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Eclecticism vis-à-vis Secularism in *Bratakatha* of Bengal

[1]Ms. Deblina Bhattacharyya and [*2]Dr. Arpita Ghatak

[1]*Independent Scholar, M.A in English, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol (India)*
[2]*ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of English, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol (India)*

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[*]Corresponding Author
Email: arpitaghatak23[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Hindu lives are filled with 'baromase taro parbon' (thirteen festivals in twelve months). But within these rituals, it can be discerned that women's wish/desires remain highly unfulfilled within their 'private space'. Among the rituals of festivity that are circular throughout the year, women perform different Brata. However, the age and ancestry of Brathakatha is highly contested among critics. Brata is not something which has one particular cause as its origin. Rather it is a continuous process of evolution and amalgamation of different religious sects and theories. It is pertinent to understand the amalgamation of the eclectic overlapping of three religions namely, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. And it is not limited only to Hindu women in general and Hinduism in particular. Economic, political, social, historical, environmental changes and religious theories are probable causes behind this. Bratakatha not only brings in social and economic changes, but it also foregrounds the artistic skills of women in public. And these feminine skills explain how traditional Hinduism has been taken a homegrown form quite beautifully and wittily. In order to find the answers to the age and origin of Brathakatha we need to focus on these issues. The present paper tries to highlight this juncture and analyse the eclecticism vis-à-vis secularism in Brathakatha of Bengal.

1. Introduction

Hindu lives are filled with '*baromase taro parbon'* (thirteen festivals in twelve months). Among the rituals of festivity that are circular throughout the year, women perform different *Brata.* But within these rituals, it can be discerned that women's wish/desires remain highly unfulfilled within their 'private space'.There are three major parts in *Bratakatha,* i.e., *Kamana*(wish/desire), *Alpona* (Drawing) and *Chara/Katha* (rhyme/story). Abanindranath Tagore, the eminent Bengali artist evaluate *Brata* as a form of psychosis, *Alpona* as its image/reflection which finds its eco in *Chara* -- dance and drama being its reaction. However, the age and ancestry of *Bratakatha* is highly contested among critics. *Brata* is not something which has a one particular root as its origin. Rather it is a continuous process of evolution and amalgamation of different religious sects and theories. It is pertinent to understand the amalgamation of the eclectic overlapping of three religions namely, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. And it is not limited only to Hindu women in general and Hinduism in particular. Economy, political, social, historical, environmental changes and religious theories are probable causes behind this. *Bratakatha* not only brings in social and economic changes, but it also foregrounds in the artistic skills of women in public. And these feminine skills explain how traditional Hinduism has been taken a homegrown form quite beautifully and wittily. In order to find the answers to the age and origin of *Bratakatha* we need to focus on these issues.

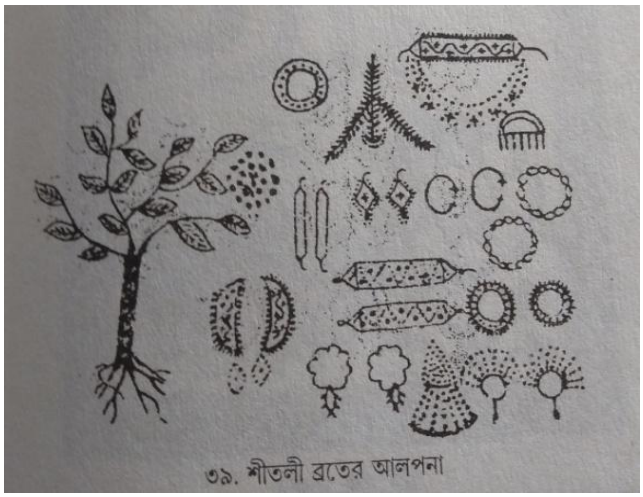

Fig. 1. An Alpana of Sitali Brata

In Bengal (India and Bangladesh) there are mainly two types of Brata. These are *Shastriya Brata* (Classical *Brata*) and *Ashastriya Brata* (non-scriptural Brata). *Shastriya Brata* and *Ashastriya Brata* have been preached in India with Hinduism. But observing texts very well suggests that they are pre-Hindu civilization and there are histories of different religious exchanges with Hinduism. Therefore, to know about the source of the *Brata*, we need to find out the source of these two types of *Brata*. First let's find out what is the origin of *Shastriya* and *Ashastriya* approach.

Geographically, Shaktism or goddess worship in India has primarily been of two types—the south Indian worship of the goddess Shri or Lakshmi andthe worship of the goddess Kali. These types have

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different values and rituals and emphasize different goddesses (or different forms of the same goddess, depending on the theology). The first type, located primarily in southern India, sees the goddess as the embodiment of good fortune, fertility, and wealth, and it respects the brahmanical tradition (the orthodox Hindu tradition, which emphasizes caste and purity). It tends to follow the classical or *shastriya* approach, with knowledge of and respect for scriptures. Shri is a goddess of blessing and auspiciousness.

The second type is found mostly in northern and eastern India, especially in West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Orissa. The focus of this Kali lineage is upon the goddess as the source of wisdom and liberation. It has a complex relationship with the Brahmanical tradition, which many of its practitioners understand to be overly conservative; Brahmanical tradition rejects, they say, the experiential aspects of religion in favour of scholarship and social status. Practitioners whom I have interviewed often claimed to be non-scriptural or *ashastriya*, finding books to be only a beginning of deeper knowledge of the divine. (McDaniel, 4)

Shastriya Brata was documented and it has come from the Purana. Of the various *upachar* (remedies) of this *brata*, there are mainly two parts — *Samanyakandya* and *Bratakatha*. There are many rituals which form the *Samanyakandya*, eg. there is *Achmon* (purifying the body with the holy water of the Ganges), *Kormarombho* (Starting of the Puja), *Sankalpya* (a solemn vow to do the puja), *Ghotsthapan* (ceremonial placing of water pot as an emblem of the deity to be worshipped), *Asansuddhi* (purifying the seat where the priest sits when he does the puja) and *Dakshina* (donating to the Brahmin).

Samayakandya and *Bratakatha* also come under rituals of the Puranas. *Ashastriya Brata* has its origin in Tantra. Because "as we know Tantra has been transmitted through family groups, down lines of pupil-teacher descent" (Rawson, 20). Later, *Meyely brata* (feminine *brata*) was started forming from the amalgamation of *Shastriya brata*'s rituals and *Ashastriya brata*'s rituals. And the depth of the old Shaktism and Tantra are reduced and *loukikota* (logic) has taken its place while taking the domestic form.

2. Critical Nuances & Constituents of *Brata*

The three major ingredients of Hindu *brata* are -- *Kamana* (desire/wish), *Alpana* (drawing) and *Chara* (rhyme). *Kamana* is an inevitable cause behind the origin of *brata*. The people from Arya and pre-Aryan civilization have its bond with earth where they were born. Their *Kamana* were limited in this earth. Both women and men are performing *brata* to fulfil their worldly desires. These are – health, long life and mundane wealth. But here we also find *kamana* is also guided by patriarchal rules. Men participate in different Vedic ceremonies, they offer to a *yajna*, while women are deprived of this practice. All their desires are confined within the inner domain of house. For instance, while men aspire to conquer the world, women's aspiration is:

Rone rone eyo raba/ Jane jane suo haba/
Akale laksi haba/ Samaye putravati haba.
(We will) Not lose (our) husbands in battles,
(We will) Be favourites of all,
(We will) Bring prosperity at times of distress,
(We will) Bear sons in future. (Basak, 16)

Thus, it can be very well understood that the extent to which the wishes of women (even young girls) have been drawn has gradually taken this *Meyely brata* form after undergoing many changes over time. Also, we find the *alpanas* of different types of ornaments and riches, that the women want to acquire. They express their wishes through religious practices because it was their sole outlet to put their aspirations forward.

Alpana is the main ingredient of *brata*. It has been said earlier that the origin of *alpana* (drawing) can also be traced in different *kamanas*. That is when we talk about different domestic *brata*, we get to know about different types of *alpana*. From the *alpana* of various classical and feminine text we can infer that not only Hinduism, but also Buddha *Tantra* might have a connection with the origin of *brata*. For instance, the main motif in the *alpana* of *brata* is Lotus. And the image of lotus has been drawn by the artistic genius of women. The drawing of lotus must be there in the *alpana* of *brata*. And the use of this lotus motif/image in each *alpana* has a similarity with *Yogsadhana* which is a part of *Tantra.*

Tantra is the most complex and difficult *Yoga* pursuit. The simple way to spread this complex ritual of Hinduism among the people is the mixture of *Tantra* and *Puran-Brata*. *Shatchakra* (seven Chakra) is an important part in *Yogsadhana* where it is stated: "Susumna narir moddhe choiti chokro ba poddo royeche (Chakras or Lotuses are situated in various points of axial channel.)" (*Shakta Tantrik Sadhana o Sahitya*, 40). These six lotuses are *Muladhar (Root), Swadhistan (where the Self is established), Manipur (city of Jewel), Anahata (Unstruck), Bisuddha (Purest) and Ajna (command).* Therefore, it is arguable whether these *Alpana* are mere reflections of women's unfulfilled *kamana* (desires/wishes) or not.

3. Different *Alpana* accompanying different *Brata* & Rituals

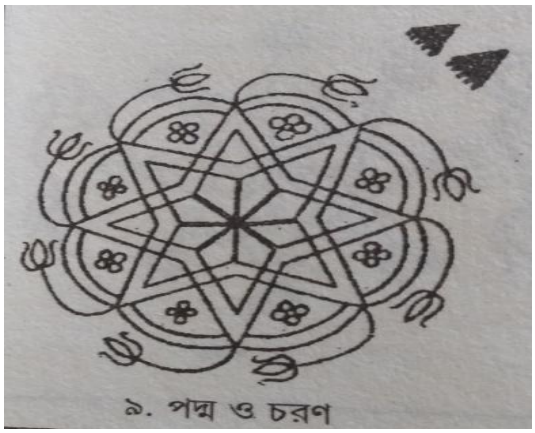

Fig 2 The Lotus Feet

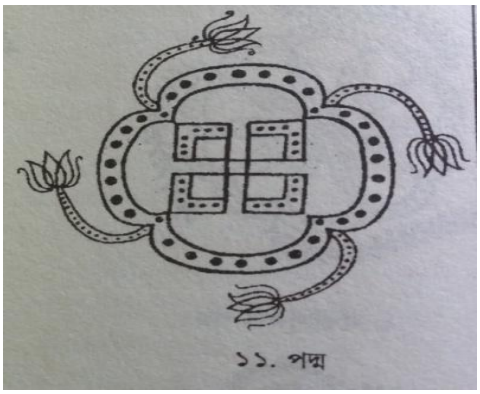

Fig. 3. Lotus Alpona

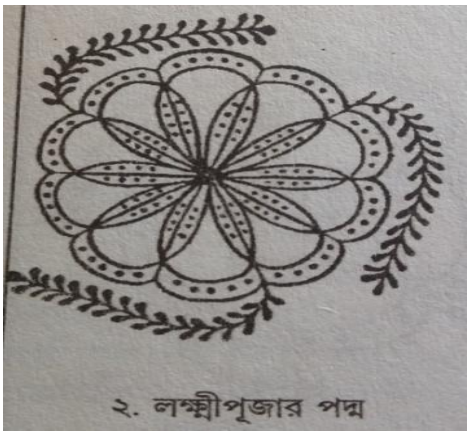

Fig. 4. The Lotus of Goddess Laxmi

Fig. 5. Alpona welcoming the Bride

Fig. 6. Bride Entering the Hallway

Fig. 7. Lotus Alpana

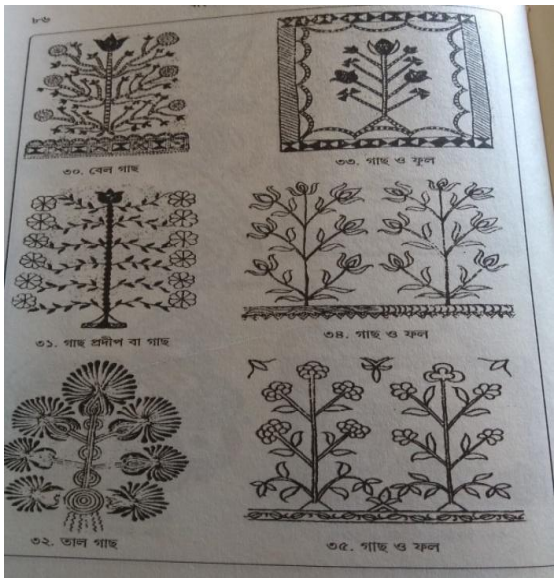

Fig. 8. Alpanas of Trees

Finally comes the *Chara* (rhyme). *Brata* is incomplete without the chanting/ uttering/reading of *Chara* and *Katha* (story). However, these *Chara* do not speak of mere desire/wish (*Kamana*). Apart from *Kamana* these rhymes tell us the preaching of unity of different religions.

Observing *Bratakatha* and *Alpana* shows that these are basically different elements of nature. For example, the *Alpana* are of tree, food grains, leaves, fruits and flowers. And *Bratakatha* is also nature centric. Now if we look at the ancient Tribal Shaktism, we may find some similarities with the Vedic culture.

Aryans also worshiped the Nature just like the Tribals. Because at that time their way of life depended on Nature. For example, *Indra* (thunder), *Varun* (water), *Vayu* (wind), *Agni* (fire) etc all the elements were worshiped in Vedic period. Whereas in pre-Aryan era trees and rocks were worshipped. And now we find the mixture of the two traditions in *Brata* where *alpana* of trees, leaves, flowers, Sun, Fire etc are drawn. Therefore, there is no doubt that *Brata* is a mixture of the Tribal culture and *Vedic* culture. However, this evolution has not been so easy. With the advancement of civilization came cultural colonisation, racism and casteism. Over time, there has been a touch of racism in simple nature worship.

4. Women and *Bratakatha*:

In Bengal there is three types of Shaktism i.e. Folk/Tribal strand, Tantric/Yogic strand and the devotional or Bhakti strand. Folk/Tribal Shaktism involves "possession, healing and animism", Tantric/Yogic strands is about "meditation and visualisation" and "the devotional or bhakti strand involving love of a particular form of the goddess and her worship" (McDaniel 6). But the depiction of the Eternal Feminine energy (*Adi Shakti*) has the picture of cultural connotation. The goddess *Kali* or *Chandi* (both have their origin in Tribal Shaktism) has been portrayed as fierce black woman who is naked, wears a garland of skulls, drinks blood and destroys evil. Whereas, when She is worshipped as Gauri or Parvati. She has been described as a fair woman who is the prettiest woman of the world, a good wife and obedient daughter, very calm and mild. Even the rules of the pujas have many differences. Animal sacrifice is done only in goddess Kali or Chandi puja. Looking at this description, it is clear what role racism and colonialism have played here.

In *Brata*, we find elements of worshipping Nature. And almost every *Bratakatha* begins with living in a forest as a punishment. But if Tribal Shaktism is one of the origins of *brata* then how is it considered as an atonement of a sin? Since living in a forest was a natural and regular phenomenon back then. And at that time there was no concrete idea concerning urbanization. However, in the context of current era it is understood that the concept of living in a forest is a later addition. In ancient India we find there are four Stages of Life -- *Brahmacharya, Garhasya, Banprastha and Sannyas*. So, living in a forest was a part of our innate culture.

An interesting point to note here is, documentation of the *Bratakatha* in Bengali started around the middle of the 19th century. And that period was the time when Indian was in a shackle under British colonialism and was richly infused with 'cultural reformation'. The British colonisers and the upper caste Hindus had parallelly started 'othering' the tribal mass. Their 'clandestine practices' where reproached with an eye of contempt. Later the British spread that racism even more making common Indians believing that living in a forest was a punishment. The concept of urbanization, industrialization and capitalism was also infused in people's mind. The *Kathas* of *brata* tell us this rural/urban and nature/culture dualism which is still prevalent in our country.

Another important aspect of *Brata* tells us about 'colonization' of women from the past. *Brata* is that kind of puja which has been performed mostly by women in the inner domain of a house. And we can now understand that it was actually performed by tribal women. But in the *Bratakatha* their role was wiped out very skilfully. We now found an old lady who usually introduced the rituals of a *Brata* to a banished Brahmin couple. But this old lady none but the old woman of Folk Shaktism who tells the tradition of worship and how to contact with the goddess. Here we understand that this is about black woman who belongs to tribe in a third world country. So, while we try to find the origin of brata, we find her role is shadowed under the veneer of high caste Brahmins.

Fig. 9. Woman painting an Alpona on the floor

While seeking for the origin of *Brata, Bratakathas* also the depict the socio economic and political situation of that period. Most of the *brata* started through some *Swapnadesh* (in the dream one is ordered to do something). And they started that puja through only the drawings of external world in the inner domain. Now, if we try to analysis from the Freudian interpretation of dream, some facts also come into light. by 1204 AD the Islamic Conquest of Bengal began with the fall of Sen dynasty capturing Gauda (present Malda district in West Bengal and Rajshahi division in Bangladesh). After that converting Hindus into Islam was started in prolific numbers. Thus, losing their cultural identity vis-a-vis religion, the local people might start dreaming that the Goddess has ordered them to worship her in a hidden place. It is significant to draw Freud's conjecture here: "Repression is the hiding away of something in our minds; what is hidden away exists in our unconscious." (Nayar, 65).

5. Conclusion

The history/mythic origin of the root of the deities of the *Brata* is also a history of exchange. After the Islamic conquest Muslim rule was established in Bengal. And after that Islam was widely spread in Bengal. According to many people, the *sufi* saints came to Bengal earlier. From that particular period the different classes took Islam for different reasons- greed was the cause behind Elites, some people are converted to Islam for fear or some people took it for political reasons. Therefore, we find a reflection of this religious conversion within the rituals of worship of Bengal.

In this context we can give an example of *Satyanarayana Brata*. Although, it is a *Shastriya Brata*, if we analyse the *katha*/story of this *brata,* find that it is about the worship of Satyapir. So here local people started offering puja to Muslim Pir taking him as another form of Lord Vishnu Satyanarayana. Satyanarayana *brata* started taking its modern shape as an amalgamation form of Satyanarayana and Satyapir. In the *Katha/Panchali* the Pir is depicted wearing Muslim dress, using Urdu words i.e., *"Joy joysatyapirsonaton, dostogiretyadi"* (Hail, the *Satya* Pir with all His Glories and Fame) (Choudhury, 32). These are some sources that play key role in the origin of *brata.* However, there could be other points to illuminate this theory further. The eclectic nature of Bengal's *Brata* is intertwined with its historic and cultural routes across the ages. A critical investigation in *Brata* requires a thorough understanding of Secularism and its tangibility in Bengal.

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