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## Religion and Rituals Associated with Agriculture among the Rural Women of West Bengal, India

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### Abstract:

*Brata or vrat refers to undergoing certain rituals, offering prayers by chanting some simple rhythmic lines along with maintaining some form of self-control for attainment of a particular wish. Brata is mainly performed by women folk and it is going on since ages. The paper revisits certain brata rituals associated with agriculture that is commonly celebrated by women folk of the rural areas of Bengal. Bratas are sociologically very meaningful to the rural women not only because of the pomp and colourfulness that it displays but because it is viewed as an easy and less expensive means of communicating one's desire, agonies and unfulfilled wishes to the folk Gods who can be pleased easily. The prevalence and continuity of bratas also bears out the silent revolution that women initiated when they were barred from entering the Hindu temple or had to satiate a Brahmin priest who justified his existence by proving himself as the only channel of communication between God and Man. Brata is a woman's ceremony where she is the priest and she herself is the worshipper.*

### 1. Introduction

India is a land of diverse culture, religion, customs and folkways. India's diversity is reflected in the various rural rituals and customs. An important cultural aspect of India's village community is the prevalence of folk religion which has socio-economic and cultural ramifications. The folks of the rural areas have invented their customs that center their family, community and needs of daily life. An important element of folkway is the prevalence of religion that dominated every aspect of their life. In this respect, the paper seeks to understand the various cultural rituals practised or *Brata* by rural women in West Bengal for increasing agricultural productivity.

*Brata* is a set of practices that is commonly performed by a community of women with strict adherence to rules and discipline for attaining a particular goal. *Brata* is usually associated with appeasing the local gods, goddesses who are believed to be endowed with magical powers and who have to be appeased with love and prayers. Each *brata* ritual is accompanied with a rhythmic chant that is recited by the women during observing the *brata*. Each narration highlights the kindness and necessity of performing the *brata* with complete faith and honesty. An important agenda of the *brata* ritual is the practice of drawing alpona, or rice paste which is used to make beautiful designs on the floor. Each *brata* is credited with a special alpona design which narrates the story and purpose of the *brata* in brief. *Bratas* is a domestic form of worship without the requirement of temple and whose knowledge is passed from one generation to the next. In short *brata* is performed with a desire to fulfil a particular desire.

### 2. Objective

To analyse the agricultural *brata* rituals performed by women folk of rural areas of Bengal, to increase crop productivity.

Bengali race emerged from the interaction occurring between the Aryan and Non-Aryan blood. In the ensuing interaction between the Aryans and the non – Aryans, there has been a great effort to preserve the culture of the Aryan blood. Hence evolved the Brahminical rites and chants that could only be performed by a Brahmin male, women were denied the right to offer prayer or participate in any Brahminical ritual. In such a situation, the women folk in their own way invented and practised their own way of worship that would address the common issues of all the women, which came to be known as *Brata*.

Being performed solely by women, it showed the lack of requirement for the Brahminical priests. *Bratas* also denied the existence of the Sanskrit verses that dominated the traditional Hinduism. *Brata* rather had grown up in its own pace and allowed women folk to construe rituals and hymn expressing their sentiments and wishes. An important element of *Brata* ritual was that it required participation of all the women present, thereby highlighting communal expression of desires and wishes in contrast with the individual desires or peculiar of temple worship.

Indian months unlike the Western category are classified on the basis of nature of climate and time of harvesting crops. Food is one of the primary concerns of man throughout communities through ancient times. In the ancient times agriculture depended on the forces of nature. Factors like adequate rainfall, quality of the soil controlled agricultural growth. Almost whole of the village was engaged in agriculture and they were heavily dependent on the forces of nature as there was no means artificial application of water or fertilizers to the plants. Hence a number of rituals evolved surrounding agriculture. While men were busy working in the field, a group of women framed some rituals that are passed from one generation to the next, with the objective of appeasing all the natural forces

associated with agriculture. *Bratas* concerning the worship of Sun God, Cows, Mother Soil, Rain gradually emerged and women worshipped these forces with diligence and sincerity, because they believed that sincere prayers meant good agriculture which meant happiness at home and among the members of the community. *Bratas* enabled not only worship of forces of nature but fast became an important ceremony of *Bratas* that were undertaken in each harvesting season as a symbol of sacrifice. For women believed that only sacrifice would yield good crops in the next season.

Thus sociologically *bratas* associated with agriculture had some vital roles for the village society-to inculcate in man the significance of agriculture in satiating one's hunger, to emphasize on the importance of fertility of soil as it was directly linked with crop cultivation, to educate the masses regarding taking care and being concerned about the accessories associated with agriculture- tools, animals etc., and most importantly *bratas* established a feeling of togetherness and 'we- feeling', because they performed the same ritual for the same purpose- welfare of family. A good harvest signified good trade and commerce which indicated the affluence of a village, each woman's *brata* ended with a note that 'may they be blessed with wealth, good husband and children.' *Brata* served as a tool for ventilation of one's anxiety, yet it was not an individual's anxiety that *bratas* addressed, rather it brought forth the anxiety, worries, concerns of the common man residing in the same locality, *brata* was thus necessary for continuance and perpetuation of society.

### 3. Case Study

Prof. Niharranjan Rai mentions a number of *bratas* associated with agriculture in *Banglar Itihas- Adi Parba* that were performed for various reasons. *Bratas* associated with agriculture and fertility of the soil were known as 'Gokul Brata' which is celebrated in the month of Vaishakha, 'Bhaduri Brata' celebrated in the month of Bhadra, *Itu Brata* celebrated in the month of Aগ্রহায়ান.

#### 3.1. The Gokal Brata

Cows have been revered in the ancient times, mainly due to its agricultural utility, and ability to supply milk. Although cow worship was unknown in the ancient Vedic ages, by the time Manu's books and manuscripts were written, there are several references to cow worship. Gokal Brata is observed in several areas of rural Bengal from the last day of the month of *Chaitra* (mid-March) to the last day of the month of *Vaishakh* (mid-April). Vermillion, turmeric and oil are anointed on the forehead, hooves and horns of the cow and water is poured on four legs and is offered some quantity of grass along with reciting a *chara* or a rhythmic verse while performing these rituals. This *brata* is supposed to be performed four consecutive years by Bengali maidens, so that the family will be blessed with good agricultural productivity.

Gokul Brata is a prayer offered for the welfare of the cattle, as cattle bears a direct link with agriculture. Scientifically, vermilion, turmeric and oil help in warding off the insects, flies, mosquitoes that can spread diseases among the cows.

#### 3.2. Tushi Tushli Brata

There is a belief that if Tushu Tushuli Brata is performed then the family will be blessed with good agricultural productivity, wealth and happiness. The *brata* is performed to appease the goddess Tushu or Toshla who control the fertility of the soil. This *brata* is inaugurated on the last day on the *Aগ্রহায়ান* (mid-December) month and continued throughout the month of *Paush* (mid-January). Every maiden has to make 144 small moulds of cowdung and keep it on a *sara* (plate) which is first decorated with brinjal leaves. Vermillion is then marked on each mould and five durva grasses (small grasses) are placed on each mould. Flowers like merrygold, radish, kidney beans is placed on this *sara* and rice dust is scattered over it. And then a short rhythmic poem is recited. On the last day of the month of *Paush* all *bratinins* (women who are performing the *brata*) should go a nearby river before sunrise and dip the *sara* in the water and fast the while day. Then at four in the evening, they break their fast by consuming jaggery mixed with moulds of rice and milk.

This *brata* is symbolic of the actual stages of cultivation of paddy plants. Vermillion represents good fortune and it is represented prosperity. The *sara* represents the field, cowdung represents soil, sprinkling of rice dust symbolizes a good harvest and decorating the *sara* with flowers implies respect and prayers offered to the forces of nature for obtaining a good harvest.

#### 3.2.1. ITU Brata

The *Itu Brata* is another important *brata* that is performed to worship the Sun god, as Sun is the main source of energy and vitality and is associated with the fertility of the soil.

Both heat and rain in required proportion is necessary for a good harvest hence they constitute the elements of nature which is worshipped by women folk of Bengal.

#### 3.2.2. Saspatar Brata

This *brata* is celebrated in honour of the deity of fertility Bhanjo. It is celebrated in the month of *Bhadra* (). The *brata* starts with the *ekadashi tithi* (eleventh day of the month) of the month of *Bhadra* and continues for ten days where many rites are observed, then on the ninth day turmeric is smeared on the maize, and in the tenth day a mock marriage ceremony takes place between the maize and the pulse accompanied with a lot of pomp and show. The marriage between the maize and *kalai* (pulse) symbolises imitative marriage between good fertility. In the courtyard a small tank is dug and on the eastern side of a paddyplant and a colocasia indica (*mankachu*) is planted. At the four corners of the courtyard figurines of crows and kites are made of rice paste and on the western side an effigy of a pig. Then a female figurine with a baby in her arms under the paddy and colocasia plant is placed suggests her association with the spirit of vegetation and fertility. Then on a large place all kinds of pulses and vegetables are offered to deity along with fruits and

other offerings. A maiden then draws water from the well and offers it to the goddess and chants the rhyme. That symbolises offering water to the ancestors so that they might not be deprived of water.

Hence this *brata* is closely associated with agriculture and each ritual of the *brata* bears a close resemblance with elements of agriculture. This *brata* imitates a good harvest and hence all its aspects are closely related with it. Maize plant represents green vegetation and the figurines symbolises humans and animals who are dependent on agriculture and feed on a good harvest.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus these examples of the simple worship by local maidens are a reminiscent of mother goddess Earth who controls the nature and all aspect of agriculture. As agriculture constitutes the main source of income and indicated the economic prosperity of a nation, much of folk – religion has socio-economic-cultural aspect; hence have survived for ages and there is an effort to maintain and continue them even today. The earliest account of worship of Mother Goddess is derived from the Aryan civilization, which still continues today in various forms worship of snake goddess in form of Ma Manasa, harvest goddess- Vanna Durga.

Through these practices of *bratas* relationship was formed among the community. *Bratas* encourages women's participation by making *alpona* an integral part of *brata* rituals. (the pastoral scene of maiden rites for decorating the floor) forms an integral part of the Bengali culture. These *bratas* are not merely a form of offering prayer rather it has a wider social role to play as women use *bratakatha* or the rhythmic story that has to be recited during performance of the *brata*. Bratakatha aids in creating relationship between women and environment-physical, natural and social. Nature creates a two-way relation between Man and Nature on one hand and between Man and Man on the other hand. Rural women folk are directly dependent on nature for fulfilling their needs, in such a situation appeasing the Nature Gods through prayers, offerings becomes a natural consequence. The study of *brata* thus becomes necessary in understanding the aspirations and ideals of the common rural women. Moreover, she derives psychological support from participation in the rituals because now her prayers can change her destiny which was predetermined on the rules of past karma (Wadley 1980)

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