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Meyele Bratakatha: Depicting Women's Life in Bengali Society through Oral Folklore

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Abstract

The term 'folklore' is used in two senses: first as a way of living of the people and second, as a discipline that studies peoples' way of life. So far as the first concept is concerned, "... Folklore is the lore, erudition, knowledge or teachings of a folk, large social unit, kindred group, tribe, race of nation, primitive or civilized throughout its history" (Boggs, 2005). Folklore is taken into consideration, the group identity of the folk, creating the lore and also living within it, comes to the fore. A symbiotic relationship exists between the individual and the group to which they belong. So within the periphery of the broader notion of culture there may be, and remains, a number of folk groups having their unique lores. There is no denying the fact that folklore possesses its own uniqueness but conforms to the basic pattern of culture in a general sense. The complementary relationship between society and folklore may be viewed by taking into account the social functions of folklore. One of such folklore among the Bengali community is a Bratakatha, a Bengali ritual narrative, which is orally transmitted through generations among womenfolk in association with a special type of rite for their wish-fulfillment. Bratakatha has been studied since long past by different fields of scholars. Primarily bratakatha was studied from literary viewpoint and afterwards from anthropological and sociological angles. Bratakatha supplies authentic evidential documents of existing socio-cultural milieu. It is the most effective medium of folklore which reflects the way of life of Bengali folk society without any distortion. Thus, in this backdrop the present paper explores the potentiality of bratakatha, one of the intangible cultural heritages of the Bengali women folk, which is on the verge of extinction with the spread of modernization, urbanization, westernization and globalization.

Keywords: Bengali, society, *bratakatha*, womenfolk, rituals, traditions

Introduction

In Bengali folk life worships are offered to certain deities in particular season and particular events of the year with the aspiration of worldly prosperity. People believe that deities will be satisfied by these vows and they fulfill their aspirations. From this viewpoint *bratas* are defined as the observance of rituals to convey the desires and fervent prayers of the women to the gods and goddesses (Dey, 1961) [5]. *Brata* is also indicated as the pious rite to destroy the sins (Mukhopadhyay, 1993) [9]. In the context of Hindu mythology, the term *brata* denotes a religious practice to carry out certain obligations with a view to achieve divine blessing for fulfillment of one or more than one desire.

Etymologically the word *brata* is derived from the Sanskrit root 'bir', which means to work. According to lexicon meaning *brata* is 'shastric customs' or 'traditional Hindu religious activities' (Bandopadhyay, 1996) [1]. But Bengali *bratas* are hardly related to shastric or vedic rites excepting a few like *Amlakidwadashi brata*, *Sabitri Chaturdashi brata*, *Soubhagya Chaturthi brata* etc. These are categorized as Shastric *brata* contrasted with 'Meyele *brata*'. In shastric *brata* vedic rituals like sacred purification, recital of benedictory incantation, ritual inauguration, solemn vow for

worship, installation of sacred water vessel, purification of cow's five article (*panchagavya*), evil eradicating incantation and purification of the mortal body etc., are performed by the Brahmin priest (Thakur, 1995) [11]. Ritualistic offerings to the Brahmins, both in cash and kind are important and compulsory parts of shastric *brata*. *Meyeli brata* also customizes this offering ritual (Poddar, S., 2010) [10].

Brata is an intangible cultural heritage of great value in the sense that it is like a legacy which is handed over from mother to daughter from generation to generation being conceived as a secret of assuring a happy life (Chakrabarty and Biswas, 2018) [4]. Genetically *brata* is highly domestic in nature and they rarely had any connection with temple or higher religious practices (Maity, 1989) [6]. *Bratas* have a feminine origin and subsequently this folk religious ritual is exclusively sustained by the women folk. These are thus designated as *Meyele brata* (womanish vow) which can also be classified on the basis of marital status of its performer (Thakur, 1995) [11] that is, *Kumari brata* (performed by maidens) and *Nari brata* (performed by married women).

In any tradition based society folk sayings and customs are the most effective devices to implement social rules. Though social rules emerge from collective consciousness some

members of the society are always found to be at variance with such rules as these regulations are framed mainly in the interest of dominant groups or classes. (MacIver and Page, 1967) [7]. The existence of the code of conduct itself does not ensure its compliance. It requires indoctrination and habituation on the part of members of society. Society undertakes the task of indoctrinating its members who undergo the process of habituation. Faith in and adherence to the social rules becomes deep-rooted in people's way of life through the repeated observance of socially regulated rites over the generations. It is a universal process of edification. In every society, besides natural and constitutional laws, a set of obligatory customs or mores are prevalent through folk speeches, proverbs, tales and rituals, which have no legal sanction but act as powerful means of supporting the social order (Poddar, S., 2010) [10].

In Bengali society *bratakatha* is such a kind of ritualistic narrative that speaks of morals to the womenfolk with the intention of creating a traditional type of ideal Bengali women who would be loyal to the social norms of the patriarchy. Bengali *bratas* are closely related to different stages of earth's revolution, seasonal cycles and agricultural activities aiming at having good crops and bringing fortune to the life of the observers. Aspiration of the society as a whole is expressed in the version of women's desire either in narrative or in ritualistic form. Women, for the sake of prosperity and peaceful family life, very symbolically perform rituals that are mostly homoeopathic in nature. At the end of each *brata* a story is narrated propagating divine grace of a particular deity and also publicizing social norms of an ideal society (Poddar, S., 2010) [10].

Among all the literary genres of Bengali folklore *bratakatha* is the only form, performance of which is entirely ritual bound of course these tales have no direct alliance with rituals. But it bears the significance of the whole *brata* rites. Immediate context of *bratakatha* is the place where *brata* is observed and both the performers and audience are *bratis* (observers), who are obligated towards the ritual context of *brata*. Time and context of *bratakatha* performance are ritual bound, but text and structure are ritual free. The only religious function of *bratakatha* is to publicise divinity of a particular deity.

Thus, tales (*katha*) of *Mangalchandi brata*, *Lakshmi brata*, *Raaldurga brata*, *Nataichandi brata*, *Itulakshmi brata* etc., describes divine power and benevolence of goddess *Mangalchandi*, *Lakshmi*, *Durga*, *Nataichandi* and *Itulakshmi* respectively. Another set of *brata* that are mainly related to nature worship in one or some way, like *Ashwaththa Pater brata*, *Punyipukur brata*, *Dashputul brata*, *Pithibi brata* etc., have no story part. In such *bratas* ritualistic activities are supported by rhymes (*chhada*) and ritual paintings (*alpanda*). *Brata* rhymes, unlike *bratakatha*, are directly related to the ritual performances (Poddar, S., 2010) [10].

Bratakatha, besides propagation of divinity of particular goddess, depicts socio-cultural reality of a traditional Bengali society. Social history could be explored or reconstructed from these stories. Its picture provides illuminating and vivid background of old Bengali society (Mitra-Majumder, 1911) [8]. These narratives are represented in women's version and in the form of women's desire but communicate social codes and norms of the large Bengali society, to be applicable to the women. Through the ceremonial observances the format of women's conduct and their social responsibilities are expressed and established in this way. Both of the performers and the audience are women. Naturally *bratakatha* takes its

shape entwined by the feelings, realizations and imagination of Bengali womenfolk. Discourse pattern, speech, rhetoric, intonation pattern all are typically feminine by nature, especially the very style of rural women's language of a traditional society is maintained in the texture of *bratakatha*.

Bratakatha is the women's vivacious creation knitted with the sweet feminine language and elegance of style. Main theme and ideas come from their life experiences which they gather from the society and nature. On the basis of these themes *brathakatha* takes its shape intertwined by the feelings, realizations and imagination of Bengali women. Naturally it represents women's world as it is reflected in their perception. In Indian situation woman's separate identity has not been recognized by the conservatives since long past. She is supposed to be the property of her socially recognized guardian. In different stages of her life guardianship is handed over from one to another male member of the family. Women are father's belonging in childhood, husband's property in married life and son's possession in old age (Poddar, S., 2010) [10]. *Bratakatha* reflects marginalized situation of women in the patriarchal set-up of traditional society. Society always structured very hard restrictions for women in their every stage of life. Especially widow women have to spend rest of her life in an agonizing and painful situation. A woman since youth learns to hate widowhood like anything. She always prays for husband's long life. Naturally a good number of *bratas* are observed for banishing widow status and confirming husband's longevity, like *Sabitri Chaturdashi brata*, *Eyo Shankranti brata*, *Jal Shankranti brata* etc. Bengali married women put *sindur* (vermillion) in hair parting as a special marker of marital state. For everlasting marital status women observe number of *bratas* in relation to *sindur* like *Akshay Sindur brata*, *Nitya Sindur brata* etc. Women's desire for having lifelong *sindur* is expressed through many *brata* rhymes.

In every society the prescribed order of rites and their rhythmic occurrences are always set by the society itself. Most important objectives of such rituals are to activate socialization and establish social control. Associated narratives establish social control through repeated utterances of the messages that exist behind the rites. It makes the idea deep-rooted in the minds of the people and makes them aware of what they should obey or not. Traditional Bengali society is mainly directed by religious doctrines of the Hindu Brahmins. Thus, following brahminical doctrines *brata* and its narration establish rules of women's suppression through a series of prohibitions. This ritual indoctrination was not forceful in nature but in reality women always obey it directed by their own instinct and inherited beliefs. In each *brata* ritual fasting is a common criterion, maintained by the women until the ritual performances are over. It is for her mental peace and supposed physical purity. But it is a sort of self-sacrifice which is encumbered to them from outside.

At the present situation this unique genre of Bengali folklore has been going into oblivion. *Brathakatha* was created in a tradition based peasant society that provided a calm and quite rural set-up for performing *brata* rites peacefully. Many of the *bratas* were associated with agricultural rites, of which some were observed in pre-harvest time with the aspiration of good production, while some were observed in post-harvest time expressing gratitude towards the deity for providing good crops. *Brata* observance requires leisure time and space. In a traditional society women's world was limited within domestic sphere. It is a collective celebration, though observed in individual's house. During the performance of

both the rituals and narrations a considerable number of women have to be present there. In the integrated rural society such collective participation was possible. Ritualistic elements of *bratas* contain large number of natural elements like flowers, fruits, leaves, soil, water, grains, blades of grass etc., which could easily be available in rural environment. But with the passage of time the settlement pattern has changed owing to the change of the socio-economic system. Gigantic growth of industrialization, accelerating urban growth and the encroachment of urban sprawls destroys village environment. Moreover, role of women has also been changing fast under the impact of social change. Now a good number of women are provided with education and job facilities. They have to render services both in home and working place, thereby facing a dearth of time and space for *brata* observances.

In the emerging new social set-up women's perspective of life and worldview have been undergoing such profound changes that allow little or no room for the observance of *brata*, the main goal of which was to build up an ideal feminine model in seeking love from the husband and in-law's family. New generations of women, especially urban educated are reluctant to observe *brata*. Thus, it is been observed in the present day context that *bratakatha* seems to have lost its context and relevance in the present urban areas. But, few such *bratas* are still alive like *Nil Shashthi brata*, *Lakshmi brata*, *Durga Shashthi brata* etc., in urban atmosphere. At present *bratakatha* is rarely narrated and social codes for a modest woman, as it is described in *bratakatha*, are outdated. To conclude, it can be said that *bratakatha* has lost its most important functional value and has been facing gradual extinction (Poddar, S., 2010) [9]. Hence, it is of at most important in this situation to give attention for preservation of this unique folk culture of Bengali society which has its own functional significance.

Conclusion

To conclude, with the passage of time the settlement pattern has changed owing to the change of the socio-economic system. Gigantic growth of industrialization, accelerating urban growth and the encroachment of urban sprawls destroys village environment. Moreover, role of women has also been changing fast under the impact of social change. Now a good number of women are provided with education and job facilities. They have to render services both in home and working place, thereby facing a dearth of time and space for *brata* observances.

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