

The Implication of Memory in Folklore: A Study through the Context of ‘Vratkathas’

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Abstract

Folklore and the traditions associated with it play an integral part in our everyday life as majority of the ‘vratas’ of the Hindu religion, which develop from these are performed through the rituals by the people. The language does not act as a barrier in this ritual process. A ‘vrata’ is a vow or promise observed by Hindu men and women which empowers the performer and gives certain divine capacity to obtain their objectives as – a husband, a family with children, mainly sons, recovery from disease, prosperity being some of them. The ‘vratkathas’ which accompanies it describe the history and the reasons behind following the ‘vratas’. The source of these ‘kathas’ are discovered in the oral narratives and they are a result derived from the memory of the people narrating it. The narratives have been written down in books to make it easier for the performer, but the sound of the sacred words echo within the believers. Sages, revered characters of the epics are the narrators in the Puranas, but in real life the eldest person in the family becomes the narrator and the teacher who from their experience recreates the rules and regulations to the younger generations. Their views and ideas of the culture reflect on their psychological orientations and prolonged belief as they supplement and complement each other. The performers are trained and they become ingrained with it. The elder people emphasise on the listening of the ‘vratkatha’ to strengthen the efficacy of the ‘vrata’.

This paper shall focus on the effectiveness of memory in the context of ‘vratkathas’ and attempt to rediscover and renew the tradition between the folklore and its culture.

Key words: folklore, ‘vrata’, ‘vratakatha’, memory, narratives, effectiveness.

Religion and the concepts associated with it are indeed imbibed in our mind from the attachment to the umbilical cord till the funeral rites and the traditions implied in it further strengthen the bond. The various folklores, Aesop’s fables, Panchatantra, the Bible stories and the Puranas throughout the world implicate the necessity of morality and the subtle

mechanism in the weaving of the plot and the characters express the ideology and philosophy underlying the social function of these narratives. The 'vratkathas' which derive from these narratives are mostly religious tales and are intended to inculcate discipline, virtue and rules of moral behaviour but simultaneously work to reinforce patriarchal authority by reinscribing feminine subordination. The source of these 'kathas' are discovered in the oral narratives and they are a result derived from the memory of the people narrating it. The narratives have been written down in books to make it easier for the performer, but the sound of the sacred words echo within the believers. This paper will attempt to co-ordinate between the narrative retelling of 'vratkathas' in the context that how recollections and memories of the various narrators help in understanding the origin and reflecting the importance and significance of 'vratkathas' in the framing of the society alongside agreeing and contrasting the various norms set by the religion, mainly Hinduism and its culture keeping aside the various orthodoxies and jingoism imbibed in it.

June McDaniel in her book *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion* describes "a brata (or vrata, in Sanskrit form) involves a vow taken by Hindu men or women, usually for the purpose of bringing blessings to the family." (McDaniel 31) She even describes it as "... generally performed in order to gain some goal – a husband, a happy family with many sons, a wealth, a job, or recovery from disease or disaster." (McDaniel 21) The overcoming of disaster is generally done by worshipping a special deity. The 'vratas' which is accompanied by these 'vratkathas' has its traces in the Puranas and the Mahabharata and the rituals prescribed in these focus on the rules and regulations still prevalent in the society. The story underlying it is the 'vratkatha' that explains the history of it and reasons for performing it. They are embedded within it and Sudhansu Kumar Ray divides them into four parts of the vratkatha: displeasure of the deity, trouble caused by the deity, fulfilment of the original vow and reward for devotion, protection of the devotee, the "mangala" incident in which the deity forgives and blesses the disciple. (Ray 49) The gods test the devotion of their devotees, and subject them to a trial and hardship. When the gods appear as beggars or lepers or in other unwanted forms, they put to test the native inclinations and the innate goodness of the character, and when they appear in dreams they project either/or situations and convey a warning regarding the consequences, or arouse the dormant conscience. They have a framework and in most cases the observation of fasts forms an integral part of it and it carries within it the element of fear on one hand and the element of covetousness and greed on the other. They define human relationships and reflect upon familial and kinship ties. Vratas, according to Jasbir Jain are often classified into two kinds consisting of the kamya vrata, which is motivated and undertaken with the objective of a particular wish fulfilment and which functions almost like

a contract between the devotee and the object of worship; and the second category being the nitya vrat, which is a fast undertaken as part of an obligatory duty. The kanya vrata results in direct opposition to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita which advocates disinterested performance of duty. (Jain 6) The 'vratas' are depicted on the lunar calendar of any region and in a specific time around the year and sometimes in a particular time period within the month. For instance – the Ekadashi surfaces twice in a month during the full moon day and new moon day with a difference of fourteen days. Similarly, 'vrata' is also based on the deities and the 'vratkatha' confirms it. For instance – the Jitastami vrat, held in the Krishnatami in month of Ashwin is followed by women for begetting son in the family and the story of the King Chandraketu and his wife performing fast for the whole day in a year influences woman to follow this. The irony in this sacred ritual that it lays emphasis on bearing a male child, not a female child. Similarly, Bhai Duj is followed by sisters for the welfare of their brother after Diwali, but no such ritual is held for the sister in return. The inequality in gender surfaces in these 'vratas' and there is hardly any vrata which the womenfolk sustain for themselves.

Now, the narrator in the Puranas can be described taking examples from various portions like the Satyatapas, Durvasas in the Varaha Purana narrate the different incarnations of Lord Vishnu citing the difference between the Dharmic and the Adharmic body and the manifestations of good and evil. The sages like Pulastya, Agastya, characters like Bhishma, Yudhisthira, Lord Krishna, Mahadeva, Narada and others portray the embodiment of maleness and Godliness and there is hardly any women requesting. The tone of Yudhisthira in Kamala Ekadashi in Padma Purana is:

O, revered one, I desire to listen to the best of the vows (in honour) of Visnu, which removes all sins and gives (its) fruit to those who observe it. O Janardana, tell me the account of Visnu's mouth; what is the manner in which it is observed? What is its fruit? ... What is the fruit of what gift? What should be done by men, O lord?

(Padma Purana 2543)

and in others like the Fire-god speaks on the vows relating to the week-days: "I shall describe vows relating to the week-days that would confer enjoyment and emancipation." (Agni Purana 511) In the description of vows, the Sankara (Mahadeva) mentions that women "When impure (i.e. during menstruation), she, being restrained, should get it done by someone else... A woman, who desiring her good, observes (Ananta Phalada Tertiya vow), gets birth as a man, favoured by Gauri. (Padma Purana 323) The worship of Lakshmi – Narayan is present in most Puranas and the various forms of Lakshmi and Visnu are lavishly worshipped. The very sacrifice consisting of Naramedha (metaphoric), Aswamedha, Agnistoma yajnas give fruitful

results and the boon perceived from these are surprising enough to drive a common man out of senses.

It is seen that sages, revered characters of the epics are the narrators in the Puranas, but in real life, the elder women, mainly the married ones instruct the younger folk, consisting of unmarried girls of young age to perform the vrata. They orally narrate the dictums and carry the traditions through generations which reflect their power of memory as most of them recollect the required materials, the following of process etc. and from their experience recreates the rules and regulations to the younger generations. Their views and ideas of the culture reflect on their psychological orientations and prolonged belief as they supplement and complement each other. The performers are trained and they become ingrained with it. The stringent rules to follow these vratas are flexible for pregnant women and substitutions are given to avail the blessings. The customs too have been lenient nowadays as young girls' health deteriorates due to prolonged fasting. The elder people emphasise on the listening of the 'vratkatha' to strengthen the efficacy of the 'vrata'. These attempts to preserve the harmony amongst people but has gradually become gendered and the women are marked as the bearers to preserve this conformity. The rituals were earlier performed by both men and women, but now it is mostly followed by the women in most of the society and the Indian society is no exception as it is performed nowadays by unmarried and young girls, married women and elders. The 'vrata' is enacted by the women in the presence of the constellation in auspicious moment is observed for welfare of the family in the Hindu religion. For the men folk, they follow the Lakshmi vratas mainly to gain wealth and other materialistic obligations, like success in business and male heir, but for the women it is the welfare of the family, good health, long happy conjugal life, to avoid widowhood and beauty. The rules for the male members are minimal marking the patriarchal domination which gives them an extra advantage providing them the breadwinner's supremacy and the women perform in favour of their husbands.

The elder women instructing the younger to draw artistic drawings, to pluck flowers, dig pits, building clay models in a way train them for their future generations and their symbolic representations is vast which cannot be understood by a young girl. The observance of cleaning and preparing draws salvation and the disciplining of the body to abstain 'tamsik' food, fasting, bathing in the holiest water reduces desire and the obedience of rituals leads to better fulfilment of promises and instantaneous awards. The women believe that extreme fasting can alter the karma and the ideologies and philosophies attached to it transform it into an active agency. The books too assure that the destiny cannot be changed but the God give relief or boon to the mankind. Miracles do take place in these narratives, but psychological pressures are also applied.

The influence of memory in these cases are pertinent enough as scholars from the West have taken interest in the Puranas and their translations have been pertinent enough to help us to understand how the words were interpreted from the oral narratives etched thousand years ago. The Occidental scholars used English language as a tool and implemented it for the recognition of the rich cultural history of India. The memory and its recollections have been penned down in written forms, and the “book” form prevailed. Of course, even within the traditions of the “book,” sound played and continues to play an important role in the transmission and assimilation of holy words in the actual life of persons. Religious scholars in many different areas are taking, with increasing seriousness, the oral-aural qualities of scripture. According to famous critic, C. Mackenzie Brown, close attention is also being given to the processes involved in committing the spoken holy word to writing. It is getting more and more recognized and the commitment of sacred words to writing is becoming of considerable moment and is not merely a matter of preserving oral traditions that might otherwise have been lost; a sacred book, for instance, often originally a vehicle for a divine revelation, may itself become the revelation. The course of development of written scriptures clearly differs from tradition to tradition and the specific ideas of a culture about spoken words and sounds and the views of what is revealed in sacred words (and images) are just some of the significant factors that vary widely and that shape the attitudes toward writing when it is introduced or at least becomes possible. (Brown 69) Such factors interact with whatever inherent psychological differences may exist between the two media; and while in some cases writing may be quite destructive of oral modes of thinking, in others, the oral and written media may well supplement and complement each other. It is difficult to trace the origins of these kathas as claimed in this paper before as they belong to the oral tradition and some of them may have a root in the puranas. However, their origins can be said to be collective and anonymous and their development accumulative. Besides offering religious consolation and recipes for remedial action, the perpetuation of the katha tradition is necessary for certain sections of society—priests, capitalists and politicians alike. They form the base of a material and the hierarchical society which constitute a body of literature which tries to define a code not only for social behaviour but also helps negotiate the fear of the unknown. As they are passed on from one generation to another or one region to another through oral tradition, there may often be different versions of the same story or happening and there is always scope for new gods and goddesses to be added to the pantheon, for new cults to be propagated and old ones to be revived as in the case of Santoshi Mata, who got into the ‘vrata’ cult from the popular culture, being defined in movies and held as the daughter of Lord Shiva. The mass submission to the popular culture led the Goddess to be included in the pantheon and sour foods are strictly prohibited while observing the puja of the

Goddess. The vrata, is divided into folk-vratas which are propounded by the mass and the Brahminical vratas described in the Puranas. Despite being grounded in the oral tradition, the folk tale has a sharp difference from the vratkathas which emerged from them. They represent a different tradition from that of the folk-tale, if it shares some of the elements of the vrat katha, contains both rebellion and subversion which the vrat katha does not. The folk tale goes on changing and accommodating new environments, and the characters are also seen in more fulsome relationships. As contrasted to the fear element in the vrat katha, the folk tale emphasises a commonsensical approach. At times there is also a sense of reversal accompanied by humour. The folk tale even as it reinforces a code of conduct which subordinates women, functions within a wider discourse as it addresses social and economic problems and is not focused on the relationship between the deity and the devoted. Vrat kathas also do not approximate to the fairy tale, even as they share the same genealogy and have some features in common with the fairy tale. The dominant pattern of a vrat katha works through deprivation or lack, devotion and reward.

The tone and the authorial intent of the narrators in the Puranas or the edited books are in tune with the norm of the society. The position of women in history portrays an uneven graph showing education of women in some ages and then determination in the next period and this constant degradation of women has led them to be following prescriptive ritualistic activities and fix their role as someone's daughter, to wife and then mother. The women possess no identity of their own and the discourse involved in it can be questioned as the written are a reflection of the oral traditions and they may have been modified and re-interpreted through the centuries and the 'truth' in these can be contested as they have been explained and re-described matching the condition of the society, mainly the women and the behaviour of the women which subtly implied in harsher and stricter rules for the betterment of the women. It all evolved out of the memory which was permanently etched in the sages or the elder women folk and according to critics, it can be claimed as most of the rituals are intended for married women, be it the Jitastami vrata, Mangalchandi vrata, Guptadhan vrata, Nilshasthi, Shivratri to the Yampukur vrata, Prithibi vrata, Punyipukur for the maidens. The dire consequences of having some specific foods can result to deformation and the fear that is induced is enough to torment a woman to sacrifice her own life for the performance of the rituals.

Finally, it can be concluded that the varied discourse of the 'vratas' and its meanings at different events and translations in different languages, and recollections from the memory has created a vast expanse of studies arousing curiosity in this specific area. The various narratives are certainly not the exact description of the 'vratkathas' but it does add a different level of interpretation to the original text. The code of conduct for woman penned in the

colonial era has transformed in the post-colonial era and the 'vratkathas' too has gained some flexibility in its rules and regulations. This is because the people studying more about these have been critiquing it and it had to be changed in the recent years. There is a very little possibility of subverting these or substituting its hegemonic categories because to do so would require a total rewriting of the text. The women, despite their societal upgradation and their affinity to modernity are coerced to follow the gruesome rituals and they are bound to follow these which arises that relationship is one of tension or of a schizophrenic split. The question too arises, that will these narratives be predominant or some changes might be even possible? The narrators can be contradicted, and the interpretations contested. There are no conclusive answers as the economic backgrounds of the practitioners are in a range from the kings to the poor. However, they represent a thriving living tradition and though lacking the potentiality of subversion and improvement, they become narratives of disempowerment.

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