



The Myth or reality of Women Empowerment: Reflections on *Meyeder Brata-katha*

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Abstract:

In the Hindu Bengali society during the Brata performances, goddesses are worshipped by the womenfolk without a priest and they themselves recite kathas or conventional stories, written in Bengali rather than in Sanskrit. Despite the fact that these kathas have 'no noticeable logical build-ups' (Spivak 2001), the brota-katha is still in practice, followed and is recited in majority of the Bengali households. This paper questions the relevance and persistence of the above practice vis-a-vis contemporary modernizing forces of women empowerment, gender equality, and financial independence of women.

Key words: *Brata-katha, Culture, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Financial prosperity*

Introduction:

The Merriam- Webster Dictionary defines culture as a customary belief, characteristic feature of everyday existence, social norms, practises and rituals shared by people in a specific time period (www.merriam-webster.com). Anthropologist James Bradley defines culture as the knowledge acquired by people generation to generation and used to interpret experience and generate certain social behavior (<https://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/mph-modules/>). Brata, on the other hand is a kind of ritual practiced as a series of domestic rites followed by the women in specific time periods



during a season where women have the sole authority and dominance. P. V. Kane traces the origin of the word during the RgVedic period and associates vrata with concepts like religious or moral practices, a kind of moral duty, and a pattern of conduct (Kane, 1974). Brata is usually associated to a particular deity, engaging in some ritual practices whose main objective is to acquire some goals which varies according to the needs and desires of the aspirants. It could either be a husband for an unmarried girl, or a happy family with many sons for a married woman, wealth, a job, or recovery from disease or disaster (Mc. Daniel, 2003). Spivak interestingly refers to brata-katha as 'little mother rituals' and its staging as the creation of a space or theatre for the woman performing it (Spivak, 2001). It is evident from the definitions on culture and the traditions of ritualistic narratives, or kathas, that Brata-kathas are an integral part of the socio-religious structure of the society specifying a pattern, norm followed by the Brata observants and indeed forms a part of the culture.

Reflection from Meyeli Brata-katha as a Cultural Component:

It was in 1919 that Abanindranath Tagore's 'Banglar Brata', with special care to Bengali culture and folk legends, was published. Abanindranath Tagore was very much influenced by Rabindranath Tagore whose inspiration enabled the compilations of the folk legends and traditions of Bengal during that period. In fact the previous compilations of the Brata-katha being referred to, has also been the outturn of the enthusiasm, inspiration of Rabindranath Tagore for proper documentation of our folk tradition for its rhythmic lyrics and the melodious words (Chatterjee, 1995). Abanindranath Tagore classified Brata-katha into two types- Shastriyo Brata-katha (Scriptural and textual based) and Meyeli bratkatha. Tagore opined that any celebration or observation based on the wish fulfilment of human desires is termed as Brata (Tagore, 1919) Nihar Ranjan Roy classified Brata into two categories- Bratas performed by the pre-Vedic Adivasis and those Bratas performed by the natives where they used the power of cave magic (Roy, 1950). Madhuri Sarkar classified Brata into five categories, namely, Kumari Brata (for girls) *Sodhoba Brata* (for married woman), *pouranik broto* (included in the Puranas), *purushder* Brata (for men in particular, though they are very few in number) and *barkendrik* Brata, for specific days in every week (Sarkar, 2019). Sarkar opined that these Brata-kathas are the reflection of human desires, actively participated by the womenfolk. These Brata-kathas, according to her, are primarily



performed for the safety, security, prosperity of the family, ancestors, domestic crops, harvests and business as well (Sarkar, 2019). Leela Dube made an interesting argument that these hindu rituals are implications of the subordinate positions of the wives in the in-laws and the paternal relatives. She pointed out that the Brata rituals are the ideological code of conduct and the bearer of values and norms which is entrusted upon the women folk in the society (Dube, 1988). Wadley, on the other hand, came up with another argument where she justifies the positive impact of these rituals. Instead of theorizing the subordination of the women in the patriarchal society, she discusses the positive facet of the Brata ritual. To her, the rituals provide a psychological comfort, a sharing experience, a collective gesture and a commonness, that is, their inner space destined to accept their fate (Wadley, 1976). Pearson remarkably attributed the practice of Brata rituals to the empowering and the increasing self-confidence of the women folk. She opined that these rituals provide the women with the positiveness to broaden their activities and gives them peace of mind, as the title of her book point out (Pearson, 1996)

The Position of Women in three Specific Brata-kathas Narratives:

It is this Meyeli Brata-katha that the present paper gives its prime importance. As already mentioned, these Brata kathas are narratives which narrate a story without which the Brata is incomplete. The Brata includes a tale that revolves around a divine being and is associated with the observance of a ritual. These rituals are performed by the women folk and are mainly woman-centric primarily having linkages with the female deities and the fertility cult (Chakrabarty, 2018). Brata is observed as a ceremony, organized, participated and initiated by the women folk (Chakrabarty, 2015). Brata involves a holistic approach for the well-being of the family. The Brata worship highlights the feminine qualities of women- caring attitude, loving nature, sublimity, perseverance (Chakrabarty, 2015). But apart from this, the Brata-katha also bears linkage to women subordination and craving for a male child. Brata rituals are elaborate and in it is the spirit of fellowship, love and domesticity of women. (Gupta, 2020).

In this article, three Brata rituals have been studied highlighting women's sublimity, perseverance and subordination. The reference to Lakshmir Brata-katha indicates sublimity of women, Itu puja Brata-katha indicates women's perseverance and subordination and So-dor Brata-katha which is to be practiced only by women having a male child hence indicating the divide in the patriarchal



society. A detailed study of these three Brata-kathas brings forth some important characteristics regarding the timing of the Brata-katha, food habits and its specific features. Another very much interesting feature is its rhythmic verses, apart from the narrative.

The Table indicates the specific criteria-

Name of the Brata	Timing as per Bengali solar calendar	Characteristics	Attributes
Lakshmi Brata	Every Thursday	Worship of the Goddess of prosperity for economic well-being of the family, happy married life	Women's sublimity
Itu Puja Brata	In the month of Agrayan (November - December). To be performed on the last day of Kartik and to be followed for the, only the Sundays in that month	Worship of the Sun-god Itu, for the agricultural productivity, economic prosperity	Women's subordination and perseverance
So-dor Brata	Pous Sankranti (December -January)	To be worshiped only by those women bearing a male child	Social stigma

The Lakshmi Brata is a clear picture of the ideal woman who should remain submissive, sublime, confined to household works, obedient to the in-laws and subordinate to her husband and must engage herself in rites and rituals. This Brata-katha begins with the doubt as to what would be the



outcome of the society as women are neglecting their daily chores and duties. These lines in the Brata-katha reads as follows:

*‘Lajja adi jotogun ramoni bhuson
Nijo sukh lagi tara korich borjon
Patire koriye hela na shune bochon
Chariya apon griho anyotro gomon.’*

The translated version of the lines in the Brata-katha points out that the women folk have discarded their qualities like modesty, sensitivity and are engaged in their personal joyfulness and enjoyment. They are so engrossed in attaining their own goals that they neglect the duties of a wife towards the husband and do not hesitate to leave their house to fulfill their goals. The Brata-katha hence recommends reciting it on Thursdays taking the women folk of the neighboring areas together and become a part and parcel of the system.

However, these Bratas point out that reciting them would result in-

*‘Bratar pholete mile dhon dhanyo ar
Dure gelo dukkho kosto, aiswarya bistar.*

As translated, the resultant outcome of the Brata would enable the wife to become saubhagyabati as regards to the bearer of family welfare, her personal welfare and economic prosperity.

Similarly, another Brata-katha namely, the itu puja Brata-katha begins with prayer-

*‘Asto chl, asto dubba
kalash patre thuye
shono sobe itur katha bhakti jukto hoye
itu den bor
dhon, dhanye, putro poutre
bhore uthuk ghar.*

This is very much clear that the Itu Brata mentions specific features where clay pot is required, a particular number of grass and rice is required, and some plants are required. These specifications highlight the agricultural productivity, monetary wealth and the pleasure of sons and grandsons. It must be noted that the Brata-kathas never mention the birth of a girl child.

The last Brata-katha tha has been selected goes to the extreme point when it clearly mentions - *Putrobatira ei Brata palon koren, kanyar ma ke ei Brata korte nei-* meaning only the son’s mother



can perform this ritual and not a daughter's mother (Parshley, 1952). This is where the patriarchal society claims its dominance. The dominance of the society is so engrossing and in such a water tight compartment that it is almost inevitable for the female counterpart to cut across the boundaries and set up a new identity for themselves. This cultural component of practicing Brata-katha is perhaps not experienced by a wide range of the female community, yet even today the preferential treatment to women giving birth to a male child has not evaporated from the society and one cannot deny its existence even in the present modern scenario.

Impact of Brata-katha and the need for a changing society

These Brata-kathas are part and parcel of the patriarchal society where male dominance is omnipresent, where women have to combat for their rights, follow rules, abide by the duties and responsibilities and is burdened with the moral duty of bringing peace at home and giving birth to a male child to continue the family tree. The area that requires special mention is that in this modern age when we are busy discussing on lines of modernity, modern women, individuality, women empowerment, financial independence, the Brata-katha is still in practice. In the patriarchal society the dominance of the male counterpart has always been in practice. In such a scenario, the age-old notion of women being the epitome of sublimity, perseverance, subordination and bearer of male successors is still in vogue. The notion of women empowerment becomes questionable here when theory and belief runs in opposite directions. All these Brata-katha indicate the desire for mundane materialistic life, economic prosperity, agricultural prosperity and domesticity of women. The craving for the male progeny has been a fundamental issue since the remote past and even in the present modern world the scenario has not altered much. In such a situation it is the inner self, the inner soul and the inner tenth of human mankind that needs to be altered to bring change in the society, to quit humiliation of the woman who is no sense responsible for bearing a girl child or for being barren. A change in woman 's economic conditions alone will not alter or transform the situation into something better, rather what is necessary is to transform the evolution of a woman in the moral, social , cultural sense and other consequences which promises a new, independent woman and requires her to be devoid of all taboos and stigma. What is necessary is to emancipate woman by letting her possess her independent existence not outside the family life,



rather by mutual understanding of herself and the society, and create a space for herself, otherwise women empowerment will still remain a myth and continue so in the present and also in the future.



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