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THE FADING ART OF BENGALI *BRATO KATHA*

Dr. SHREYA GHOSH

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Holy Cross College, Tripura

Email:ghoshshreya.manti@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

The term 'culture' stands for the wide body of customs and values by which an individual can perceive him and his cultural identity. The *bratokathas* of Bengal are great treasure trove of Bengal's rich cultural heritage and folk religion. From far off times, young girls and married women observe ceremonial fasts- *brato* and practice religious rites to seek blessings of God for their wish fulfilment. It is popularly believed that performing these rituals would assign her to the notion of a 'pious-virtuous woman' in accordance to the accepted notions of womanhood laid down by patriarchy. As these *brato* rituals passed on from grandmothers to granddaughters, they occupied great significance in the lives of Bengali women. But gradually many *brato* rituals have eroded, some are on the verge of extinction and the rituals in many cases have altered to a great extent. Apart from the onslaught of time and place, the evolutionary progress of women (in all aspects of life) often bears the blame for this gradual change. The weak and helpless woman of yesteryears who followed ceremonial rituals for fulfilling her wishes has now evolved into a more independent, self-reliant woman and therefore refrains from seeking *saubhagya* (good luck) by observing such rituals. Thus, on a wider scale *bratokathas* are facing threats of extinction in modern times. This paper tries to assess how the social evolution of women is altering and gradually silencing the *bratokathas* of Bengal.

Keywords: bratokatha, cultural identity, saubhagya

Bratokathas are integral part of Bengal's rich cultural heritage and folk-religious belief. Folk religion is not a different religious practice, infact, the term reflects the religious dimension of folk culture. Edward Burnett Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* explains 'culture' as "...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (Tylor 1) Culture thus lends a special character to a person as a social being. Folk religious customs are basically regional-religious customs and are outside the official domain of religion. *Bratos* are folk- religious practices that are observed by Bengali women not only in West Bengal but also in other parts of Eastern India like Bihar, Assam, Tripura, Orissa. The term '*brato*' is derived from the Sanskrit word '*vrata*' that goes back to the times of Rig-Veda. The concept of *brato* is traditionally associated with the cosmological order of Gods and dharma. They are

believed to be directives from the omnipotent power for the wellbeing and prosperity of all subjects. Laden with a deep moral they preach the path of righteousness and self-sacrifice. *Bratos* or '*vrata*' are basically ceremonial fasts or religious observances with rituals involving various self-imposed restriction of food and regulation in behaviour observed at specific time.

However, more than men, women are mostly seen to observe *bratos*. The genesis of *brato* is not definitely known but it is generally believed that they have originated in far off times as '*vrats*' find mention in the Vedas and the Puranas. Pradyot Kumar Maity writes, the fact that *bratos* were observed right from medieval period is confirmed by the reference of some *bratos* in many vernacular texts. Scholars are of the opinion that originally *brato* was non-brahmanical as it was not associated with the official doctrine of Hinduism and later it was infused with brahmanical Hinduism. Gradually they came to be categorized into two types, *sastriyabrato*(brahmanical) and the *asatriyabrato* (non-brahmanical). Abanindranath Thakur in his book *BanglarBrato* also refers to a similar categorization but in his terminology he calls the latter *meyelibrato*(the ones observed by the females). This terminology indicates the fact that the non-brahmanical *bratos* are those that did not require any additional *brahman* or priest and were observed by the women folk. Maity further classified *meyelibrato* into two branches, *kumaribrato* and *naribrato* among which the former was observed by young unmarried girls and the latter by married women. From early times *bratos* had a great significance in the lives of women and they have been passed on across generations from grandmothers to grand-daughters. Later in early twentieth century many publishers in Calcutta collected these performance based oral traditions in books aptly titled- *Meyeder Bratokatha*.

According to Dr. M.S. Randhawa "in spirit and content, the Bratas are the magico-religious rites performed by women folk... for invoking the blessings of various deities to secure domestic happiness and the welfare of dear ones." (Maity 1-2). *Bratos* can be understood as ceremonial fasts observed by women as they follow a vow and perform rituals to seek blessings for the fulfilment of their desires. These desires are usually about the wellbeing of family members, getting a good husband, having a child, having a prosperous life, good weather etc. The traditional *meyelibratos* comprise elaborate procedure of handful rituals. Preparations start from the previous day as women take vegetarian dishes and collect various items required for the rituals. On the day of *brato* women follow a cycle of purification to observe fast. They draw *alpanas* or motifs, recite *chhadas* or verses, read out or hear the *katha* or story that narrates the history behind the initiation of the *brato* and also validates the significance as well as the purpose of observing the *brato*. Women believed that apart from the fulfilment of their specific desires *bratos* also contribute to bring *saubhagya* or good luck for them and their family. However, women do not follow these 'religious observance' with complete diligence only for wish fulfilment. Anne Mackenzie Pearson notes that 'the observance of *vratas* is considered praiseworthy behavior.' (Pearson 52). The author explains that it was women; more than men, who "...were expected to subject themselves to this sort of self-restrictive behaviour in this form" (Pearson 53). The patriarchal order instilled this belief that performing these rituals one would naturally assign herself to the notion of pious-virtuous womanhood.

With time these ceremonial, self-imposed rituals following various restrains and regulations have become an indispensable part of the socio-cultural identity of Bengali women. But, gradually many *brato* rituals have eroded; some are on the verge of extinction and in many cases the rituals have undergone significant change. Apart from the onslaught of time and place, the evolutionary progress of women in almost every aspect of life, often take the blame for this gradual change. The once subordinate-helpless woman who used to follow ceremonial rituals for her wish fulfilment has now evolved into a more independent, self-reliant woman and therefore refrains from seeking *saubhagya* (good luck) by observing such rituals. This change is more discernable in the urban areas while women in semi-urban and rural areas still observe some age old *bratos*. But on a wider scale the *brato-kathas* are facing threats of extinction in modern times and this paper tries to assess how the social evolution of women is altering and gradually silencing this cultural tradition with which almost every Bengali woman once identified.

From antiquity women have suffered subjugation in all forms of social endeavours in a system run by patriarchy. In case of religious activities men enjoyed greater access as they reserved the exclusive rights of

performing pujas and yagyas in temples. However, women were restricted within the courtyard of their domestic worlds but observing ceremonial vows and fasting enabled them active participation in religious activities without any governing agent like a *purohit* or priest. On the other hand, *brato* rituals and practices are also instrumental to impose regulations on women and reinforce the domination of patriarchal order. Their whole hearted devotion and service towards their family, children and husband drive their resolve to abide by the often regressive *brato* rituals. Women emphasised on being an ideal daughter, wife or mother and were expected to be virtuous, tolerant and sacrificing who would do anything and everything to fit into the tradition of *dharmachari-sanskari* (devout-cultured women). And those who failed to do so were considered *asubho* or inauspicious for the overall prosperity of the family. Infact, the psychology of women was conditioned in a way that they believed that the happiness and prosperity of their family can be achieved and safeguarded by observing the rigid *brato* rituals. Moreover they also believed that *bratos* offered a possible option to change their destined fates and hence their prayers were mostly for a good husband or a child.

Some of these *brato-kathas* are zone-specific as they narrate local myths passed on across generations as "...bratageet (ritual songs) sung by women mainly to ward off evil and ensure the well-being of the house hold."(Chaterjee 8) Thus the socially subjugated woman with a mindset fostered to suit the convenience of the patriarchal order willingly participated in *brato* rituals for the wellbeing of their dear ones. In this way women were restricted from conducting various religious rites like *pujas* in conventional places of worship. But women were hardly concerned about their social restrictions as they were contented to play a significant role by carrying out religious activities at home and to some extent these rituals also made them self-reliant in communicating with their deities. Thus, *bratos* gained significance in the lives of women as they became an important activity of religious motivation. The desire of changing their destiny made them blind to the fact that to a great extent their desires originate from their subordinate social identities.

But in the course of time these rituals are gradually losing ground and are less performed or have undergone significant changes. However, women still continue to observe these rituals although the original purpose behind many *bratos* have been lost and many rituals have also been altered to a great extent. With altered social role and change in material reality women find themselves in a complicated fix when it comes to observing *bratos*. In a detailed study on Hindu Bengali women's participation in religious fasting Jaita Talukdar explains how a women's social, educational and financial status affects her involvement with age old *brato* rituals. She notes that "women's engagement with conventional rituals were not wholly about either resistance or submission to religious fasting but rather a little of both." (Talukdar 142) With an ever-evolving notion of womanhood their participation in *brato* rituals has underwent considerable change. Talukdar explains that some women observe *bratos* to 'either re-invent traditional meanings of fasting or reap its extra religious benefits' while some participate in ritualistic fasting even if they are not 'fully convinced of the ritual's ability to transform their material conditions' (Talukdar 142) In the discourse of *brato* rituals the image of an ideal-virtuous mother, daughter or wife no longer appeals to a modern educated woman who now enjoys better social, financial and psychological freedom. This wave of change has altered the age old prescribed rituals to a great extent. It is this change which leaves a cumulative impact on the belief system of a modern-educated Bengali woman.

However, the desire for a good husband or prosperous life still continues to lead a considerable percentage of both unmarried girls and married women to observe some *bratos*. For instance the *shivaratri brato* or *bipodtarini brato* are some popular *bratos* that are still being observed on a large scale. But the rituals associated with these *bratos* have been altered to suit the convenience of the performers. The *shivaratri brato* is one of the most popular *brato* that both unmarried girls as well as married women observe for the desire of a good husband or for the well being of their husbands. However, the *katha* or story of this *brato* narrates different significance or purpose behind observing this *brato*. Infact, most young girls confuse between *shiva brato* and *shivaratri brato*. The purpose of observing the former is the fulfilment of a specific desire of the *bratini* (one who observes the brato) while the purpose behind observing the latter is to free one from the sins of his/her conduct as lord *Shiva* explains to *mata Parvati* in the narrative of the *brato-katha*. Moreover the procedures narrated have almost become extinct. The doctrine of worshipping four self-made *Shiva* idols at four different times or *prohor* with four different ingredients is no longer in practice. These days most girls and women have

conveniently negotiated the procedures to arrange all ingredients and perform the puja at one single time in a nearby temple.

Another significant change associated with *bratos* is the dying tradition of drawing *alpanas*. *Alpanas* are an integral part of *brato* rituals, in fact, each *brato* has a specific *alpana* often depicting the rituals associated. The connection between *bratos* and *alpanas* can be understood from the book cover of *Meyeder Bratokatha*. These days *alpanas* have become rare in urban households and at places where they are still drawn one can observe changes in the style and patterns. *Alpana* is basically simple motifs associated with folk religious rituals and rites. It is generally drawn on the courtyard or floor of the house with a semi-fluid batter of rice flour and water. But the traditional simple motifs have been replaced by elaborate designs that are drawn not with fingers but with paint and brush. In some urban houses plastic stickers have replaced the traditional *alpana*. These changes in the *brato* rituals are seen as an impact of changing times. The new age Bengali woman is now sceptical about the purpose and significance of *bratos* and the gradual fading away of these rituals can also be seen as defiance against the concept of ideal womanhood laid down by patriarchy.

Brato-katha as an essential part of Bengali culture lends a distinct cultural identity to Bengali women. Although in modern times their significance seems to have diminished yet most women observe various *bratos* throughout the year. *Bratos* or *vrats* reflect "a true picture of the woman's heart- her desires, fancies and imagination..." (Maity 2) In early times observing *brato* gave women a sense of purpose as they were contributing to the well being of the family. But the modern woman often finds herself questioning the folk practices which deal with rigorous, often regressive notions of purity and restraint. Yet women still subscribe with the idea of complete devotion and perform these self-imposed vows with necessary modifications driven by the hope of changing their social and material reality. But there is no denying that changing times have brought an eradication of tradition. The fading tradition of *alpanas*, the in-house gatherings of women rhyming *brato-geet* like the folk-songs of Manasa-Mangal katha et.al are gradually being lost. In order to get to the root of this loss one must assess the social and psychological implications of the various 'desires' (from a woman's perspective) behind observing *bratos*. Here it is imperative to explore the varied ideological implications of *brato kathas* and its impact on the ever-evolving social identity of women to analyze the reasons behind the fading art of *brato-katha*.

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