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## ASPECTS OF HINDU WOMEN'S VRAT TRADITION AS CONSTITUTIVE FOR AN ECO-SPIRITUALITY

In the face of growing fears concerning both the devastating consequences of policies and practices supportive of environmental degradation, and the sense that humanity has alienated itself from the very earth that sustains all life, increasing attention is being focused on spiritual solutions to this global crisis. In particular, the practices and values of historically pre-literate (often aboriginal), apparently "simpler" societies are being sought out as models for a healthier, more balanced and integrated way of life. Many indigenous peoples have held world views which ritually, mythically and practically acknowledge the interconnectedness of all living things and the sacrality of the earth itself. Certainly such a view has existed in various expressions in India.<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this article is to point to aspects of a group of rituals referred to in Hindi as "*vrata*" (votive calendrical rites) which, I argue, can be seen as prototypical and also constitutive of an emerging global movement that goes under the rubric of eco-spirituality. I will consider three aspects of the *vrata* tradition, practised and perpetuated predominately by women. Each of these aspects is undergirded by the notion of "inter-connectedness." The first aspect concerns the historical relationship of *vratas* to the appeasement of natural forces and to the seasonal and agricultural cycles. The second concerns the aims and effects of current *vrata* observances on the performers and their families.

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1. Indeed, there are a number of philosophical frameworks within the richness and antiquity of Hinduism which could give direction to an "eco-spirituality". The religio-philosophical system of Vedanta, for example, would affirm a Native American view that "separation between [man] and nature is a mirage" and that the perception of separation is a result of ignorance. (Jan Hartke, Introduction, *Mother Earth Spirituality*, by Ed McGaa, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990, xv.) Of course, Native American religion is often portrayed as "world-affirming" whereas Vedanta (or even Indian religion in general) is portrayed as "world-denying". However, the practical implications of their worldviews may well be more compatible than this characterization would suggest.

The third aspect concerns the idea of sacrifice inherent in the performance of *vrats*.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF VRATS

In general, *vrats*, found throughout India, are optional ritual observances, directed to a deity, involving fasting, worship (*puja*), the recital of narratives (*kathā*) concerning the efficacy of the rite, and the giving of gifts consisting of money and/or items of food and clothing to specified recipients (other women, brahmins, etc.). *Vrats* are usually performed on a regular basis (weekly, yearly) to achieve particular objectives (health, human and agricultural fertility, prosperity, spiritual merit) following rules that have been transmitted from generation to generation.

The performance of *vrats* intersects with a wide range of practices in Hinduism and governs a wide range of acts and behaviours, both ritual and ethical. These practices include worship, speech and silence, sleep, clothing, sexual activity, food (kind, preparation, amount, time when eaten), cooking (how, where, when and for whom), gift-giving and receiving, story-telling, singing, the creation of ritual art, and pilgrimage.

Finally, the form and function of *vrats* as they are currently observed are derived historically from two major sources. One is the brahmanical-Sanskritic tradition (from *Gṛhya* and *Dharma* sūtras to Purāṇas and Nibandhas) and the other is from local 'folk' practices and possibly practices of India's autochthonous peoples.

#### I. Historical Relation of Vrats to Natural Forces and Agricultural cycles

Religious rituals, of a daily, calendrical and occasional variety, have played a major role in the religious lives of most Hindus for centuries. While such rituals serve a variety of functions, one of them has been to remind regularly the individual of his or her dependence on the earth and her bounties and to offer a means to thank and propitiate divinized natural forces, or the gods and spirits long associated with agricultural life. For example, many Hindus offer a daily prostration

to the sun (divinized as *sūrya*) in thankful recognition of the dependency of life on the sun.<sup>2</sup>

Mildred Luschinsky, writing about the life of women in one village north of Varanasi, has described one of the calendrical rites that are observed with the aim of asking the gods for a good crop. It is called "Hariari" (*hara*-green plus *anna*-food). She writes (1962:494):

On the day selected by a family, women of the family prepare enough fried unleavened wheat bread and rice pudding for the entire family. Then the woman who will perform the rite gets five sprigs of *bathua* (any green plant of the winter crop) from the fields. She puts this *bathua*, seven pieces of fried bread, and a little rice pudding on a plate. Near the plate is a container of water. She takes a little water into her hands and circles her cupped hands over the plate five times. Meanwhile other women build a small fire and feed the fire with a little butter, brown sugar, and incense. The woman who is performing the rite turns to the fire, presses her hands together and says a silent prayer, 'O Mother Hariari (personification of the crops), grow and bear flowers and bring fruit' or 'Dharti Mai (Mother Earth), give us good crops.' The women of some families omit the fire offering and the prayer, but all say that they honor mother earth on this day in the hope that the crops will be abundant. After a short ceremony, family members feast on the fried bread and rice pudding.

Luschinsky (1962:495) comments that through such calendrical rites and ceremonies and "special rites in times of need," villagers try to maintain the goodwill of the gods and "they often show reverence for spirits associated with their agricultural operations as well as those associated with other important facets of their life."

Of the plethora of *vrats* now observed, only a few are concerned explicitly with agricultural themes and the worshipful propitiation of natural forces. However, this may not have always been the case. The lively women's *brata* (Bengali for *vrat*) tradition in Bengal has been

2. There are also numerous *vrats* which are directed to *Sūrya* such as *Bāṛa Itwar*, *Ḍala Chāṭh*, *Sūrya Saṣṭhī*, and the Bengali *Itu Vrata*.

documented by scholars such as Abanindranath Tagore (1919) and more recently by Eva Maria Gupta (1983). They argue that this tradition antedates the relatively late arrival of the "Aryan" (speaking peoples) into Eastern India and that though it is thus very old, it has, in the hands of women, managed to preserve many of its "pre-brahmanical" elements (such as the worship of "totemistic" animals and the worship of early harvest goddesses). Among such elements in *bratas* still observed in Bengali villages are themes reflective of the geomorphology of the Bengali delta and the "agricultural religiosity" of its people. That is, one group of *bratas* is concerned with the specific problems of cultivation related to the delta. In the prayers and songs, *pūjās* and *ālpānās* (ritual art) and dance dramas of various *bratas* (e.g., the Puṅyipukur, Toslā, Basudhārā, Māghmandal, and Kṣetra Bratas) the "*brati*" (votary) expresses her desires for the fertility of the soil, for the growth of the fertile swampland in the delta, for timely and sufficient (but not overwhelming) rain during the monsoon season, and for rich harvests. Some *bratas* include very specific wishes: that neither the water in the pond nor the trees dry up in the (pre-monsoon) heat.

The divinized natural forces (or powerful spirits and gods associated with these forces) worshipped and propitiated in these *bratas* are manifold. In seventeen out of twenty-four Bratas presented by Gupta, "a divinity is addressed in an anthropomorphic (Lakṣmī-Nārāyan, Sūrya, Indra), a theriomorphic (Manasā, Subacani, Śaṣṭhī) or in an abstract form (Lakṣmī, Pritibhī, Visnu, Siva). Six Bratas turn to the powers of nature such as mountains, rivers (Bhadulī), heavenly bodies (stars in the Tārā Brata) or plants (Tulsī in Puṅyipukur)." (Gupta 1983:53)<sup>3</sup> Other *vrat*s involve the worship (if only for the duration of the ritual) of various mundane objects (e.g., winnowing baskets, pots), plants, animals and birds. As numerous scholars have noted, some plants and trees are worshipped as the dwelling place of particular gods. In Bengal, the deity to whom the most number of *bratas* are directed is Lakṣmī, a goddess who, Gupta writes (1983:39), has had an intense presence in Bengali life from the beginning to the present day. Lakṣmī "was in the 'high time of Bratas,' which probably began with the settlement of the upper-delta region, revered as the first mother of all that exists."<sup>4</sup>

3. I am responsible for the translation from the German of all passages quoted from Eva Maria Gupta's book in this article.

4. Gupta goes on to say that Lakṣmī is associated with "all the riches in and above the earth. Her first connection is . . . with the riches of the harvest-

In many parts of India, the effects of urbanization and telecommunications are accelerating a process that has been going on for centuries whereby local spirits, gods and goddesses are slowly being supplanted by more brahmanical, pan-Indian deities who are not as intimately linked with particular natural forces. Yet, in these ancient *bratas* one can readily detect the sense of the ambiguous power – both beneficent and malevolent in its effect on humans – of the gods and the forces of nature. And one can see in women's *vrat* traditions a relationship of give and take, of sacrifice and offering, placation and reverence between the human and the divine. "Mother Earth" is not simply a benign, life-giving, predictable source of nurture and sustenance. She is, to humans, equally capable of destruction and creation; she can be malevolent, life-taking and unpredictable.<sup>5</sup> The "folk" *vrats*, at least, may have originally developed as ritualized (some scholars would use the word "magical") ways to exert control over the forces of nature (as well as exert control over the social forces that can determine the shape of Hindu women's lives). The term 'control' is not used here in the sense of dominance, but rather as meaning the sense of control that comes through self-empowerment within a relationship of give and take.

Interestingly, as Luschinsky, Gupta, and others have noted, it was (and remains) primarily women who had the responsibility to ask for the beginning and end of rain, and to ensure the prosperity and contentment of their families and villages. While the effects of urbanization and the introduction of modern technology have helped to diminish the necessity of women's ritual responsibility for ensuring good harvests, rains and so forth, the stated aims of many *vrats* and women's own comments about the purpose of their observance reveal that women still feel responsible for protecting and maintaining the health and well-being of their families.

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products as a basis for economic stability. But also other goods of the earth are presents from her: minerals, stones, animals. . . The riches of the sea are also overseen by her and presented [as a gift] by her: pearls, mussels, corals. Likewise the riches from conquests and from trade. . ." (1983:40)

5. These are precisely the traits of many of Hinduism's gods, and more particularly, goddesses. For example, the erstwhile goddess of smallpox, *Śitalā* (the "cool one"), both gives and removes pustular diseases to humans. But while she is unpredictable and easily angered, she is also, like most Hindu goddesses, revered as Mother, and can bestow all manner of good things to her sincere devotees.

## II. Values Inculcated through the Performance of Vrats and Women's Stewardship of the Family

If the interconnectedness with 'Mother Earth' and the natural forces is no longer a major and explicit theme of the majority of *vrats* observed today, our interconnectedness with, and responsibility to, one another certainly is. From an early age, Hindu girls learn about the mechanics, purposes and meanings of *vrats* through observation of older female relatives and gradual participation in the rites. They are taught that it is their duty and special ability as women to promote auspiciousness and well-being in the family. As embodiments of Lakṣmī, the divine source of auspiciousness, women are understood to mediate both the ebb and flow of auspiciousness in the family. The performance of *vrats* is an important part of this process because it involves bringing together special time, place and items considered favourable for creating an environment charged with auspiciousness. Indeed several women who I interviewed in Banaras in 1985 told me that "*vrats* are for auspiciousness" and that "*vrats* give peace and happiness to the family;" or, as another woman put it: "by keeping *vrats* in the home, happiness and peace will prevail. Troubles are kept far away and one's wealth increases". When one newly married woman said that, "through *vrats* women do the protection of their husbands" (echoed by other women in so many words), she meant that the merit a woman accumulates through performing *vrats* can be transferred to her husband, and that fasting and self-control increases a woman's *śakti*—her transformative, creative energy which either translates her wishes into reality or is somehow transferred to her husband. A woman's performance of *vrats* signifies that her actions have a potentially transformative power insofar as through her regular observances her husband's life may be protected, fertility of the crops may be assured, her reproductive capacity will remain intact, and her family wealth and general well-being will also be enhanced.

It is this sense of stewardship over the well-being of the family inculcated through rites like *vrats* that, I believe, allows women to extend their sense of responsibility beyond the borders of their own homes to the surrounding environment, especially when that environment is increasingly threatened by devastating practices such as clear-cut logging. I am thinking in this instance of the "chipko" movement started by women in the Garhwal region of northern India in the mid

1970's. Seeing that logging practices were causing flooding, soil erosion and a loss of fuel and fodder supplies, women banded together to protect the trees physically by wrapping their arms around them thereby preventing loggers from cutting trees down. Eventually these women were successful in their goal of preventing wholesale destruction of the forests.<sup>6</sup> Such a sense of responsibility and stewardship over the home also radiating to the surrounding environment (which has, for women at least, been culturally conditioned) is an essential component of any eco-spirituality. So, too, are some of the behavioural and attitudinal values which the observance of *vrats* regularly reinforces among its practitioners.

### III. Vrats, Sacrifice and Spiritual Discipline

A third aspect of the *vrat* tradition that can be seen as contributing to an eco-spirituality concerns the notion of sacrifice inherent in the performance of a *vrat*. While *vrats* can be turned into conditional vows where the individual's observance follows upon the deity's response to a supplication, a *vrat* ordinarily is non-conditional. In other words, the process involves giving before receiving; self-sacrifice in the hope of obtaining that which one desires. Such notions of self-sacrifice are explicitly developed in the Sanskrit textual tradition treating of *vrata*. In this textual tradition, though *vrats* are prescribed for all months of the year, little attention is paid to the themes of the agricultural cycles. Instead, the celestial configurations with their astrological meanings are paramount to the form and efficacy of the *vrat*. At least as important to the success of the *vrat*, however, is the votary's behaviour during the course of the rite - behaviour which includes adopting proper mental attitudes (patience, quietude, control of anger, lust, greed, in short, "mental purity"), and physical self-restraints (in the form of full or partial fasting, sexual abstinence, remaining awake, taking purificatory baths - all supportive of physical purity). The votary also goes through various forms of devotions such as *pūjā*, *jagaran* (keeping an all-night vigil), *japa* (repeating the name of God),

6. For a good description of the chipko movement see relevant articles in *Manushi - A Journal About Women and Society*, nos. 6 and 7, 1981. Unfortunately, as Gopa Joshi recounts in her article, "Protecting the Sources of Community Life" (no.7, pp. 22-23), many of the women involved in the action were subsequently harassed and slandered by the men in their communities who felt threatened by the women's leadership and the publicity they had garnered.

*kīrtan* (devotional singing), and *homa* (offerings into the sacred fire), all of which promote a reverent attitude. All these actions serve to discipline and purify the votary, so that, through the votary's regular practice (*sādhana*) year after year, the end of the *vrāt*, the ostensible purpose for which the rite is observed, becomes less important than the process of deepening discipline, self-control and devotion to God.<sup>7</sup>

For many of the women in Banaras with whom I spoke, it was precisely this feeling of self-purification and self-discipline, and the regular avenue for the expression of spiritual yearnings in their performance of *vrāts* that was of greatest personal significance. The two-fold notion that if you do not give you cannot expect to receive, and that practising self-discipline within a spiritual framework allows one to lead a more materially-detached, balanced and peaceful life, seem to me fundamental to any effective and spiritually-based ecological movement. Such notions, if put into practice, would serve as a corrective to prevailing attitudes among governments, businesses, and individuals that (i) progress is to be measured only in industrial and material terms, and (ii) that reciprocity first means taking as much as one can and giving back as little as one can.

In conclusion, I have attempted to draw attention to several aspects of the Hindu *vrāt* tradition that can contribute to the formulation of an eco-spirituality. While difficult to prove historically, popular folk *vrāts* (sometimes referred to as *laukik*, "of the world"), seem to have developed out of villagers' attempts to establish ritually a mutually beneficial relationship with the natural/spiritual world. Through the regular observance of *vrāts*, individuals sought to create a harmonious and fruitful social and physical environment. As E. M. Gupta writes, *vrāts* put women in a "position to live in a creative equilibrium with themselves and with their surroundings."

Certainly today *vrāts*, as calendrical rites, foster a keen sense of the awareness of time, of its qualitatively discrete properties, and of the celestial bodies and the cycle of seasons. *Vrāts*, moreover, serve to strengthen ties between families through the exchange of gifts

7. Regarded in this light, the *vrāta* tradition in its Sanskrit textual rendering is accorded lavish praise by traditional pandits, such as the editor of the Sanskrit Nibandha, the *Vratārāja* of Vigvāgama, whose comments are found in his introduction to the text.



and the honouring and feeding of members of other families. Indeed the formal wishes expressed in some *vrats* extend to include whole segments of society as found in the statement, "may the poor become rich," in the Puṇyipukur Brata. Finally, *vrats* inculcate values such as forbearance, quietude, detachment, responsibility for the welfare of others and self-sacrifice, values central to any spirituality, and particularly one that privileges the sacrality and interconnectedness of the earth and the life it supports.

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