

## Performance, Appropriation and Adaptation: A Case of *Vrat Kathas*

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The rich folklore of India poses a challenge to any attempts at its analysis owing to the extremely rich layers of history behind it. Indian folklore is a complex blend of myriad cultures, traditions, myths and legends that have been handed down from generations, significantly through the oral tradition. This peculiar feature of orality that defines Indian folklore *viz.* stories, songs, dances etc., demands that the method of its study must be multi-dimensional, unconventional and holistic. This paper seeks to study one of the folk traditions of storytelling, namely the *vrat katha*. The discussion will centre on the ways in which the textuality of the *vrat-katha* as a religious story is defined in great measure through its performance. Furthermore, the different ways in which the *vrat katha* seeks to perpetuate as well as subvert the dominant orthodox ideologies is sought to be explored. Lastly, the appropriation of the *vrat kathas* through media, for instance cinema, the formation of cults, the impact of adaptations on the original text and meaning of the *katha* remains a relevant question to be considered.

Oral tradition of storytelling has always been an important part of India's culture. Till today, ordinary village folk assemble to listen to stories, epigrammatic tales, proverbs and parables, which are considered as a source of ancient wisdom and a commentary on contemporary values. The source of these stories, as well as those that form part of *vrat-kathas* are often identified as *Kathasaritsagara* (c. A.D. 1100), Vedic ritual manuals, *Mahabharata* (c. 400 B.C.- A.D. 400), Buddhist *Jatakas* (c. 300 B.C.) and the *Panchatantra*. Often these stories refer to the magical and shamanistic powers, belief in ghosts and spirits and so on.

### I

The genre of *katha* is basically a narrative, which can be legendary, historical or folk in nature. *Vrat kathas* are a part of the larger category of the *katha* and are classifiable as religious tales. These tales have been instruments of religious preaching not only in Hinduism but also in Jainism and Buddhism. *Vrat katha* is a tale that forms a part of religious practice. Several rituals that include fasting and worship accompany it. *Vrat kathas* are associated with fasts meant to be kept at different days of the week. In addition to this, special fasts are observed on religious festivals like *Janam Ashtmi*, *Kartik Puja*, *Satyanarayan ki Katha*, *Naag Panchami*, *Tij Tyohar*, *Karva Chauth*, *Gangaur*, *Shitlakshmi*, *Nirjala Ekadashi*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Santoshi Maa ki Vrat Katha* etc.

What needs to be emphasized is the performative aspect of the *vrat katha*. The central story or narrative is inextricably tied to the larger framework of complex processes of rituals and rites that include prescriptions about social, moral and even sexual conduct in addition to rules about food and diet. Jasbir Jain (2004) perceptively suggests:

The embedded narrative [*katha*] is, in the main, an illustration of the contract specified by the performative act, a contract which if violated may lead to unpleasant consequences, and if

observed meticulously may lead to reward and fulfillment. While practices, rituals, deities may differ, the contract is not a variable category. (p. 64)

The complex paraphernalia of rituals may differ across occasions and types of *vrats*. However, certain constituents remain same across all the performances of *vrats*. Although present day *vrat pujas* are not very complicated, they still include worshipping the *tulsi* (basil) plant, which is emblematic of Lord Vishnu. Inclusion of auspicious items such as bangles, toys, *roli*, *kumkum/sindoor* (vermillion) and *haldi* (turmeric) is a consistent requisite across all *vrat* performances. Preparation of *prasad* is one of the most important features of fasting. According to the *Satyanarayan Vrat Katha*, the preparation and consumption of *prasad* must be done with utmost devotion and piety. Refusal to eat the *prasad* offered to a person is considered disrespectful to the deity and could lead to dire consequences.

In special *vrats* such as *Tij*, *Satyanarayan*, *Mahalakshmi* and *Ahoi Maa vrat*, a *pandit* is called to recite the specific *vrat-katha* that is often translated into Hindi or vernacular language to explain their meaning. *Vrats* stipulate clear-cut instructions about what must be eaten on the specific day(s) of the fast. For instance, *Santoshi Maa vrat* forbids women to consume anything sour in taste. Similarly, during the nine-day *Navratri* fasts, the devotee must abstain from consuming flour in any form. *Karva Chauth* and *Mahalakshmi vrat* require married women and mothers respectively to eat or drink nothing till they glimpse the sight of the full moon at night. Stipulations about food require that the devotee must eat *saatvik* i.e. simple, vegetarian food instead of *taamsik aahar* (elaborate and non-vegetarian meals).

Apart from these strict strictures about food, another feature of *vrats* includes *dan* or an act of charity towards the Brahmin *pandit/ panditayin*. This is often done in the form of giving certain sum of money, lentils, ghee, fruit, sweet, cooked food, grains and often clothes.

## II

*Vrat* practices are often based on women's involvement in Vedic rituals as laid down by orthodox priests many centuries ago. *Vrat* is traditionally seen as synonymous with *upavas*, which has a ritual or religious significance. The main purpose of the *vrat-katha* was to show how a prescribed ritual like *vrat* serves to help women fulfill their duties as laid down by their religion. It is to be noted that often these *vrats* are observed not only by women but also men, particularly in cases where the *vrat* or the *upavas* takes the form of *upaya* or remedy. *Vrats* as *upaya* is a practice that continues till date (often on the recommendation by priests and astrologers). They are seen as instrumental in easing out or completely remedying the difficulties of one's life. Men and women observe further, special *vrats* because they are supposed to be beneficial for one's prosperity and marital prospects.

What is of crucial significance is the fact that till today, among the *vrats* that women observe in Banaras and North India, the *vrat-katha* or the story is central if and only if it exists in concomitance with its performance through prayer or *pooja*, keeping fasts/ *vrats* and carrying out all the rituals that accompany it. If one fails to "perform" the *vrat* strictly in accordance with the terms laid out, the whole meaning of the central story is lost. The organized session of the art of storytelling therefore becomes composite, a kind of multi dimensional performance in which a clearly defined audience gathers to hear and participate in the *katha*.

Komal Kothari (1981) has shown that in Rajasthan, a group of religious stories referred to as *Deval* are popular (p.33). *Deval* refers to a body of twenty-six *kathas* from the *Mahabharata*. The names of the individual *kathas* refer to characters from the epic itself—*Urjan Bharata* (Arjun), *Bheeyam Bharata* (Bheem) and *Ahmano Bharata* (Abhimanyu). The manner of narrating these

tales is of crucial importance. These *Deval* stories are sung by groups of people gathered specially in large numbers. The atmosphere is pious and the narration of the *kathas* occurs in the form of a *jagran* that continues through the entire night. This *jagran* or vigil is participatory in nature where all the devotees sing, chant and dance together. Certain *vrat-kathas* can be sung only within the family while others can be performed within the colony or *mohalla* that is organized along the lines of caste.

### III

As pointed out earlier, fasts are observable by both men and women but the motives and rewards for both are often very different. It is commonly noticeable that men keep certain fasts, which promise material well-being, successor in the form of a male heir and business profits. On the other hand, for women, fasts are almost always motivated by a husband/family-centered concern. Fasts such as *Karvachauth* are undertaken for the long life of the husband, which would ultimately save them from widowhood.

Jasbir Jain (2004) powerfully argues that in fasts like *Karvachauth*, *Tij* or *Gangaur*, *kathas* do not project any individual aspirations for women outside the realm of procreation or material well-being (p.97). One could take the example of *Karvachauth vrat-katha* to substantiate this argument. The *Karvachauth katha* begins in “*praacheen kaal*” or distant past with the story of Arjuna and Draupadi. Seeing her husband Arjuna immersed in deep meditation oblivious to the danger at hand by his enemies, Draupadi becomes worried and seeks the help of Lord Krishna. Krishna narrates the story of Shiva who had advised Parvati to keep *Karvachauth vrat* in order to remain *suhaagan* or forever bound with her husband through the ties of matrimony. *Karvachauth vrat* will ensure the long life of the husband and protect him against all evil-forces. This outer or meta-narrative of the *katha* encloses an inner story, which is that of an old Brahmin and his four sons and a talented, beautiful daughter. His daughter is cursed for forging the *Karvachauth vrat* with the help of her brothers who show her an artificial moon and hence persuade her to break the fast before the actual appearance of the moon. At this point, the Brahmin’s daughter is advised by the wise priestess Indrani who tells her to keep the *Karvachauth vrat* with utmost devotion, respect and piety in her heart and more importantly, carrying out all the rituals as per the “*riti*” or tradition. Doing this would absolve her of her sin and ensure the long life of her husband.

The story of this fast enables us to argue that most of these *vrats* are not concerned with relationships per se but rather the family roles and the codes of conduct which defines them. Women, according to these *kathas* exist solely as wives, sisters, daughters or mothers without any individual identity of their own. Furthermore, the whole idea of practicing a fast, with its strict rules about food and sex is grounded in the ideology that women are creatures of great appetite. Thus in order to keep these appetites in control, occasional penance is necessary which ensures the discipline of mind and body. The values projected in the *kathas* are hierarchical and patriarchal. They express an attitude, which is fatalistic laying stress on abstinence, self-discipline, charity and virtuous life.

### IV

However, having said that, one cannot ignore the fact that the *vrat-kathas* are a composite art form and place great premium on the ‘act’ of story ‘telling’ and ‘listening’. It is this element of telling and listening, which makes the meaning drawn from the *kathas* nuanced. A comparative approach in this respect is useful for its insight into the parallels and departures that take place

from the actual *katha* and the way in which their intended meaning is often subject to manipulation owing to the orality that governs the performance of these *vrats*—the tale telling and the listening of it.

The critical role of performance event to any understanding of folk literature, in this case, the *vrat kathas* has been recognized. In North-Indian low caste community of potters near Banaras, Shiva and Parvati are revered as powerful deities. Men and women alike worship Shiva and Parvati and practice ritualized fasts. In a study carried out by Neema Caughran (1999), what came to the surface was the fact that the individualities of the tale-tellers and audience affected the actual and received meanings of the *katha* text (p.524). As Caughran remarks, the criss crossing of the public and private realms of the tellers' lives, the occasions for telling, and the stories themselves are multilayered (p. 514).

The mythical relationship of Shiva and Parvati serves as a backdrop for real relationship issues—the discourse of power between men and women, adultery, parenting and support (Caughran, 1999, 514). The example given is that of a particular potter woman named Arti, who while narrating the Shiva-Parvati *katha* speaks Lord Shiva's lines in a mock-male voice which in turn makes the audience recognize her mockery of and their own subordination to the male ideologies about women. What are striking in this example are the coded insinuations, which the potter woman makes about the way in which men treat women. The very process of coding and subsequent decoding on the part of the audience changes the perception about the meaning of the *katha* for the reader/listener. Arti's "tactic" or ability to consciously reclaim the public as well as "orthodox" tradition of *vrat katha* to comment on male and female discourse of power and personal life is extremely important. It brings to focus how a traditional and age-old custom of *vrat-katha* could be used as a strategy of resistance; how a patriarchal space can be "liberated" to address issues of personal as well ideological importance. Caughran rightly argues that she successfully turned her potentially embarrassing position as a woman without the support of her husband, into a kind of triumph of her own personal faith (p.525).

## V

As these *kathas* are passed on from one generation to another, there is a high possibility of new elements being added or certain changes that may accrue to the original text of the story. Even though the primary mode of the *vrat-kathas* has been through the oral tradition, the major *vrat-kathas* are now available in print, and through the internet. With the growth of technology, these *vrat-kathas* have acted as an important source for the popular films in Bollywood. A case can be made for the hit film in 1975 alongside *Sholay* and *Deewar*, namely *Jai Santoshi Maa*. In this film, Satyawati is oppressed by her in-laws and is finally helped by Santoshi Maa, a mother goddess and ultimately regains the love of her husband. Rachel Dwyer (2006) suggests that this film is a generic mixture of the devotional, mythological and the social (p.46). Further, this mixture derives from the manner of the *vrat katha* about a specific deity.

The film is adapted from a prayer book, *Shri Santoshi Mata Puja va Vrat-Katha* in Hindi. If one compares the actual *katha* and its portrayal in the film, numerous differences between the two can be pointed out. For instance, Santoshi Maa is not the daughter of Ganesha in the *vrat-katha* as she is in the film. While the *katha* does not specify the names of the three jealous goddesses, the film portrays Parvati, Brahmani and Lakshmi as rivals of Santoshi Maa. The film portrays a curse, which makes the husband forget about Satyawati, and therefore allows for an accommodation of the stock character of the vamp or the "other woman". However, the actual *katha* does not mention about any curse. Further, the number of *vrats* is cut from sixteen consecutive Fridays to twelve.

*Jai Santoshi Maa* can be contextualized within the repertoire of mother-goddess films based on *vrat-kathas*, which became popular from 1960s onwards. Veena Das (1981) in her essay “The Mythological Film and Its Framework of Meaning: An Analysis of *Jai Santoshi Ma*” argues that the film is a modern version of the goddess story, which the goddess is not a form of *shakti* or power as she does not fight nor does she want anyone destroyed (p.45). Rather she is a benevolent figure who only requires the suffering of a single devotee as her sacrifice. Satyawati is a sati figure whose sacrifices and *vrats* force the goddesses to intervene and fulfill her personal desires.

Publicity of this film, revival of interest in Vaishno Devi, Bhakti and Aastha channels and T-Series cassettes replaced the traditional modes of transmission of the *kathas* through the professional storytellers such as *charvaks* and *bhats*. Santoshi Maa has been created or resurrected as a counter move to the growing materialism and therefore aimed at a revival of indigenous age-old traditions, thereby creating a cult around the central deity of Santoshi Maa.

## VI

The *vrat-katha* therefore becomes an interesting art form of storytelling, the proper import of whose meaning and significance can only be understood best in the larger context of its performance. As this paper has attempted to show, with the increasing aid of technology, the performance of the *vrat katha* is no longer limited to the acts of narration and listening but also the working out of the *katha* on the screen as a film. As Komal Kothari suggests, cinema has appropriated folk entertainment forms, transposing its ingredients and often its subjects, into the standard fare of Indian screen (p.39).

Yet, if one focuses attention to the substratum of oral traditions that have functioned as religious didactic lessons, but more importantly so as popular rural media for centuries, one could pin-point several methodologies by the means of which the sacred written word gets transmitted and disseminated. By making the teachings enshrined in the revered Hindu Sanskrit texts like the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* easily available and understandable as folk wisdom, the *vrat kathas* have had an extremely important role to play. The debate over their subversive or orthodox tendencies nevertheless remains a different question.

While being didactic in nature, they still allow for certain “coding” or “tactics” on the part of the teller of the tales to appropriate the meaning of the *katha* to his/her own purpose. Lastly, the *vrat-kathas* in the contemporary Indian scene have taken a different slant altogether. Increasing commercialization of Hindu customs and traditions have turned the practice of keeping fasts into fads and trendy habits. The customized meals in restaurants and hotels offer most exquisite menu while sticking to the ingredients specified for each *vrat*.

Important fasts such as *Tij* and *Karvachauth* are not just ritualized fasts. Rather the *vrat-katha* becomes an elaborate ceremony whereby a spirit of competition governs the choice of required “*shingar*” (the elaborate ritual of dressing-up of a married woman) and *dan* on the part of women. Furthermore, as Philip Lutgendorf (1991) suggests, the *vrat-katha* has an important economic aspect to it for the *katha* is a livelihood, a profession by means of which the narrators/tale tellers maintain themselves and their families (p.166). *Katha* therefore becomes a business that the performers “sell”, commanding high fee and thereby reducing the art to just another commodity to be traded in the marketplace.

Thus, Hindu woman’s sense of duty and obligation towards the well-being of their families through the performance of *vrats* does not entirely explain the fascination with these rituals and traditions. One could conclude aptly by suggesting that women perform *vrats* also for the social, physical, psychological and spiritual benefits. Not only do they provide a means to satiate one’s

spiritual goals but also, as this paper has attempted to highlight, act as a method on the part of some women to assume control over their own lives. It becomes a means to gain empowerment within the environment in which women lack any individual status. This enabling side of the *vrat-katha* comes solely from its performative aspect. Therefore, no analysis of any *vrat-katha* can be complete until it looks comparatively at its associated rituals, the dialogue between the tales and rites and more importantly, especially in the modern context, the appropriation and adaptation of the oral tradition of the *vrat katha* into cinema and daily soaps motivated by increasing commercial and political interests.

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