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PRAXIS OF *BRATAKATHA* AND *PANCHALI* IN FOLK RITUALS OF THE BENGALIS: A  
CRITICAL STUDY ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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**Abstract**

The major chunks of the Bengali population that live in the eastern part of India, around the river delta of the Ganges, have their own rich culture, folk traditions, literature, art, music and food habits. The paper is aimed at the study of social implications and cultural representation of women in terms of the practice of folk rituals using *panchalis* and *bratakathas*. These narrative tools have been in use in rural Bengali traditions since the medieval era for pleasing a few goddesses like *Sitala*, *Laxmi*, *Bipodtarini*, *Santoshi*, and so on. This paper focuses on the folk rituals involving praxis of the *bratakathas* and *panchalis* by the Bengali Hindu women. These rituals are weaved around the domestic span of a closed agrarian society. The women are at the centre of these rituals. The rituals are designed by the cultural belief system to canvass the ladies in the community as pious, chaste, and well-wishers of the entire family. In fact, it is the innate and universal nature of the women across cultures to make a happy world around them. However, the rapid urbanization of the society is responsible for the declination of the popularity of such rituals called *brata* that invariably engage reading out *bratakatha* and *panchali*. Fortunately, the cultural tradition of observing *brata* is still well preserved, not in any lesser intensity, in many rural areas of the Bengali population.

**Keywords:** Rituals, Folk, Culture, Identity, Women, the Bengali.

**Introduction**

In the folk tradition of any culture, storytelling in various formats has been practiced from time immemorial. In any popular culture, storytelling sessions have served both the purposes of entertainment and also transmission of the tradition and customs of the community life. The *bratakatha* and *panchali*, as a part of the oral tradition of storytelling, are being transmitted by words, involving at least two agents – the performer

and the listener, across generations. In this paper, the performance parts of the different *bratas* or rituals are critically looked into, leaving the evolution of the *kathas* or the stories. However, the fact is, without narrating the *katha* (story) the *brata* (ritual) is not considered complete.

The *bratakatha* is a tale that celebrates a divine being and is associated with the observance of a ritual involving fasting mostly performed by women. It is recited during the worship of the

goddess or god associated with that ritual as B.N Patnaik, mentions in his article "On Two Lakshmi-Centred Discours in Odia". The *bratas* of goddess *Laxmi*, *Bipodtarini* and *Santoshi* are done in an extensive way in Bengali Hindu households, especially in the rural areas of the population. According to Shila Basak, the story of the *bratakatha* has an intimate connection with custom, tradition and the system of belief. They inform us about the religious belief prevalent among women (Basak, 2000: 60). The *panchali*, on the other hand, is the verse form in which the narrative centres around either a god or a goddess who wants to get worshipped on earth, and for this a human being has to suffer hardship. The *panchali* recites how the worship of goddesses is established on earth and how the submission led to the mitigation of all hardship from the lives of the devotees. At the end of almost every *panchali*, it is explicitly spelled out that those who act accordingly are rewarded with prosperity and good health for the entire family.

The *bratakathas* have been an important part of the Hindu society in Bengal, Orissa, Assam and Tripura, along with some other parts of India. These *bratakathas* have an intricate relationship with the worship of the gods and goddesses in the community life of the Bengali people. The *Bratas* are mainly all those practices and custom which are observed for the fulfilment of the various desires and wants of the human, especially of the women (Basak, 2000:1). The word *brata* originally means the practice of rules or the performance of rites while praying to god for worldly gains. Reading out *bratakathas*, the special tales, after the offerings, mark the completion of the ritual or *brata*. The oral tales of the *bratas* have found their way into the sphere of written literature in verse form which is also known as *panchali*. Later, such *Panchalis* have given rise to a type of literary composition in Bengali which is now better known as the *Mangalakavya*.

The Brahmanical *bratas* (involving priests or *purohits*) of the *puranas* and *dharmasastras* do generally abide by the pre-existing rituals, but most of the folk *bratas* are performed in households by wives, mothers and sisters. They demonstrate new revelations or deviations sometimes. The *bratas* of women tend to be communal and participatory in

nature, involving a group of people of varying ages and experiences. The *bratakatha* or *panchali* are articulated in the vernacular languages which are understood by common people as against the Sanskrit mantras of Brahminical *bratas*. These domestic and womanly *bratas* (also known as *Meyeli bratas*) always involve uttering of actions of a deity through *katha* as against *yagna* (sacred Fire) and *ahuti* (burnt offerings) of Vedic worship. Thus, the mass participation of women celebrating such *bratas* in every household makes it a great testimony of popular culture. The Brahmanical *bratas* enforce the rules of traditional Hinduism but folk *bratas* of women ignore such details. But the rigorous self restrains, daylong fasting, prohibitions at personal level have always been the hallmark of these folk *bratas*.

According to P.V. Kane, the *Brata* is originally related to the dual idea of obedience and duty during the Vedic period. Later, this was associated with the religious undertaking or a vow involving extreme restrictions on physical pleasure or modification of behaviour. Thus *brata* originally involved rigorous perseverance and observance of rules. In course of time, much flexible and lucid forms of *brata* were evolved and popularized by the non-brahmin housewives of the Bengali households (Bhattacharya, 613). These *bratas* have the only objective of the fulfillment of simple wishes having simple rules or *niyamas*. These *bratas* consisted of a collection of common items, drawing of motifs with rice powder, recitation of *panchali* and listening to the story of the worshipped goddesses. The women are the transmitters as well as the participants in these *bratas*.

### Methodology

This paper uses the prevalent *bratakatha* and *panchali* used in the *bratas* observed by the rural womenfolk of the Bengali community. A few *bratakatha* and *panchali* related to goddess *Laxmi*, *Santoshi* and *Bipodtarini* comprise the primary material of the study. These stories and verses give hints toward the observable intention of the women *bratis*. A descriptive analysis is applied in the study to critically examine the narratives of rituals in order

to find out the role and motives of the women behind observance of such *bratas*.

### Findings

The *Laxmi brata* is observed every Thursday and Goddess Laxmi is worshipped on the full moon day in the month of *Ashwin*. This day is called *Kojagari Purnima*. Women keep fast, the idol is decorated with flower; '*Alpona*' is drawn with rice powder. The whole family comes together to listen to the *Katha* (story). The *Santoshi Mata brata* is observed on sixteen successive Fridays or till one's wish is fulfilled. The devotee performs worship with special offerings of jaggery and chickpeas. The devotee should have only one meal during the day and not eat or serve sour foods to others. The *Bipadtarini brata*, is usually observed on Tuesdays or Saturdays in the month of *Ashada* according to the Hindu Bengali Calendar. Her legends as described in the *bratakatha* established her name, *Bipada Tarini*, which literally means deliverer from danger (Ostor, 2004). In all these *bratas*, women of different ages worship the divine goddesses with utmost sincerity.

### Discussion

The rules and norms of the *bratas* have so many manifestations. All religious rituals typically involve controlling bodily desires and promoting a sense of sacrifice. The devotees pray to godly powers in order to please them with a hope to reap the benefits of perpetual bliss. The women '*bratis*' embrace fasting and perform the *brata* in abiding by every detail and with full conviction. It can be assumed that the ritual of fasting by women might have resulted from the lack of food at home. The women might be sacrificing the food for the men and children in the name of *brata*. On the other hand, the women *bratis* sought the blessings of the goddesses so that they can acquire a few godly powers of prosperity happiness and good health. In the Hinduism divinity in female form has always been worshipped as a symbol of power of 'Good' over 'Evil'.

In medieval Bengal, the rituals were mostly related to agriculture (often observed for protection of crops and cattle), community or family welfare (for protection against dangers, death and disease).

Originally, the *bratas* as rituals belonged to an oral vernacular tradition. The older women passed on the ritual instructions while they were mainly performed by the younger women. In this way, the older generation could control the young ones in a family in the name of molding them as perfect housewives. In this context, mention may be made of the *Sati* tradition (accepting death with deceased husband) as the Brahmanical concept of a perfect wife. In fact, the *bratakathas* and *panchalis* highlight the women-centric 'performances' in an attempt to the assertion of identity in a gender biased social structure.

### Conclusion

The oral tradition of telling *bratakatha* at the end of the *brata* eventually made way for the written *panchali* and other literary forms like *Mangalkavyas* in the Bengali culture. The performances in the rituals can be seen as a medium of culture dissemination across generations. Even today, the *bratas* have retained the rituals of articulating *katha* and reading out *panchali* by the women for future well-being or to mitigate a family crisis. A reading of the *bratakathas* reveals that the desires and wants of the *bratis* consist primarily of the mundane wish fulfillment as against the Vedic concept of spiritual attainments. The *bratakatha* and *panchali* indicate towards the purification of women who are often put to test by the Goddess. The modification of characters is solicited as the corrupt ones are corrected through punishments. Such *bratas* emphasize the significance of women with an aim to enhance the universal feminine qualities like care giving and sacrifice for the family and community..

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