

The Significance of *Brata* Rituals in the Life of the Married Women in Rural Bengal

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Abstract: *Brata is an age-old religious ritual practiced by women of West Bengal. It has its roots in the totemic cults of the aboriginals of this land. Brata finds reverberation in the identity that it ascribes to women as being the Su-Grihini and care-giver of her family. In the present day, community jubiliations buttressed by the perception of Dharma provides legitimacy to Brata that makes it an omnipresent ritual. In this paper, I attempt to underscore an anthropological and cultural perspective of Brata and understand its significance in the religious life of married women in rural Bengal.*

Keywords: Brata, faith, women, tradition, celebration.

Introduction

The existence of religion is undeniable. It is either perceived as a coercive force, binding humanity together by bringing them together under one faith or as a disruptive institution that weakens scientific reasoning and makes one susceptible to irrationality. There are staunch believers, atheists and even critics who deny the existence and relevance of God, nonetheless they find themselves preoccupied with the notion of God. Some consider religion as an 'inner faith that could move the world, while some name it as a supernatural force whose existence is perceptible in the miraculous events of life and a few regard religion as an institution that makes humans feeble and static. Nonetheless in spite of its varying manifestations one cannot disregard the social meaning that is attributed to religion.

India is a land of multifarious religious activities and organization. The presence of religion in the life of an ordinary individual is undeniable. Daily life of an ordinary individual breaks with the chiming sound of the local temple bells, the morning walks are accompanied with the chanting of the '*hari naam*', exam preparations are bolstered with divine mantras, mothers pray and keep fasts for the general well-being of their children, school

examinations are taken very seriously and so are its accompanying prayers. Mothers offers prayers and make donations at temples so that their children are benefitted by lady luck. This is not unknown to the people; they have grown up under the shadow of faith and experience religion as an integral part of their lives.

India's historical past is a tale of spiritual Hinduism that is codified in texts or *granthas* and is observed in the mainstream dominant religion, and the local folk religion that is cherished, remembered and lived through memories and carnivals. Among the various forms of folk religion, *Brata*, premised on the edifice of faith, continues to perform a significant role in the spiritual, social and emotional life of an Indian woman's life. In the whirlpool of empirical diversity, *Brata* appeals as a women centric religious ritual which has its diversification in different regions of the country but its uniqueness and commonality is asserted by the principles of 'auspiciousness and purity, care for others, helping with problems and expressing personal faith' (Daniel 2003: 30).

There have been many scholars (Pearson 1996: 45-77) who have traced the origin of the word *Brata*. Pearson refers to the work of Kane (1974: 1-21) where he describes the word '*br*' to mean a choice or to select. This meaning was given by Yaska in his *Nirukta* written in the 5th-6th B.C. According to him, "*as a choosing involves willing*", '*br*' can also be used to mean "*to will*", and '*br*' with a suffix can be used to mean "*what is willed*". But he also gives various other meanings that can be derived from the word '*br*', which are: to command, to obey, to perform one's duty along with the correct observance of religious and moral practices and upholding the sacred or solemn vow. Hence *Brata* is a vow or promise, usually to a deity, associated with a ritual practice to gain some goal- a husband, a happy family with many sons, wealth, a job, or recovery from disease or disaster (Daniel 2003: 29).

Brata is a set of rituals that involve fasting, worshipping and praying together a common God or Goddess, or any elements of natural objects that are believed to have supernatural powers. It is the festival of the common people, distinguished by the age-old customs, beliefs, rituals, proverbs, riddles, songs, myths, legends, tales, ceremonies, art, symbolism, and various other cultural manifestations.

Anthropological understanding of Brata

Randhawa (Ray 1961: 'Foreword') writes that '*Bratas* are magico – religious rites performed by women folk in Bengal for invoking the blessings of various deities to secure domestic happiness and welfare of the dear ones. Tagore (1919) was the first author to initiate a detailed discussion on *Brata* rituals. He writes about the arts, crafts, and stories connected with *Brata*. On a deeper study it is observed that the origin of this tradition is hidden in the aboriginal totemic tradition of the various autochthonous ethnic groups who lived in this country in ancient days. The ancient Indian aboriginals in their attempt to fathom the working of the Universe, believed that divine powers resided in the elements of nature like the rivers, oceans, trees, animals and birds. They conferred sacred powers on the elements of Nature and invented rituals (systematic repletion of acts) based on the principle of sympathetic magic to appease them (Tagore 1919; Roy 1950; Das 1952; Roy 1961).

There dawned a realization among the natives that natural powers could protect and prevent hazards of all forms if they could be appeased through innovative rituals. Rituals were thus initiated in groups that would facilitate communication of one's desires or *kamana* and in turn would safeguard the community against the onslaughts of nature. Primitive society was characterized by collective consciousness. Prayer was not an individual isolated activity rather it was offered in groups to seek welfare for the entire community. As a natural consequence, the normative performance of *Brata* acquired group legitimacy. Some of the common wishes of the natives which they sought to be mitigated through rituals were prevention of drought, famine and flooding. The natives performed *PurnipukurBrata* and prayed so that water might not get dried from the ponds during the spells of extreme dry heat of *Baishakh* season. Similarly, prayers through *BasundharaBrata* were offered so that they were blessed with adequate rainfall (Tagore 1919: 22-28).

The Aryans named the natives of this country as *Anya Brata*, and their religious rituals were called *Brata* (29). The supernatural powers attributed to the elements of nature were not exclusive to this land, rather Tagore notes several aboriginals in different parts of the world who worshipped the common natural forces like the Sun, rain and mother Earth. The corn Goddess of Mexico (Tagore: 1919: 36-37), for instance, bears remarkable similarity with the Goddess Lakshmi who holds a bunch of paddy shaft in one hand and *Lakshirghara* or the earthen pot containing coins in the

other. Similarly, the Huichol community used symbolic representation through sketches similar to the use of *alponain* Bengali *Brata*.

Nihar Ranjan Roy (1950: 615-617) divides *Brata* into two categories. First, there were *Bratas* that were performed by the pre- Vedic Adivasis and *Bratas* of the aboriginals where they used the power of cave magic. In the early Vedic period, rituals were Non-Puranic and Non-Brahmanic in nature. The natives formed an agricultural community who portrayed their wishes using *guhajadu* (cave magic). The customs and rituals of the natives were associated with their daily agrarian work. Hence agrarian activities like preparation of the soil by ploughing, sowing of the seeds, harvesting of the crops were accompanied by rituals. Cave magic and its associated performance was not given consent by the Vedic sages and they refused to accept or legitimize it. Performance of cave magic as a recourse to gain favours and strength was an unacceptable ceremony hence it was not mentioned in the ancient texts written/composed during the Early Vedic Ages (Roy 1950: 616).

Due to socio-economic reasons like marriage, war and proximity in settlement areas, the Aryans and the non- Aryans interacted with each other resulting in the process of acculturation. Ancient ingredients like fruits, vegetables, beetle nuts, turmeric, banana, *paan*, *dhan* (paddy), coconut, vermilion, *sindur*, *ghat* or a pot, and the symbol of doll (that is drawn on the pot), used by the pre-Aryan natives, became a part of the ritual observances of the Aryans Brahmanical society. This is one of the major reasons for the gradual acceptance of the Non-Brahmanical *Bratas* into the Aryan society. The Non-Puranic and Non-Aryan *Bratas* in Bengal gained popularity in the early middle ages (fifth, sixth and seventh century) and continued to be widely accepted for days to come.

With the passage of time, the aboriginal *Bratas* required the presence of a Brahman priest to solemnize them. Women retained their initial status, as the main *Brata* practitioners and preachers, in these instances. Once a certain *Brata* was legitimized by the Brahman priest, it was included in the Puranas, facilitating the process of 'upward mobility' (Daniel 2003: 3). These *Bratas* have transformed its nature from being a non-Aryan, native, unrecognised religion, to being a recognized ritual, performed by the Brahman priests in the Hindu society. Some of these *Bratas* that underwent the process of upward mobility were *Shivratri Brata*, *Akhanda Dwadashi Brata*, *Purnima Brata*, *Rambhatritiya Brata*, *Budhashtami Brata*, *Mahanavami Brata*, *AnangEyodashi Brata*, *Adityashayan Brata*, *Raskalyani Brata* and *Sharkara Brata* (Roy 1950: 616).

S. K. Roy (1960) gives an anthropological perspective on *Brata*. The Bengali community descended from the Palaeolithic race. They lived as hunters and gatherers but gradually with the passage of time as the delta expanded the Paleolithic race migrated to the alluvial plains. They became agriculturally and commercially advanced people. 'It is for this reason that their culture, art and crafts are fundamentally and functionally related to those of the aboriginal tribes living today in the hills around the new alluvial tracts' (Roy 1960: 6). Bengal, he writes, was subjected to tidal overflow. In the rainy season the whole alluvial plain was converted into a sea and rivers overflowed most of the area. Thus, frequent heavy rainfall, floods, storms and earthquakes, brought disappointments to the primitive inhabitants. The common *Brata* practised by women was the *Zampukurer Brata* which was performed to protect the inhabitants of the swampy areas from ferocious wild animals.

Sudhashu Kumar Roy writes: 'Brata is a domestic form of religion and apparently not associated with temple service. It is the fundamental religion to which all Bengalis are born into and brought up' (Roy 1960: 10). He further writes that originally *Brata* was not a secluded domestic religion of women alone, but existed as an interior wing of a single and complete magico-religious observance that also had a powerful exterior wing for men: 'somehow or other, the link between the two sexes has now been lost or cut off. The introduction of Brahmanic religion, philosophy and mode of worship tended to disintegrate the full-scale functions of the Brata religion' (pp.12-13). In other words, with the introduction of the Brahmanic religion into the domestic life of the Bengali household, men have gained more power and importance in the external aspect of religion, while women have retained their participation in the domestic observance of religion in the form of *Brata*. This clearly reflects on how *Brata* has become a ritual that is participated by women.

For S. R Das (1953), *Brata* is significant, because it has shaped the Hindu religious rituals. 'Brata persists side by side with the so called Hindu rites and practices....It is in the folklore that we find an expression of genuine desires, aspirations, emotions and thoughts of a people...Certain Bratas have retained their indigenous features because they have not been legitimized by the Brahmins and absorbed into the Vedic culture. Their originality is marked by the absence of a male Brahmin priest, (who is appointed to offer prayers and services on behalf of the devotees) and absence of unnecessary ceremonial elaborations that make them an all-inclusive women-centric ritual. Besides, absence of strict cast/e rules makes

the Brata an open system for all to participate irrespective of the caste norms and makes Brata a truly folk religion.' (Das 1953: 2-3).

Barun Kumar Chakraborty defines *Brata* as a ceremony, participated and organized exclusively by women. A renowned folklorist that he is, Chakraborty analyses the concept of *Brata* from the perspective of cultural studies, explaining how *Brata* is an expression of women's feminine nature and qualities in a patriarchal society. *Brata* performance as a domestic religious ritual becomes a medium of achieving respect not only from the members of the family but also from one's self. A woman undergoes penance, and sacrifices her desires for the sake of the others in the family. She finds extreme solace in offering prayers for the wellbeing of her family members (Chakraborty 2015: 242).

Chakraborty explains that originally men were engaged in the outside activities, while women were engaged in the domestic activities. An important part of the domestic interior world was celebration and participation in religious rituals. Women were taught, ever since childhood, to look after the welfare of their husband and children. The emotional inclination to care for their beloved ones was buttressed by the agencies of socialization. One of the main agencies that imparted lessons on being a good woman and a good wife was through *Bratakathas*.

There are chiefly three types of *Brata* identified by Tagore (1919: 17). The *Shashtriya Brata* (*Brata* that has originated in the Aryan culture and are mentioned in the Rig Veda), *Kumari Brata* (that is performed by unmarried girls between the age of 9 and 14) and *Meyeli Brata* that is mainly observed by the married Bengali women and whose rituals are the result of cultural acculturation between the Aryans and the natives. The *Brata* that I am chiefly concerned with in my study and that is commonly followed by women in West Bengal is *Meyeli Brata*.

Nature of Meyeli Brata

The popularity of *Meyeli Brata* is mainly observed in the rural areas where there is a close association between the nature of social organization, economic pattern and religious observances. The powers worshipped through *Meyeli Brata* are elements of nature like plants, shrubs, stems, a lump of earth, stone, and sometimes even the grinding stone (*sheelnora*). They are either personified as human Gods/ Goddesses or worshipped in their natural form. These 'supreme forces' are believed to be easily appeased

by obeisance of the simple rules which are set in accordance with the Bengali lunar and harvesting calendar (Basak 2006:20-33). Consecutively in the rural areas, harvesting is not simple an economic activity for self-sustenance rather it is a manifestation of their religious temperament. Each of the agricultural step is preceded by and concluded with *Brata* observance. The ingredients for each *Brata* is determined by the seasonal variations and its correspondent fruits and vegetables available (Maity 1989: 1,6-9).

The essential characteristics of a *MeyeliBrata* in its purest form are: 1. Making arrangements for collecting the fundamental ingredients required for *Brata*. 2. Reflection of one's wish through *Alpona*, which is a form of art drawn on the floor with rice paste. Each *Brata* has its separate *Alpona* designs. 3. Narration of the *Bratakatha* among a group of women. *Bratakathais* the recitation of a story organized in such a manner that it has explicable moral understanding. *Bratakatha* requires to be heard as a moral obligation to a deity. A *Bratakatha* is divided into four parts, viz. a. Displeasure of a god or goddess for nonfulfillment of a promise, b. days of trouble caused, c. fulfilment of promise and d. *mangala* or incident or reward to the devotee for their loyalty. The next and the most important feature of *Brata* tradition is the 4. Non- involvement of a male priest or any Sanskrit slokas or *mantra* in the conduction of the *Brata* rites. Prayers to the Almighty that is reflected through *charaor* rhythmic couplets after which the objects of worship are offered with flowers and the desire is expressed silently. A woman shall continue to perform *Brata* till her wish were granted. If she desired, she could still continue her *Brata* as a mark of gratitude. As these rituals have been performed by women through generations, they have acquired the status of a priestess, who has the power to assuage the weaknesses and sorrows of the family.

Fruits and flowers are offered as symbols of appeasement. Worshippers experience both faith and fear when they offer prayers to the Almighty for these are not merely blocks of stones but they are personified Gods and Goddesses whose appeasement shall ensure a better, safer and prosperous future. A typical feature of the ancient native rituals is the prohibition or certain acts or taboos during the ritualistic performance. Those acts were considered taboos that were found to be contradictory in nature. For instance, kiln could not be placed near the ritual performed for rainfall, as kiln shall heat and evaporate water. (Tagore 1919:17) Thus, *Brata* ritual is a reflection of the principle of causality as perceived by the aboriginals. Their understanding of the world is based on homeopathic magic (Frazer 1890),

where the belief prevails that the nature of conducting the ritual shall bring forth the similar result in the real world.

West Bengal is mostly a plain land, drained by different river systems, its land is best suited for agriculture. Being influenced by such geographical conditions, agriculture has become the chief occupation of the people. Rice, a staple diet, is not only cultivated for sustenance but it is important constituent of trade exchange. Other occupations like weaving and sea ferrying have also emerged on the fringes. Agriculture is a laborious occupation, involving several steps like sowing, reaping, harvesting and thrashing. Each step has to be successfully completed with swiftness and skillfulness to move on to the next step. For ripe rice grains, adequate water has to be given to the rice plants. This has intrigued the preliterate people to construe images and conceptions about the supernatural forces who would either facilitate their lives or create havoc unless appeased through prayers. Susan Wadley was the first author to mention about the auspiciousness that women attached with the ritual performance. For the practitioners, *Brata* observance marked their auspiciousness, which was explained by their commitment to the womanly duties (Wadley 1976: 150).

Given the cultural background of *Brata*, do we codify *Brata* as magic or as mysticism, ritual or an everyday practice, faith or habit, religion or superstition? As multiple thoughts cross my mind, I seek to explore the reason for continuance and persistence of *Brata* in the present state of West Bengal.

Methodology

My research is a qualitative explorative study. A convenient, purposeful, snowball sampling study was conducted in the rural areas of Howrah namely, Jagatballavpur, Amta, and Nabagram. The areas too were chosen through convenient sampling. A 'reliable resource person for each area was the point of contact. Fifty married women between the age of 19 and 86 were interviewed through face to face interview conducted by an interview schedule. Case study method was also adopted to avail primary data about the respondents.

Observations

The demographic profile of Shyampur- (Nabogram) shows that the maximum respondents belonged to the early middle age group (30-44 years),

majority of whom were married but, there were also a few respondents who were widows, unmarried and separated. On a whole, the maximum respondents belonged the general caste while a considerable number of respondents represented the Scheduled caste category as well. The educational distribution of the respondents reveal that the majority of the respondents were educated till Higher Secondary but some were illiterate. Many of them had obtained Bachelor's and Master's degree as well, explaining that the educational qualification of the respondents varied largely.

Maximum respondents belonged to the middle-income group whose income ranged between 21,000- 40,000. The majority of the respondents were housewives, but the sample population, also consisted of respondents who were students. Some of the respondents were engaged in farming and fishing activities. The majority of the husbands of the respondents were engaged as farmers or as fishermen. A few of them earned their living as tuition teachers.

According to the respondents, *Brata* is a religious activity of worshipping the Almighty. But there were respondents who replied that *Brata* is an activity that helped in continuing the family tradition and rituals.

Amta was characterized by elderly population, who were fifty years and above. They belonged to Scheduled caste and OBC. The women were married while some respondents were widows. The educational status of the area was poor as most of the women were illiterate. All the respondents from Amta area were housewives and their husbands were farmers by occupation. The area was stricken with poverty as most of the families belonged to lower income group. For the people of Amta, *Brata* is a tradition that has been continuing since age old times. Hence, they did not want to stop performing *Brata* as that might result in infuriating the Gods. They performed *Brata* with intense faith. They referred to *Brata* as Baar that was characterized by its auspiciousness.

Interestingly, the respondents believed that because they were married, they were all 'sansarimanush', who had to perform *Brata* for the wellbeing of their family. *Brata* was to be performed on every auspicious day, like the Purnima, Ekadasi and on a Saturday. Those who responded that *Brata* should be performed for children's welfare replied, that as mothers, it was their moral duty to keep *Brata* for the welfare of their children so that no harm shall fall upon them.

On further probing, the respondents replied that although there is no guarantee that they shall get something in return or a definite result, they would still like to perform the age old *Bratas* to maintain the religious

tradition of the family. The general wish, among the respondents in Amta, was to have a stable situation at home. They expressed their gratefulness to the Almighty through *Brata*. The majority of the respondents replied that they performed *Brata*, because they believed in the effectiveness of *Brata*, while a considerable section of the sample performed *Brata* because they feared that non-performance might bring ill luck and harm to the family. A considerable number of respondents believed that they bore the responsibility of passing down the essence of *Brata* tradition to their next generation.

Jagatballavpur - The respondents in this category belonged to late middle age. They had children who were adults, some of them had even gained the status of being grandmothers. Most of the respondents interviewed were either married housewives or widows. A fairly large number of respondents gained their livelihood through agricultural activities. Some of them had large tracts of land. There were a few households who earned their living from the agricultural produce as well as by engaging themselves in academic activities. Majority of the respondents belonged to general caste and they lived in joint families.

The respondents in Jagatballavpur believed that *Brata* must be performed by married women for the wellbeing of their family and children. Those who responded that *Brata* is a popular folk festival, reasoned that in some cases *Brata* has been imposed by the Brahmin priests upon the common people due to which *Brata* is still relevant in contemporary times.

Unlike Amta where respondents replied that God will look after them if they performed *Brata*, no one in Jagatballavpur replied back with the similar thought. Rather for the respondents of Jagatballavpur, *Brata* practice is a reflection of the Bengali culture. *Brata* was a form of worship, a puja that had to be performed. Their faith in *Brata* was strengthened by the long history of its performance.

Case Study

Case No. 1. Minati (name changed) an elderly woman X of 80 years old, educated till class 12 and lives in Jagatballavpur village subdivision of Howrah district. By caste she belongs to *sadgopjati* (Shudra Varna), a general caste. The family earns its livelihood from selling the agricultural produce.

She has been observing *Bratas* like the *KulkulitiBrata* and *Shiv RatrirBrata* since her childhood. After marriage, she added some other *Brata* to her list on her mother-in-law's instruction and has been following them since

then. She is a dedicated homemaker and believes that regular *Brata* practices shall keep her family united. Some of the *Bratas* performed for the welfare of her children and family are *Ashok ShashthiBrata*, *Neil ShashthiBrata*, *ChabraShashthiBrata*, *ItuBrata*, and *Lakshmi Brata*. *Brata* for her is *puja* (worship) that is accompanied with fasting. If any specific wish gets fulfilled by performing *Brata*, it is repeated again to show gratitude to the Goddess / God. She says: 'Bratakori mane einoye je amionnokichunakorleo, amarechepuronhobe. Bratakori, monerbishshashtheke .Brataamakeanekashubidathekeuddharkoreche.'

(Just because I perform *Brata*, it does not mean that I will not have to do anything to attain my wish. I perform *Brata* because I believe in it. I have been able to overcome many problems in the past through *Brata*). She further adds that *Brata* has strengthened her mental powers and has helped increase her concentration and focus in life. Hence, she feels she has been benefited by *Brata*. *Brata* is neither a burden, nor a practice of sacrifice. She has wilfully agreed to undertake *Brata* practise for the sake of her family.

As we speak, she gets comfortable and continues to talk about the changes that has occurred in *Brata* practices. She remarks that *Brata* performance has become much easier with time. There are temples erected now and priests appointed to conduct the *Brata* rituals. The temples have attached courtyard where women can sit and talk about their common issues. The priest is appointed to conduct the daily prayers and worship the *Brata* Goddesses like *Manasa* and *Shitala* in whose name temples are constructed.

I was inquisitive to know whether she believed that her wish would be fulfilled through *Brata*. To which she replied that she will worship and pray with sincerity and let God take care of the rest. If her wish were not fulfilled it did not mean that God was cruel, rather it was due to lacking sincerity in her prayers.

The above case study explores the intensive faith that women have on *Brata* rituals. *Brata* started off as an obligatory ritual but with time it has become a regular practice essentially connected with their existence.

Case No. 2 Case Study 2 is Mandira (name changed) a widow of about 55 years old in Amta. She belongs to OBC –B category and has never been to school. She has five children. She works as a domestic helper in other's house, but due to ill health she had to leave that job. Now she is a home-maker, and exists on whatever her children contribute. Her monthly income is less than twenty thousand rupees.

For her, *Brata* is a ritual of fasting. The most important aspect of *Brata* is the rule of what 'is to be eaten' and what 'not to be eaten'. Fasting is a way of showing loyalty to the Goddess, who shall henceforth be pleased with her sacrifice and grant her a wish. The *Brata* followed by her are *ItuBrata*, *Mangal Chandi* and all other *ShashthiBrata*. On probing the reasons for keeping fasts on specific days, she replies, *I observe ItuBrata so that my daughter is blessed with a son and I perform the rest for the welfare of my family. I hope they stay disease-free, healthy and happy*". She has never thought of herself as a separate individual identity apart from her family, hence her prayers, rituals and thought processes centred on her family.

But as an afterthought she says, "May be the practice of *Brata* will not yield a definite positive result, but I feel satisfied that I have done my part, my Dharma. If God is satisfied, he will look after me and fulfil my wishes. After all, everything is in the hands of the Almighty."

Conclusion

Brata is observed in different parts of India, but the *Bratas* observed in West Bengal are unique in its own ways. It is a ritual accompanied by dietary restrictions for fulfilling their desired wishes. It is beyond the canons of Brahmanical scriptures, rules of austerity and self-abnegation. As a women centric ritual, it is an escapade from the tiring, relentless daily household chores. A Bengali woman who has spent her entire life in the rural areas considers her village land and family as the only reason for her existence. Reared up in this faith, she can hardly relinquish her responsibilities as a mother or a wife. While performance of domestic duty is her priority and, in most cases, the only alternative left for her, she chooses domestic life against the external world, and makes it an integral part of her identity, shrouding it with *Brata* and its religious rites.

A Bengali *Brata* does not imply complete absence of food and displaying signs of torture masked in the garb of self-sacrifice to pacify the Almighty, rather *Brata* rituals in Bengal is lenient in many ways. It prescribes mandatory consumption of certain specific seasonal food items either in raw or in cooked form. The entire essence of Bengali *Brata* lies in its emphasis on commensality. Despite all forms of social, economic or age barriers, *Brata* prayers preaches a general and homogeneous welfare of all without creating the rules of social distancing. Hence *Brata* rites of West Bengal carries an educative message with it, that is – social problems

are best dealt with, when common prayers are offered. Praying for others, rather than praying for one's own selfish desire is the essence of *Brata* (Tagore 1919: 7). In certain instances, where *Brata* is a community festival and people rejoice altogether in celebrating it, *Brata* continues to be prevalent as a representation of the community homogeneity.

A common sight, often seen, in the interior areas of West Bengal is rural women clad in sarees, carrying earthen pots that contains some plants, incense sticks, conch shell, flowers and sweets, going to a nearby pond, open field or a temple to successfully complete their *Brata*. After completion of this ritual, they distribute sweet to fellow *bratinis*, children and family members as a symbol of sacredness.

The commonly performed *Brata* in the rural areas I visited continues to be - *Lakshmi, Shitala, Shashti, Itu, Chandi and Bipattarini*. Many of the respondents could not give a lucid definition of the term *Brata*, regarding it as a compulsory ritual that married women should observe for the welfare of their family. But beyond the obligatory nature of *Brata*, there lays a history of cultural richness. *MeyeliBrata* has acquired its uniqueness not only from being a ritual that is exclusively performed by women but also because it conveys and expresses the finer concerns and qualities about them. The essence of these rituals lay in the daily observances by women for everyday wishes such as longing for good health and life of the husband, desire for male and healthy children, longing for financial security and stability, and removal of hindrance.

Brata is beyond the commonsensical rationality of associating worship penance, sacrifice and fasting. It is a treasure trove of the Indian culture. Unlike daily worship, *Brata* has a definite date and month on which it is to be performed. *Brata* is dependent on month, *tithi, nakshatra*, year, *amavasya* and *purnima*. Scientifically calculated to match with the movement of the celestial bodies. Seasonal food is prescribed for each *Brata*, which gives women the luxury to relish these delectable food items that are otherwise denied to them due to the patriarchal organization of the society, or she denies them herself, willingly allowing other family members to devour them.

The sui-generis nature of *Brata* is its holistic approach to the well-being of the family, especially the children. *Bratas* like *Sheetal Shashti, Neil Shashti, Aranya Shashti, ItuBrata* are a few examples of prayers offered to various unusual elements of nature like the Mortar and pestle, saplings, plants, who are personified as Goddesses. The *Brata* worship highlight certain womanly concerns that they identify themselves with. Women

endeavor to seek happiness in these ideals, and pursue them through the guided worship of *Brata* Goddess. Chakraborty (2015) evaluates the feminine qualities of love, care, sacrifice, service that are expressed through the performance of *Brata* rituals. He observes that *Brata* empowers women to act independently in the religious domain by challenging the powers of male priesthood. By underscoring qualities like love, sacrifice, togetherness in the *Bratakatha*, *Brata* performance has become an important agency of socialization by preaching young women to be caring and dutiful to the needs of their husband and children. These qualities are imbibed by Bengali women and when they exhibit these qualities in their daily behaviour, they are appreciated as being *Su-ghrihini*.

Most of the women living in the rural areas are not concerned with the history of evolution of *Brata* and have not even bothered to think about motivations behind performing *Brata*. Yet for ages they have been believing, practicing and preaching this age-old ritual. Regarding it as their *dharma*, an essential part of Hindu religion and have transmitted the knowledge of *Brata* orally across generations. Therefore, an element of obligation has always been associated with *Brata* rituals. *Brata* has been observed with an element of fear, as non-performance of *Brata* shall cause harassment and obstacles in life. In course of time, *Brata* has become an obligatory, compulsory ritual that has to be rendered by married women to beget blessings for the family. Her auspiciousness and evaluation are associated with the success of the *Brata*, which is assessed by the economic prosperity, agricultural fertility and wellness of the children.

Women in the rural areas of Bengal have extreme faith in the goodwill of the Almighty. They love, revere, pray, propagate and preach the teachings of the God to their fellow villagers. There has been a perceptible change in the orientation towards *Brata* among the young educated women who aspire to be independent, think ahead in life beyond the confines of rules of domesticity. The few newly educated, first generation learners, look beyond religious rituals in their life. Not that they disrespect their elders performing *Brata*, but they would prefer to avert the ritual, which they feel are time consuming and unnecessary. In spite of the few structural changes that has occurred in the *Brata* performance, for instance construction of temples for *Brata* Gods, in spirit *Brata* continues to be women's forte.

In an age when time is significant and busy time table dominates life, most of the *Bratas* are either fading from memory or losing their practical significance yet women associate the dichotomy of *paan punya* with *Brata* observance. The belief that non-observance of *Brata* shall have a

contradictory impact on their lives continues to prevail. Fear of the consequences that might result from the break off from an age-old tradition is the major reason for the acceptance, prevalence and continuity of the *Brata* rituals. Some *Brata* rituals are made elaborate some have restrained procedures nevertheless the essence of *Brata* lies in its spirit of fellowship, love and altruism laid out in women's domesticity.

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