself on the peak of Malayagiri as food for Garuḍ. Upon hearing the distress of Śaṅkhacurṇ's mother, Jīmutavāhan's heart was filled with sympathy and compassion, for Śaṅkhacurṇ was the only support she had in her old age. Because of the death of his father at the beginning of his youth, the mother had brought him up with great hope and fondness.

Jīmutavāhan assured the mother of Śaṅkhacurṇ saying, 'mother, I myself am ready to go as food for Garuḍ in place of your son. You should abandon this worry and sadness.'

Having said this, Jīmutavāhan took the red cloth from the hands of Śaṅkhacurṇ that was worn for that occasion, put it on himself, bowed to the mother and asked permission to depart. The snake mother was wonderstruck. Her heart became more heavy from compassion. She made great effort to stop Jīmutavāhan, but how could he be stopped? He promptly took the path towards the prescribed mountain top to be food for Garuḍ, while the mother and sons remained staring at him with sadness and amazement.

When Garuḍ came to his food peak at the fixed time, eagerly scanning here and there, his strong beak collided with the food and the whole peak reverberated. His beak got a big shock when it collided with the strong body of Jīmutavāhan and a frightening noise was produced from the impact. Garuḍ's head whirled, being stunned with much pain. (Soon,) he became quietly stable while there king Jīmutavāhan remained, lying still as before, wrapped in red cloth like the other snakes.

After some time, when Garuḍ became cool and composed, he asked - 'brother, who are you? I have been doing this action continually for years but I have never encountered such a strong body. I am eager to make you acquaintance.'

King Jīmutavāhan, lying wrapped in the cloth, replied

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<sup>4</sup> Garuḍ is the animal vehicle of Viṣṇu, represented as a half man, half vulture.

in this way - 'O king of birds! I am Jīmutavāhan. I could not bear the pathetic cry of the snake Śaṅkhacurṇ's mother; therefore I have come here to fill your stomach in place of him. You can eat me without uncertainty.'

The moonlit glory of Jīmutavāhan spread all over the three lokas (earth, heaven, and the neither region). The king of the birds, Garuḍ, had already heard stories about his honour. His rigid heart started to melt from the fire of this great model who was a remover of others' troubles and a most righteous king. He raised the king with great respect and entreated him to ask for a boon while begging forgiveness for his faults.

King Jīmutavāhan had no scarcity of material things in the three worlds but he did not want to make the grace of the bird king Garuḍ fruitless. He said humbly and in a voice with contentment and gratitude - 'O bird king, I am very much obliged for your unerring kindness. My wish is that as many snakes as you have eaten up until now please return them to life through the power of the knowledge of revivification so that no other mother should have to suffer like the mother of Śaṅkhacurṇ.

The beneficent voice of king Jīmutavāhan was filled with so much pain that the bird king Garuḍ became restless. With a choked throat he granted the boon to be fulfilled upon the king's word. He made the snakes come back to life through the unfailing knowledge of revivification. In the world of the snakes an endless sea of happiness surged due to the king's compassion and beneficence. From all directions a shower of blessings fell for his achievements and the scent of nectar was spread through his moonlit glory which pervaded the three worlds.

At this time, the father and brother of princess Malayavatī had also arrived there searching for him. They arranged the marriage of Malayavatī and Jīmutavāhan with great pomp and show.

This blessed event took place on the eighth of the dark half of Āśvin. Since then, the importance of this festival has been spread among the whole of women's society (strī-jāti). All women complete this vrāt with great faith and devotion for the sake of the long life of their sons.

A folk tale (lok kathā)

Many stories are current in relation to Jiutiya. One of them goes as follows.

In a certain jungle a kite used to live on a samar (cotton) tree. At a little distance from there, in a ditch covered with bushes, was the lair of a female jackal. They lived together in harmony. Whatever the kite hunted she gave a share of it to the jackal, and the jackal also used to pay back the kite's generosity. Everyday the jackal would save something or other for the kite. In this way, their days passed by happily.

Once, in this very jungle, the neighbouring women were observing the Jiutiya Vrat. The kite saw this. She had the memory of her past life. She took an oath (pratigna) to complete this vrat, and, following her, the jackal also took an oath to complete this vrat. They both observed the vrat with great faith and devotion. The whole day they both kept a waterless fast, remaining without food, and wished for the welfare of all creatures. But, when night came, the jackal began to become restless with hunger and thirst. It became difficult to pass the time. She went quietly towards the jungle and finding some left-over flesh and bones from the remains of wild animals she brought them back and began to eat as silently as possible. The kite was not aware of what was going on; but, when while chewing a bone, the jackal made a cracking noise, the kite asked - 'sister, what are you eating?'

The jackal said - 'sister! what should I do? Because of hunger my bones keep on cracking. How can there be hearty food and drink while keeping such a vrat?' But the kite was not so stupid. She realized everything. She said - 'sister, why are you speaking lies? You are chewing a bone and saying that my bones are cracking because of hunger. You should have considered before whether you would be able to fulfill this vrat or not.'

Becoming ashamed, the jackal went far away. She felt overwhelmed by hunger and thirst so, after proceeding some distance, she ate and drank until her stomach was full. But the kite remained in the same state (fasting) the whole night.

The outcome too was befitting. All the children that the kite had were healthy, beautiful and good, while each child of the jackal died within a few days of birth.

Jiutiya stories told by Shyamdevi

(a) There were seven brothers who went for pilgrimage, or to do business. So the wives drove their (the brothers') sister out of the house and said to her, 'bring pounded rice without using a mortar and pestle.' Having gone to the jungle, she sat down and cried. The birds came from above and asked, 'why are you crying?' Her name was Soncirai. Soncirai said, 'what to do? My sisters-in-law have given me rice to pound. How can I pound it? So the birds pounded the rice with their beaks. She took the rice and returned home. Then they (the sisters-in-law) said, 'bring a strainer filled with water.' So she kept on pouring water in the strainer and it kept on flowing out. Then again she started to cry. At that time, Śiv and Pārvatī were passing by. They asked, 'Daughter, why are you crying?' She said, 'they have asked me to fill this sieve with water but it keeps flowing out.' They (Śiv and Pārvatī) gave such a curse (śrap) that the holes were closed. Then she carried the water and returned. (Thus) one should say the name of Mahādev (Śiv) daily. This is a story that is told (during Jiutiya).

(b) There was a kite and a jackal. The kite asked, 'O sister, why are you not eating today?' She replied, 'I am the votary of Jiutiya Mā.' So the jackal said, 'I will also do that.' And the kite said, 'so be it.' So the jackal stayed there the whole day, did pūjā-path and returned to its hole when midnight came. It had stored the bones of some animal (in its hole). At night it started chewing the bones and made sounds. The kite asked the jackal, 'what is that sound coming from your hole?' The jackal said to herself, 'what shall I do?' 'O sister, did I not keep the vrat? When I just turn, all my bones crack!' When a long time had gone, Śiv and Pārvatī were passing by, and the jackal fell at their feet and said to them, 'I was a vratin - but I ate. So I couldn't maintain the Jīvit (Vrat).' So they gave a curse (boon) that she become well (that absolved her).



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