

A STUDY OF THE PURĀNIC VRATAS

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## ABSTRACT

Along with pilgrimage rituals vrata-s (a form of religious vow) are one of the major forms of religious observance in popular Hinduism. Details of how these vows should be practised, who may observe them and the merit that they confer are described in many of the Purāṇas (compendia of Hindu religious lore, ritual practices, philosophy, myth, geneologies and so forth written in Sanskrit between c. 400 and 1400 A.D.).

In this thesis my aim has been to provide an explicit picture of the nature and function of these vrata-s within the Purāṇic context. In the first section I have traced the meaning of the term 'vrata' from its earliest usage in the R̥gveda to its usage in the Purāṇas where it became identified with a religious observance involving fasting, pūjā (worship), and dāna (the giving of gifts) directed to a deity in return for religious merit, a favour (e.g., sons), or as a form of expiation. In the next section of the thesis a selection of vrata-s from four Purāṇas have been described. These vrata-s are then analyzed according to nine categories, including deity to whom the vrata is to be directed, ritual requirements of the vratee, and the purpose for which the vrata is to be undertaken.

In the process of researching this thesis certain prevalent ideas about the Purāṇic vrata-s found in secondary

literature, such as the idea that these vrata-s are mainly directed to women or that low as well as high caste Hindus had equal privilege to observe them, were found to be misconceptions. A reason for the existence of these misconceptions is the tendency on the part of some writers to confuse śāstric vrata-s (those sanctioned in the sacred texts) with popular or 'Folk' (laukika) vrata-s (those given less treatment or none at all in the texts).

This thesis has also addressed the controversy over whether vrata-s represent a popularization of Vedic religion or a 'Brahmanization' of popular religious practice. It was determined that the texts themselves do not provide conclusive evidence for either position. Rather, all one can say is that the vrata-s incorporate elements of both Vedic or 'Brahmanic' and non-Vedic thought and practices and that this kind of fusion is itself a characteristic of the Purāṇa literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I

The Purāṇas, medieval Hindu texts written in Sanskrit, have been taken increasingly seriously by scholars in recent decades as important and reliable sources of information on a myriad of topics from royal lineages to household religious rites. One of the topics that is discussed in many of the Purāṇas is vrata-s. These are religious observances; specifically a form of religious vow in which the 'vratee' (Sanskrit 'vratin') resolves to fast, and to honour the chosen deity for a particular period of time and usually for a special purpose such as the acquisition of religious merit, good health, sons, or wealth. Vrata-s represent a primarily individual form of religious practice. A vrata can be observed at almost any time. The duration may be one day, one month, or even years. A person of any age, caste and sex may undertake a vrata, and many of the restrictions imposed on women and śūdras with respect to performing religious rites were lifted in the case of these observances.

Scattered references to the term vrata may be found in the earliest literature of India - the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas. But, as will be shown in the second part of this introduction, the term underwent various shifts in meaning from the Vedic

to the post-Vedic literature until it attained its present sense, described above, in the Purāṇas written or compiled from the middle of the fourth century A.D. on. From the fifth century references to vrata-s in all Hindu Sanskrit literature begin to increase markedly, suggesting that by this time these rites had started to become a well-known and accepted form of religious practice.

Some scholars have argued that the vrata-s were originally 'folk-rites' - popular rituals in which the participant(s) would try to win the favour of a local deity through propitiation in order to gain or avert something, for example, fertility and wealth, or disease and famine. The brāhmins, seeing the intransigent popularity of these rites, decided to 'brahmanize' them and incorporate them into the still fluid Purāṇic literature. This was done, the proponents of this theory say, because the brāhmins (1) wanted more control over the religious practices of the populace, and/or (2) they were economically depressed and believed these rites would provide a way of gaining much needed income, for the Purāṇic vrata-s require generous donations of gifts to the officiating priest. Other scholars argue that the Purāṇic vrata-s represent a popularizing of Vedic Smṛti material on the part of the brāhmins for the purpose of attracting more adherents to traditional Brahmanical religion which was being challenged by Buddhism and Jainism. These theories will be examined



specifically in chapter one, but the questions they raise concerning the origin of the Purāṇic vrata-s will provide a focus throughout this thesis.

Vrata-s have been classified in a number of ways, but the most broad division made is between śāstric (those vrata-s sanctioned in the sacred texts and requiring the consent and guidance of a priest) and non-śāstric (those not officially sanctioned and not requiring the consent of a priest). Non-śāstric vrata-s have been practised, mainly by women, for many centuries and in different parts of India alongside with the śāstric vrata-s. The fact that primarily women practise vrata-s today has led many scholars to assume that Purāṇic vrata-s were mainly for women. As we shall see, the texts themselves do not support this assumption.

This study arose from a desire to gain an understanding of the śāstric vrata-s as they are described in selected Purāṇas, namely, the Matsya, the Linga, the Garuda, and the Agni. However, in searching for secondary material it became quickly evident that very little critical work has been done on the Purāṇic vrata-s. Vrata-s that are being currently practised are now receiving some scholarly attention - mostly by anthropologists, but the Purāṇic vrata-s have been virtually ignored. When these vrata-s are mentioned in academic articles or books they are more often merely described than critically analyzed. Hence, in this thesis, I have not followed any model of analysis previously laid

down. My approach has been to set out a series of categories by which to first describe in detail a sample of Purāṇic vrata-s and then to analyse them. These categories are: (1) time that the vrata begins, (2) duration, (3) deity to whom the vrata is directed, (4) purpose/reward of the vrata, (5) who may perform the vrata, (6) the ritual implements and offerings, (7) the requirements of the vratin and procedure, (8) role of priests, and (9) the nature and amount of gifts that are to be given and to whom. This description and analysis by categories makes up the bulk of the thesis - chapter two, parts I and II.

In the second part of this introduction a brief history of the use of the term vrata from the Vedas to the Manu and Yājñavalkya Dharmaśāstras is given. The first chapter consists in a general discussion of the history, authorship, date and content of the Purāṇas followed by a review of the concept 'vrata' in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas, focussing on definitions, classifications, essential features of a vrata, and conditions under which a vrata may be undertaken.

The aim of chapter one is to set the Purāṇic vrata-s in a context and to present what the texts (Nibandhas and Smṛtis as well as Purāṇas) say about vrata-s. In this discussion I will also present what contemporary scholars have said about them.

## II

The etymology of the term vrata has been a controversial subject among scholars.<sup>1</sup> The term first appears in the earliest part of the Rg Veda and continues to appear with some regularity in the Atharva Veda, the later Samhitās and the Brāhmanas. Briefly, the controversy over vrata has centered on the problem of which root the word is derived from. W.D. Whitney held that vrata derived from the root vrt - "to proceed/turn" - thus meaning "procedure, course, line of movement, course of action, conduct or behaviour, obligatory actions imposed by religion or morality".<sup>2</sup> V.S. Apte, accepting the √vrt derivation, focused on 'route or circular path'. Apte held that the divine vrata-s mentioned in the Rg Veda mean the heavenly routes, the divine rounds, the periodical movements round the sky closely adhered to by the gods themselves.<sup>3</sup> P.V. Kane refutes 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 Rg Veda. Apte tended to ignore the cases, Kane believes, in which the term was used where the

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<sup>1</sup>For a fuller discussion of this controversy see P.V. Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1958) V, pp. 1-21; P.V. Kane, J.B.B.R.A.S., 29 (1954), pp. 1-28; V.M. Apte, Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute, 3 (1947), pp. 407-488.

<sup>2</sup>Apte, B.D.C.R., p. 411.

<sup>3</sup>Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, V, 3.

contextual meaning did not fit his theory; or, he would put these cases in separate categories. Kane derives the word from the root vr̥ - "to choose/select". He suggests that choosing involves willing and thus  $\sqrt{vr̥}$  can also mean "to will", and  $\sqrt{vr̥}$  with the suffix 'ta' can mean "what is willed", and by extension "law or ordinance".<sup>4</sup> Kane 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 vr̥, are command or law, obedience or duty, religious or moral practices, religious worship or observance, sacred or solemn vow or undertaking, then any vow or pattern of conduct.<sup>5</sup>

Kane then goes on to illustrate his derived meanings of  $\sqrt{vr̥}$  plus ta by citing a number of passages from the Rg Veda where vrata occurs.

I find it difficult to accept some of Kane's meanings, in particular, 'religious or moral practices', 'religious worship or observance' and 'sacred or solemn vow', because it seems that he is reading too much into the uses of vrata in the Rg Veda from what he knows about its later

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

uses, as we shall see below. Other scholars I have come across take the term vrata in its early vedic context to mean laws in general or ordinances of ṛta<sup>6</sup>, fixed and regular behaviour, and personal function<sup>7</sup> or duty.<sup>8</sup>

What is noteworthy is that the gods are spoken of as having their own vrata-s (RV III.7.7, II.38.9, III.56.1) and as ruling over the vrata-s. Varuna, the guardian of ṛta, is also the upholder of the vrata-s<sup>9</sup>, and appears to be the god most often mentioned in connection with the vrata-s. Vrata-s are thus intimately connected with the activity of the gods and with ṛta and have the sense of 'immutably fixed ordinances' that keep the world in order and to which all beings are subject, including 'wilely demons'<sup>10</sup> and humans. "RV 9.112.1 states that the various vocations which men engage in are their various vratas. It is not surprising to find also that the sacrifice, which is the single most important activity that vedic man could perform, is described

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<sup>6</sup>Banerjee, "Purānic Basis of the Vratas Mentioned in Bengal Smṛti", Indian Culture, 13, No. 1 (1946), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup>J. Gonda, A History of Indian Literature, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrossowitz, 1975), I, pp. 97, 167.

<sup>8</sup>See W. Norman Brown, "The Basis of the Hindu Act of Truth", Review of Religion, 5 (1940), p. 38.

<sup>9</sup>Gonda, op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>10</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 5.

as a vrata at RV 1.93.8."<sup>11</sup>

In the later Saṁhitās and Brāhmaṇas and in the Upaniṣads, Kane notes the

ordinary sense of vrata 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, yavāgri (barley gruel) or the mixture of hot milk and curds (called amikṣā).<sup>12</sup>

The second meaning is the one picked up by Keith and Macdonell in their Vedic Index of Names and Subjects. They say that vrata in the Saṁhitās and Brāhmaṇas "has the peculiar sense of the 'milk' used by one who is living on that beverage alone as a vow or penance".<sup>13</sup> These references, as the ones cited by Kane, often refer to the dikṣita (one undergoing a dikṣa or consecration ceremony for a vedic sacrifice). During the ceremony the dikṣita

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<sup>11</sup>C. Heckaman, "Toward a Comprehensive Understanding of Rta in the Rg Veda", M.A. Thesis, McMaster University 1980, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup>Kane, op. cit., 23. The following passages are cited as examples: TS II.5.5.6; TS V.7.6.1; Tai.Up. III. 7-10. Many of these passages are injunctions of both an ethical and ritual sort, e.g. 'one should not speak untruth', 'one should not eat bird's flesh for a year'. For the second meaning of the term, these passages are cited: TS VI.2.5.1; SB III.2.2.10 and 16.

<sup>13</sup>Keith and A. Macdonell, Vedic Index of Names and Subjects, (London, 1912), 2, p. 341. References cited include: AV VI.133.2; TS VI 2.5, 3.4; SB III.2.2, 10.17; 4.2.15.

undergoes purificatory rites and evidently milk is considered one of the substances that is particularly pure and suitable for a brāhman. In this case vrata, identified with the milk, may symbolize the purifying process which the initiand is undergoing - as dikṣa has also been construed as an initiation rite.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the ritual practices involved in the dikṣa ceremony have a number of parallels with vrata rites as described in the Purāṇas. For example, the dikṣita 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 brāhmanas.<sup>15</sup>

The link between vrata and dikṣa appears again in the Grhyasūtras. Gonda has pointed out<sup>16</sup> that the Grhyasūtras (c. 600-400 B.C.) generally use the term vrata in connection with the dikṣa of the young boy about to become brahmacārin (a celibate student under the tutelage of a brāhman preceptor), but also with the dikṣa of a snātaka (one who has finished his studentship and is ready to become

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<sup>14</sup>See M. Eliade, Birth and Rebirth; The Religious Meaning of Initiation (chapter on dikṣa). New York: Harper, 1958.

<sup>15</sup>See Eliade, op. cit., (chapter on dikṣa) and Śatapatha Brahmana, (Sacred Books of the East Vol. XXVI). pp. 1-47, PT. II and Gonda op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>16</sup>J. Gonda, Change and Continuity in Indian Religion, (The Hague: Mouton & Co. 1965), pp. 329-331.

a householder) and a householder. The vrata-s as part of the dikṣa are intended to prepare the person who undertakes it for the study of sacred texts and to make him a recipient of its fruits.<sup>17</sup> Yet even after the dikṣa a student was expected to undertake particular vrata-s when he studied a new section of Vedic literature.<sup>18</sup> So, for example,

before a student began to study the Mahānāmni or Sakvari verses forming a supplement to the Sāma Veda, he had to prepare himself by keeping a vow, the sakvari-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 had prepared himself by these and other austerities, the verses were recited to him . . .<sup>19</sup>

The meaning of vrata in the Dharmasūtras, which are dated from about the same time as and a little later than the Grhyasūtras, continues to have the sense of restrictions as to food and behaviour during a certain stage in one's life, e.g. as a brahmacārin, or while participating in a

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

<sup>18</sup>H.C. Chakladar, Cultural Heritage of India, ed. H. Bhattacharya, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, 1953, 1962), II, p. 569; for more descriptions of these now obsolete vrata-s that every Vedic student had to undergo see Kane, History of Dharmasāstra V. II, pp. 370-3.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 569-70.



Vedic rite. The Āpastamba Dharmasūtra II.1.1ff. "specifies the observances to be followed by the husband and wife from the day of their marriage such as eating only twice in the day . . . fasting on parvan days,<sup>20</sup> and so on.

According to S.R. Das,<sup>21</sup>

Patanjali in his Mahabashya [c. 150 B.C.] defines Vrata as 'vriyate iti anena' i.e. 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 dviya castes. It is clear that Patanjali 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 dviya castes] . . . While describing the Vratas he says that milk and such other liquids were the Vrata or vinaya of the Brāhmanas, yavagna of the Kshatriyas and amikshya of the Vaisyas.

In Manu (c.100 B.C. - A.D. 100), Yājñavalkya (c. A.D. 100-300) and other early Smṛtis vrata is identified with the prescribed observances of prāyaścitta-s (expiations).<sup>22</sup>

Further mention will be made of the connection between expiation and vrata-s in chapter I. Finally, in the Mahābhārata

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>21</sup>S.R. Das, "Vrata Rites of Bengal", Man in India, 32, No. 4 (1952), p, 212.

<sup>22</sup>Kane, op. cit., p.27. For a detailed discussion of prāyaścitta see Kane, History of Dharmasāstra, IV, pp. 1-130; and Cultural Heritage of India, D.C. Bhattacharya ed. (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission, 1962) II, ch. 23.

the word vrata is mainly used in the sense of a religious undertaking or vow in which one has to observe certain restrictions about food or one's general behaviour . . . It was also applied in the epic to a course or pattern of conduct or behaviour not necessarily religious.<sup>23</sup>

The preceding review of the usage of the term vrata shows that the term shifted in its meaning from its earliest usage in the Rg Veda to its use in the Smṛtis of Manu and Yājñavalkya. The concept of vrata, Kane suggests, gradually came to be restricted as the concept of dharma became more all-embracing, while ṛta disappeared altogether.<sup>24</sup> Thus, instead of denoting the fixed functions of an entity (be it god or man) which preserve and support the ṛta through the power of dharman which we find in the Rg Veda, vrata came to be applied to the special food prescribed during a religious observance and then to the rules of conduct (which still included prescribed and proscribed foods) and finally to the rules plus the reason for the rite - i.e., expiation. This picture of the term's history of meaning is somewhat simplistic, and a thorough-going investigation of its early usage could easily be the subject of a separate thesis. For the purposes at hand it is hoped that this review will provide a background against which the concept of vrata in the purāṇic context may be viewed.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 27. "For example, in the Sabhāparva 58.16 Yudhisthira says that it has been his constant vow that he would not refuse dice-play when he was challenged to it."

<sup>24</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 21.

## CHAPTER I

This chapter will continue with an overview of the usage of the term, or rather, concept of vrata in the Purāṇa and Nibandha literature. Since this is the literature that will concern the body of this thesis, and since in this literature the discussions of vrata-s and attempts at a definition become more numerous, a more detailed account is required. To begin with, a few preliminary comments on the Purāṇas and Nibandhas with respect to their dates, authorship and contents will be made.

Tracing the genesis of the name 'Purāṇa' and the oral traditions and/or body of literature to which it originally referred, has proved to be, like so many areas of ancient Indian history, problematic for historians of religion. The word 'purāṇa' means originally nothing but purāṇam ākhyānam, i.e., 'old narrative' according to Winternitz.<sup>1</sup> Pusalker, following Winternitz, contends that up to the 'period' of the Atharva Veda, the Purāṇas signified only the tales of old and were allied with itihāsa (history), gāthā-s (songs), nārāsamsi-s (laudatory or eulogistic works), inter alia, and it is doubtful, he says, whether

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<sup>1</sup>A. Pusalker, Studies in Epics and Purāṇas of India, (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963), p. 455.

the term then conveyed any class of Purāṇa literature.<sup>2</sup> It is in the early sūtra literature that the existence of Purāṇas as actual texts - or at least as a recognized body of literature - is attested to. "In the Gautama Dharmasūtra xl.19), which is regarded as the oldest of the preserved law-books, it is taught that the king is to take as his authorities on the administration of justice, the Veda, the law-books, the Vedāṅgas, and 'the Purāṇa'".<sup>3</sup> In the Dharmaśāstras that followed, from the fifth to first century B.C., more and more references to the Purāṇas can be found, suggesting the emergence of a definite and separate class of literature. "A study of the references to Purāṇa in the Sūtra literature clearly shows . . . [that] the Purāṇas had come to be regarded as authoritative as a religious treatise . . . the recital of which was considered to be sanctimonious."<sup>4</sup>

It is probable that at this time a very old definition of a Purāṇa contained in the lexicon of Amarakośa and in some of the extant Purāṇas arose. This is the 'pañcalakṣana' (five characteristics) definition and it

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>M. Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, 2nd ed. trans. S. Ketkar (1920, rpt. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1963) vol. II, p. 455.

<sup>4</sup>S. Gyani, Agni Purāna: A Study, (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, vol. XLII, 1964), p. 16.

says that a Purāṇa is to contain five topics: (1) creation (sarga), (2) re-creation (pratisarga), (3) geneology (vamśa) of gods and sages, (4) cosmic cycles (manvantara), and (5) accounts of royal dynasties (vamśānucarita). Hazra maintains that these five subjects were probably what the earliest Purāṇas (non-extant) were primarily concerned with, but when later Purāṇas were composed or compiled the pañcalakṣana was neglected and greater importance was given to matters religious and social.<sup>5</sup> This transition from the original character of the Purāṇas to their new form incorporating topics on social rites and customs began to occur not later than the middle of the fourth century A.D.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Purāṇas began to overlap with what had been the domain of the Dharmasūtras and Smṛtis. Hazra postulates two main stages in the development of the Purāṇic Smṛti material. In the first stage (approximately third to fifth centuries A.D.) the Purāṇas covered topics that had formed the subject-matter of the early Smṛti-Samhitās such as those of Manu and Yājñavalkya:

But in the second stage, which began from about the beginning of the sixth century

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<sup>5</sup>However, it should be noted that the pañcalakṣana were not entirely ignored in later Purāṇas for one can still find these characteristics or topics interwoven into many of the texts.

<sup>6</sup>R.C. Hazra, Studies in the Purāṇic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs, 2nd ed. (1940; rpt. Dēlhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), p. 6.

A.D. . . . [there is an increase in the variety of Smṛti topics. In this stage new topics added relate mainly to various kinds of gifts [dāna], initiation [dikṣa], sacrifice to the planets and their pacification, Homa [a ritual in which ghee is thrown into the consecrated fire as an oblation to the gods], consecration (pratisthā) of images etc., saṁdhyā [morning and evening worship], glorification of Brahmans and their worship, glorification of holy places [tīrthas] . . . , vrata and pūjā [worship]. These topics are found neither in the works of Manu and Yājñavalkya nor in the Purānas . . . which were written earlier than about the beginning of the sixth century A.D.]<sup>7</sup>

These 'second stage' topics continued to be of central interest to the Purāṇa compilers and editors in the ensuing centuries. But at the same time, the texts retained their fluid character as "tradition demanded that they should be re-edited with the changes in society so that their importance as works of authority might not decrease".<sup>8</sup>

Hazra does not explain what he means by 'tradition' in this context. No doubt tradition (in the sense of old, venerable, established) and authority go hand in hand in India, as elsewhere, but it would appear that given the changeable nature of the early Purāṇas and the fact that no extant Purāṇa corresponds exactly to the earliest definition of one, a 'Purāṇic textual tradition' must have been long in the

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 188-9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

making - and even then was never clearly fixed and well defined.

Where, then, did the authority of the Purāṇas come from? We have seen that in the Gautama Dharmasūtra (c. 600-300 B.C.) the Purāṇas are already considered authoritative in matters of dharma. As well, from an early point the sage Vyāsa who was believed (and is still believed by orthodox Hindus) to have compiled the Vedas and the Mahābhārata was also assigned the authorship of the Purāṇas. So it is probable that, initially at least, the authority of the texts was simply conferred on them by the brāhman community who most probably set them down.<sup>9</sup>

There have been some theories put forward (notably by E. Pargiter) that the Purāṇas were written by kṣatriyas and were actually anti-brāhman polemics, but these theories have been discredited.<sup>10</sup> One has only to look at the depiction of brāhmins in many of the Purāṇic vrata descriptions to notice that brāhmins are frequently praised, are sometimes to be worshipped in addition to or instead of

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<sup>9</sup>The Purāṇas, however, never officially had the same status as the Vedās. They were considered as a supplement to the Veda, "principally intended for the instruction of women and sūdras, who were not entitled to the study of the Veda . . . Only the Veda, says Rāmānuja [SBE, vol. 48, p. 338 f.], serves for the attainment of the highest knowledge, the knowledge of Brāhman, while Itihāsa and Purāṇa lead only to the cleansing of sins". Winternitz, History of Indian Literature, p. 463.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Pusalker, op. cit., (1963), pp.38-9.

a deity, and expect to be lavishly rewarded with gifts by the vratin to ensure the success of the observance. Further, though Vedic rituals are to a degree supplemented by 'Purāṇic rituals' they are not altogether rejected in the Purāṇas. This strongly suggests that brāhmins and not another group were largely responsible for setting the texts down.

Another prominent feature of the extant Purāṇas, and especially of the Upa-purāṇas, is their sectarian stamp. It is quite possible that sectarian brāhmins (followers of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Devī - in particular) who had moved away from orthodox Vedic Brāhmanism and who were influenced by (or partly the perpetrators of) an emergent bhakti-oriented religion took advantage of the fluid state of early Purāṇa literature to edit and insert 'up to date material' reflecting - and indeed often advocating - their particular sect's philosophical and religious beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Hazra has a theory which seems to be supported by many other scholars about why the brāhmins took such an

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<sup>11</sup>Winternitz states this idea more forcefully (and disparagingly) when he says: "we do not know when this literature [passed into the hands of] the lower priesthood, which congregated in 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, History of Indian Literature, p. 464.)



interest in promoting the Purāṇas.<sup>12</sup> This theory states that during the early centuries of this 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>13</sup> As more people strayed from the brāhmaṇic fold, the brāhmins began losing power, income and prestige. They realized that the revitalization of the varnāśramadharmā (the dharma of each of the four castes) and the authority of the Vedas and Śāstras was essential to the reestablishment of their own authority and economic well-being. Thus, the orthodox 'brāhmaṇists', 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>14</sup> To attract more followers, then, the exclusivity of Vedic

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<sup>12</sup>E.g., Banerjee in Indian Culture, XIII, 1946; Kane, History of Dharmasāstra, V, p. 43 ff.

<sup>13</sup>Hazra mentions in this discussion that women tended to be more easily morally corrupted too; a common Indian belief.

<sup>14</sup>Hazra, op. cit., pp. 213-14, 226, 257.

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 brāhmins through the Purāṇas and Smṛtis.

The brāhmanical religion did experience a revival during the Gupta period (fourth to sixth centuries) - though Buddhism and Jainism did not fare so badly either. The Gupta period, Thapar says, "saw the acceptance of the Aryan pattern . . . , an important aspect of which was that the status of the brahman was firmly established."<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the influence of 'Vedic culture' had been growing in the South and a number of Tamil kings patronized brāhmins.<sup>16</sup> It was during this period and up until about the fourteenth century that the eighteen major or Mahāpurāṇas were composed or compiled and set down in Sanskrit.<sup>17</sup>

S.R. Das, differing in his emphasis from Hazra,

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<sup>15</sup>R. Thapar, A History of India, I (Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), p. 166. She also says: "The fact that a number of texts were rewritten with an underlining of the brahman viewpoint indicates that the status was effective and powerful." (p. 166)

<sup>16</sup>See Thapar, Ibid., pp. 184-5.

<sup>17</sup>It is interesting to note that the Buddhists and Jains also composed Purāṇas or Purāṇa-like works during this time, probably in imitation of the Hindu Purāṇas. See Winternitz, op. cit., p. 461.

maintains<sup>18</sup> that the reason the Purāṇas were able to become so popular was that they successfully absorbed and integrated many "non-Aryan" elements, thus appealing in particular to that segment of the population most 'prone' to straying from Vedic religion. "A large number of the popular rites and practices including certain vratas were given new interpretations and eventually incorporated into the Brahmanical system."<sup>19</sup> Das holds that a large proportion of the vrata-s found in the Purāṇas were of non-Aryan origin - before they and their accompanying kathā-s were "brahmanized" (or perhaps "Sanskritized") - and that the original folk-vrata-s, 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

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<sup>18</sup>Das, "Vrata Rites of Bengal", Man in India, 32, No. 4, (1952), p. 222.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 222. J. Helen Rowlands also takes this position in her La Femme Bengalie Dans la Littérature du Moyen-Age, (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1930), pp. 50-51. She says: "Les brata populaires (açastriya ou Laukika) doivent dater d'une époque pré-pouranique, pré-hindoue. Abanindranāth Tagore suppose que c'est parmi les gens désignés dans les Védas sous le nom de anyvrata qu'il faut chercher les origines de nos brata." And, "Les brata canoniques (çastriya) ou pouraniques furent probablement introduits à l'imitation des brata populaires, qui existaient déjà dans le pays, pour prêcher la bhakti et répandre l'adoration de certaines divinités."

Brahmanical literature".<sup>20</sup>

Kane<sup>21</sup> and Banerjee<sup>22</sup>, rather than talking about the inclusion of vrata-s and other popular folk-rites in the Purāṇas as a concession to their prevalence at a popular level, as Das holds, suggest that the inclusion of vrata-s (as well as dāna, upavāsa etc.) and their glorification in the Purāṇas represented a popularization of Smṛti material, as Hazra maintained. The success of this popularization was ensured by the promise 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>23</sup> The Brahmapurāṇa (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 Brāhmanas to whom the fees stated in the texts are paid." The Bhaviṣyapurāṇa (uttara 7.1) provides that a man crosses easily the deep ocean of hells by means of the boat of vrata-s, upavāsa-s, and niyama-s.<sup>24</sup> There were also

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<sup>20</sup>To corroborate this claim it would be necessary to examine and compare descriptions of vrata-type observances in the epic and early folk literature of North and South India (if they exist) with Puraṇic versions and to ascertain what changes were made.

<sup>21</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>22</sup>Banerjee, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>23</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>24</sup>Both translations by Kane, op. cit., p. 43.

promises of a better incarnation as shown in a passage from the Varāhapurāṇa (47.20 ff.) where king Nrga, who was a śūdra in his previous birth, is said to have become a king by observance of the Buddhavādaśī-vrata.<sup>25</sup> There are many other examples of the praise showered upon the vrata-s in the Purāṇic descriptions of them. Often their efficaciousness and power are favourably contrasted with the observance of "hundreds" of Vedic sacrifices - in particular, the Aśvamedha or 'horse-sacrifice' which was one of the more expensive, complicated and prolonged of the Vedic sacrifices.

Banerjee observes that "in their zeal of popularizing the vratas the Brāhmanas withdrew their ban even on prostitutes who had, strictly speaking, no caste and were branded as 'fallen' . . . [We find that in the Purāṇas] prostitutes are allowed to participate in vratas\*, and even the Veda-knowing Brāhmanas have not the slightest hesitation in accepting any kind of gifts from their hands".<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact that Banerjee's generalization about the universal accessibility of Purāṇic rites finds support in such statements as 'Vrata-s are to be observed by all without discrimination' (Matsyapurāṇa 70.32), I am not convinced

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<sup>25</sup>Hazra, op. cit., p. 238.

\*In fact there is even a vrata, the "Anangadāna-vrata", for prostitutes in Matsyapurāṇa 70:42-45, which will be taken up in the next chapter.

<sup>26</sup>Banerjee, op. cit., p. 39.

that all brāhmins would have been so open minded in practice. Further, if one reads the vrata descriptions in the Purāṇas, one will notice that only a minority of them specifically say that women and śūdras may practice and benefit from the vrata. I will return to this question of who could perform the vrata-s in chapter two.

The impression may have been given from the references to vrata-s made above that vrata-s proliferated in the Purāṇas from the beginning - or from the time that the texts began to take on the form which they currently have. This is not the case. Rather, as Kane notes<sup>27</sup>, the number of vrata-s in the first centuries A.D., according to the written evidence, was not very large. But gradually their numbers increased, perhaps as they proved successful in their popularity, until they mushroomed in the works compiled in the ninth to the fourteenth centuries. These works include both late Purāṇas or interpolated parts of earlier Purāṇas (e.g., the Matsya, the Liṅga, the Agni, the Padma, and the Garuḍa) and Nibandhas, such as the Kṛtyakalpataru of Laksmīdhara (first half of twelfth century), the Caturvargacintāmaṇi of Hemādri (end of the thirteenth century), the Vratakalaviveka of Śūlapāni (1375-1430) and the Vratarāja.<sup>28</sup> The result is an immense literature on vrata-s. As Kane says: "There is no topic on Dharmaśāstra except

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<sup>27</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>28</sup>"Considered the leading Sanskrit treatise on vratas

probably that of tīrthayātrā and of śrāddha on which the Purāṇas wax so eloquent as on vrata."<sup>29</sup> Though the number of vrata-s 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 vrata. One commonly finds in the later Purāṇas (e.g., the Padma, Agni, Garuḍa, and Śiva) whole sections lifted out of earlier Purāṇas, sometimes reformulated with a different sectarian angle. The reasons for this are firstly, because the later Purāṇic editors tended to want 'their' Purāṇas to be all-inclusive or encyclopaedic like the Mahābhārata, and therefore more generally authoritative, and secondly, because this kind of editing in the Purāṇas had by this time become commonplace, even 'traditional'. For example, the Matsya, Padma, and Agni Purāṇas are basically compendia written and added to by many authors over a period of centuries. This process inevitably involved duplication.

Similarly, in the Nibandha literature<sup>30</sup> authors

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in West India at the present day" writes J. Jolly in Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), vol XII, 1921, p. 656.

<sup>29</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>30</sup>The Nibandha literature, 'medieval digests' of dharma, essentially took over from the earlier Smṛtis and Dharmasāstras. Some scholars (e.g., Winternitz) view them as generally inferior to their predecessors. The Nibandhas tend to rely on information from the Purāṇas as much as from the Smṛtis and Sāstras. They actually often cite the Purāṇas as their authority on a given topic. It is probably for this reason that the Nibandhas discuss vrata-s far more than the Smṛtis.

often took portions of earlier works and added them to their own verbatim. Examples are works like Vratārka and Vratarāja which contain long passages from Hemādri and others.<sup>31</sup> Even Hemādri borrowed from earlier works. As well, the topic of vrata is rather "inextricably mixed up with discussions on kāla [time] and tithi".<sup>32</sup> The Purāṇa and Nibandha writers 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 celebration of festivals. Much of the discussion on vrata-s is thus devoted to determining which are the most auspicious times for their effective performance according to these astrological calculations.

Another factor to bear in mind when examining the literature on vrata-s is that vrata-s are often confused or interchanged with prāyaścitta (penance) and utsava (festivals) by medieval writers. This is because vrata-s, prāyaścitta-s and utsava-s share some of the same characteristics in their observances such as eating or abstaining from certain foods, ritual bathing, performing pūjā-s reciting mantra-s and giving gifts. A noteworthy example is Śivarātri, an observance obligatory for Śaivas,

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<sup>31</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>32</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 58. Tithi is defined as the time or period required by the moon to gain twelve degrees of the sun.



which though once probably a vrata (and still called that) has now taken on the appearance of a festival. Perhaps what most distinguishes an utsava from a vrata is that utsava-s are public religious observances in which a whole group or community participates while vrata-s are usually practised by individuals for specific purposes. Also, utsava-s usually last nine or ten days and occur at regular intervals (e.g., once a year), while vrata-s may be observed anywhere from a day to a lifetime and may be undertaken regularly or occasionally.

Kane says: "Many vratas contain an element of festivities and many utsavas have more or less a religious element also and were religious in the beginning though later on they became secular . . ." <sup>33</sup> This observation may well be true, but the distinction between religious and secular as chiefly pertaining to vrata-s and utsava-s respectively is not really very helpful because an argument could easily be made to the effect that utsava-s take place within a 'religious' context as much as do vrata-s. One would have to admit, finally, that the boundary between these two rites is blurred in theory as well as practice, but, whereas vrata-s can be part of the observance of an utsava (as in the case of Śivarātri which requires the participants to fast, observe niyama-s, etc.) an utsava

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<sup>33</sup>Kane, History of Dharmasāstra, p. 253.

(festival, not festivities) would not be part of a vrata.

There is an early connection between vrata and prāyaścitta: "The sages of the R̥g Veda", Kane notes, "were acutely conscious of sin or guilt and pray to the gods, particularly Varuṇa and the Ādityas, for forgiveness and for being freed from the consequences of sin". They often say that they violated the dharmas or the vratas (ordinances) of the gods and implore forgiveness.<sup>34</sup> The means of expiating these transgressions was through sacrifice which also involved fasting, observing certain behavioural rules and giving gifts or fees to the officiating priest. Thus again we see that the term vrata became disassociated with laws, ordinances or fixed functions with respect to dharma and became associated with prescriptions for expiating the negative effects of breaking those rules, for prāyaścitta-s had started to be called vrata-s by the time of Manu, Yājñavalkya, and other Smṛtis.<sup>35</sup>

However, in the later Smṛtis, the Purāṇas and the Nibandhas prāyaścitta and vrata were treated as separate topics though many of the well-known prāyaścitta-s (e.g., cāndrāyaṇa) have been integrated into the Purāṇic vrata-s<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>History of Dharmasāstra, IV, pp. 5, 36.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., V, p. 27.

<sup>36</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 prāyaścitta-s were adopted into the Purāṇic vrata-s. (Kane, V, p. 103)

whose specific purpose is indicated as expiatory. Indeed, one category of vrata-s has been called 'expiatory' and is referred to as naimittika (to be done for a special purpose, occasionally) as we will see below.

What differentiates vrata-s and prāyaścitta-s then, is that the latter are prescribed observances to nullify or moderate the effects of some transgression from a mahāpātaka ('major offence') like brāhman-killing to an upapātaka ('minor offence' - these are innumerable) like stealing or being an atheist. Their purpose is essentially to purify oneself, and to pay back society (or the dharmic-order) for one's transgressions. A vrata may be undertaken as a penance, but it may be undertaken for many other reasons as well; the majority of Purāṇic vrata-s are optional observances whereas prāyaścitta-s are usually imposed from without, by a family priest, the village council, or even by a king.

#### Definition of Vrata

Up to this point I have not given any specific definitions of vrata as they occasionally appear in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas. It seems that no particular definition ever became the definitive one and indeed it appears that most writers on the subject avoided making such an attempt - concentrating instead on the classification of various kinds of vrata-s and on outlining what they considered to be the essential features of a vrata. Nevertheless, to give an idea of how Purāṇa-Nibandha

definitions resembled or differed from earlier formulations, a few are presented in what follows. The first is from the Agnipurāna (175.2-3). Kane interprets this passage as: "A restrictive rule declared by the śāstras 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>37</sup> The Garudapurāna (128.1-2) defines a vrata as: "an act of living in conformity with the rules of conduct and self-control [niyama-s], as laid down in the Śāstras. The vrata is but another name for penance (tapasyā). A Vratee is under the obligation of observing specific rules of conduct and self-control".<sup>38</sup> These niyama-s will be discussed presently. What is interesting to note in the above 'definitions' is the connection made between vrata and tapas. Tapas, which originally meant 'heat' in the Rgveda, came to be

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<sup>37</sup>Kane, Ibid., V, p. 33.

<sup>38</sup>This translation is by M.N.D. Shastri, 1908 (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1968). The following translation of the same passage adheres more closely to the Sanskrit version: "A Vrata should be performed together with the observation of Niyamas (restraints) mentioned in the scriptures. A Vrata is a form of penance. Yamas (self-restraints) along with Niyamas (external restraints) should be equally observed. (trans. by a board of scholars, ed. J.L. Shastri, Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Series, vol. 12, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978.)"

associated with the inner heat generated by śrama (effort) on the part of the brāhmacaryas, and then with 'austerity' in general. The term was also used in connection with prāyaścitta-s and was later sometimes called a niyama.

What we have here, then, is a long history of interconnection between the concepts vrata, tapas, prāyaścitta 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 four terms are brought together, not quite as synonyms, but as closely related elements in religious observances. In the case of the Purāṇic vrata-s, the vrata can be viewed as being the 'subject' and tapas, niyama, and prāyaścitta its 'modifiers'. In other contexts, vrata may be a constituent element of a prāyaścitta and tapas of a niyama.<sup>39</sup>

The Nibandhas contain some 'definitions' of a vrata which tend to be even more vague than the Purāṇic examples. Srīdatta in his Samaya-pradīpa (c. 1275-1310) defines vrata as 'a definite resolve [saṅkalpa] relating to a certain matter held as obligatory'. He says further that a resolve made with the addition of condition not enjoined by the

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<sup>39</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 Apt'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'.

Śāstras is not a vrata.<sup>40</sup> Bhatta Lakṣmidhara in his Kṛtyakalpataru (c. 1100-1130) says that a vrata is a resolution based on the Śāstra whereby one contemplates what to do and what to abstain from.<sup>41</sup> Raghunandana in his Vrata-tattva (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 upāvasa and the like.<sup>42</sup> The Dharmasindhu (a late digest, c. 1712) defines vrata as a kind of religious rite consisting of pūjā and the like.<sup>43</sup>

The only significant difference between the Purāṇa and Nibandha definitions of vrata is that the former focus on tapas and the niyama-s, in other words, on the austerity and restraint aspects of the observance, while the latter focus on the resolve - the preliminary vow to do such and such things. One emphasizes the actions, the other a determination 'to do'. This difference may be explained by the fact that the Nibandha definitions conform to statements made in earlier Smṛti texts, notably the Manu-Smṛti which says (II.3): "resolve is the root of desires, of sacrifices,

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<sup>40</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>41</sup>Quoted by B.N. Sharma, Social and Cultural History of Northern India 1000-1200 A.D., (Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1972), p. 105.

<sup>42</sup>Kane, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

of vratas and the characteristics called yamas - all are known to spring from resolve".<sup>44</sup>

All definitions refer back to 'the Śāstras' which is a general term used frequently in medieval Hindu literature to mean 'works of authority', i.e., the Dharmasāstras and Smṛtis and probably the Purānas and Nibandhas themselves. The idea behind this reference was in all likelihood that the ritual or prescription in question must be properly guided by someone (a brāhman) familiar with the texts and procedure. This concern for performing a religious observance in the correct, stipulated way may be regarded as a legacy from the Vedic sacrifices wherein the success of the rite depended on the exactitude with which the details of the ritual were carried out in conformity with the texts.

#### Essential Features of a Vrata

As to the essential features of a vrata the texts are more or less in agreement, although, again, they rarely spell out these 'essential features' at a given point and in a systematic way. The following list of features is adapted from Das.<sup>45</sup> Not all of the items, however, are always included in each vrata description.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., V, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup>Das, op. cit., p. 215.

The śāstriya-vrata components are: the utterance of a benediction (svastivacana), commencement of the rite (karmārambha), resolve (saṁkalpa), placing of the jug (ghatasthāpana), purification of self and the image of the deity (śodhana) - often using pañcagavyam (curd, milk, ghee, cow dung and cow's urine), chanting of mantras (sacred verses), fasting (upavaśa) - which usually means only taking one meal in twenty-four hours and restricting the kinds of food to be eaten; it also has the wider meaning of abstaining from all sensual pleasures, worship (pūjā), the giving of gifts (dāna) and a full meal (bhujjya) to brāhmins or needy people, and lastly, the listening to the kathā - or the story which proves the efficacy of the rite observed. Those features which are apparent in at least ninety-five per cent of the vrata descriptions in the Purāṇas are: fasting, pūjā and the giving of gifts. These three features, then, coupled with an attention to the suitable astrological conditions, may be regarded as the most important for the observance of any vrata.

Other things which a vratin is often expected to observe are continence, abstaining from contact with 'low', 'bad', or ritually impure persons,<sup>46</sup> taking frequent purificatory baths, sleeping on the bare ground, reading of or listening to the Vedas and Śāstras, and generally acting in

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<sup>46</sup>These are sometimes specified as any women or śūdras.



a way that is conducive to spiritual upliftment, e.g., being truthful, kind, charitable and so on.<sup>47</sup> The Agnipurāṇa (175.10-11) mentions the 'ten virtues' (niyama-s) which are to be practised while observing a vrata: "forebearance, truthfulness, compassion, charity, purity (of body and mind), curbing the organs of sense, worship of deities, homa, contentment, and not depriving another of his property. This ten-fold dharmaḥ is declared as common to all vratas".

This list of niyama-s appears in more or less the same form in many Purāṇas and Nibandhas.<sup>48</sup> The purpose of the niyama-s was to serve as a physical and spiritual preparation for the devotee about to begin a religious rite or festival. No doubt these preparations also served as a way of letting others know that one was in the process of observing a special and indeed sacred rite during which normal activity and behaviour would be altered.

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<sup>47</sup>Agnipurāṇa ch. 175, Garudapurāṇa ch. 128, Lingapurāṇa ch 24.

<sup>48</sup>In fact the concept of niyama goes back to at least the first century of the Christian era. Patañjali in his Yoga-sūtras (2.32) says that niyama-s, one of the eight yogic aids, consist of five observances: cleanliness, contentment, austerities, sacred studies and surrender of works to God. Yama-s (the practice of abstinances) and niyama-s "are also to be found in Vedānta and figure prominently in the Jain and Buddhist religions where they are known as right conduct (cāritra) or perfections (pāramita) respectively". See M.R. Yardi, The Yoga of Patañjali, (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1979), p. 42.

Classification of Vrata-s

The classification of vrata-s is another area in which many writers on Hindu religious practice (including those of the present day) have focussed. The most broad classification is between śāstric (those sanctioned in the Purāṇas and Smṛtis) and non-śāstric. This classification, as far as I know, is not mentioned in the Purāṇa texts themselves. In fact, the Purāṇas are not particularly interested in classifying the vrata-s, at least not in any formal way.<sup>49</sup> But the Nibandha writers and modern scholars have shed much ink on this matter. A few of these classifications will be cited. Hemādri<sup>50</sup> makes two general divisions: the first is kayika vrata, which are vrata-s in which fasting is the central element, and the second is manasika vrata-s, which are vrata-s which may include non-

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<sup>49</sup>Exceptions are the Agnipurāna and the Padmapurāna. The former classifies vrata-s into seven groups: (1) Vaiṣṇavi, (2) parthi, (3) bhautiki, (4) śrautiki (5) godāna, (6) snatakatva, (7) pakṣa-yajña. Kane quotes the Padmapurāna (IV.84.42-44) as saying, "ahiṃsa (abstaining from causing injury), truthfulness, not depriving a person of his property by wrongfully taking it, brahmacarya (continence), freedom from crookedness or hypocrisy - these are mental vratas that lead to the satisfaction (or favour) of Hari; [ekabhakta, nakta, upavāsa, ayācita] - this is physical vrata for human beings; study of the Veda, recounting (the name of) Visnu, speaking the truth, freedom from back-biting - these are vratas of speech." 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 a vrata.

<sup>50</sup>Quoted in Das, op. cit., p. 213.

violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), and brahmacārya. This division appears somewhat contrived and lacking in textual support. However, in Hemadri's treatment of the vrata-s in his Caturvargacintāmani (c. 1260-1270), the vrata-s are ordered into ten groups each group of which is named for an astrological or seasonal category except the last which is prakirṇaka or miscellaneous. So, for example, he begins with tithi vrata-s and goes on to vāra vrata-s (days of the week), nakṣatra vrata-s (asterisms on the moon's path), etc. Similarly, Lakṣmidhara in his Kṛtyakalpataru<sup>51</sup> makes six classifications based on the time (tithi, day, month, year) during which the particular vrata is to be performed. His last category is also for miscellaneous vrata-s. Other Nibandha writers such as Jīmūtavāhana (Kalaviveka c. 1100-1150) and Sūlapāni (Vrata-kalaviveka c. 1375-1440) also order the vrata-s according to the proper time for their performance.<sup>52</sup> But, as the title of their works suggests, these writers were more concerned about the time (kāla) of vrata-s in any case than about the actual procedure (prayoga) of them. The Vratatattva of Raghunanda does concern itself with procedure more than with time, but I found no references to a 'system of classifica-

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<sup>51</sup>Quoted in Sharma, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>52</sup>The Purāna vrata descriptions often do list a series of vrata-s under the heading of, for example, 'saptamī-vratas' or 'nakṣatra-vratas'. But this is not consistently the case.

tion' if he wrote one.

Modern writers, of the last two centuries, who have classified vrata-s have tended to use different categories from their predecessors. For example, Ward<sup>53</sup> distinguishes two kinds of vows: unconditional vows to perform religious ceremonies, and conditional vows consisting of a promise to present offerings on condition that the deity bestows such and such benefits. He refers to vrata-s as the unconditional vows. The interest in the vratin's purpose and intent as the basis for a classification of vrata-s typifies the approach of many of the modern scholars. Thus, for instance, Banerjee writes<sup>54</sup>:

The vratas found in the Purānas admit of two broad classifications: i) purificatory or expiatory and ii) devotional. The first variety of vratas is resorted to by people in order to atone for sins committed by them. As instances of such vratas may be cited the Cāndrāyana vrata<sup>55</sup>,

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<sup>53</sup>W. Ward, A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos, 3rd. ed. (Birmingham: W.H. Pearce, 1817), I, p. 75. It should be mentioned, however, that Ward made his classification from observation, rather than from a study of the texts.

<sup>54</sup>Banerjee, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

<sup>55</sup>The Cāndrāyana-Vrata is a vrata often mentioned in the Purānas as a means for removing sins. As such it is really more of a prāyaścitta. It involves taking one morsel of food on the first day of the bright half of the month, on the second tithi two morsels are to be eaten and so on until on the day of the full moon (purnamāsī) fifteen morsels are taken; then on the first of the dark half fourteen morsels, one being reduced on each succeeding day.

Prajapatya<sup>56</sup>, etc. The devotional vratas are observed by people for attaining a definite object, e.g. the birth of a son, acquisition of wealth, etc.

Banerjee makes two further classifications. One is based on a division of "active" and "passive" which seems to be somewhat arbitrary and imprecise. He says: "In the former one has to take particular kinds of food and worship certain deities. In the passive vratas . . . one has merely to practise abstinence by resorting to fast . . ." <sup>57</sup> The difference to me is not clear as fasting may be viewed equally as a non-passive act.

His third classification, similar to his first, is one also mentioned by Kane<sup>58</sup> and Sharma<sup>59</sup> and is, in fact, a very old classification which was applied to Vedic rituals. It is not therefore a 'modern' classification at all - but the Purāṇas that I examined made no mention of it in connection with the vrata-s. In this one there are three divisions of vrata-s: (i) nitya, (ii) naimittika, and (iii)

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<sup>56</sup>The Prājāpatya-Vrata, like the Cāndrāyana, is undertaken as a prāyaścitta. There are several ways of observing it. One is quoted by Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, IV, p. 145: on the first day food is taken only by day, on the second only at night, on the third day food obtained without asking for it is taken and on the fourth a complete fast is observed. The same process is repeated for two periods of four days each.

<sup>57</sup>Banerjee, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>58</sup>History of Dharmaśāstra, V, pp. 56-7.

<sup>59</sup>Op. cit., pp. 105-6.

kāmya. Literally the first two terms signify a period of time - nitya meaning 'perpetual' or 'constant' and naimittika meaning 'occasional'. The third term refers to desire. In the context of vrata-s the term nitya applies to those vrata-s which are to be performed regularly and are held to be necessary or obligatory. Naimittika refers to vrata-s undertaken occasionally, for a specific purpose or reason. These vrata-s are usually expiatory in nature. Kāmya are optional vrata-s observed for the purpose of attaining some specific object. An example of this sort would be the popular Sāvitrī-Vrata, discussed below, performed by a wife for her husband's welfare. However, the desired 'object' of a kāmya vrata may be something more directly tangible like getting a good harvest or promotion. Or, the desired object may be something that can only be secured in the 'next' world such as eternal reunion with loved ones or eternal bliss in one of the god's loka-s.

Vrata-s can be both kāmya and nitya or kāmya and naimittika depending on who is to observe the vow. For example it may be that the vrata is nitya for devotees of the god to whom it is directed while kāmya for others who may desire the special rewards that the vrata is supposed to confer. Nitya vrata-s are generally to performed as a duty (obligation) rather than for any reward.

Kane observes, somewhat sceptically, that the bulk of the vrata-s practised in medieval and modern times are

kāmya and that,

most of the vratas are really secular though under the garb of religion and, though certain disciplines (such as fast, worship . . . celibacy, truthfulness) have to be observed, [they] breathe a frankly materialistic attitude; they are meant to appeal to the ordinary human cravings that rule the world.<sup>60</sup>

A less sceptical attitude is represented by Venkatesuren who says of vrata-s: "These have a 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>61</sup> My own view on this matter will be brought forward in chapter two and the conclusion.

#### Conditions Under Which a Vrata may be Undertaken

In regards to the conditions under which a vrata may or may not be undertaken the general rule seems to be that it is fine to begin a vrata any time provided that the time is auspicious (i.e., the correct tithi or conjunction of tithi-s, etc.) and the vratin is in a condition of ritual purity. The samkalpa usually marks the beginning of a vrata. If, after this, there is a birth or death in the family, or a female vratin begins menstruation, these things do not

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<sup>60</sup>Kane, History of Dharmasāstra, V, p. 55.

<sup>61</sup>"Ethics in the Purānas", Bhattacharya, ed., Cultural Heritage of India, II, p. 297.

affect the efficacy of the vrata. According to the Kṛtyakalpataru and the Caturvargacintāmani, "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>62</sup> Even death in the midst of a vrata does not deprive the vratin of the merit for which he or she began it. However, if a person having begun a vrata voluntarily stops it without completing it "dire consequences" are held to be in store. "Chagalaya declares, 'when a person, having first undertaken a vrata, does not carry it out, being led away by some desire, he while alive becomes (i.e., is to be treated as) a cāṇḍāla and after death becomes a dog'."<sup>63</sup> The Agnipurāṇa (ch. 128) says: 'A vow broken through anger, greed, or incontinence should be atoned for by three days fast and a clean shave of the head.'

For those unable to keep a complete fast when required the following foods could be taken without incurring any demerit: water roots, fruits, ghee, milk, any food with the permission of one's preceptor, and medicine.<sup>64</sup> These are traditionally considered very pure

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<sup>62</sup>Quoted in Kane, op. cit., V, p. 49.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 47-8.

<sup>64</sup>Banerjee, op. cit., p. 42.



foods. In fact, however, most of the vrata-s in the Purāṇas do not require a complete fast in any case, so the majority of participants would not find the fasting too much of a strain.

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The last question to be posed before concluding this chapter is, how do the Purāṇas begin their recitation of vrata-s; do they appear in a particular section in conjunction with other topics? The answer to the latter question is that one cannot generalize. The Agnipurāṇa begins its recitation of the vrata-s after a discussion of prāyaścitta-s which is appropriate enough, but the Garudapurāṇa has its description of vrata-s inserted between the Brhaspati-niti-sara (economic policy and artha) and the Solar dynasty (royal lineages). Other Purāṇas such as the Matsya have groups of vrata-descriptions inserted in various places - seemingly at random. With respect to the former question, the opening section of the Agni and Garuda Purāṇas will be quoted as examples. The Agnipurāṇa (ch. 175) begins its recitation of the vrata-s with the following statement: "Now I [Agni] shall describe the fasts, ceremonies [vrata-s] and penances which are to be respectively observed, performed and practised by men and women on the different days of the week, and on the passing of the sun to new zodiacal signs, or under the auspices of the benign asterisms and phases of the moon." The Garudapurāṇa (ch. 116) makes

the following general statement on vrata-s:

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

This last statement describes in a general way the model vrata. The person who supplicates his chosen deity with fasting and pūjā may be granted his wishes and more if the deity is well disposed. The passage recommends constant devotion to God, not necessarily restricted to a particular time, which signifies an emphasis on bhakti. Indeed, many of the Purāṇas advocate bhakti alone as a means of getting what one wants - whether spiritual upliftment, 'salvation', or a material object. Though both statements advise the practising of vrata-s on any and all days of the week, month, year, they also stress the correct astrological calculation, which again, one finds often in the Purāṇas. The gods may be powerful in their own right, but the movement of the planets and stars must at all costs be taken under consideration for they also may exert their powers on humans. Some planets even have malignant influences, as

illustrated from this passage from the Agnipurāna (ch. 190):  
 "by performing the vrata, which should be practised on the  
 nights of the seven Wednesdays, marked by the asterism  
 Viśākha, a man becomes able to get rid of the baneful  
 influences of the planets, and secures their graces in  
 return".

This concludes chapter one. In general, then,  
vrata-s are rites performed, usually accompanied by fasting,  
pūjā, gifts to the brāhmans or the gods, and yield either  
 material this-worldly results or 'other-worldly' results.  
 They should be done at the appropriate moment. A discussion  
 of specific vrata-s will now ensue in chapter two.

## CHAPTER II

### Part One: Description

The fourteen vrata-s to be described and analyzed in this chapter have been collected and collated from descriptions found in translated editions of four Purāṇas, namely the Matsya, Linga, Agni and Garuda. Occasionally material from other texts which also discuss the relevant vrata-s has been included in the descriptions. All sources used will be indicated at the beginning of each vrata description. Specific Purāṇa references are to English translations listed in the bibliography. The reasons for selecting these four Purāṇas to the exclusion of others are, firstly, because they have been translated into English and secondly, because they in fact contain a large number of vrata descriptions. As well, they represent fairly well the whole period of time Purāṇas were being compiled. According to Hazra's chronology of Purāṇic chapters relating to various subjects<sup>1</sup> the vrata-s in the Matsya-purāṇa are relatively early, chapters 54 to 81 (excluding 65 and 73) being dated from 550 to 650, and chapters 95 to 101 from about 650 to 900. The Lingapurāṇa chapters on

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<sup>1</sup>Studies in the Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs, 2nd, ed., (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975).

vrata-s are dated approximately 800 to 1000; the Agnipurāna chapters from the ninth century (except for interpolated chapters 21 to 106, 263 to 272, and 317 to 326 which are later), and the Garudapurāna chapters from the tenth century. The Agni and the Garuda are the most 'encyclopaedic' of the four and so there is a likelihood that they borrowed from earlier sources. The Padmapurāna (untranslated to date) has the largest section on vrata-s, but it is a late Purāna (compiled, edited and interpolated from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries - with some chapters being earlier) and according to Hazra the Sṛṣṭi-Khaṇḍa, which, together with the Brahma-Khaṇḍa, has the greatest number of vrata-s, has borrowed heavily from the Matsyapurāna.

The fourteen vrata-s presented in this chapter were selected from among dozens of vrata-s surveyed. The criteria of selection were not based upon any of the 'classifications' listed in chapter one, for I did not find these a useful way of dividing the vrata-s for a systematic presentation in this chapter. None of the Purānas themselves discuss the vrata-s in a systematic way and I did not wish to impose a rigorous system upon them. So, the first criterion of selection was that several of the vrata-s should be typical or representative as far as possible in order to provide the reader with an idea of what the majority of vrata descriptions look like. A typical vrata description begins with a statement of the merit that the vrata will confer on the

person who observes it: wealth, prosperity, health, a place in the god's loka, male progeny, among other things. This is followed by an account of how to practise the vrata: when to begin and end it, what deity(ies) should be worshipped, and in what manner, what mantra-s, if any, should be said, and what offerings given. Lastly, the description specifies how many brāhmans and/or other persons are to be fed, the sort of food to be given and the amount and nature of the gifts to be donated. Fasting, either completely or partially, usually the day before the pūjā and other procedures take place, is always a central feature of a typical vrata, as is the giving of gifts. The first seven vrata-s to be described may be considered 'typical' in including these features.

The second criterion was that some vrata-s that are atypical or unusual in one or more features should be included. Under this heading are those vrata-s which are for a specific type of person, e.g., the Anānyadāu-vrata which is for prostitutes, or for a specific purpose which requires a special procedure - such as the Bhīmadvādāsī-vrata for those unable to keep a full fast or the Ajāchita-vrata for success in battle which requires a buffalo sacrifice. Vrata-s number 8 to 12 fall within this category.

Lastly, I looked for vrata-s that were specifically for women in order to determine whether they differed in any way from the typical vrata or from vrata-s specifically

for men. The last two vrata-s fulfill this criterion.

For each vrata some introductory comments are given to point out interesting features and/or to provide some background information where this may help clarify an aspect of the vrata description. A more detailed discussion of the various categories (time, purpose, etc.) in relation to the fourteen vrata-s follows in part II of this chapter. In the introductory comments and in part II other vrata-s are occasionally referred to by way of comparison or where they illustrate a particular point.

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1) Anāṅga-trayodshi-vrata (Garuda P. ch. 117)

This vrata as mentioned is a typical one. What is of special interest is the ritual implements and offerings to be used, especially the various kinds of twigs to be used for cleaning the teeth and the various kinds of flowers to be offered in the pūjā and the spices and herbs that the vratin is to live on during the fast days.

Begins: 13th day of the moon's increase, month of Mārgaśīrsa.

Duration: one year

Deities to whom vrata is directed: Śiva (addressed in several epithets), Kāma.

Purpose/expected reward: health, opulence, 'a beautiful wife', and the 'blessings of paternity'.

Who performs: not specified.

Ritual implements (to be used by vratin or as offerings to

the deity(ies): dhuṣṭura flowers, toothbrushes made of mallika, vilva, vaṭa, kadamva, and plakṣa twigs, confectionaries, vilva leaves, sandal-paste, puris and kachouris, strings of pearls, maruvaka, kunda, modaka, aśoka, champaka, karavira, vakula and lotus flowers, sugar, pot herbs, ghee, cushions, cakes, milk, vrihi and sesame seeds.

Requirements of the vratin and procedure: The vratin is to live on honey on the day of the worship in the month of Pauśa, make offerings and do pūjā; he is to take nothing but camphor on the day of worship in the month of Caitra, make offerings, do pūjā, recite mantra-s; only cloves can be consumed on the vrata day in the month of Aśada, and so on. "At the year's end, the puja should be closed with the offerings of milk, potherbs and lotus flowers to the deity. The votary who has been living a life of strict continence from a few days before the date of the worship, shall worship the image of the god of love [Kāma] on a golden throne with offerings of flowers, perfumes etc., and a thousand oblations of vrihi and sesame seeds should be cast into the sacrificial fire in his honour. The votary shall pass the night in songs and festivities and again worship the god on the morrow . . ." After giving gifts and feeding cows and brāhmans he shall think himself as a man who has accomplished the ends of his life".

Priest necessary? As a recipient of food and gifts; otherwise his role is not specified.



Gifts to be given: a bed, cushions, umbrellas, shoes, clothes, and metal utensils filled with seeds.

2) Nakṣatrapuruṣa-vrata (Matsya P. ch. 54)

The nakṣatra puruṣa is an imaginary figure, in the sense that our constellations are 'imaginary figures', whose body is supposed to be composed of the clusters of asterisms, grouped so as to form its different parts. In this vrata the nakṣatra puruṣa is made into an image of a deity "according to the instructions of the Brāhmaṇa" (MP. 54). Each part of this image is to be worshipped under the auspices of each of the twenty-seven asterisms. The vratin begins with the feet of the image and ends with the top of the head; worshipping one part each day.

This same vrata is described in the Agnipurāṇa ch. 196, with a few differences in detail. One also finds other vrata-s in the Matsyapurāṇa (e.g., chs. 60, 63, 64) which involve worshipping the deity limb by limb, but they are not specifically called nakṣatra-puruṣa. Similarly, one finds vrata-s under the name of a specific nakṣatra signifying only that the vrata is to be observed under the auspices of that particular asterism or group of asterisms.

An unusual feature of this vrata is that it is to be performed by a man for his wife, so it seems from the use of the male pronoun, or by a widow. It begins: "Tell me which vrata is the giver of gradual emancipation to married women or widows, possessing all good and auspicious qualities?"

Begins: month of Caitra (first day)

Duration: twenty seven days

Deity: Viṣṇu

Purpose/reward: Vratin attains all his desires and washes off all his faults and the faults of deceased ancestors.

". . . devotee should recite the following: 'As the worshippers of Viṣṇu never get any suffering or sin, so let me get beauty and health as well as highest devotion towards Keśava; as the house of the lord is never devoid of Lakṣmi, so my house may never be bereft of my consort in all my life". (vs. 25-26)

Who performs: a man on behalf of his wife, or a widow.

Ritual implements/offerings: none specified in the Matsya-purāna, but in the Agnipurāna it is stated: "the gods should be invoked and worshipped on a pitcher full of molasses".

(196.7)

Requirements/procedure: He should recite a mantra for each part of the deity; he should abstain from salt and oily food during the twenty-seven days and should feed others according to his means.

Priest necessary? Yes, to officiate and to instruct the vratin in the making of the image.

Gifts: "Devotee should give away a beautiful and big golden mace, studded with pearls and other jewels, cows, garments, a bedstead. He should give a golden image of Hari placed in a jar filled with jaggery."

3) Kalyānīni or Vijayā Saptamī-vrata (Matsya P. ch. 74)

In the Matsyapurāna there are a series of seven vrata-s, each with 'saptamī' at the end of its title meaning seventh tithi, which are dedicated to the sun god (Sūrya). These are called "Sauradharmā" and each vrata has a specific benefit indicated in its title such as "sorrow-destroying fast" (ch. 75), "fruit-gift fast" (ch. 76) which is "the destroyer of sins and the giver of great merit", "gift of sugar" (ch. 77) which is said to give the same benefit as an Aśvamedha sacrifice, and so on. At the beginning of the description of these vrata-s Śiva, the narrator, says to Brahmā: "These are the givers of endless merit. All these have been respected by the Devas and the Ṛṣis . . ." (ch. 74.3-4). The following description of the Kalyānīni (or Kalyāna) Saptamī vrata is an example of these "Sauravrata-s".

Begins: 7th tithi, month of Śūkla

Duration: thirteen months, one day per month

Deity: Sūrya

Purpose/reward: liberation from sins; obtainment of a long life, health; prosperity.

Who performs: not specified.

Ritual implements/offerings: uncooked rice, white cloth, fruits, incense, flowers, sandal paste, raw sugar, salt, ghee.

Requirements/procedure: "First day the devotee should bathe in cow's milk, put on white clothes, and sit facing east and

draw the picture of an eight-petalled flower [lotus] made of uncooked rice powder. He should then draw a circle around that lotus, and in the center draw its pericarp with the same material. Then on all sides of it, he should draw eight pictures of the sun with flowers and rice. The devotee should put a pinch of uncooked rice on each petal of the lotus, after reciting certain mantras, beginning with the picture of the sun on the eastern petal, then south-eastern, southern, etc." (vs. 5-9) At the end of this procedure Saura should be saluted. "The sun should be worshipped on the alter by being offered white cloth, fruits, . . . all of which should be given away in charity to Brāhmanas."

Priests necessary? The texts does not specify the role of the priest except as recipient of food, gifts and worship; "good Brāhmanas should be devoutly worshipped with raw sugar, ghee, milk, and then they should be given gold, placed on a dish containing sesamum." (vs. 12)

Gifts: In addition to the above, the next day brāhmanas "who are free from hypocrisy" are to be fed and given a pot of ghee, a piece of gold, and a pitcher of water. At the same time the devotee should say: "O adorable sun, the Supreme Self be pleased". (v. 15) On the saptamī day of the thirteenth month "thirteen cows with their mouths covered with gold and bodies adorned with clothes and ornaments should be given away" - although if the vratin is poor, one cow may be sufficient. (v. 16) What is noteworthy about

this vrata is the use of ritual diagrams made with flowers and rice powder (which the other Saura-vrata-s also include). They also appear in roughly ten per cent of other vrata-s in the Purāṇas examined to date. These alpana-s will be discussed in part two under 'requirements, ritual offerings and procedure'.

4) Saubhāgya Śayana Vrata (Matsya P. ch. 60)

This vrata involves the worship of Parvati (along with her consort Śiva) as the 'giver of bliss'. The form of worship is very similar to the Nakṣatra-puruṣa-vrata in that it includes the worship, with appropriate mantra-s, of each part of the body of an image of Parvati and Śiva. It appears, though, that this whole procedure is to be completed in one day, repeated monthly for a year, rather than each part of the body being worshipped over the course of the year, as in the Nakṣatra-puruṣa-vrata. An interesting aspect of this vrata is that the description of the ritual is preceded by an etiological-type myth explaining the origin of the 'givers of prosperity'. The myth goes as follows:

When the regions of Bhūḥ, Bhuvah, Svar and Maha . . . were consumed, then the good fortune of all creatures went and centered itself in the heart of Lord Viṣṇu, in Vaikuṇṭha [Viṣṇu's heaven] . . . Again, long time after, with the object of creating the world, O king, the plastic material, consisting of Pradhāna (root matter), and conscious souls called Puruṣas, was envelopped with self-consciousness (ahamkāra), when there arose a rivalry between Brahmā and Kṛṣṇa [Viṣṇu] regarding the fashioning

of the future world. Then (from the clashing of their wills), a terrifying flame of fire arose in the form of a linga by the warmth of which the good luck of the world resting in the heart of Hari came out (in the form of perspiration). (vs. 2-4) That good fortune emerging from the heart of Viṣṇu . . . [reached] the earth in liquid form, and Dakṣa the wise son of Brahmā, drank up this giver of beauty and loveliness. (vs. 5-6) Thence Dakṣa got mighty power and great lustre, and the remainder of (good luck) which reached the Earth was divided into eight parts. From them was produced the seven givers of prosperity to all men, namely 1) sugarcane . . . 2) nispāva (coriander?), 3) cumin-seed . . . , 4) [ghee], 5) cow's milk . . . , 6) saffron . . . , 7) safflower . . . . So also the common salt was produced as the eighth, and these are called Saubhāgya Aṣṭaka, the eight blessings. That which was drunk by Dakṣa . . . became his daughter, known as Sati . . . The very Sati is called Goddess who gives bliss (Saubhāgyamayī) and also prosperity and emancipation. Those men and women who worship her with devotion may obtain everything.

This myth is not a characteristic vrata-kathā.

Rather, it is an attempt to explain, in a roundabout way, why Sati or Parvati is called Saubhāgyamayī and why it is to her that this vrata should be directed. It also usefully details the Saubhāgya-aṣṭaka which are required in the ritual.

The myth itself contains elements of Sāṃkhya philosophy and common mythic themes such as the rivalry between Viṣṇu and Brahmā, which is settled by Śiva's manifestation of superiority (through his endless or fiery

liṅga), the role of Dakṣa as creator and Sati as his daughter. But the way the themes are put together to illustrate how the Saubhāgya-aṣṭaka appeared and Sati's connection with it is unusual. It is only unusual in that it appears to be unique to this vrata.

Begins: 3rd day of lunar fortnight, month of Caitra (because "on that day the Goddess was united to Śiva").

Duration: one, seven, eight or twelve years.

Deity: Parvati and Śiva

Purpose/reward: vratin receives all blessings, 'achieves all his [or her] ends and emancipation', begets good fortune, beauty, longevity, clothes, ornaments, etc. One who observes the vrata for seven, eight or twelve years 'goes and enjoys the region of Śiva for three kalpas'. However, "This ordinance had better be observed without any object of bearing fruits" (vs. 44). Lastly, "one who hears or advises others to listen to the account of this ordinance, passes his days in heaven for a long time . . ." (vs. 48).<sup>2</sup>

Who performs: men or women, married or unmarried.

Ritual implements/offerings: flowers, fruits, incense, lamps, offerings of food, the 'eight blessings'.

Requirements/procedure: 'Devotee should bathe him or herself

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<sup>2</sup>This verse is a common formula at the end of the vrata descriptions in all Purāṇas examined. Sometimes the merit acquired from just hearing the vrata is said to be almost equivalent to performing the ritual.

with sesamum, and then Gauri and Śankara should be worshipped with flowers, fruits, etc., and the image of Gauri should be bathed in Pañcagavya and scented waters.'

Then begins the worship of each part of the god and goddess beginning with the feet, while uttering specific mantra-s, e.g., Śivāyanamah. (Mantra-s tend to be different names or epithets of the god or goddess.) "After worshipping Śiva [and Parvati?] the devotee should place before Him the Saubhāgya Aṣṭaka . . ." Then the vratin should wash the horn of the cow in the night and drink the same. "Getting up in the morning, the devotee should bathe, and after turning the rosary, should offer clothes, garlands, ornaments, etc., to the Brāhmaṇa and to his consort." (vs.30) In addition to the preceding procedure, the vratin must eat or drink a certain food each month, e.g., cow dung in the month of Vaiśākha, flower of the mandāra tree in Jyaiṣṭha, curd in Śrāvana. As well, certain varieties of flowers are to be offered in worship each month, and a different name of the goddess invoked when making offerings each month. Priests necessary? Again, role is not stated other than as recipients of gifts.

Gifts: A married woman or a maid 'should give away a bedstead, along with the necessary requisites', and 'besides this and according to his means, the devotee should give to the Brāhmaṇas and their wives, clothes, grain, ornaments, cows, cash, and should not give way to niggardliness or doubts'.



(vs. 43)

5) Sarasvata vrata (Matsya P. ch. 66)

This vrata begins with Vaivasvata Manu asking the Lord by what vrata one gets 'sweet speech, worldly prosperity, intelligence, skill in all arts and sciences, inseparable conjugal union, fast friendship and longevity'. The specificity and variety of the list is unusual. It is more common to find vrata-s beginning with general statements of the sort: 'this vrata confers wealth and prosperity or health and happiness', or simply, 'this vrata is venerated by all the devas'. Occasionally one also finds vrata-s which are for a single purpose such as for the longevity of infants (Matsya P. 68, Agni P. 181), but most seem to be for general purposes. Yet, the specificity and variety of the above list may be explained by the fact that most of the items listed are connected with the goddess Saravatī to whom the vrata is directed. The goddess is especially associated with speech and learning (she is the mother of the Veda) and in the vrata we find the verse: 'Goddess: the Sacred Vedas, the Śāstras, the songs and the dances . . . are not apart from you; by your grace let success attend to me' (vs. 8). She is also associated with wealth and progeny.

Begins: 'on a Sunday' at an auspicious hour.

Duration: thirteen months

Deity: Saravatī and Gāyatrī (whom the Matsya P. holds to be another form of Saravatī).

Purpose/reward: Purpose stated above; reward, which is sometimes inconsistently distinguished from the purpose stated in the beginning, is learning, wealth, a melodious voice and attaining Brahmā-loka for three kalpas (vs. 16-17)

Who performs: open to men and women.

Ritual implements/offerings: white flowers, sandal, unhusked rice, ghee, milk, gold. The image of Gāyatrī to be worshipped is specified as holding a viṇā, a rosary of akṣa beads, a kamaṇḍulu and a book in each hand. (These attributes conform to the typical iconography of Sarasvatī.)

Requirements/procedure: Vs. 4 states that the devotee should begin the vrata by 'adoring the Brāhmaṇas on the morning of the day which is most proper for the worship of the goddess he usually worships' - meaning Sarasvatī? This verse is followed by 'or [my emphasis], the fast should be observed on a Sunday and the Brāhmaṇas fed . . . after consulting the stars and determining an auspicious hour for the feast' (vs. 5). Then the devotee should worship Gāyatrī, and invoke the goddess for boons, success and protection. After the pūjā the devotee should 'in silence take his meals, morning and evening . . .' fasting during the day.

Priests necessary? Role not specified.

Gifts: flags, bells, a silver-eyed milch cow, sandal, clothes, and a crest-jewel. "Afterwards the preceptor should be worshipped with devotion, [and] with garlands, cloth and sandal-paste, without giving way to miserliness."

6) Vrata of a Month's Privation (Garuda P. ch. 122)

According to the description of this vrata it is "imperatively obligatory [for] women, anchorites and forest-dwelling hermits to practice the penance". Nothing further is said about why this vrata is obligatory for the above people. The practice of the vrata is fairly straightforward and fasting, of a rather vigorous sort, is the central feature of the vrata.

Begins: 11th tithi of the moon's increase, month of Aśvina

Duration: thirty days

Deity: Viṣṇu

Purpose/reward: The reward is "enjoyment of creature comforts in this life and residence in heaven in the next".

Who performs: women, anchorites and forest-hermits

Ritual implements/offerings: pūjā offerings

Requirements/procedure: After making a saṁkalpa to Viṣṇu the vratin is to bathe thrice a day and worship Hari. The vratin is to avoid using oil or unguents during the period. A full fast is required but "milk may be taken by the penitent in the case of fainting during the fast".

Gifts: none except feeding the brāhmans at the end of the vrata. What is remarkable about this vrata is the inconsistency between the worldly reward and the stipulated vratins (except women). Anchorites and forest-hermits have supposedly rejected the life of fleshly comforts. Are they to reject the tangible reward as a test for themselves, or

is the enjoyment of fleshly comforts only supposed to be meant for the women? The answer is not obvious from the vrata description itself.

7) Ekādaśī-Vrata (Garuḍa P. ch. 123, 125, 127; Agni P. ch. 187; Narada P. ch. 23; Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, V, pp. 95-100, 103-115)

One of the most important vrata-s (important because of the number and length of references made to it in the Purāṇas and Nibandhas<sup>3</sup>) is Ekādaśī. Ekādaśī, as the name suggests, is a vrata to be observed on the eleventh day of the moon's increase or decrease in each month (although Caitra is the favoured month). Aside from a general directive to fast on this day, there is, typically, little agreement amongst the sources that describe it in regard to the specific details of how to observe this vrata. However, there are two points on which the Purāṇas and Nibandhas seem to agree. One point is on the attention given to the proper and improper time (tithi) for beginning the vrata. All sources agree that beginning the vrata on a day in which the moon enters her twelfth from her eleventh phase must be avoided at all costs.<sup>4</sup> Discussion on the most auspicious, less auspicious

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<sup>3</sup>There are separate treatises on Ekādaśī written by Medieval writers, such as the Ekādaśīviveka of Śilapāni and the Ekādaśītattva of Raghunandana. Besides, such medieval digests as Kālaviveka . . . , Hemādri on Kāla . . . , Kālanirṇaya of Madhava . . . , Vratarāja . . . devote hundreds of pages to discussions on Ekādaśī." Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra, V, p. 95)

<sup>4</sup>For example, Garuḍapurāṇa ch. 125 says: "Gāndhārī

and inauspicious times related to different categories of potential vratins takes up more space in most sources than a description of the rite itself.

The second point on which the sources converge is the degree to which the efficacy of this vrata is praised. The merits acquired by its observance are enumerated in detail. Examples of this praise will be quoted in the following because though many of the vrata-s are prefaced with or ended by laudatory comments, the amount given to this vrata is exceptional.

In the Nārada-purāna there is a long passage on the greatness of Ekādaśī:

. . . by the fire arising from (the observance of) Ekādaśī, fuel in the form of sins committed in hundreds of past lives is reduced to ashes. Thousands of Aśvamedha sacrifices and hundreds of Vajapeya sacrifices do not reach even up to the 16th part (of the merit) of the fast on ekādaśī. [It] bestows heaven and mokṣa, confers a kingdom and sons . . . and a good spouse and the health of the body . . .<sup>5</sup>

In the Garuda-purāna (ch. 127) it is said:

This Ekādaśī vratam [referring specifically to the Bhaimi-Ekādaśī vrata to be performed in the month of Māgha] destroys all sins as surely as a bad son brings ruin on his family, a false wife brings death and disgrace to her husband; a

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fasted on a day when the 10th and 11th phases of the moon were mixed. Her hundred sons perished. Hence such days shall be avoided for fasting purposes."

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Kane, op. cit., V, p. 98.

false minister brings confusion to his king, and a pious act dispells the gloom of iniquity . . . Neither the practice of charity and philanthropy, nor meditation and burnt offerings can vie with the vratam under discussion, in respect of merit and sanctity . . . This Bhaimi Ekādaśī is by far the most sacred of all the other sacred Ekādaśīs in the year.

Finally, the Agnipurāṇa states, more modestly: "A man, by fasting on the occasion of such a blending [of a dvadasī and an ekādaśī tithi], and breaking his fast on the day of trayodaśī, attains the merit of performing a hundred [Aśvamedha] sacrifices" (ch. 187).

Kane comments that the 'cult' of Ekādaśī "went on growing apace, so much so that for the 24 ekādaśīs of the 12 months of the lunar year and for the two ekādaśīs of the intercalary month separate names were invented".<sup>6</sup> He goes on to discuss the reasons for some of the names based on material from Hemādri and others who connect the names with various myths about Viṣṇu, especially the myth of Viṣṇu sleeping for four months each year.<sup>7</sup>

There are several other aspects of this vrata worth mentioning. One is that the vrata was open to all castes and to women, and was recommended to followers of Śiva and Surya as well as Viṣṇu.<sup>8</sup> The Garudapurāṇa (ch. 123) states

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 104, and Nārada-purāṇa I, pp. 1-2.

that the vrata is obligatory (nitya) to all, "a breach being sinful and degrading". Another point is that this vrata is one that singles out Vaiṣṇavas (adherents of one of the Vaiṣṇava schools) because, according to the Nibandhas, e.g., the Kātanirṇaya and the Nirṇayasindhu, and the Purāṇas, e.g., the Nārada and the Brahmavaivarta<sup>9</sup>, they are especially required to observe this vrata and to fast not only on the ekādaśī day but on the previous and following days as well, provided that the tithi-s appear at the appropriate times. Interestingly, sannyāsins and widows are also governed by the rules for Vaiṣṇavas (fasting for three days), according to one text, the Nārada Purāṇa, purvardha, ch. 29.45.

Procedure for vrata (according to the Narada P.):

The vratin is to worship Viṣṇu, bathing the image in pañca-mṛta after performing his own ablutions on the morning of the daśami day. In other texts he is to start with a saṁkalpa. On the ekādaśī day he is to fast, completely in the Nārada and Garuda Purāṇas, and partially, abstaining from cooked foods, according to other texts. On this day he should also bathe the image of Viṣṇu and worship it with upacāra-s<sup>10</sup>, plus recite the Purāṇas. Next day he completes

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<sup>9</sup>Kane, op. cit., pp. 114-15, and K.D. Nambiar, Purāṇa vol. XIX, No. 1, p. 276.

<sup>10</sup>Upacāra-s are items of showing honour in the procedure of deva-pūjā. For an enumeration of them see Part two of this chapter under section 'ritual requirements, offerings and procedure'.

the vrata by feeding and giving gifts to brāhmanas.

Role of Priests: Not specified other than as recipients of food and gifts.

8) Bhīmadvādaśī-Vrata (Matsya P. ch. 69)

This next vrata is for those unable to keep a full fast - "the pious who are unable to suppress their hunger" - again suggesting the centrality of fasting in a vrata. The description is full of interesting details. The first detail of note is the purpose of the vrata which is unabashedly stated as "how, by practising small austerities, may one get large reward?" (vs. 3). Indeed the reward of the vrata is great: it "will be the giver of benefits of all sacrifices, the destroyer of all sins and calamities, the giver of the highest prosperity", for this vrata is "the most ancient of all forms of ordinances and is venerated by the Devas" (vs. 17-18). But, the cost (literally) of this is also great as it involves the participation of many brāhmanas, elaborate rituals, and sumptuous gifts.

Some of the ritual that is to be performed such as the erecting of a pandal (tent), the sitting on a black deer skin and the offering of sacrifices to Agni, Rudra and Viṣṇu by four Ṛgvedi, Yajurvedi and Samavedi brāhmanas respectively sounds very much like the details of the Vedic sacrificial rituals one finds in the Brāhmaṇas. Further, a number of gods are to be worshipped in this vrata, including Viṣṇu and Śiva who figure prominently in vrata-s. In regard to these



two gods one of the things that the vratin is to say in the course of the observance is: "Keśava [an epithet of Viṣṇu], the destroyer of all evils, be pleased. Śiva is enthroned in the heart of Viṣṇu and Viṣṇu is in the heart of Śiva. As I do not see any difference between the two, so may be long life and prosperity to me" (vs. 51-52). It is uncommon to find in the later Purāṇic vrata-s statements that assert that there is no difference between Śiva and Viṣṇu as one is usually given priority over the other. But in earlier Purāṇas, such as the Matsya, this assertion is not uncommon. (Further discussion of this latter point will be found in Part Two of this chapter under 'Deities'.)

One last item of interest concerns the beginning of the vrata which relates the story of how the rituals of the Bhīmadvādaśī-vrata came to be explained by Lord Kṛṣṇa and promulgated in the world by Bhīmasena. The kathā, narrated by Śiva to Brahmā, includes a characteristically detailed explication of how in the Vārābha Kalpa there will be fourteen manvantaras<sup>11</sup> of which the seventh will be the Vaivasvata manvantara and in the twenty-eighth Dvāpara Yuga of this manvantara Viṣṇu will manifest himself in 'three different ways to relieve the world of its burden' (vs. 5-7).

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<sup>11</sup>For an explanation of the Purāṇic divisions of time see, e.g., W.J. Wilkins, Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Puranic, 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1882. Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1979)

One of these manifestations will be Kṛṣṇa who, at a 'noble assemblage' in Dvārikā, 'at the close of the pauranic discourses', is asked by the Pāṇḍava Bhīmasena about the vrata. (Bhīmasena's problem is that his hunger is never appeased on account of a 'wolf-like fire in his stomach' vs. 14). Kṛṣṇa then proceeds to explain: "The devotee who may not be able to fast on the 8th, 14th, and 12th day of the bright fortnight, or on any other prescribed day, attains unification with Viṣṇu, by keeping a fast on this day [the 11th] only" (vs. 19-20).

What we have here, then, is a curious mixture of Vedic rituals molded by and imbued with Purāṇic rituals and myths. The vrata is essentially directed to Viṣṇu who is not a major Vedic deity but is very important in the Purāṇas. In the rite, four Ṛgvedī brāhmins are to offer sacrifices to Agni (the god central to any Vedic sacrifice) and four Yajurvedī brāhmins are to recite mantra-s sacred to Rudra (a Vedic god who in the later tradition was often identified with Śiva). Finally, four Samavedī brāhmins are to chant hymns of the Samaveda sacred to Viṣṇu along with Ariṣṭa hymns (vs. 40-44). This is the clearest example I have come across of an attempt, not to 'brāhmanize' popular rites, but to 'purāṇacize' Vedic rites.

Begins: 10th day of the bright fortnight in the month of Māgha

Duration: three days

Deities: Viṣṇu (primarily), Lakṣmi, Śiva, Gaṇeśa

Purpose/reward: indicated above

Ritual offerings and procedure: Devotee should first bathe in water mixed with sesamum, after anointing his body with ghee. He should then worship Viṣṇu (in the manner of the nakṣatra-puruṣa) with prescribed mantra-s. Then Lakṣmi is to be worshipped with mantra-s and Garuḍa saluted. (vs. 22-26) After this Śiva and Gaṇeśa should be worshipped with sandal, incense, flowers and foods, and the devotee should take ghee, porridge, milk and sugar in silence and walk a hundred steps. Later the devotee should brush his teeth with a stick of banyan or khadīr, facing east or north and holding kuśa [grass] in his hand. After sunset he should perform his sāṅdhyā and say "I salute Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu), 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 on the Dvādaśī day and make an oblation of [ghee] to Agni . . . I shall, with mind controlled, eat rice, cooked with milk, with a few good brāhmaṇas. May that be fulfilled by your grace, without any obstruction." (vs. 29-32) This marks the sāṅkalpa, the resolve to perform the vrata which takes place on the 10th day. The devotee is to sleep on the ground.

At daybreak he is to hear recitations from Itithāsa, after which he is to bathe, perform the sāṅdhyā prayers, offer water libations to his ancestors, salute Hṛṣīkeśa

(Viṣṇu) and erect a pandal in front of his house. (vs. 35-36) He is to make a portal and an alter on which he places a pitcher of water. He is to worship the four Dikpālas (guardians of the four directions). "There the devotee should sit on a black deer-skin and over his head place the pitcher of water, after making a hole in its centre. He should then allow the water to trickle, drop by drop on his head, and, in the same way, should allow a stream of milk to fall on the head of a symbol of Viṣṇu." (vs. 38-39)

The devotee is to make a sacrificial pond, one hand deep, in the shape of a cone and surrounded by three circles after which "the Brāhmanas should be asked to make an offering of [ghee], milk and sesamum to Lord Viṣṇu, after the rituals of Ekāgni, with mantras sacred to Viṣṇu . . . A stream of [ghee] . . . should be pored into the fire as well as the charu, mixed with cow's milk." (vs. 40-41) Thirteen pitchers of water, their mouths covered with plates of fig leaves, food, and five jewels underneath white cloths, should 'be placed'. At this point four Ṛgvedi brāhmanas are to offer sacrifices to Agni facing north; four Yajurvedi brāhmanas are to recite mantra sacred to Rudra; and four Samavedi brāhmanas are to chant hymns of the Samaveda sacred to Viṣṇu along with Ariṣṭa hymns. With the giving of gifts, the night is to be passed in rejoicing, singing and music.

Priests necessary? Yes, their role is quite important as can

be seen from the preceding description. The vratin's preceptor is mentioned and he is probably the one who would guide and preside over the whole procedure.

Gifts: The twelve brāhmans who participated are to be honoured with garlands of flowers, sandal-paste, bed sheets, gold rings, gold sacred threads, gold bangles, different kinds of cloth, milking pots of bell-metal, and a big feast with 'dainty dishes'. To the preceptor double of the above gifts are to be given. To charity thirteen good milch cows, horns covered with gold, hoofs with silver, covered with cloth and painted with sandal are to be given.

The description of the vrata ends with statements revealing the efficaciousness of the vrata when performed by others in the past. For example: "The public women of other Kalpas having observed this vrata, have become apsaras [celestial nymphs]", and "one dairy maid, of a previous Kalpa, having observed this vrata out of curiosity alone, has now become Urvaśi in the heaven of Indra" (vs. 59-60). Those who are cited as having performed and benefitted from the vrata in the past are women.

#### 9) Anānyadāu Vrata (Matsyapurāna ch. 70)

This vrata is specifically for 'public women' and it too has a number of interesting features. This vrata from the Matsyapurāna is the only one that I encountered which is for prostitutes, but it may be noted that prostitutes are often mentioned either in the kathā-s accompanying some of

the vrata-s or in the shorter statements which assert the transformational power of the vrata as we saw in the Bhīmadvādaśī-vrata. The prostitutes are commonly depicted as achieving an elevated, sometimes even divine status (see M.P. ch.100) through their observance of a particular vrata. But in the Anānyadāu-vrata, though the prostitute is promised a removal of all her sins and eventually a place in Viṣṇu-loka, she is still required in this life to maintain her role, and further, to be especially obliging towards brāhmins desiring her favours.

The vrata is to be directed to the god Kāma, appropriately enough, and one of the statements the vratini is to make (similar to the Bhīmadvādaśī-vrata) is: "As I do not make any difference between Viṣṇu and Kāma, so O Lord Viṣṇu, be pleased to always fulfil my desires". (vs. 52)

The vrata is prefaced with a kathā which I will summarize to give an example of a typical vrata story. It is about the 16,000 wives of Kṛṣṇa who one day chance upon Lord Śambu and cast amorous glances at him 'being targets of the arrows of Kāma'. Kṛṣṇa comes to know about it and curses them, but he relents somewhat after they supplicate him. He describes a vrata to them which will 'liberate them from bondage'. Some time later the curse comes into effect and the wives of Kṛṣṇa are seized by robbers. The women bemoan their fate and a sage appears whom they worship. They tell him they have lost their dharma and ask him why they have

been degraded to the status of concubines and ask what the duties of concubines are. The sage tells them that they were once the daughters of Agni who, when sporting at a lake one day, neglected to salute the sage Narada (who chanced to go there) and instead asked him how they could become wives of Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu). Narāda granted their request but cursed them for their lack of propriety and their conceit. The curse is the same curse which Kṛṣṇa put upon them, that of being forcibly carried away by thieves. "In consequence of the curses of Narada and Kṛṣṇa you gave way to lustful feelings and have become prostitutes." (vs. 25) Narada proceeds to tell them about the war between the Asuras and the Devas which left numberless widows who were forced to become prostitutes. Indra told these widows to look upon, with equal eye, the kings your masters and on śūdras.

All of you will attain prosperity, according to your fate. You should satisfy those who would come to you with adequate sums of money to enjoy your company, even if they be poor. But you should not give pleasure to proud men.\* You should give away cows, land, grain, and gold, according to your means, in charity on the sacred day of worshipping the devas or the ancestors. You should act as the Brāhmanas will say. In addition to this, I shall tell you a vrata which all of you should blindly practice." (vs. 29-32)

Vrata begins: on 'a Sunday' under the asterisms of Hasta,

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\* Perhaps because the women themselves (that is, the wives of Kṛṣṇa) had suffered the consequences of conceit. (This story of the 16,000 wives of Kṛṣṇa is based on a section in the Mausala Parvan of the Māhābhārata.)

Puśya or Punarvasu.

Duration: thirteen months, once a week

Deities: Kāma (and various forms of him)

Purpose/reward: vrata is a dispeller of all sins and a 'giver of innumerable benefits'.

Ritual implements/offerings: incense, flowers, sandal and eatables.

Requirements/procedure: The vratini should bathe in water mixed with several herbs, then worship an image of Kāma from feet to head with different mantras (names of Kāma), and also salute various other deities including Viṣṇu and Siva. A brāhman 'well versed in the Vedānta who must be virtuous and free from bodily deformity' is to be worshipped.

That Brāhmaṇa should be well fed and be devoutly looked upon as Kāma, for the sake of sexual enjoyment. Each and every desire of that Brāhmaṇa should be satisfied by the woman devotee. She should, with all heart and soul and with a smile on her face, yield herself up to him." (vs. 44-45) "In this way, the good Brāhmaṇas should be kept satisfied for a period of 13 months. (vs. 57)

Gifts: A prasthā (measure) of uncooked rice is to be given to a brāhman every week for thirteen months. At the end of the period the same brāhman is to be given full bedding, a lamp, shoes and an umbrella. Then the brāhman and his wife are to be honoured with

gold thread, gold rings, fine cloth bangles, and with incense, garlands of



flowers and sandal paste." (vs. 49) In addition: "The images of Kāma and Rati seated on a plate of copper, placed on a vessel full of molasses, their eyes being of gold and they being well-dressed, should be given away, along with a fine milch cow, a vessel of bell metal and a piece of sugarcane . . . (vs. 50-51)

As can be seen, the vrata itself is not particularly difficult to perform. What it does require is the vratinī to have sufficient means to afford the quantity and quality of gifts specified and for the vratinī to make herself available for the sexual enjoyment of the officiating brāhman on each Sunday. In addition to this it is stated that:

If, with the consent of that Brāhmaṇa, another handsome person comes to them, these women should, with love and affection and to the best of their ability, perform all the 58 kinds of observance of love, favourite of man and gods, which would lead to pregnancy and which is not harmful to their soul's welfare. (vs. 58)

The above suggests that the courtezans must be well educated in the arts of their trade, which would perhaps debar the 'less cultivated prostitute' from observing the vrata. Courtezans who were well educated and living in urban areas often did have large sums of money at their disposal, and would easily be able to afford to practise such a vrata.<sup>12</sup>

10) Vrata of the Relinquishment of all Results (Matsya P. 96)

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<sup>12</sup>See India as Seen in the Kuttanī-Mata of Damodragupta, trans. A.M. Shastri, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975).

This vrata is out of the ordinary because the benefits accrued from performing it are not to be enjoyed in this life but in the next; "hear the benefits that accrued to the devotee in his next life, by his relinquishing the fruits of this ordinance". Although later it is said (vs. 22) that "there is no ordinance like this that can give such everlasting boons in this world [my emphasis], as well as in the next", perhaps the vratin is to abstain from taking advantage of the possibility of boons in this life as part of the merit of observing the vrata.

The term 'fruit' is often used figuratively in Indian philosophy to mean the 'results of one's actions', but in this vrata real fruits or metal representations of fruits play a major part in the procedure. Sixteen kinds of fruits are to be made into gold, sixteen into silver and sixteen into copper 'according to the means of the devotee'. (Some of the items listed are not actually fruits - such as cardamom, cotton, bamboo, liquorice and kidney beans.) These are all to be given to a 'peaceful Brāhmaṇa couple'.

Thus, the relinquishing of the fruits of one's actions is literally enacted through the giving away of gold, silver, and copper fruits. It is also enacted by abstaining from eating fruits, roots, and certain grains for a year. (vs. 4) This play on the word 'fruit' is exemplified again in vs. 14; "As the numberless Devas dwell in all kinds of fruits, so let my devotion be to Śiva, as a

consequence of my performing this vrata of relinquishing the fruits of actions."

Begins: on the 3rd, 8th, 12th, or 14th day of the bright fortnight in the month of Mārgasirṣā

Duration: one year

Deity: Śiva and Dharmarāja

Purpose/reward:

The devotee remains in the region of Śiva for as many thousand Yugas as there are atoms of gold, silver and copper . . . This ordinance washes off all the life long sins of the devotee. He never has the pain of losing his son, and he attains the region inhabited by gods. (vs. 23-24)

Who performs? men or women

Ritual implements/offerings: none aside from the gifts of food, metal fruits and gold images to be given away.

Requirements/procedure: Vrata to be commenced after invoking the brāhmins and feeding them with sweet cooked rice. Images of Śiva, Nandi and Dharmarāja are to be made in gold and forty-eight fruits are to be made in gold, silver, and copper. Two pitchers of water, covered with cloth, are to be placed on grain, and a bed covered with cloth is to be prepared. 'On some sacred day' (at the end of the vrata?), the above are to be given away with three food plates 'to a peaceful Brāhmaṇa couple who may have a big family' having first worshipped them. (vs. 14) Then the vratin is to eat an oil-less meal, observe the vow of silence, and feed the

brāhmans according to his means. (vs. 20)

Role of Priests: As stated above, they are to be invoked at the beginning of the vrata and given food at this time and at the end.

11) Ajāchita Vrata (Garuda P. ch. 133)

In the Purāṇas that I have examined vrata-s directed specifically to a goddess are less common than vrata-s directed to gods - though the gods' consorts are often included in the worship. No doubt the situation would be reversed in a Purāṇa such as the Mārķendeya or Kālikā because these Purāṇas hold the Devī to be the supreme deity. In the Ajāchita-vrata Durgā the demon-slayer and her various fierce manifestations are to be worshipped alone. Indeed it is said that even the god Śankara and others "have worshipped her on that day [the navami tithi] and acquired infinite piety".

This vrata has several interesting details, one of the most notable being the inclusion of a buffalo sacrifice with the attendant blood offering. This practice is well known in its association with Durgā-pūjā but it is most uncommon within the context of a vrata. However, the description of the vrata makes it clear that this particular observance directed to Durgā the warrior goddess and protectress is especially suitable for a king wishing victory over his adversaries. Perhaps it is not so surprising then that a blood sacrifice is required for it might

ensure that the goddess has the necessary strength or that she is merely satisfactorily propitiated in order to help the king in his battle. That a buffalo is to be sacrificed may be connected to Durgā's most famous battle against the buffalo demon. That a king would be more likely to be in a position to perform this vrata is borne out by the requirement that a vratin must build a new (wooden) temple to the goddess and must have a golden image of her made. But it should be mentioned that the passage goes on to say that "as an alternative, the goddess should be invoked and worshipped at the head of a spear, or at a sword-blade, or in a book, picture or a mystic diagram". The alternatives are probably for those less well endowed be he a king or otherwise, or perhaps for a king whose battle must be waged imminently.

In the Agnipurāṇa (ch. 185) there is a series of navami vrata-s also dedicated to Durgā. The first two are described very briefly and involve a simple pūjā. But the second vrata also requires that nothing but (rice) cakes be eaten on the appointed day. The third vrata, which is called the greatest of the navami vrata-s, is known as Aghārdana and seems to be another version of the Ajāchita-vrata described below.

Begins: 9th day of the moon's increase, marked by the asterism Uttarāśāda

Duration: two days, but four days for a king

Deities: Durgā and her manifestations: Ugrachandā, Prachandā,

Chandogrā, Chandāvati, Chandrupā, Atichandikā

Purpose/reward: Vratin granted 'infinite piety' and victory in battle.

Who performs? A king is mentioned but not in an exclusive sense.

Ritual implements/offerings: that which is necessary for pūjā and sacrifice.

Requirements/procedure: The pūjā is to begin with the recitation of mantra-s to Durgā followed by the performance of the rites of Hridinyāsa.<sup>13</sup> The pūjā is to be concluded with the performance of the Angushtha-Kanishtha Nyāsa. A wooden temple is to be constructed and a gold or silver image of the goddess worshipped therein on the eighth tithi. Durgā is to be contemplated as respectively holding a human skull, dagger, bell, a mirror, making the mudrā tarjani, a

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<sup>13</sup>According to Eliade the rite of nyasa, obscure in origin, involves a 'ritual projection' of divinities into the various parts of the body. 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." (Yoga, Immortality and Freedom. Princeton: Bollingen Series LVI, 1958, pp. 210-11.)

The Hṛdinyasa, as the name implies, is a nyasa centered in the heart (of the vratin). "Rites of Nyasa in the heart, etc., are with the six words Namah, Svaha, Vasat, Hum, Vausat and Phat, and along with the Nyasas on the fingers beginning with the thumb and ending with the little finger the devotee shall worship the goddess Sivā." (GP. 133) Durgā is very much part of the Tantric pantheon, and so it is not surprising the nyasa rite should be part of a vrata directed to her.

bow, a banner, a small drum and a noose in her left hands, and a spear, club, trident, thunderbolt, sword, mace, arrow, discus and a rod in her right. Then the different manifestations of the goddess (listed above), each marked by a specified colour and each standing on a lion with the left leg thrust out, are to be contemplated. The Daśākṣari mantra\* is to be mentally recited and then the goddess' trident is to be worshipped. A fast is to be maintained by the vratin during this time (on the eighth tithi).

A bull buffalo, five years old, should be sacrificed at the close of the night, and the blood of the offering should be offered by duly reciting the 'Kali Kali' mantra. The blood should be dedicated to Putāna in the south-west, to the sin-demoness [?] in the north-west, to Chandikā in the north-east and to Vidarikā in the south-east quarter of heaven.

The king is to have started on the previous sixth tithi and is to close it with rites of japa and homa and by feasting unmarried virgins. Unmarried virgins are often thought of as particularly auspicious and sometimes 'powerful' in the Hindu tradition.<sup>14</sup>

Gifts and priests are not mentioned in this vrata.

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\* Daśākṣari ('ten letters') is "aum Durgā Durgā rakṣini svāhā".

<sup>14</sup> See S. Wadley, ed., The Powers of Tamil Women, South Asia Series No. 6, (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1980)

12) "Holy Rite of Śiva for Twelve Months" (Līṅga P. ch. 83)

The Līṅgapurāna discusses about ten vrata-s, several of which are described within a short paragraph. Two are described at some length and involve performing a specific vrata-ritual each month over the period of a year. These two will be taken up.

The pattern of the vrata-ritual for each month of the "Holy rite of Śiva" is fairly similar. In the vrata for the month of Pauṣa, for example, the vratin is to fast on the eighth day in both fortnights and at night eat rice, wheat and milk products. He is to worship Śiva with ghee, perform japa of Śānti mantra-s, 'speak truth and conquer anger', feed 'good' brāhmins barley cooked with milk and ghee, and sleep on the ground. "He shall dedicate a tawney-coloured cow and bull to Bhava the Lord of the Devas . . . 0 leading sages, he goes to the excellent world of the fire god. After enjoying extensive pleasures he is liberated [from] there itself."

In the month of Māgha it is the fourteenth day that the vratin is to fast, and he is to offer Rudra a black cow and a black bull, along with ghee and a blanket, feed brāhmins and so on. The next month it is the eighth and fourteenth day that he is to fast and worship Śiva, and he is to offer a copper-coloured bull to the god.

Each month the vratin is said to attain the world of or to merge with a different god including the moon and



the sun, Vāyu, Īśāna, except in the month of Vaiśākha where the vratin is said to attain the benefit of an Áśvamedha sacrifice. This benefit is associated with several other vrata-s listed in the Liṅgapurāna. Observing this whole vrata series the vratin "attains identity with Śiva and obtains the path of perfect knowledge."

13) Umā-Maheśvara Vrata-s (Liṅga P. ch. 84)

Strictly speaking the Umā-Maheśvara vrata-s are for the welfare of men and women, but more attention is given to the way women should practice the vrata-s and the merits that they will gain than is given to men. This suggests that they were expected to be performed by women more than by men.

The basic procedure of the vrata-s is similar to the preceding one. The vratin is to prepare haviṣya (an oblation, such as ghee) on the full and new moon days and on the eighth and fourteenth days, and worship Bhava. The vratin is to make an image of Umā-Maheśa in gold or silver and install it (the place is not indicated). At the end of the year brāhmins are to be fed and gifts given to them. The vratin is then to "take the lord of Devas to the temple of Rudra on chariots, . . . fitted with all excellent things and decorated with umbrellas and chowries . . ." He attains union (sāyujya) with Śiva; but, "if the devotee is a woman she will attain sāyujya with the goddess" (Bhavānī). This latter statement provokes the interesting question of

whether one gender is thought to have to merge with the deity of the same gender. In the Liṅgapurāṇa this is certainly the case.

Other qualifications for females are: "If the devotee is a virgin or a widow she shall abstain from taking food on the eighth and fourteenth day. She shall observe celibacy and continue the rite for a year." The rest of the vrata is the same as above. In verse 10 and following it says of the next vrata: "The woman devotee shall take no food on the new moon day. She shall observe all other restraints and continue the holy rite for a year" at the end of which

she shall make a trident in accordance with the injunctions and dedicate it to the lord. After the holy ablution she shall devoutly worship Īśāna with one thousand white lotuses. She shall dedicate a silver lotus with a gold pericarp. She shall give gifts to the brāhmins. That woman undoubtedly dispels all wanton sins, such as the destruction of the foetus, by means of the holy rite of the dedication of the trident.

What is of particular interest in the above description is the reference to the 'sin' of abortion. This is the only reference to abortion in connection with vrata descriptions in the Purāṇas that I came across.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Buddhist nuns, among others, are known to have performed abortions. It is not surprising, though, that the brāhmins, as the probable fashioners and caretakers of strīdharma, should feel threatened by the possibility of women controlling their bodies in this way.

14) Sāvitṛī Vrata (Agni P. ch. 194; Kane, History of Dharmaśāstra V, pp. 91-4)

The Sāvitṛī-vrata, still apparently widely practised in India,<sup>16</sup> takes its inspiration from the story of Sāvitṛī, the ideal of a pativrata, in the Mahābhārata (Vanaparva, ch. 293-9). The story of Sāvitṛī is also recounted in several Purānas, e.g., Matsya, ch. 208-214, and Skanda, Prabhasa Khanda, ch. 166. Briefly, Sāvitṛī was a princess who chose to marry an exiled prince, Satyavat, even though he was fated to die in a year. But Sāvitṛī managed to win back the life of her husband and all his former possessions from the god of death, Yama, through her extreme fasting, her virtue and her wit. Yama then also granted Sāvitṛī the birth of a hundred sons. Because of her devotion to her husband and her success in saving him Sāvitṛī came to be regarded as the model wife, representing the highest type of conjugal fidelity.

A short description of the vrata is found in the Agnipurāna and Kane gives the procedure as set out in the Nibandha Vratārka. There are some differences in the two descriptions so the Agnipurāna version will be given first followed by the Vratārka version so that the two may be

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<sup>16</sup>See B.A. Gupte, Hindu Holidays and Ceremonials, (Calcutta: Thacker Spink & Co., 1916), pp. 238-45; and S. Mazumdar, "Socialization of Hindu Middle Class Bengali Women", South Asia Bulletin Vol. 1, Winter 1981 (U.C.L.A. Asian American Studies Centre).

compared.

Begins: day of the new moon in the month of Jaiṣṭha

Duration: three days

Deity: Sāvitṛī. In the vrata no image is made of her.

Who performs? females, married and unmarried

Purpose/reward: A woman practising this vrata "becomes exceptionally fortunate".

Requirements/procedure:

The female Vratī should fast for three consecutive days . . . and worship Sāvitṛī the model of chastity, with the grains known as the Saptadhānya, underneath a [vaṭa] tree\* . . . [women] should join hands in a [circle] and dance and sing round the [vaṭa] tree . . . and worshipping it with pasted saffron.

Priest: The only role a brāhman seems to have is as a recipient of food and gifts.

Gifts: Next morning the women are to dress up and dedicate platefulls of offerings by repeating the mantra 'Obeisance to Sāvitṛī and Satyavāna' and make them over to the brāhmins. On the same day the 'pious' brāhmins should be treated with sumptuous repasts, and the vratinī should break her fast. "Farewell should be bid to that model wife (Sāvitṛī), by reciting the mantra which [goes]: 'Be pleased, O thou goddess Sāvitṛī'."

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\*The vata tree is significant because it was under such a tree that Satyavat had taken shelter when the moment of his death approached.

The above description suggests that women might practice the vrata together but the Vratārka version does not corroborate this. The Vratārka description has the vratinī begin her observance with a samkalpa in the form: "I shall perform Sāvitrī-vrata for securing long life and health to my husband and my sons and for securing freedom from widowhood in this and subsequent lives." Gupte in his description of the Sāvitrī-vrata, which is based on popular practices in North India at the turn of the century, also says that the purpose of the vrata was to avert widowhood.

The Vratārka description continues as follows: The vratinī:

should then sprinkle water at the root of the vaṭa tree and surround it with cotton threads and should perform its worship with upacāras and then offer worship to Sāvitrī (with image or mentally) from her feet upwards and pray to her to bestow on her beauty, good name, prosperity, and freedom from widowhood. Then she should worship Yama and Nārada and give presents . . . to the priest and break her fast next day.

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This completes Part One of this chapter. This sample of vrata-s should reveal the wide variety of ritual details, rewards, and so on, that may be found under the name vrata in the Purānas, and it shows why it is difficult to give both a precise and comprehensive definition of a vrata. It is the intention of Part Two to clarify some of

the details found in these vrata-s by providing more general information pertaining to our categories. Some of the questions which the vrata-s either individually or collectively provoke will also be taken up in this section.

## Part Two

Time (kāla) for Beginning the Vrata

According to the Naradapurāna (29.2), "All rites of the śrauta or smarta type, vrata, dana and every other act enjoined by the Veda do not yield proper reward as long as there is no determination of the tithi proper for it."<sup>17</sup> In other words, the correct time for performing a rite is of crucial importance in ensuring maximum efficacy of the rite. In her article "The Hindu Festival Calendar" K. Merrey has noted that "In the various Hindu calendars, time loses its homogeneity, and individual moments are defined as qualitatively non-equivalent. Points in time have inherently auspicious or malevolent characteristics, related to the relative positions of the sun, moon planets, and stars."<sup>18</sup> In the same vein J. Bruce Long has written: "The ritual calendar does not so much measure the passage of time in objective form, as it delineates the appearance of 'the sacred' in time."<sup>19</sup> A considerable amount of literature has been written by Hindus over the centuries concerning which moments are imbued with 'the sacred' - or more specifically, are auspicious or inauspicious for the

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<sup>17</sup>Quoted by Kane in History of Dharmaśāstra, V, p. 73.

<sup>18</sup>Karen Merrey, "The Hindu Festival Calendar", Religious Festivals in South India and Sri Lanka, eds. G. Welbom and G. Yocum, (Delhi: Manohar, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup>J. Bruce Long, "Mahāśivarātri: The Śaiva Festival of Repentance", Welbom and Yocum, op. cit., p. 193.

numerous festivals and rituals that are observed in the calendar year. Manuals known as pañcāṅga-s are used by brāhmins to help them determine the proper time for a particular ritual. They are prepared from the different astronomical texts and are printed today in the vernacular languages for local usage.<sup>20</sup> But specialists may also be consulted for important occasions to ensure success. As the name suggests, the pañcāṅgas deal with five topics: nakṣatra<sup>21</sup> (asterisms or lunar mansions), vāra (the seven days of the week measured from sunrise to sunrise), yoga<sup>22</sup> (addition or conjunction), karana (a half tithi), and tithi.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Merrey, 'Festival Calendar', p. 8.

<sup>21</sup>The nakṣatra-s are the stars and clusters of stars along the moon's path, and "probably functioned originally as points of reference for fixing the moon's positions". (Merrey, p. 11) The sun passes through all of the nakṣatra-s in a year's time. The moon traverses one or more nakṣatra-s daily.

<sup>22</sup>Yoga-s are (1) a period of time during which combined motions of the sun and moon are increased by 13°12'. The twenty-seven yoga-s vary in length and are each named; (2) co-occurrence of two or more phenomena, such as certain vāra-s, tithi-s, or rāsi-s (zodiacal signs). (Merrey, p. 11)

<sup>23</sup>Each month is divided into two fortnights. The bright fortnight (śūkla pakṣa) is the fifteen day period of the moon's waxing, between the new and full moons. The dark fortnight (Kṛṣṇa pakṣa) is the period of the moon's waning, between the full moon and the following new moon. Each fortnight includes fifteen lunar phases (tithi), one tithi representing the time required for the moon to travel twelve degrees on the ecliptic in its revolution around the earth. A complete lunar month includes thirty tithis, which are designated from one to fifteen during each fortnight. (Merrey, pp. 1-2)



In the Purānic vrata-s the month, the nakṣatra and the tithi for commencing and ending the observance are usually specified, although, again, from one Purāna to the next there are variations. For example, there is a section in the Agnipurāna where a series of vrata-s are described which stress a particular tithi. Such and such vrata-s may be performed on e.g., the saptamī (seventh) tithi of each or a specific month, such and such on the aṣṭamī (eighth) tithi and so on. Often the name of the month for performing a certain vrata is not mentioned at all. In the Garudapurāna, on the other hand, the month is usually given first and then the specific nakṣatra but rarely the tithi. In other Purānas one may find the same kind of series as in the Agnipurāna but based on the months, nakṣatra-s or vāra-s rather than the tithi. Sometimes it appears that the Purāna author/editor was simply trying to make sure each month or tithi was covered by at least one vrata, for some of the vrata descriptions are extremely short and cursory.

Explicit explanations of why a vrata should be started at a certain time are rare, but occasionally reasons are given as in the Saubhāgya-Sayana-vrata which says that 'on this day [3rd tithi, kṛṣṇa pakṣa, Chaitra] the goddess was united with Śiva'. (Mat. 60) However, a few generalizations may be made which could be applicable to the vrata-s.

The day, year and lunar months are divided into light and dark periods.

Day time, the bright fortnight when the moon is waxing, and the annual six-month period between January and June . . . when the sun travels northward in relation to the equator . . . are symbolically and structurally analogous periods.<sup>24</sup>

They are diametrically opposite to nighttime, the dark fortnight and the six-month southward course of the sun (July-December). Light periods are auspicious, dark periods generally inauspicious and potentially perilous. Many more festivals occur in the śukla pakṣa than in the kṛṣṇa pakṣa.<sup>25</sup> This is true for vrata-s as well.

Periods of transition between light and dark times such as dawn, sunset, new and full moons, and summer and winter solstices are perceived as dangerous and ambiguous but also as highly potent. Thus many rituals, especially the daily temple and household rituals, are structured around these times. This is also generally true for the saṃkalpa, the pūjā, and the pāraṇā (rite that ends an observance marked by honouring the officiating priest with food and gifts) that are part of a vrata. These rites are usually performed in the early morning.

In my examination of the vrata-s in the four Purāṇas the month of Chaitra (March/April) was most often mentioned for beginning a vrata followed by Māgha (January/February).

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<sup>24</sup>Merrey, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

The month of Śrāvana (July/August) was the least often mentioned month. This is not surprising considering it is the high point of the monsoon in much of India and traditionally many activities were suspended during this time. In addition it marks the beginning of the dark half of the year and therefore may be considered inauspicious.

As for the pakṣa-s, again a slight majority of the vrata-s stipulate beginning the vrata on a tithi in the śūkla or bright pakṣa. The most frequently mentioned tithi-s are the pratipad (1st), the saptami (7th), aṣṭami (8th), the ekādaśi (11th), and the caturdaśi (14th). Certain combinations of tithi-s such as a mixture of the 11th and 12th on the same day are said to be terribly inauspicious.

However, for these generalizations to be more meaningful they must be correlated with other factors. For example, the day time and the śūkla pakṣa are associated with Viṣṇu, Sūrya, Indra and Agni. The night and the kṛṣṇa pakṣa are associated with the moon, Soma, and often Śiva.<sup>26</sup> Further, the 8th tithi of each fortnight is sacred to the goddess, the 14th tithi of the kṛṣṇa pakṣa is special to Śiva and the month of Māgha is sacred to Viṣṇu.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Merrey, op. cit., pp. 13-14. See also J. Bruce Long, op. cit., p. 194. The nighttime is Śiva's favourite time. "This is the time when he comes and goes among men and takes up his residence in the world for worship."

<sup>27</sup>Winternitz, op. cit., p. 474.

Among the fourteen vrata-s examined in this chapter we find that the Kalyānīni-vrata, directed to Sūrya is indeed in the śūkla pakṣa, as are the Bhīmadvādaśī-vrata and the 'vrata of a month's privation' - directed to Viṣṇu. The Bhīmadvādaśī-vrata also takes place in the month of Māgha. The vrata-s to Durgā are to be observed on the 8th tithi, and the Sāvitrī-vrata is to be observed on a new moon day - a period of transition (and highly potent). But the Sarasvata-vrata just says to begin 'on a Sunday', and the 'vrata for relinquishment of all results' - directed to Śiva - is to be observed on the śūkla pakṣa. This does not necessarily imply inconsistency with established rules and beliefs. At the least it suggests that more information would be needed - more factors taken into account - for one to say with any certainty why a particular vrata is to begin or end at a particular time.

As for the duration of vrata-s, they can be observed anywhere from one day to a lifetime. Typical amounts of time are one, two, or three days each month for a year or in one month of the year, and twenty-seven to thirty days continuously. I could not detect a correlation between the kind of vrata (kāmya, naimittika; typical, atypical), purpose and the length (duration) of the vrata.

#### Deities to Whom Vrata-s are Directed

Although most of the Purāṇas have some sectarian

affiliation — designated by their name (i.e., the Līṅga-purāṇa is essentially Śaivite, the Garuḍa [Viṣṇu's vehicle] essentially Vaiṣṇavite) — it is more common to find passages which recognize both deities, even though one may be indicated as superior, than passages in which either Śiva or Viṣṇu is said to be the sole deity worthy of worship to the exclusion of the other. Even in the Līṅgapurāṇa, which is the most sectarian of the four Purāṇas under discussion, most of the vrata-s are directed to Śiva, yet the abodes of the gods to which the vratin goes includes Agni's, Yama's, Vayu's, Varuṇa's and the Yakṣas'. In the Matsyapurāṇa, which could just as easily be called Śaivite as Vaiṣṇavite, Nandi is ordered by Śiva to give instructions not only on the Śaiva vrata-s, but, immediately following, on the Saura vrata-s and Vaiṣṇava vrata-s as well. (Mat. 95-96, 97-98, 99-101) Aside from the change in the name of the deity there is no remarkable difference in the rituals or formulas to praise Viṣṇu and Śiva. It appears that a common pool of rituals and mantra-s were drawn upon by the Purāṇa writers/editors of various sectarian persuasions.

Occasionally one finds that Viṣṇu and Śiva are to be worshipped together in the same vrata (e.g., Agnipurāṇa, 184). Some scholars (e.g., Agrawala, Matsyapurāṇa: A Study, p. 175) have interpreted this to mean that it represents a way of bringing about a synthesis between the followers of Śiva and the followers of Viṣṇu, or that it represents a way of

appealing to both groups. This is possible, but it is also possible that the author of the Purāṇa passage is himself tolerant and accepts the idea that both Viṣṇu and Śiva are equally powerful — even if he worships only one.<sup>28</sup>

Though Viṣṇu in his various incarnations and epithets and Śiva in his many epithets, alone or with their consorts, are the most prominent deities to be worshipped in the vrata-s, other deities such as the goddesses, Sūrya, the moon-god, Brahmā, Kāma are often mentioned as the deities to be worshipped as well. Even the Ṛṣis (sages), pitṛs (ancestors), the stars, the earth, divine guardians and nymphs, and serpents are the object of worship in vrata-s.<sup>29</sup> Some vrata-s do not mention a deity at all (e.g., Agnipurāṇa, 182, 186).

One common feature in some of the longer vrata descriptions is the worship of the deity — Viṣṇu, Śiva, or Devī — under a different name or aspect each day for the duration of the vrata. Whether the devotee would respond differently to the various names and aspects of the deity and whether he or she would gain a fuller understanding of the deity's dimensions through this kind of worship are

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<sup>28</sup>In Pusalker's opinion, "Sectarian Purāṇas preach the supremacy either of Viṣṇu or of Śiva, but generally, the older Purāṇas glorify also the rival deity." Studies in Epics and Purāṇas, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup>Brāhmins too, but I will take up that issue later in this chapter.

interesting questions that the texts themselves do not pose nor answer. With deities as complex and multifaceted as Devī, Viṣṇu and Śiva I would suspect the answer to be yes on both counts, but field research would have to be done to corroborate this.

Is there a connection between the deity, the purpose or nature of the vrata and the vratin? That is, are particular deities associated with particular kinds of benefits, and, when vrata-s are specifically for women are the vrata-s more often directed to a goddess rather than a god? In answer to the first question it can be said that some deities do have very specific associations that make them suitable to be propitiated for certain desired ends. Kāma, for example, is frequently worshipped for attaining physical beauty and success in love and thus it is not surprising that it is to him that the vrata for prostitutes is directed. Goddesses such as Lakṣmi (or Śrī) and sometimes Parvati are connected with prosperity and good fortune, Sarasvati with learning and Durgā with vanquishing enemies and pecuniary boons in the vrata-s. Ganēśa who is often invoked at the beginning of religious ceremonies, important undertakings and even serious written works in medieval and later Hinduism as the god of wisdom, prudence and the remover of obstacles does not figure prominently in the Purāṇic vrata-s. If he is mentioned it is usually as one of a number of deities to whom worship or mantra-s are to be directed.

An exception is the Garudapurāna (ch. 129) in which a series of vrata-s to be directed principally to Ganeśa are described. The rewards, including erudition, wealth, fame, and 'immunity from all earthly calamities' correspond to those things which the god is known to bestow. When Śiva or Viṣṇu are the principal deities in a vrata the merits or rewards may be anything from numerous progeny to endless bliss. There is no difference that I could detect between the things the two gods can confer to a vratin as a reward.

As to the relation between goddesses and vrata-s for women it may be said that among the vrata-s specifically for women (and they constitute a minority) most are directed to a goddess. This is not surprising since in the Hindu tradition a woman fulfills her dharma through marriage and motherhood. Those things which she is expected to desire most are a good marriage, many children and the longevity of her husband. These and related items - fertility, prosperity, health, luck - usually fall under the auspices (though, as we have seen above, not exclusively) of one or another goddess. However, when a vrata says that 'a woman or śūdra may perform this vrata and receive the same benefits' (as a male dvijā) the deity is as likely to be a god as a goddess.

Finally, it should be mentioned that several Purānas, such as the Garuda (137.16-19), the Skanda (1.33.78-82) and the Narada (1.56.133-35) state which deities preside over



different days of the week and tithi-s. The Garuda gives a list<sup>30</sup> of each tithi and the presiding deities of that tithi.

Purposes of and Merits Received by Observing a Vrata

When reading the vrata descriptions one readily notices how much space is devoted to a detailing of the kinds and amount of reward or merit that the successful completion or sometimes even just the hearing of a vrata can bestow on an individual. Vrata-s are often favourably compared to Vedic sacrifices with respect to the merit they confer. While the Purānic vrata-s do speak of the vratin attaining the benefits of mokṣa or mukti (release), a place in the god's loka-s, the removal of the effects of 'sin' (bad karma), they also focus on bhukti - earthly enjoyments: long life, health, prosperity, beauty, ornaments, and learning, among other things. A sonless couple observing particular vrata-s will get sons, a poor man wealth, a sick

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30	1st	<u>tithi</u>	moon's wane	-	Kuvera, Vaishvanara, Brahmā
	2nd	"	"	-	Yama, Lakṣmi, Nārāyaṇa
	3rd	"	"	-	Gauri, Vighnesha, Śaṅkara
	4th	"	"	-	Chaturvyuha
	5th	"	"	-	Hari
	6th	"	"	-	Sūrya, Karttikeya
	7th	"	"	-	Bhaskara
	8th and 9th		"	-	Durgā with her female cohorts, guardians of the four quarters of heaven
	10th	<u>tithi</u>	moon's wane	-	Moon god
	11th	"	"	-	Rṣis
	12th	"	"	-	Hari
	13th	"	"	-	Maheśvara
	14th and 15th		"	-	Brahmā and the pitṛs

person health, a depraved person will become freed from sins, a low caste person will be a king in the next life, a wife can ensure the welfare of her husband.

If one takes seriously the theory of brāhmins trying to bring the masses back under their fold through the Purāṇas, one could say that the reason the texts dwell on bountiful rewards for observing these rites is that it would encourage more people to practise them. In Kane's words, 'the vrata-s under the guise of religion served to appeal to the ordinary human cravings and materialism of the average person'. Kane is speaking about the Purāṇic vrata-s which he believes to be predominately of the kāmya type. He does not appear to hold this view with regard to the 'expiatory' vrata-s (naimittika type) nor of the obligatory (nitya) vrata-s "such as that of a brahmacārin or snātaka or householder".<sup>31</sup> While his opinion does hold true for some Purāṇic vrata-s which do blatantly appeal to materialism (the fruits of which are said to be attainable with little effort), yet his skepticism is unfairly general-

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<sup>31</sup>Kane, op. cit., V, p. 28. Kane seems to forget that the Vedas promise worldly rewards too to the sacrificer. "The nature of the ordinary offering to the god 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 . . ." (A.B. Kieth, The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanisads, Harvard University Press, 1925, p. 259.

ized. Each of the four Purāṇas stresses the practice of the niyama-s during the vrata and a number of vrata descriptions such as the Kalyānīni-vrata or 'vrata of a month's privation' accentuate the spiritual merits as much or more than the material.

A section from the Dīpandāna-vrata, 'light-gift-vrata' (Matsya P. 200), says: "A moment's gratification of the senses is sure to be followed by millions of years of extreme agony and excruciating pain". This statement expresses a belief that was not uncommon among many of India's ascetics and philosophers; attachment to the senses is a sure way to ensnare oneself further in samsara (the cycle of rebirth). Yet, the same vrata description in which it appears promises worldly rewards. Do not worldly (material) possessions also obstruct the path to mokṣa? Not necessarily, for in classical Hindu theory the accumulation of worldly goods is encouraged so long as it is within the bounds of what is necessary for the gṛhastha (householder) to fulfill the accepted goal of that stage, artha (wealth) - a goal intended to ensure the material comfort of his family. But though wealth may be accumulated and enjoyed it must not be coveted.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the desires of the senses may be acknowledged but not satiated or indulged in. Restraint is

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<sup>32</sup>Coveting another's property is even worse, being counted as one of the five 'great sins' in the Dharmaśāstras. See Kane, op. cit., IV, p. 12.

a great virtue, and nowhere is this more emphasized than in the matter of sexual expression. For this reason the directive to fast in most vrata-s usually includes sexual continence.

Nevertheless, the question of the motive of an individual for undertaking a vrata remains, and since the texts do not address this question one can only speculate. Phrased another way, one could ask, are the vrata-s always performed with an expectation of reward - be it spiritual or material? And, if the performance of a vrata does not bring the desired result (e.g., sons) does the vratin blame him or herself? The vrata? The deity? Or is this 'blame' expressed at all?

The rewards described in the Purāṇas often sound like formulas. This is especially so when the vrata is named after a month, a tithi or a nakṣatra and the time (more than the details of the merit) is clearly of central importance. In other cases, where the vrata is named according to the results obtained by it, such as the Saubhāgya-vrata, the rewards are much more specific and less formulaic. Thus one might expect the latter type to be practised by those whose motive is to gain something in particular (or to lose something - like the effects of some pātaka), while the former type may be practised for more general purposes such as to gain auspiciousness for the household or punya (spiritual merit) for oneself.

With respect to vrata-s of an expressly kāmya sort one would have to say that their very nature presumes an expectation of reward, while in the other two 'types of vrata-s' the reward would be subsumed under duty, obligation or penance fulfilled. If someone practised Purāṇic vrata-s often<sup>33</sup> and if they are mostly of the kāmya type then how strong a motivation would the expectation of a specific reward be if the expectation was repeatedly unfulfilled? I would suggest that the vrata-s were and are not performed with a high expectation of the material reward and that an expectation of a spiritual reward of some sort would always accompany the observance of a vrata. In this way, if the material benefits associated with the successful completion of a vrata did not appear then the vratin would probably feel that the effort of the vrata was not wasted because spiritual merit would have been acquired. If blame for the failure or nonfulfillment is expressed it would probably be directed by the vratin against him or herself for having improperly conducted some part of the ritual. This is in fact the traditional answer to this problem. Neither the deity nor the ritual itself would be considered 'at fault' or ineffective; only the vratin or devotee's vaigunyam -

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<sup>33</sup>And this is not an unreasonable assumption if one considers contemporary evidence indicating that vrata-s are a type of rite which tend to be practised many times in a person's (especially woman's) life - not just once or twice. See J.H. Rowlands, La Femme Bengalie, Paris: 1930; pp. 61-2.

unskillfulness.

On Who can Undertake a Vrata

The question of who was allowed to observe vrata-s has been touched upon already when it was suggested that the Purāṇa writers opened the doors of the Brāhmaṇical religion to all members of Hindu society as part of their effort to attract more adherents. But, not surprisingly, there are some contradictory statements made about this alleged 'open door' policy in both the Purāṇas and Nibandhas. This is especially evident in the case of women. On the one hand we find that there are vrata-s prescribed specifically for women, including courtezans, while on the other hand the injunctions of Manu regarding restrictions against women performing any religious rites on their own continued to prevail. Manu V. 155 states that "A woman cannot perform a separate sacrifice, a separate vrata or a separate fast by herself; she is honoured in heaven by waiting upon her husband."<sup>34</sup> Kane mentions that the Viṣṇu-Dharma-sūtra (25.16) "provides that a woman who observes a vrata in which a fast enters [sic] while her husband is alive deprives her husband of his life and herself goes to hell".<sup>35</sup> And, in the Adityapurāṇa quoted by Hemādri, "whatever act of benefit in the other world a woman does without the consent of her

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<sup>34</sup>Kane, op. cit., V, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

father, husband or son yields no fruit to her".<sup>36</sup> This statement is essentially repeated in the Lingapurāna (84.16) which says: "O excellent brahmins, the holy rites, japa, dāna, penance and everything else should be performed by women only at the behest of their husbands since women are never independent."

To balance these assertions, it seems unlikely that in practice a courtesan would ask a male relative for permission to observe a vrata (if anyone, she would ask her kuttanī [bawd or madame]), and a number of examples of women doing religious rites on their own may be found in the Purānas, including in the kathā-s accompanying some vrata descriptions. However, most women, married or not, probably would ask a male relative for permission to perform such a rite, at least as a formality. Further, it would be recognized that courtesans are not bound by the kinds of rules that other women are, and that women in kathā-s, though often held up as models of wifely behaviour, are, for various reasons, allowed to get away with more.

Banerjee insists on the point about the relative freedom accorded to women with respect to practising the Purānic vrata-s when he says:

While in the Vedic sacrifices the Yajamāna  
has to play a part along with his wife,  
in the Purānic Vratas a man or woman can

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<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Kane, Ibid., p. 51.

independently take part, though some Vratas are to be performed by a couple . . . [Women] can perform Vratas in all stages of life, whether they are unmarried, married or widowed. The usual disqualifications of an unmarried or widowed woman [because of periodic impurity or general inauspiciousness] have been removed in the case of Vratas.<sup>37</sup>

As well, The Smṛti-Nibandha writer Devala says this concerning who could benefit from observing a vrata:

There is no doubt that [people of] all varnas are released from sins by observing vratas, fast and restrictive rules of behaviour and by mortification (literally heating) of the body.<sup>38</sup>

However, this is probably somewhat of an exaggeration.

In a sample of sixty-one Purāṇic vrata-s that I examined fifteen did not specify who was to perform the vrata, eighteen were for men only, one for a husband on behalf of his wife, in four men were inferred but women possibly included, three were for brāhmins, six were for women alone, two said that women and śūdras were permitted, seven said that men or women could perform it, one was for 'women, anchorites and forest hermits', and four were for bhikṣus (mendicants). These figures suggest that while women and śūdras could observe some vrata-s they by no means had access to them all. Therefore generalizations of the

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<sup>37</sup>Banerjee, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Kane, op. cit., V, p. 51.



sort 'vrata-s were open to all' must be treated with caution. That a quarter of this sample did not specify who was to practise the vrata could mean either that anyone was allowed to or that the author of the vrata assumed that only dvijā men would.

The Līngapurāna was the only one of the four Purāṇas examined that indicated who was to observe the vrata in each case. But this Purāṇa also had the fewest number of vrata descriptions. The four vrata-s for bhikṣus all come from this Purāṇa.

The vrata-s, but not penances, may be practised through a proxy (pratinidhi). 'The performance of a vrata', the Agnipurāna (ch. 128) says, 'may be delegated to one's son in the case of ill health'. It is unlikely that the son would then have a share in the merit of the vrata; his merit would come from obedience and duty carried out. One text, the Trikāṇḍamaṇḍana states these rules about pratinidhi:

No pratinidhi (substitute) is allowed in the case of kāmya rites, a substitute is allowable in the case of nitya and naimittika rites; some recognized a substitute even in a kāmya rite after it is once begun; there is no substitute for a mantra or the deity or the fire . . . some say that a substitute is not allowed in the case of (a prescribed) place or time.<sup>39</sup>

This text reveals that there is no strict consensus on this

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<sup>39</sup>Quoted in Kane, op. cit., V, p. 53.

matter and that the use of a proxy was not restricted to vrata rituals. What would distinguish the use of a proxy in vrata-s from say Vedic rituals is that a pratinidhi for a vrata could be a son, wife, brother, husband, sister, pupil, purohita (village priest), and a friend<sup>40</sup> whereas the possible substitutes for a Vedic ritual were far more restricted.

#### Requirements of the Vratin, Ritual Offerings and Procedure

In chapter one it was noted that a person undertaking a vrata was to do certain things like observing the niyama-s, sleeping on the floor, bathing and so on. The Purāṇas also list a number of foods, articles and practices which are to be strictly avoided. The Garudapurāṇa (ch. 128) for example says that a vratin,

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 tooth-brush, 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 (ch. 175) has much the same list but adds wine and boiled rice belonging to others as items to be

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

avoided while fasting and garlands, bright-coloured clothes, fumes of burning incense, sandalpaste and "suchlike articles of luxury" as forbidden things to use.<sup>41</sup> Not eating oily or cooked foods is also usually prescribed in the vrata-s.

There are probably several reasons for these specific prohibitions. In the first place the vratin is supposed to be undergoing a form of tapas and general restraint so 'luxurious' items like perfume, ornaments and betel leaf should be avoided in the name of austerity and simplicity. Secondly, foods (and other things) were divided by Hindus into categories of pure, less pure and impure. The pañcagavyam and pañcamṛta mixtures are considered extremely pure (or sattvic) and are commonly used in religious rituals. Salt, wine, meat, onions, spices are generally impure and tamasic (conducive to slothfulness and sluggishness). The latter must naturally be avoided if one

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<sup>41</sup>The Agnipurāna gets even more specific in later verses in its various prohibitions and requirements of the vratin. It says: "The man who bathes every day, practises 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, 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, and make it whole as a medicine; even in the event of its accidental and unwished-for break."

wishes to be in a ritually pure state, for ritual purity is "the path to dharma, the resting place of Veda, the abode of prosperity (śrī), the favourite of the gods . . ." <sup>42</sup>

As far as can be determined 'bellmetal' as an inferior metal is probably 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 thought to be more pleasing to the gods. <sup>43</sup> Abstention from the use of flowers, sandalpaste, unguents, must refer to personal use because these items are central to the devapūjā. Toothbrushes as an offering may seem somewhat peculiar, but in the Purāṇas at least, they are not at all unusual. <sup>44</sup>

Even though the above items are generally prohibited, some of the items are nonetheless prescribed in the ritual of a few vrata-s. For example in the Anāṅga-Trayodaśi-vrata the vratin is to live on honey on the thirteenth day of Pousā, and in the Kalyānīni-vrata the vratin is to put on

<sup>42</sup>Harita, quoted by Kane, op. cit., II, p. 651.

<sup>43</sup>See Gonda, Viṣṇuism and Śivaism, p. 82

<sup>44</sup>Indeed, according to Gonda, ibid., p. 176, footnote 66, "There are manuals (see, e.g., Agitāgama, 19, 22ff.) 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. (Ibid., p. 68)

white clothes on the first day.

At this point it may be useful to discuss in more detail the ritual practices that are mentioned in our fourteen vrata-s. It is not possible to discuss all the rituals in all the fourteen vrata-s within the confines of this thesis so only the following will be taken up: the saṃkalpa, the pūjā including the upacāra-s and mantra-s, and the alpana (ritual diagrams).

The saṃkalpa (resolve, statement of intent) ordinarily takes place on the morning of the first day of the vrata, after bathing.

Even when a tithi does not begin in the morning . . . the saṃkalpa has to be made in the morning provided that a vrata is to be performed on that tithi though it be viddha. If no saṃkalpa is made the person secures very little benefit from the vrata and half the merit is lost.<sup>45</sup>

The saṃkalpa, an example of which follows, is to be declared before the sun, other deities or a brāhman priest.

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]. Pundarikākṣa, I shall, with mind controlled, eat rice cooked with milk, with a few good Brāhmins. May that be fulfilled by Thy grace, without any obstruction.

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<sup>45</sup>Devala quoted in Kane, op. cit., V, p. 81

In our sample of vrata-s four out of fourteen state what the samkalpa should be.

As to the purpose of the samkalpa Diehl has noted that it "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>46</sup> The samkalpa, then, formalizes the 'pact' as it were that the vratin wishes to make with the deity to whom the vrata will be directed. At the same time the vratin expresses his or her realization that the desired results are ultimately dependent on the beneficence or grace of the deity. This expression of humility on the part of the vratin is further demonstrated by the devotee's making no reference to the particular results that are in fact desired.

A pūjā of some sort to the deity(ies) is mentioned either specifically or vaguely in all of the fourteen vrata-s. The pūjā can be very elaborate and expensive and comprise a major part of the vrata or they may involve a simple procedure like offering flowers to an image of the deity. Written evidence suggests that devapūjā (the worship of images kept in the house) is a development that took place in the first few centuries of the Christian era and it gradually replaced the Vedic practice of

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<sup>46</sup>C. Diehl, Instrument and Purpose, p. 85.

homa.<sup>47</sup> But whereas homa with Vedic mantra-s could not be performed by women and śūdras, devapūjā could be performed by all. Gonda asserts that "the Hindu devapūjā originally and essentially is an invocation, reception and entertainment of God as a royal guest. It normally consists of sixteen 'attendances' (upacāra)."<sup>48</sup> Many of these upacāra-s were originally offered to brāhmins who had been invited to officiate at a Vedic ceremony such as śrāddha (a funeral rite).<sup>49</sup>

There are various opinions among the Smṛti-Nibandha authorities concerning how many upacāra-s there are and their order. Five and sixteen are the most common numbers.<sup>50</sup> The following are the sixteen upacāra-s as given in the Nṛsiṃhapurāṇa (62.8-14)<sup>51</sup>: (1) invocation (āvāhana); (2) a cushion to sit on (āsana); (3) washing the deity's feet (pādya); (4) pure water (arghya); (5) rinsing the mouth with water (ācamana); (6) bathing the deity (snāna); (7) clothing (vastra); (8) sacred thread (yajñopavīta); (9) anointing the

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<sup>47</sup>See Kane, op. cit., II, pp. 705-12. For one of the earliest descriptions of devapūjā (from the Viṣṇudharma-sūtra) see Kane, ibid., pp. 726-7.

<sup>48</sup>Gonda, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>49</sup>Kane, op. cit., II, p. 730.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., V, p. 34; J. Bruce Long, "Mahāśivarātri", p. 215.

<sup>51</sup>Quoted in J. Bruce Long, op. cit., footnote #36, p. 215.

body with unguents (anulepana) or perfumes (gandha); (10) flowers (puṣpa); (11) incense (dhūpa); (12) light (dīpa); (13) cooked-food offering (naivedya); (14) betel nut and leaf (tāmbūla); (15) gift of clothes, umbrellas, etc. (dakṣiṇa); (16) circumambulation of the image (pradakṣiṇa). If only one upacāra can be offered by the devotee, he may use flowers alone.<sup>52</sup>

Only a few of these upacāra-s are in fact named in the vrata-s that I examined. Bathing of the deity (with ghee, water, milk, pañcagavyam or pañcamṛta), anointing the image with sandalpaste or perfumes, and offering the deity flowers, incense, sandal and food (milk, ghee, sesame, rice, fruits, sweets) were the most commonly mentioned items in connection with the devapūjā.

Though not normally included as an upacāra per se, mantra-s are frequently part of the pūjā. Three of the five mantra-s that are referred to as such among the fourteen vrata-s are names of the deity. Gonda, in speaking about this type of mantra says:

A mantra containing the name of a god -  
for instance namaḥ Sivāya - is indeed

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<sup>52</sup>Kane, op. cit., II, p. 730. There are very detailed rules about the use of flowers. The Visnu-Dharmasūtra (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, II, pp. 732-3) There are different grades in the merit of offering certain flowers, and these grades are different depending on the deity to whom they are offered.



regarded as embodying the energy of the god which is activated by pronouncing the formula. The knowledge of, and meditation on, a mantra enables the adept to exert influences upon the god, to exercise power over the potencies manifesting in it, to establish connections between the divinity and himself, or to realize his identity with that divinity.<sup>53</sup>

The two other mantra-s mentioned are (GP. 117), "Om, Obeisance to the mace-bearing god who is without any origin", and (GP. 133), the daśāksari-mantra to Durgā: "aum Durgā, Durgā rakṣini svaha". The syllable 'aum' is in itself meaningless but is considered very sacred and potent, and in practice is the most ubiquitous mantra among Hindus and Mahāyāna Buddhists.

In the Kalyānīni-vrata described earlier we saw that the use of alpāna-s or ritual diagrams formed an important part of the vrata rite. Information concerning the origin of these alpāna-s is difficult to find. Tantric religious rites which have used ritual diagrams (maṇḍala)<sup>54</sup> for many

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<sup>53</sup>Gonda, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>54</sup>A maṇḍala comprises 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 maṇḍala itself, are other circles containing images of divinities or their emblems." (M. Eliade, Yoga, Immortality and Freedom, Bollingen Series LVI, Princeton, 1958, pp. 219-20.) The maṇḍala is both an image of the universe and a theophany. It also serves as a 'receptacle' for the gods who are invoked to enter the sacred area and are contemplated and interiorized by the initiand. There are also 'psychic maṇḍala-s' wherein the ritual diagram is constructed

centuries may well have influenced the Purānic vrata alpana-s. Though the mandala-s are generally more complex and esoteric than the vrata alpana-s, they have certain characteristics in common such as the use of rice powder to draw the diagram, the symbolic use of lotuses to represent the deity, and the uttering of mantra-s to invoke the deity. It is also likely that the use of ritual diagrams was a feature of folk-rites already in practice which the Purāna writers/editors incorporated into some of the vrata-s. Evidence for this latter conjecture comes from the fact that alpana-s are used today by women in North India in many of their religious practices.<sup>55</sup> S.K. Ray, in his study of the ritual art of vrata-s in Bengal, notes that ". . . in the religion of brata [Bengali for vrata], art is an indispensable means of communication between the devotees and the gods".<sup>56</sup> Each brata, he says, "has its own alpana, which at the time of its performance, is drawn with finger tips

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mentally by the adept. One vrata (GP. 126) in fact uses 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 the vrata description fall into the usual pattern of Purānic vrata-s, suggesting that these sections were appended to a Tantric rite already in practice.

<sup>55</sup>See Mckim Marriott, "Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization", M. Marriott ed., Village India (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); and S.K. Ray, The Ritual Art of the Bratas of Bengal, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhya, 1961).

<sup>56</sup>Ray, op. cit., IV

on the ground . . . The alpana related to a brata must clearly depict the object the bratee desires to have, otherwise its performance will be meaningless and impossible".<sup>57</sup> Finally, he suggests that "the purpose of these alpana-s 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>58</sup>

In the Kalyānīni-vrata the picture of an eight-petalled lotus, a flower rich in meaning in Hindu mythology, probably signifies Sūrya himself. The eight suns around the lotus probably signify the "eight directions": the four cardinal points and the four intermediate points, each one over which presides a lokapāla or guardian. The pattern of eight figures around a central image is originally found in the Buddhist Eight-Bodhisattva maṇḍala.<sup>59</sup> This image with its directional symbolism was taken over by the Hindus. In many vrata descriptions the vratin is to worship or pay homage to the lokapāla of each direction, beginning with the eastern direction, then south-eastern, etc.

#### Role of Priests and Dāna (gift-giving)

The role of brāhman priests is rarely spelled out

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>59</sup>See Phyllis Granoff, "Vrścikodarī", East and West, Vol. 30, December 1980, pp. 94-5.

in the vrata descriptions - except as recipients of gifts, food and honour. Yet, one cannot assume therefore that brāhmins did not officiate to some degree during the observance of a 'śastric-vrata'. The brāhmins were the custodians of the sacred texts - including the Purāṇas. The texts were written in Sanskrit and brāhmins were usually the only ones who could read Sanskrit. They would be the ones most likely to know the details of the mantra-s, the prayers, and other rites that are frequently mentioned by name only in the vrata-s. They would know how to conduct the various rituals involved in the pūjā-s, in the making and consecrating of images, mandapa-s and so on. For these reasons it is not illogical to expect that brāhmins must have participated as officiants during the vrata procedure. However, it is also plausible, given the paucity of references to their role, that their participation, though ritually important, was minimal in many of the vrata rites. An exception would be the Bhīmadvādaśī-vrata where many brāhmins are involved in the procedure and where their role is explicitly described. Interestingly, this is the vrata which, among the fourteen vrata-s, most resembles a Vedic sacrifice.<sup>60</sup>

Though the brāhmin as officiant is not discussed

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<sup>60</sup>In Vedic sacrifices brāhmins played the central role and the sponsor (the yajamāna) merely participated as instructed by the priests.

much the brāhman as recipient and that which he is to receive is discussed at great length in the Purānas. Occasionally he is to be honoured and worshipped as a god - but always he is to be fed and is to receive gifts. The expression of the idea of brāhmanas as gods can be found in some of the earliest texts. Kane<sup>61</sup> and Gonda<sup>62</sup> cite the following passages among others as examples:

Verily, there are two kinds of gods; for indeed, the gods are the gods, and the brahmanas who have studied and teach the sacred lore are the human gods . . . the brahmanas have the power of placing the sacrificer who gratifies them with gifts, in the heavenly world. (ŚB. 2,2,2,6-7)

The brahmanas have all the gods in them. Whatever words are spoken by brahmanas are spoken by the gods. (Parasara 6, 52f.)

In the Purānas the brāhmanas are frequently eulogized and divine powers are ascribed to them. They are called the

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<sup>61</sup>History of Dharmasāstra, II, p. 134 ff.

<sup>62</sup>Change and Continuity, pp. 203-4. Gonda also notes the following in his discussion of the position of brāhmanas: "In the Rgveda the brāhman 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) and is considered able to restore people to health (10, 97, 22). He is also without reserve believed to be able to work wonders (5, 40, 8) . . .". "As is well known, purānas and other texts of the Hindu period introduced many stories of members of the first class who possessed miraculous powers to neutralize evil influences . . . to allay meteorological phenomena, to strengthen the gods." (Gonda, p. 202)

"visible gods on earth and are identified with Viṣṇu or some other prominent deity [e.g., Varāhapurāna 125, 169; 37, 34], so that any ill-treatment of them means the same to these deities. The brāhmanas are also often directed to be utilized as one of the mediums of worship."<sup>63</sup> There are several examples of the worship of brāhmanas in our sample of vrata-s, e.g., the Sarasvata-vrata (Matsya, 66), the Anānyadāu-vrata (Matsya, 70), and the 'vrata for the Relinquishment of all Results' (Matsya, 96).

In chapter one of this thesis it was suggested, in connection with Hazra's theory, that in the first few centuries of the Christian era patronage of the brāhmanas was not dependable since the 'heterodoxies' were making inroads and the loyalties of kings and the populace were divided. This is one of the reasons, Hazra, Banerjee and others maintain, that the giving of gifts (dāna) to the brāhman priests is so markedly stressed in many of the Purānic rites. Hazra states:

. . . the way in which gifts are connected with vows in the Purānas, proves definitely that one of the main objects of encouraging the latter is inducement to making gifts. This fact is further evidenced by the description of many vows in which gifts are of primary importance.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Hazra, Studies in the Purānic Records, p. 258. Hazra also notes: "The later the purāna the greater the claim to their divinity." (Ibid., p. 259)

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

Banerjee, in the same vein, says:

The articles of gift such as salt, sugar, etc., distinctly betray the worldly condition of the priestly class for whom it was difficult or almost impossible even to earn the barest means of subsistence. The gift of gold and other precious metals or of land and house means nothing but a contribution to the material welfare of the Brāhmanas.<sup>65</sup>

While Banerjee may be exaggerating somewhat the argument that one of the reasons vrata-s were encouraged was for economically depressed brāhman priests to gain more income is persuasive. This is not to suggest that the giving of gifts to brāhmanas was a new idea introduced in the Purānas, for the practice of dāna has a long history as well.<sup>66</sup> But there seems little doubt that the range and number of gifts prescribed in the Purānas are significantly higher than that prescribed in earlier texts.<sup>67</sup> Further, the later Smṛti and Nibandha writers go into much more detail than earlier writers concerning the qualifications of

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<sup>65</sup>Op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>66</sup>For more information on the history of dāna see Kane, History of Dharmasāstra, II, pp. 837-88; and Gonda, Change and Continuity, pp. 222-6.

<sup>67</sup>The multiplication of gifts in the Purānic vrata-s, Hazra contends, "stands in striking contrast to the simple priestly fee prescribed in the ṣaṣṭhi-kalpa of the Mānava-grhya-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." (Hazra, op. cit., p. 256)

the donor and donee, the kinds of gifts that were appropriate and inappropriate according to various circumstances, the place and time that were suitable, the merits that could be accrued, etc. Some of the Mahādāna-s ('great or major gifts') described in the Purānas actually sound like vrata-s. 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 mantra-s 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'.<sup>68</sup>

The donees were not, of course, limited to brāhman priests and preceptors. The making of donations was considered a highly meritorious act and an important way of leading a religious life in the present Kali age (see Kurmapurāna, 1, 28, 17). A donee could be a maṭha, a temple, a 'needy family', or one's neighbour, among others. Similarly, the donors were not always those who utilized the services of a priest - they could be kings or queens, landowners or merchants who wished to patronize a certain maṭha or sect or who simply desired to acquire merit through generous donations. However, in the Purānic vrata-s it is

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<sup>68</sup>See Kane, op. cit., LI, pp. 871-7.



the brāhmins who are the most frequently cited recipients of 'the gifts and often the word 'brahman' is qualified by 'good' or 'free from hypocrisy' or 'learned in the Vedas'.

Devala quoted in Hemādri<sup>69</sup> classifies gifts into three groups: (i) 'best' - food (ghee, sesamum, 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, fruits, etc. Among the fourteen vrata-s food as a cooked meal and/or as separate items of grain, ghee, sesame, is the most popular form of dāna, occurring in ten out of the fourteen vrata-s. The gift of cows<sup>70</sup> is next in popularity, being mentioned in seven of the vrata-s, followed by gold and cloth - mentioned in six of the vrata-s. Other popular items include garlands, sandal-paste, beds, pots and ornaments. This division of gifts according to frequency of citation fits more or less the above classification.

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., II, p. 847.

<sup>70</sup>Cows as gifts are very popular in the mahadāna-s as well. This is because cows were economically important and socially they conferred status on the owner. If real cows could not be given something representing a cow could, as shown in the Matsyapurāna (82.13-15) with its description of the 'ten dhenus' in which fixed quantities of molasses, ghee, oil, milk, honey, sugar, curd, juice were to be given away as equivalent to a cow.

In two of the vrata-s the dictate to give gifts is made but the kind of gift is not specified. In two vrata-s gifts are not mentioned at all.<sup>71</sup> In several vrata-s the vratin is warned not to be miserly in his giving. One resorting to vitta-sāthya (spending less money than what is allowed by one's income) "with regards to gifts is doomed to hell".<sup>72</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 vratin is poor, then one (e.g., cow) is enough'.

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The concludes Part Two. It is clear that this section of the thesis could be expanded considerably in an effort to take account of each and every element in the vrata descriptions. Some of the ritual implements and procedures, for example, are sufficiently obscure to require a very wide knowledge of the Hindu, Buddhist and Tantric texts and manuals of ritual for their significance to be fully explicated. However, a thorough explanation of the contents of the Purāṇic vrata descriptions has not been the aim of

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<sup>71</sup>This does not necessarily mean that in the actual practice of the vrata gifts would then be left out completely - especially if a priest was involved, for gifts or at least providing a meal to a brāhman or a 'needy person' is that which must complete the vrata. (See Banerjee, op. cit., p. 36)

<sup>72</sup>Banerjee, op. cit., p. 37.

this section, nor of the thesis as a whole. Rather, I have focussed on those features of a vrata which seem to be most seminal to the vrata rite (such as time), those most in need of an explanation to facilitate some understanding of the particular vrata description (such as upacāra-s or ritual diagrams), and those most intriguing (such as the role of priests).

The great variety of detail and lack of consistency in the vrata descriptions and under each of the categories makes the formulation of useful generalizations about procedure, etc., by way of summary somewhat difficult and inappropriate. (We encountered the same problem in our attempt to define a vrata.) Hence such generalizations were avoided (and are so now) except where the evidence clearly warranted them — such as in the statements: 'the saṅkalpa normally takes place in the early morning', or 'the role of priests is rarely indicated'.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSION

We have seen that the term vrata first appeared in the Vedas and meant 'fixed functions of an entity' or 'immutably fixed ordinances' which preserves the ṛta the order of the world. We have also seen that over the centuries the meaning of vrata shifted. The term was identified with the prescribed foods that a dikṣita must eat in the Brāhmanas, then with the preparatory rites (restrictions as to food and behaviour) that a dvija student or snataka or householder undertakes at each stage of life and study in the Grhyasūtras, and then with niyama-s in Patañjali and prāyaścitta-s in the Dharmaśāstra writers Manu and Yājñavalkya. By the time vrata appears in the Purānas it signifies rites to be practised at certain stipulated times (according to the correct tithi, nakṣatra, etc.) accompanied by fasting, pūjā and dāna.

The samkalpa (resolve) which marks the beginning of the Purānic vrata and which is said to a deity or brāhman priest gives this rite the unmistakable character of a religious vow, and 'religious vow', 'vowed observance', or simply 'vow' is in fact the way this term is usually translated when it occurs in works contemporary with or

later than the Purāṇas. It seems inappropriate to use this translation (as Kane did) with most of the pre-Purāṇic literature because the sense of vrata then was as 'prescribed observance', that which was necessary to preserve order, or behavioural restrictions which were necessary as preparatory observances for doing something else. Vrata in the Purāṇas is an essentially voluntary act. The Purāṇic vrata-s are not required to be done for any particular reason (unless they happen to be also a prāyaścitta). They are 'available', as it were, for anyone who wishes to acquire punya (religious merit), or numerous other things.

Are the Purāṇic vrata-s derived purely from the Vedic Brahmanical tradition or did they actually originate from an indigenous culture, from 'folk religious' practices? And why did these rites suddenly proliferate in this literature? These questions were raised earlier and some theories presented. Let me briefly review the arguments.

Das contends that vrata-s were essentially indigenous practices, "primitive magico-religious rites", that were absorbed and transformed by Aryan culture. He maintains that there is hardly any evidence of Purāṇic-type vrata-s in pre-Purāṇic literature, and that the Purāṇic vrata-s are mostly non-brahmanical or non-Aryan rites. J. Helen Rowlands, in the same vein, thinks that the śāstric vrata-s were introduced in imitation of popular rites. Banerjee and Kane, on the other hand, take their cue from Hazra who believed

that the Purāṇic vrata-s (along with utsarga, tirtha, etc.) represent a 'popularization of Smṛti material'. That is, these rites were basically 'made up', created from 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 [muttering the name of the deity], . . . (homa), keeping awake during the night, and listening to tales . . ." <sup>1</sup> All these, he says, have their parallels in Vedic rituals.

My position on this question falls between these two views. An observation by S. Indradeva in an article entitled "Women in Folk and Elite Traditions" <sup>2</sup> encapsulates this 'midway' position:

. . . 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

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<sup>1</sup>Hazra, op. cit., p. 240.

<sup>2</sup>In Sankar Sen Gupta, ed., Women in Indian Folklore - A Linguistic and Religious Study, (Calcutta: Indian Publications Folklore Series, no. 15, 1969), p. 287.

but in the degree of sophistication,  
systemization and self-consciousness.

The Purāṇic vrata-s, in my estimation, are an example of this fusion or interweaving between 'folk' and 'elite' traditions. It is probably impossible to determine for sure whether these observances represent originally a 'brahmanization' of folk rites or a 'popularization' of Vedic rites. What can be determined from the evidence in the texts themselves is: first, that the Purāṇas were compiled and edited by brāhmins. This is consistent with the role and position that the brāhmins have in the vrata descriptions. Second, that vrata-s, as rites described above, first appear in these texts and that discussions of them multiply as the texts become more recent. Third, that vrata procedures do contain many parallels to Vedic rituals but they also contain non-Vedic elements such as the use of ritual diagrams, the inclusion of local (or non-Vedic) deities such as Durgā, and the use of nyāsa-s.

The Purāṇas, then, 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. At the same time they retained their 'Hindu' character because they remained in the hands of brāhmins who were interested in preserving, if not enhancing, their status in Hindu society.

As to why the vrata-s proliferated in the later Purāṇas the answer is probably because these rites proved to be popular amongst both brāhmanas and others for several reasons. One reason is that they were feasible. One did not have to be particularly rich to observe them, for, though gifts are always required, concessions are made for those unable to afford the stipulated items. In several of the vrata descriptions that were included in this thesis a choice of considerably simpler procedures was given after the details of the more complicated procedure had been outlined. Thus there is flexibility in this aspect of the vrata observance too, in contrast to the rigidity of Vedic rituals. Of course, we can assume that a brāhman would have to oversee the application of these alternatives but the vagueness of the texts on these matters suggests that the priest or preceptor could use his discretion in a way that the priests of a Vedic sacrifice could not. As mentioned previously, the close adherence to the ritual details of the text in Vedic sacrifices was fundamental to the efficacy of the rite. In vrata-s the attention to auspicious and inauspicious times was more important to the efficaciousness of the rite.

Another reason for the apparent popularity of the vrata-s was the fact that they could be performed by almost anyone, at almost any time. In other words, they were accessible, or more so, at any rate, than Vedic rituals.



Though the texts do not fully support the view that vrata-s were especially directed towards women and sūdras, there is no doubt that some of the restrictions normally imposed upon these groups (primarily because of their ritual impurity) were lifted in the case of vrata-s. Widows and menstruating women, categories of females that are considered particularly inauspicious and polluted respectively, were yet eligible to perform certain vrata-s with the permission of a male relative. As well, other ritual impurities that normally affect religious observances, such as a death in the family, did not affect the vrata rite provided the rite had already begun.

Two other possible reasons for the popularity of vrata-s are (1) the range of purposes for which a vrata could be observed and (2) the merits promised. Within our sample alone the range of purposes is wide, from progeny to a higher station in the next world or next life. "A woman will be reborn as a man" one vrata promises. It is conceivable that any problem, any desire that one wanted alleviated or fulfilled could be sought through the observance of a vrata.

As to the merits promised, we have seen that the descriptions dwell on them at some length and often in rather exaggerated terms. Kane, in particular, focusses on this point and thinks that it was one of the main reasons vrata-s became popular and that it reveals the 'materialistic attitudes and expectations' put under the 'garb of religion'. The brāhmins pandered to the 'ordinary human cravings'

through vrata-s, to which Banerjee adds, 'as a means to gain income'. What Kane does not say is that Vedic rituals as described in the Brāhmaṇas also promised cows and sons and worldly rewards.

In the end, it is not so much the issue that the Purāṇas promise more rewards for their rites than the Brāhmaṇas do that is of interest but the fact that the vrata-s are favourably compared to the Vedic sacrifices, and are often said to be superior. This means that the vrata-s were being touted as rites to be performed instead of the Vedic rites. Their efficacy is as potent as or more so than the old sacrifices. This point, it seems to me, is one of the things that would have appealed to many within and without the Hindu fold.

Are vrata-s recognized by the tradition as a legitimate form in which a woman, householder or śūdra may practice asceticism? One way to find an answer to this question would be to examine literary works, especially plays - which can be a good source of information on prevailing attitudes and customs, in which women or householders are depicted as observing a vrata. The Purāṇas that were examined in this thesis do not say anything about this question directly. Nevertheless, it is possible to extrapolate. Earlier we saw that the terms tapas (in the sense of inner heat generated from effort) and niyama (restraints) initially were applied to the brahmacāryas (celibate students) and to

the yoga initiands - in other words, to those practising some form of asceticism. Aside from the dvija householder and his spouse who practised tapas (here meaning austerity) and observed various restrictions before participating in a Vedic sacrifice, few women, householders and śūdras were legitimately allowed to practice asceticism unless they left the varnāśramadharmā system altogether - that is, became sannyāsins. Given that the central feature of a vrata is fasting and if indeed the vrata-s were open to all castes and sexes, then these rites would be a legitimate form in which these persons could gain the spiritual merit and power associated with ascetic practice.

Interestingly, this possibility with regards to women seems to have escaped Banerjee who says: The object of allowing women to observe vrata-s without regard to the usual prohibitions made against them was, in the first place, that,

The Brāhmanas had to guard against the conversion of women to asceticism by Buddhists and Jains, which was steadily causing a disintegration of society and creating, among the people, a sense of aversion to the second stage of life, viz. Gārhasthya. For this reason it was necessary to devise means of attracting women to family life. . . . The mind of the average woman will naturally be attracted to such religious duties as would render her husband or son free from all maladies, make them happy and long-lived . . . Thus, in a way the Vratas seem to have been a means of keeping women within the fold of family life by holding out assurances of a happy

existence here and hereafter.<sup>3</sup>

If Banerjee's conclusions about women being converted into Jain and Buddhist nuns or ascetics are correct one could turn his remarks around to suggest that the authors of the Purāṇic vrata-s saw a way in which women could participate in ascetic practices without leaving their dharmic duty — by observing vrata-s. Vrata-s, then, may well have been a way of keeping women within 'the fold of family life - not through assurances of a happy existence but by allowing women more freedom to express their religious sensibility and more freedom to legitimately control their religious lives.

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There is considerable scope for further study on these religious vows. Of interest would be to ascertain how vrata-s differ from other kinds of Hindu ritual-temple and household, for example. It would be useful to pursue further the close connection between utsava-s (festivals) and vrata-s, and to pursue the way in which myths, often derived from the epics, are used in the vrata-kathā-s to provide justification for the practice of the vrata-s and to show their efficaciousness. Finally, it would be interesting to examine what vrata-s are like in practice.

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<sup>3</sup>Op. cit., p. 38. Hazra also expresses this idea, see op. cit., p. 231.

Who actually observes them? Are the Purāṇas used as manuals of procedure? In what ways are the śāstric vrata-s similar and different from the non-śāstric? Such research would greatly enhance our knowledge of devotional Hinduism as a whole and contribute significantly to our knowledge of Purāṇic religion.

APPENDIX

CHART OF HINDU (LUNI-SOLAR) MONTHS AND NAKSATRAS\*

Amānta**	Fortnight	Nakṣatra	Gregorian Months
Caitra	śukla (light) kṛṣṇa (dark)	citrā svāti	March-April
Vaiśākha	śukla kṛṣṇa	viśākha anurādhā	April-May
Jyaiṣṭha	śukla kṛṣṇa	jyeṣṭhā mūla	May-June
Āṣāḍha	śukla kṛṣṇa	pūrvāṣāḍha uttaraṣāḍha	June-July
Śrāvāṇa	śukla kṛṣṇa	śrāvāṇa dhanīṣṭhā	July-August
Bhādrapada	śukla kṛṣṇa	śatatarakā pūrvā- uttara bhādrapada	August- September
Āśvina	śukla kṛṣṇa	revatī āśvini bharaṇī	September-October
Kārttika	śukla kṛṣṇa	kārttikā rohini	October-November
Mārgaśīrṣa	śukla kṛṣṇa	mārgaśīras ārdrā	November-December
Pauṣa	śukla kṛṣṇa	pūnarvasu pusya	December-January
Māgha	śukla kṛṣṇa	āśleṣa maghā	January-February
Phālguna	śukla kṛṣṇa	pūrvā- uttara- phālguni hasta	February-March

\* Adapted from K. Kerrey "The Hindu Festival Calendar" in Welbon and Yocum (eds.), Religious Festivals in South India and Sri Lanka (Anchor: New Delhi, 1982), p.

\*\* Amānta months are reckoned between successive new moons. This system prevails in South India, Maharashtra, Gujarat

and Nepal. In the Pūrṇimānta system, prevalent in northern India, lunar months are reckoned between successive full moons. In Pūrṇimānta the month of Caitra corresponds to March, Vaisakha to April, etc.

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