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VRATA AND ITS SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE: A BRIEF STUDY

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Abstract:

Vrata has played a unique role in our present society. Vrata is a Sanskrit word which means devotion. It is directly connected with the ritualistic observances that the devotees have taken such as fasting, performing prayers, sustaining from special types of food and drink and visiting pilgrimage and so on. The Vratas accomplish an unbelievable duty to establish unity and fidelity among the people. There are various types of Vrata which are performed in our society in honour of different deities in different seasons. In this paper, I have discussed briefly about the Vrata and its social significance in modern society.

Keywords: Vrata, social significance etc.

Definition and Introduction of the Vrata:

The Vratas are the important aspect of Hinduism. The Vratas perform an incredible duty to establish unity and fidelity among the general masses. India has recognized the geographical land of festivals. The people of India celebrate so many festivals every month of the year. The word 'Vrata' is a Sanskrit word, which means 'Vow', 'Devotion' and 'resolve'. It is directly connected with the ritualistic observances that the devotees have taken such as fasting, performing prayers, sustaining from special types of food and drink and visiting pilgrimage and so on.

The Vrata is supposed to be the main sacrifice performed by every religion. Basically, the Vrata means the complete dedication of the soul and mind to God. Etymologically, the term 'Vrata' is a Sanskrit word, which indicates a 'Vow' religious rites and customs which all sacred religious texts are elaborated as the practice of austerity. The term 'Vrata' originated from the root 'Vr' with the suffix 'ta', which indicates 'what is willed' or simply 'Will'. The root 'Vr' means 'to will'. So, the word 'Vrata' is deeply associated with the person's desires or wills. The hymn of the Rgveda has explained that the profession of all human beings is considered to be his Vrata. In the simple sense, the word Vrata indicates the supreme act of sacrifice. The Upanishads have explained that the Vratas which are performed by the general masses divided into three categories- 1. Kāyika is related to the purification of the body. 2. Vāchika, which is deeply concerned with the purification of speech (tongue), and 3. Manasa, which is vitally related to the purification of the mind.¹

In the Aitareya Brāhmana, “the word ‘Vrata’ has two secondary senses. One is ‘religious observance’ or obligation’ in a proper course or pattern of conduct for a person, and the second one is an Upavāsa or fasting, where the worshipper remains at night near Gārhapatya fire. Another meaning of Vrata is supposed to be Upavāsa, where the devotees exceed the whole night in the darśa-iṣṭi and the Pūrṇamasa-iṣṭi near the Gārhapatya and other fires or remove all types of food or fasting, that he conducts Upavāsa in Darśa and Pūrṇamasa-iṣṭi, because the devotee, who does not perform Vrata, the gods do not partake of the offering performed by one, therefore the devotee should actively Perform the Upavāsa with concentration that the God may partake of his offering.”²

The Gṛhya- sutras and Dharma-sūtras also discuss the same meaning of Vrata. The Āśvalayana Gṛhya-sutra says that “these are the Vratas where the devotee should not bathe at night, nor bathe naked, nor run while it is raining, not Crossing River without bathing in it.” The pariplava Gṛhya- Sūtra says that “the snātaka has to follow for three days after samāvartana certain observances like not taking meat, not using earthen vessels for drinking water, not looking at women and sūdras, corpses and crows, not speaking with sūdras, not urinating or voiding ordure nor spitting in front of the sun, or the devotee must speak the truth.”³

The Āśvalayana Gṛhya-sūtra has explained that “at the time of the vrata the ceremonies have started from the shaving of the head up (मुण्डन) to paridāna. Which are conducted at the time of Upanayana is replayed each period with each vratas.” According to the Āśvalayana smṛti, “there are four vratas like Mahanāmni vrata, Mahābrata, Upaniṣad vrata and Godana (मुण्डन). Each vrata must be performed for a year.” The sāmkhāyana Gṛhya-sūtra has described the name of the four vratas which are important for Vedic students like Śukriya (which precedes the study of the main part of the Rgveda), the Śākvara, Vrātika and Anupaniṣada vratas (these precede the study of the different section of the Aitareya Āraṇyaka). The Gobhila Gṛhya-sūtra (which is connected with the sāmaveda) has prescribed the vratas as Godānika, Vrātika, Āditya, Aupaniṣads, Jyeṣṭha- sāmika each lasting for one year. Gautama, Sāmkhyaāyana – Gṛhya sutra, Gobhila- Gṛhya sūtra and other sutra texts have presented absolute Vratas which had the incredible importance and every Vedic ancestors should be performed at that time. The Āpastamba Dharmasūtra defined “the Vratas (observances) to be performed by the husband and the wife at the time of marriage such as eating twice in the day, not eating to gratify, fasting on the specific sacred days.” In the same process, the text Āpastamba Dharmasūtra has explained the procedure of Vratas for the snātakas (स्नातक-व्रतानि). In the text of the paṇini, “the sutra ‘Vrate’ has formed the word from Vrata with the affix in (nim) preceded by a substantive such as ‘Sthandilāśāyin’ and ‘Aśrāddha-bhoji’ one who performed the Vrata can’t eat or taking śrāddhas food. Pāṇini also has given the title of a verb from Vrata in the sense of ‘doing’ -(व्रतयति व्रतं करोति).”⁴

The Manusmṛti, Yājñavalkya smṛti and Saṁkha Smṛti and other smṛtis who were adopted many more regulations regarding expiations (Prāyaścittas) are recognized as Vratas. ⁵

The word Vrata is used in the text Mahābharata as a kind of religious practice or vow where a Person (devotee) has to follow some specific limitations about the specific food and drink or person’s (devotee’s) general behaviour. From the ancient period, the principal meaning of the word Vrata is to be the religious tasks or vows, performed on a specific day (tithi), week, month or specific period for acquiring the expectable results from the deity, usually belonging to the limitations of food and behaviour. In this sense, the term Vrata should be used in this category. Therefore, the Vratas may be expiatory (prāyaścittas) or obligatory or they may be honorary and self-imposed for getting some specific desired results.⁶

In the later period, the discussion has found on the comprehensive definition of Vrata. Sabara said, “The Vrata is recognized as a mental activity which is a resolve in the form – I shall not do this and illustrate the care meaning of this sentence that one should not contemplate at the rising or setting seen.” The Agni

Purāṇa has explained Vrata as the limitations which were delivered by the śāstras is recognized as Vrata. And the Vrata is also called Tapas; control of sense organs and other rules and regulations. It is called tapas because it offers to suffer to the devotee and it is also recognized Yama since when a person has to control the entire sense organs.⁷

Manusmṛti says that “the Saṁkalpas is the main root of desires or sacrifices or Vratas and the principal characteristics recognized as Yamas- all are known to spring from saṁkalpa. But the Saṁkalpas performed by the devotee is not recognized as Vrata.” The Amarakoṣa declared that “the word ‘Niyama’ and ‘Vrata’ are the same meaning and that the latter consists of fast and the like that creates ‘puṇya’.” While the Āpastamba Dharmasūtra remarks that “the word tapas is used to the rules of the task illustrated for a brahmacārin.”⁸

“Raghunandana defines Vrata that the Vrata is concerned with various rites or rituals on which the saṁkalpa is made and also that the Vrata is a kind of niyama ordered by the sāstra, characterized by Upavāsa and the like and every niyama such as- ‘ऋतु-कालाभिगामीस्यात्’ .”

The Vrata prakāśa defines Vrata as – “A specific resolve (saṁkalpa) which is renowned to the learned called Vrata”.

The text Dharmasindhu defines that “the vital characteristics of the Vrata are connected with religious practices, sacrifices and so on. Besides the main root of any Vrata depends upon some specific resolve (saṁkalpa)”.⁹

The text Vratarāja has explained that “the Vrata is recognized as saṁkalpa, by which anyone has performed his daily religious act with specific saṁkalpa. It is called Vrata.”¹⁰

The text Amarakoṣa explains Vrata as ‘a rules or procedure which are directed by the Śāstras (religious treatises) is called Vrata.’¹¹

The text Vrata-Nirṇya-Kalpa-vallī defines Vrata as ‘the specific tasks which are practised before performing any sacrifices is recognized as Vrata. The task or duties which are observed in the entire year on the two specific ‘Pakṣa’ namely Śukla and Kṛṣṇa pakṣa is called Vrata.’¹²

Different types of the Vrata:

The Vratas have played an important role in Indian society to make out the unity and fidelity among the people. India is an agriculture-oriented country and all the Vratas and festivals are connected with the sowing and harvesting of crops. The important sides of those festivals are that the people of India take the chance to gather and deliver their affections to each other. So, the people of India have celebrated several Vratas in different seasons and different periods in honour of different deities.

Many more discussions have been found regarding the Vratas, especially in all Purāṇas. Besides the Upaniṣads have explained the Vrata is of three types. But according to the Purāṇa, the Vratas are divided into four sections namely- 1. Kāyika- vrata. 2. Vāchika- vrata. 3. Manasa -Vrata. 4. Payo- Vrata.

1. Kāyika vrata: This type of Vrata is vitally connected with the body. When a devotee performed this Vrata he should remain too fast, sleeping and taking baths in time during the Vrata.
2. Vāchika vrata: This Vrata is directly related to the devotee's speech. The devotee gives importance to truthfulness, reciting holy texts during the time of Vrata.
3. Manasa Vrata: This Vrata is directly related to the devotee's mind. The devotees give more emphasis to controlling the mind, controlling the passions and prejudices at the time of performing Vrata.
4. Payo Vrata: In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, a detailed description has found of Payo Vrata. The Vrata is performed for twelve days and the worshipper eats only milk during the Vrata period. To satisfy god viṣṇu, goddess Aditi observed this Vrata and fulfil his desire. According to Matsya Purāṇa, In Payo Vrata, the devotee takes a fast and eats only water for one day night or three nights.

The disciples who are mentioned above are not restricted; they are included in any Vrata in any combination. At the time of performing Vrata food and drink are allowed to the devotee. The devotee has to be taken Sāttvika food during the time of performing Vrata. The core difference between the Vrata and fasting is that food is allowed to the devotee in Vrata whereas food is not allowed to the devotee during the time of fasting.¹³

The people of India have performed different types of Vrata in different periods or tithis. There are some important Vratas and festivals which are performed in different parts of India in different seasons in honour of different deities such as- Vāra Vratas, nakṣatra Vratas, Yoga Vratas, Karaṇa Vratas, Saṁkrānti Vratas, Māsa Vratas, Ṛtu Vratas, Samvatsara Vratas and Prakīrṇa Vratas etc.

Social Significance of the Vrata:

The Vratas have displayed a dynamic role in Indian society. The general masses are performed different kinds of Vratas or fasts in honour of different deities for the welfare of their lives and societies. In each part of India, the people observe Vratas or fasts as an important festival. Each and every community has its own culture and customs. Based on that culture and customs, they practice Vratas in different periods of the season. From the Vedic periods, the Vratas have been performed greatly in different seasons by the devotees for the welfare of mankind. Similarly, in the medieval and modern digests, the Vratas have been observed hugely and recognized as holy sacrifices. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa comments that "the deities do not accept an oblation by someone, who has not undertaken a Vrata." Merits are attained by undertaking Vrata. The people are benefitted both physically and spiritually to perform the Vrata. We have observed different kinds of Vratas performed in our society. In our society, the Vratas like Ekādaśī, Rakṣābandhan, Śiva caturdaśī, Nāga pañcamī have been observed in different seasons. People perform those Vratas due to the welfare of the family. For example, Rakṣābandhan is performed hugely for sharing love and respect among the brothers and sisters. It is said that Śiva caturdaśī Vrata is performed for attaining good results in life. Similarly, Manasā puja and Nāga pañcamī vrata are performed for removing the danger of snakebites and so on. The Vratas which are performed in our society have their own significance and values. The important thing is that the Vratas play a vigorous role to bring unity and honesty among the people. It has delivered the opportunity to the people to gather love and affection among each other. The Vrata has attained an unique significance in society as similar to festivals. The Vratas are recognized as the soul of Hinduism. In the Hindu community, each and every person has performed the Vratas in different festivals in different seasons. Not only in the Hindu community but also

in the Muslim and Christian communities also, the Vratas or fasts are performed greatly in different seasons. At last, we may say that the significance of Vratas in our society is very high and very incredible.

Conclusion:

From the above mentioned discussion, we may say that Vrata has played a vital role in our present society. Vrata is performed in various countries of the world. The people of the world have known the scientific value and the spiritual values of the Vrata. Modern generations are very conscious about their health. It has played a vital role to bring unanimity and veracity among the people. So modern generation have known the great value of the vrata and performed these in their day-to-day life for welfare.

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