

# The Role of Vrata Ceremonies in the Folk Culture of Purba Medinipur: A Review

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**Abstract:** *In the folk culture of Purba Medinipur, the glorious presence of Vrata (vows) ceremony can be seen across a wide spectrum of folk rituals. The largest part of the population of this district is Hinduism. Generally, the five religions such as Saur, Shakta, Ganapatya, Vaishnavism and Shaivism are collectively called Hinduism. Among the followers of these religions, there are many vows held throughout the year. Ekadashi, Shivratri, Santoshi Ma, Vipattarini, Satyanarayana, Shanidev, Lakshmidivi, Sri Krishna Janmashtami, Radhasthmi, Ramnavami and Jitashstami etc. are mentionable among them. Vratas observed as day such as on every Monday, Tuesday, Saturday, Friday and Thursday of every week; as religious month such as Kartik month, Agrahayan month etc. are celebrated by the devotees according to certain rituals throughout the year. The purpose of this article is to explore the evolution of these rituals in Purba Medinipur district and its social usefulness*

**Keywords:** Hinduism, vows, rules, evolution, search

## I. INTRODUCTION

East Midnapore District is part of the Lower Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Eastern Coastal Plain. Geographically, this district can be divided into two parts. (1) Almost complete plains in the east, west and north and (2) coastal plains in the south. Wide areas of the district are composed of sediments and are relatively fresh and coastal sediments. The land elevation here is within 10 meters above sea level. Geographically, the district is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal and Baleswar district of Orissa in the south, Paschim Medinipur in the west, Howrah in the north and South 24 Parganas district in the east. The important rivers of the district are Rupnarayan, Haldi, Kansavati and Keleghai. Being agriculture based district, more than 80 percent of the people of this district live in villages, whose main livelihood is agriculture.<sup>1</sup> On January 1, 2002 AD, Purva Medinipur district emerged after bifurcation from undivided Medinipur district. The district has 25 blocks and five municipalities in four sub-divisions namely Tamluk, Kanthi, Egra and Haldia.<sup>2</sup> As of 2011 census; the population of the district was 5,095,875. Among them, the number of men is 2,629,834 and the number of women is 2,466,041 respectively.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the people of the district are Hindus who keep themselves involved in various rituals throughout the year.

## II. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The ceremony that takes place in the society by wishing something is called *Vrata*. Two types of vows namely classical and feminine are prevalent in our country. In feminine vows again two types of observation such as virgins and women are also seen. Five-six to eight-nine year old girls take a virgin vow and older girls take a woman's vow after their marriage. As a result, three types of vows - classical, virgin and female - are seen in Bengal. In classical vows, the tales of vows are heard first with *achaman* (cleanse the mouth with water before worship), *svastivachan* (benediction), *karmarambha* (beginning of activities), *sankalpa* (solemn vow), *ghot sthapana* (placing a water-pot for worshipping it as the symbolic representation of some deity), *panchagavyasodhana* (purification of five articles derived from the cow), *shantimantra* (chants for peace), *dhinarga* (small offer to god) *asanashuddhi* (purification of seat), *matrikanyasadi* (calling deity after self purification) and *vishagarghasthapana* (placing special offer), followed by *bhujji* (offer to the fore fathers which receive the priest after worship)– offering and donation to Brahmin as *daksina* (honorarium). Virgin vow can be said to be a combination of these two rituals, classical and unscriptural. Here, along with the liveliness and

depth of the Vedic ceremony, the simplicity of the secular vows has also been lost and the Brahmin named priest and the complicated forms of charms and incantations have prevailed. The Kumari Vratas are found in a very pure state. In this Vow the first thing is collection of necessary things. Such collection will be according to the rules of the vow. Thereafter some rituals such as giving an image of desire, drawing *alpana* (white paint with liquid rice-paste), digging a small pond etc., are followed. Then holding a flower to the image the devotee expresses her desire. Finally the observers of the vow either listening to the words of the vow if there was such system related to it or just only holding the flower express his last wish and end the vow. There is no place for priest or *tantra-mantra* (charms and incantations) in this vow.<sup>4</sup>

Vrata is a Sanskrit word. It means 'vow, determination, devotion, and prayer for health, fertility, long life, and the happiness of loved ones.' It is also the practice of austerity especially the people of Hinduism and Jainism in matters of food and drink as part of prayer. The word vrata is mentioned over 200 times in the Rig-Veda. It is also found in other Vedic literature, including the Upanishads, but in the Vedic period the word vrata was not associated with personal religious practice but rather in the sense of universal laws and inner ethics in the nature of the universe. In the hymn of Rig-Veda 9.112.1., every man's vocation to God is considered as a vow. Again, in Rig-Veda 1.93.8., the act of dedication in hymns is called vrata. In later Vedic literature self-imposed control over food and conduct is sometimes used in conjunction with vows. The Hindu Upanishads depict the concept of vows as a disciplined system of moral conduct in which one respects food, helps the helpless, welcomes guests, and prays for student learning. The Puranas place this practice as a concept of women's empowerment, while the scriptures place vows as a possible form of atonement for both men and women. The presence of vows was seen in the pre-Aryan age also. Both Aryans and Pre-Aryans are related to the world in which they are born. Both have some material desires like wealth, rice, good fortune, health, long life etc. which bind them to this world. Just by looking at the vows that both are making, it is clear that there is only this difference between the desires of men and the desires of women, the Vedic rituals for men and the vow rituals for women.<sup>6</sup> We will find many gods of the Vedas among the other vows (non-Aryans). Various events attract the thoughts of people through different seasons. At the root of all these events, they imagine various gods or demons. They make vows to fulfill various desires such as crops, good fortune, etc., whether they are Aryan or non-Aryan. This is the purpose of the vow and the history of its origin.<sup>7</sup> Vratas are mainly observed within women's society and most of them are non-Vedic, non-Puranic, not related to religious texts and non-Brahminical.<sup>8</sup>

Vrat is generally regarded as a religious ceremony. There are four types of Vrata in terms of ceremony and twelve subdivisions in terms of action. The four types are – *Kamna* (desire), *Kriya* (action), *chhara* (rhym) and *vratakatha* (words or story of vow). *Kriya* means what is done in the ceremony of the vow. According to action the twelve subdivision of the vow are-

1. *Snan* (bathing)
2. *Upbas* (fasting)
3. *Naba bastra ba suddha bastra paridhan* (Wearing new clothes or clean clothes)
4. *Alpana ankan* (drawing alpana)
5. *Ghot chitran* (Painting the image of small seizures of earthen pitcher)
6. *Matir ba pitulir ba goborer putul kimba chhobi nirman* (making a puppet or picture by soil or thin paste of raw rice or cow dung)
7. *Puspa chayan* (Picking flowers)
8. *Grihangane, gram than, brikhya than, ghate, khete gamon* (Walking in homes, villages, groves, wharfs and fields)
9. *Mantracharran arthat manoskamna bisayak chara aorano* (uttering hymns i.e. chanting rhymes about desires)
10. *Pujarchana arthat ful deoa, dhan durba deoa, tel sindur deoa, ulu deoa ityadi* (worshiping i.e., giving flowers, paddy, vermilion, oil, wool, etc.)
11. *Vratakatha shraban* (listening the words or tales of the vow)
12. *Brater paran* (passage of the vow). It denotes sometimes seven Brahmins are to be fed, sometimes 12 or 8 mothers are to be fed, then the observers of the vow will eat fruit or eat whole boiled food or luchi (thin cake of flour fried in boiling ghee), semolina - etc. and family members will also get a share.<sup>9</sup> If we see at the Vrats prevalent in Purba Medinipur, the present status of the ancient Vrats in the society becomes clear.

**Ekadashi Vrat:**

There was a religious provision for the devotees of the Vaishnava religion that they are required to observe two *Ekadashi Vrats* in each month throughout the year. In the full calendar of Benimadhava Shila of 1425, *Mohini* and *Apara* in the month of *Baishakh*, *Padmini* and *Kamala* in the month of *Jaishya*, *Pandava* and *Yogini* in the month of *Asadha*, *Shayan* and *Kamika* in the month of *Shravan*, *Putrada* or *Pavitra* and *Aja* in the month of *Bhadra*, *Parshwa* and *Indira* in the month of *Ashwin*, *Pashankusha* and *Rama* in the month of *Kartik*, *Utthan* and *Utpanna* in *Agrahayana* month, *Mokshada* and *Sophala* in *Pausha* month, *Putrada* and *Shattila* in *Magha* month, *Bhaimi* or *Jaya* and *Vijaya* in *Phalgun* month, *Amalaki* and *Papamochani Ekadashi* in *Chaitra* month are mentioned in the list of *Vaishnava Vrata* festivals.<sup>10</sup>

**Vrat on Purnima and Amavasya:**

According to the Bengali calendar, there is a religious order to observe the rituals of Purnima (day of the full moon) once and Amavasya (day of the new moon) once every month.

**Vipattarini Vrat:**

This Vrat is celebrated on Tuesday or Saturday between the second and tenth days of the Shuklapaksha (bright fortnight) in the month of Ashad. Married women, widows or virgin girls take this vow in the hope of getting rid of all kinds of dangers. On the occasion of this fast in Tamluk town, the temple of Goddess Bargabhima is very crowded. Apart from this, many women worship in the Shitala temple located in different cities.<sup>11</sup>

**Shasti Brata:**

In our country, goddess Shasthi is worshiped in various names throughout the year. Among them, the common worship of goddess Shasthi are: *Aranya Shasthi* (also called Am Shasthi or Jaai Shasthi) held in the month of Jaishtha, *Lunthan* or *Lotan Shasthi* held in the month of Shravan, *Chapra* or *Manthan Shasthi* held in the month of Bhadra, *Durga* or *Bodhan Shasthi* held in the month of Ashwin, *Mula Shasthi* held in the month of Agrahayana, *Patai Shasthi* held in Paush month, *Shital Shasthi* held in Magha month, *Ashoka Shasthi* and *Neel Shasthi* held in Chaitra month. Worship of Shasthi in the months of Baishakh, Ashadha, Kartik and Phalgun is not practiced in this country.<sup>12</sup> In this district, on the day of Durga Shashti of Shukla Paksha (bright fortnight) in the month of Ashwin, daughter-in-laws observe the Durga Shashti Vrata. After fasting for the whole day they do this worship and after completing the worship they listen to the vows and then take the *prasad* (food offered to the goddess) dedicated to the Goddess. On that day, devotees eat dry food, i.e. do not eat boiled rice. *Shital Shasthi Vrat* has to be observed on 6<sup>th</sup> day of *Shukla Paksha* of Magha month. Cooking is stopped on that day. On the day before the Vrat celebration, all the things should be boiled and the rice should be cooked. The stale rice is taken on the day of the worship of goddess Shasti. It is believed that if you observe this vow, the family will be free from grief. On the day before *Sankranti* of Chaitra month, all women take this vow for the well-being of their children. It is customary to fast all day and go to a nearby Shiva temple in the evening to pour water from a bucket on Shiva's head. At the same time, women take the offerings of worship. Women go to the Shiva temple and pour water on Shiva's head and at the same time offer lamps to goddess Shashti.

**Darpan Darshan Vrat:**

This vow is observed by both men and women. The day after the worship of goddess Kali in the month of Kartika, this vow is celebrated in some areas of Kanthi sub-division. On that day, barbers get money or clothes from the male and female observers of the vow by showing brass mirrors in their respective areas. It is believed that looking at this mirror increases *paramayu* (year of living) and brings back childhood memories.

**Birinchi Brata:**

This vow is prevalent in some parts of the district. However, about 30 years ago, it is known about the practice of Birinchi worship in Baruttar Hingli village of Sutahata police station of Haldia subdivision. This pooja was held in the front yard of the house of the palodhis of this village. A clay palm in the shape of the *gauripatta* of *Shivlinga* with a baby crocodile next to it is seen to be used as a symbol of the Birinchi deity. It is worshiped on every Sunday of the

month of Paush. Brahmin priests preside here. By performing this worship, barren women become fertile, get rid of feminine diseases, get relief from sores, and above all become wealthy.

#### **Bheem Puja Vrat:**

Vrat is observed on the occasion of Bhim Puja on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of bright fortnight of Magha month. The purpose of this Vrat is to wish for a good harvest, which is also known from the celebrants of the Vrat. On this day, men observe Bhimi Ekadashi Vrat.

#### **Shivratri Vrat:**

The ritual of observing Shivaratri Vrat on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the dark fortnight of the month of Phalgun is celebrated all over India. To observe this vow, thousands of men and women throng to the various Shiva temples of the district to offer *deepmalas* (row of lamps) and *anjali* (offer an oblation of flowers or water with folded palms) to the deity. This vow is popular among the people of the Hindu castes everywhere in the district. Even though it is customary to stay awake all night and worship four times in four praharas i.e. 12 hours, nowadays women and girls perform this worship only once. Sadhvas (married women whose husband is living), virgins and widows and even men observe this Vrat. This vow is taken by virgin girls in the hope of getting rid of the sorrows of the world, happy married life and getting a husband like lord Shiva.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Vow of Mangal Chandi:**

There are nine types of Mangal Chandi.

1. *Mangal Chandi* worshipped throughout the year (this worship is done every Tuesday)
2. *Harish Mangal Chandi* (this worship is to be done only every Tuesday of Baisakh month)
3. *Joy Mangal Chandi* (this worship is only to be done in the first month)
4. *Kului Mangal Chandi* (this worship is to be done on the Tuesday of Sukla Paksha of Agrahayan month)
5. *Sankatsa Mangal Chandi* (this worship is to be done on any Tuesday of Agrahayan or Magha month. It is also known as Praksha Chandi.)
6. *Sankatsa Mangal Chandi* (this worship is to be done on any Tuesday in the month of Agrahayan)
7. *Sodo Mangal Chandi* (this worship is to be performed on the day of Paush Sankranti)
8. *Natai Mangal Chandi* (this worship is to be performed on every Sunday in the evening of Agrahayan month)
9. *Mangal Sankranti* (if the *Sankranti* (last day of the month) of the month which has 30 days falls on Tuesday and *Shukla Paksha*, then it is called Mangal Sankranti This worship has to be done on that day.)<sup>14</sup>

In this district the devotees have to observe Mangal Sankranti Vrat on the day when Sankranti falls on Tuesday. Generally, women do not eat on that day; Eat *luchi* or chide (parched rice) dai (curd) etc. One has to go to any nearby temple to offer worship. In Tamruk city, most of the women go to temple of goddess Bargabhima and perform this vow. Lakshmi Vrat:

Worship of goddess Lakshmi is performed almost every month. Although Thursday is the broadest day of this worship, many people do it on Sunday as well. The *Kojagri laxmi puja* (done on the day of full moon in the month of Aswin) and worship of goddess Laxmi in the month of Kartik is done at night during the fixed day. Goddess Lakshmi is usually worshiped in the following months in our country: Bhadra month, Kartik month (on new moon night), Paush month, Chaitra month, Kojagri (on Ashwin Purnima night), Kshetra Vrat (in Agrahayana month). In every Thursday of Agrahayana and Paush months Lakshmi Vrat is celebrated at home at home in this district.<sup>15</sup>

### **III. CONCLUSION**

However, three points are worth noting in the discussion of Vrat today. First, Vrat is a wish-based ritual of agrarian village life, and this village is currently changing rapidly. Secondly, Vrat is mainly a ceremony of girls and these girls were almost all illiterate and had almost no connection with the outside world. Thirdly, the traditional belief that Vrat originated from dates back to ancient times. For these three reasons Vrats are gradually disappearing from our lives. The vows that have survived are also not like those of earlier days.<sup>16</sup> Purva Medinipur's Vrata related research shows that many ancient Vratas have lost their existence in the folk society. Many of those who used to observe Ekadashi and other Vrats regularly choose special Vrats to observe them. Similar changes are observed in food habits and rituals

also.<sup>17</sup> The role of the vows in the society is very significant. People's belief involves in it. Depending on it they spend a holy time span throughout the year. This traditional belief is especially helpful for rural Bengali women in keeping their family and social bonds intact. In the present era of Globalization, many women have stopped observing the vows due to modernity, employment and changing social environments, but it is clear from field surveys that their faith in this matter has not been lost.

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