Vrat: Ceremonial Vows of Women in Gujarat, India*

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Hinduism, as it is followed in the cities, towns, and villages of India, should not be confused with either the nebulous, text-book Hinduism which is glorified as its philosophy and is spoken of in abstruse language, or the popular, slick, paperback Hinduism replete with information on straying sacred cows, hissing cobras, darting tigers and lions, and the miracle-performing yogis, intended for the consumption of the curious European traveler. Neither is it a paradise of the anthropologists and ethnographers in search of a fossilized culture of unchanging rites and rituals, and fasts and feasts. The practitioners of Hinduism are as human as the followers of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Of course, the researcher does come across individuals, families, and groups engaged in traditional observances which obtain in abundance throughout the subcontinent, though the encounter of enclaves of Westernized, secularized, modernized individuals, families, and groups even in the rural regions is not an uncommon experience. In both rural and urban areas modernization has taken place, but the degree, level, and kind of it differs from individual to individual, family to family, group to group, village to village, and town to town. Again, this modernization is nothing new to the Hindus, but forms an integral part of an historical process.

But even here we cannot talk of Hinduism as a whole. "Hinduism" is an abstraction and, as a generic concept, is useful for academic disguisitions. It does not exist as such in all its plenary, text-book implications and connotations, in every household. Its followers are indi-

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viduals, families, or groups. And modernization need not necessarily mean Westernization, urbanization, secularization or technologization. In fact none of these need be equated with any of these. For convenience we may refer to these complex, multiple concepts by the acronym Wemosutization, using the first two letters of Westernization and Modernization, and the first only of Secularization, Urbanization, and Technologization; and where this newly coined cognomen is employed, it may refer to one or more of these processes. Wemosutization can be seen operating among the upper, middle, and lower classes (not necessarily castes, since members belonging to any Hindu caste may belong to any class, depending upon their economic status) in various ways: by modified, truncated, symbolic, or negative observance of daily or periodic rituals. Wemosutization is a socio-cultural process which is initiated and maintained by and large through imitation. As is the case with any innovation or the initiation of an innovative process, such movements are inaugurated by individuals, and spread in an expanding linear or circular motion, as the momentum catches on, depending upon several variables: the change should be unobtrusive religiously and socially; and the transition should be easy, smooth, economical, within reach, acceptable to all, convenient, and fulfill a need, either real or imagined. A certain aspect of the upward mobility, in the case of lower castes, is referred to as Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1972, p. 7) and implies the acceptance of a 'superior' tradition and becomes the catalyst of Wemosutization, though Sanskritization need not necessarily and always mean Wemosutization and vice versa.

One or the other of the processes of Wemosutization has, or several of it have jointly, bequeathed to India new concepts, values, reforms, institutions, and systems. Some of these are the Western type of schools and universities, printing, newspapers and periodicals, post and telegraph, telephone, radio, trains, buses, cars, planes, roads, canals, ships, boats, factories, industries, electricity, supermarkets, department stores, building complexes, skyscrapers, all kinds of ultra-modern weapons, democracy, elections, the Constitution, legal system trial by jury, and humanitarianism. The list is not exhaustive.

Wemosutization has brought in its train several significant changes in the pattern of life of the common man in India. It is not unusual to find sofas and cushioned chairs in the living rooms, dining tables and chairs and concomitant cutlery and crockery in the dining rooms, bedsteads, dressers, and closets in the bedrooms of almost every well-to-do middle-class, upper middle-class, and upper class people. These were

undreamt of a century ago. Though orthodox women in these classes, and especially brahmin men and women in them, still prefer to sit on the floor and eat their food served on plantain or other leaves or on silver or brass plates, and with their fingers, the 'new-set' prefers to sit on chairs and eat at tables, mostly with fingers, though spoons, knives, and forks are not uncommon. If a family has an orthodox person—an older man or woman, to him or her all this is sacrilegious. For the place where the food is eaten, having become polluted after the meals, should be 'purified' by cleaning it with cowdung and water. Now a varnished table cannot take cowdung. The purifying thus goes by the board. The introduction of the table, chairs, spoons, forks, and knives itself meant some Wemosutization, but that brought the negation of the cowdung closer to total Wemosutization.

But this process has not uprooted tradition completely. It is in the tenacious nature of Hindu tradition to withstand modernity, tolerate it initially, and subsequently absorb it or be absorbed by it or even permit it to stand beside it, that has kept hoary prescriptions alive in India. Ladies may operate keypunch machines, typewriters, and calculators, but still wear their *kumkum*, vermilion powder, on their foreheads, and drape themselves in the *saree*. The stewardesses on Air India International are a brilliant example. On a certain festive occasion almost every Hindu family can be seen engaged in cleaning its tractors, cars, bicycles, large and small tools, books, and other products of technology, and at the same time sprinkling vermilion water and applying vermilion paste on them, and worshiping them. Taxi and rikshaw drivers would wash with religious care their vehicles, products of technology, and decorate them with vermilion paste almost every week.

The brahminical conception of pollution and sin, and purity and merit has undergone significant change due to Wemosutization. A brahmin could not go near an untouchable; if he did, he became polluted and the remedy lay in his taking a ritual bath to purify himself. He could not be touched by the members of any other caste or by the members of his own family, if the latter had not taken their purificatory bath. If he were so touched, he had to undergo the same process of ritualistic purification. Now this is impossible to observe in cities where brahmins have to travel to their offices, where they work, in crowded trains and buses; they have to deal with members of the other castes and casteless people in close proximity at all places outside their homes. The same brahmins may sit and eat with members of other castes at restaurants, whereas at their own residences non-brahmins and others cannot

even see them eat.

Women in menstruation, regardless of caste, were considered to be polluting and were isolated from the mainstream of life. They could not be touched. Now ladies who work at factories and in offices cannot observe this injunction. Men and women do get polluted sitting or working near or touching women in menstruation, but do not take an immediate or even late purificatory bath. There were days when brahmin men could be shaved by a barber only on certain days, in the mornings, in the week. After the shave, water had to be poured on their head, since, in that polluted condition, they could not touch any pot or pan. Now, with the advent of the daily shave with the manual or electric shaver, a brahmin can shave himself at any time of the day or night, and does not even take the purificatory bath afterward.

Many of the rituals connected with the human life-cycle have been affected significantly by Wemosutization. Many have been abrogated, many truncated, some abbreviated, and some abbreviated and combined, and a few truncated, abbreviated and combined with non-ritualistic, purely secular matters. Instances of the abrogated rituals are the naming ceremony and shaving the head of the young boy at his initiation. Brahmin boys in South India do get the sacred thread at their initiation, but, whereas the ceremony lasted two or four days some decades ago, it is now dismissed in a matter of hours in a single day. Here and in the marriage ritual we see truncation and abbreviation at work. Many of the rituals have simply been severed; some have been abbreviated. The residue is a token and serves just a symbolic purpose. Many marriages and initiations are combined, in truncated and abbreviated form, to save expenses and time. The wedding ritual has been modernized considerably. The groom, except when sitting or standing with the bride before the sacred fire, or when walking around it, almost always appears in the best of woollen tweed suit, even in the hottest summer. It is as if this modernity has become a new tradition. The marriage hall is brightly lit by electric floodlights; camera men keep busy taking movies and stills; and dozens of electric fans operate at maximum efficiency to circulate the same hot air all around. Soft drinks pass round freely to quench the thirst of the profusely sweating invitees. The wedding itself is reported in newspapers and slick magazines with the photographs of the newlywed in their brightest clothing—girls in *sarees* and men in suits. Brahmin girls were married off before their menstruation, decades ago, but now it is not unusual to find virgins in their late teens and mid twenties working in offices and factories.

Whereas unmarried girls, in those days, had to be trained in keeping the house, in cooking, dishwashing, scrubbing, and in certain domestic arts and crafts such as music, dance, and knitting, nowadays have to go to schools, colleges, and universities to obtain education in modern science and technology, in literature and arts, and in other disciplines, so that they may obtain academic qualifications to work. Pilgrimages were undertaken, at the fag end of the life-span, for religious purposes. Decades ago, these older people, when embarking upon a pilgrimage, said permanent 'goodbye' to their kith and kin, and the village folk, for they went to die at the sacred place. They walked or were taken by friendly farmers or others in their bullock carts on short distances. Now we have specialists among travel agents, experts in organizing pilgrimages. There are regularly scheduled chartered buses, trains, and planes for the purpose, and food and lodging expenses of the 'pilgrims' are taken care of. The pilgrimage itself has become an excuse for sightseeing, shopping, and visiting friends and relatives. Going to the sacred shrines and places is "on the side." Such legacies of modernization as the radio and cinema are exploited for bringing tradition to people—the former regularly celebrates most Indian festivals, and the latter brings themes from the sacred epics and other lore to the people.

It is in the backdrop of this admixture of Wemosutization and tradition that we shall consider a unique tradition that obtains in North India exclusively among women, the folk ritual vows or *Vrat*, and place it in contrast with its counterpart observed by the males, and officially sanctioned by the scriptures. The folk *Vrat* is the creation of the folk. There is no reference to it in the Hindu scriptures. And the folk *Vrat* never came under the surveillance of the brahmin priests; the official *Vrats* did and do. If the latter are a scriptural requirement, the former has no scriptural authority to look to or enforce it. It is there, communicating the unexpressed hopes and aspirations of the multitude.

The folk *Vrats* of North India are periodic rituals in most of which girls and women engage to celebrate certain festive occasions or to worship certain deities standing for certain human conditions. In *Vrats* the ladies express their emotions of hope, rejoicing, aspirations, gratitude, and so forth, in songs. They also listen to or narrate certain traditionally circulated tales during many *Vrats*. These tales are partly religious and partly secular in character, and relate to the occasion celebrated or the deity worshiped or both. Though the *Vrat* connotes vow or resolution, no such vow is taken on these occasions, but there are regular fasts and prayers. The ceremonial consists of two basic elements: the ritual part

and the tale-telling session. The ritual itself has, in most cases, three ingredients: the activities anterior to the ritual; the ritual; and, after the tale-telling session, the post-ritual activities. A typical ritual has thus four stages in this chronological sequence: preparations; the ritual; the tale-telling session; and the conclusion. But not all *Vrats* have tales and some of the rituals are very nominal too. We shall examine these stages in one example, a little later.

Origin and evolution: Vrats have been prescribed for observance by males in several Hindu scriptures. The *Puranas,* ancient Indian chronicles, not only make reference to them but also offer detailed instructions as to when, how, and why should *Vrats* be performed. They contain information on punishments for the poor performance or non-performance of *Vrats,* and for the sin of their performance by women without the approval of their husbands, sons, or fathers. These male-oriented, officially sanctioned *Vrats* are rigid, abstruse in their philosophical conceptions, and crude in their punishments. Women were and are excluded from the performance of the official *Vrats.* We do not know when exactly the female-oriented *folk Vrats* originated, but they had something to do with and were either bequeathed by or greatly influenced by similar rituals that presumably belonged to the indigenous culture of India, long before the invasion of the sub-continent by the Aryans from the North.

Archaeological artifacts unearthed from the dozens of sites all over India indicate that the culture that flourished at these places was highly civilized and carried on a brisk and prosperous economy both within and without. They also hint at the existence of a religion, a mythology, a philosophy, and legends peculiar to these peoples and indicative of a long evolution and persistent tradition. These people were the Dravidians, remnants of whom survive even today in South India. They had their own galaxy of gods and goddesses, and their own rituals and customs. Their highest god was probably *Shiva* and their angriest goddess *Kali.* It is conjectured that this culture had a highly trained priesthood, intricate priestly functions, and elaborate rituals and ceremonies, which were all officially sanctioned by its religion. Almost every activity was preceded by some ritual, whether wearing a turban or proceeding to a temple. We witness the survivals of these rites in India even today. Women had their own quota of rituals, especially the "resolutions," which became a routine matter week after week, month after month, year after year. These resolutions and rituals, and the myths and legends connected with them are our present concern.

The Dravidians were great seafarers and a prosperous maritime people. Enterprising and courageous, they established colonies and trading posts from Greece in the West to Java in the Southeast. They were warriors and sailors and sailed to far off continents to conquer and establish their civilization. The men, whether on land or sea, were uncertain about their return. The women at home prayed for their success, their safe return, and their welfare in the here and the hereafter. They would "resolve" to forego the pleasures of eating by abstaining, for example, from some food they liked very much, to please some goddess so that she might grant their wishes.

Thus arose domestic folk rituals, resembling the official rituals, but differing from them entirely in their flexibility, functions, and meaning. The folk *Vrats* that we witness in North India today are the rich legacies of this ancient Dravidian tradition.

The present day performers of *Vrats* call themselves Aryans, not Dravidians. The reason is not far to seek. The Aryan conquest of India that commenced some two to three thousand years before the Christian era began, was complete by the beginning of that era. The conquerors had to content with a highly civilized culture. The best way to win over their subjects was not in battles but by assimilating their gods, myths, tales, legends, rituals, rites, ceremonies, and so forth. This the Aryans did. It is usual to talk on the Aryanization of India, a phenomenon which is true to an extent. But by and large what was happening was the Dravidianization of the Aryans. The Aryans themselves were a nature worshiping tribe. And the kind of nature worship of the Dravidians was to their immense liking. Thus they promptly adopted most of the Dravidian gods, customs, and rituals. And, besides, the Aryans were constantly battling, among themselves, with the indigenous population, and with several tribal cultures like the Nagas in the Northeast. They were not a maritime people though. Still the Aryan wives and mothers and sisters lost as many of their husbands, sons, and brothers on the battlefield as did the Dravidians on high seas or on battle grounds. These women promptly imitated the rituals of the indigenous folk. It is thus that we have parallels in the Aryan culture of *Vrats* obtaining among the Dravidians. The Aryans never had a *Shiva* or a powerful *Vishnu*, no goddesses, except perhaps the glorious and glamorous *Ushas*, the Dawn, and no spirits of the trees, stones, rivers, and mountains. The Dravidians had them. The Aryan culture was male-oriented and male-dominated. The Dravidians gave an enormous share to the women in the management of domestic and other economic affairs. We see a

mixture of both the male-oriented culture and the female-dominated household in India today.

This syncretism of the two cultures flourished unhampered until about the tenth century A.D. Buddhist and Jain philosophies only added to their color and vigor. Even the Greek influence that commenced about the fourth century B.C. and lasted several centuries, did not undermine this syncretic nature of the Indian culture. But the invasion of the India by the moslems in the tenth century changed all this. The invaders were notorious for their plunder and loot, for their sackings of temples, and for their forcible proselytization of Hindus into the Moslem fold. Millions were killed in the process. This suffering went on for nearly seven centuries during which the country was laid prostrate and experienced an unthought of insecurity, fear, terror, mass murders, loot, and arson. Men went into hiding, and engaged themselves in fruitless wars, and died in the field. This circumstance intensified the practice of *Vrats* by women who were anxious for the safety of their men, and longed for more sons to compensate for those killed, and for the welfare of their men. Women went into seclusion, for obvious reasons, and adopted the veil, a feature which is totally absent in South India where the Muslim influence was minimal, and where one does not observe any of the North India *Vrats*. Outlawry became pronounced and women had to live all by themselves, waiting for occasional surreptitious visits by their menfolk in hiding in the hills of Gir in Saurashtra, and in the caves and jungles of the other parts of North India. All these factors intensified the performance of the womanly *Vrats*.

Then came the Christian missionaries who converted thousands of Hindus and others to Christianity. This development again spelled disaster and the loss of men, and resulted in the women clinging to their *Vrats* much more tenaciously than ever before. By now the functional value of the *Vrats* almost disappeared and *Vrats* became ritualistic observances which *had* to be kept alive lest an angry goddess should cast a curse on a hapless family or woman.

By 1845 India had been subjugated by the British. Since that time technology and industrialization, Westernization and urbanization, advanced by zealous British administrators and businessmen, have made incursions into the Indian polity, culture, and economics, and brought about sweeping changes in the attitudes, customs, and manners of the people. The introduction of Western education created a new middle-class. On the one hand, this class adored the ancient traditions of India and rapidly introduced a revitalizing process referred to as Sanskritiza-

tion, without falling a victim to emotionalism, but keeping the process on the intellectual plane; and on the other, the middle-class shied away from orthodox observances of rites, rituals, and ceremonies. As education spread, the size of this class swelled, and the size of the nonbelievers and nonperformers also increased. Most townspeople in India, educated as they are, belong to this class.

Industrialization and technology and the consequent urbanization and the movement of people from rural to urban areas have caused tremendous changes in the life-patterns of the common man in India. The political fight for freedom has united the people into a new nationhood as had never been the case before. Previously the masses did not care for their rulers, and they had several kinds of masters: Aryans, Greeks, Moslems, and the Europeans. They were not aware of themselves as a nation. The concept or feeling of nationhood was very vague and thin then. Now a new sense of nationhood has brought in its wake changes in the attitude toward folk *Vrats*. While the educationally emancipated men do not believe in them, their wives may still observe them; and the believers and non-believers have no quarrel. They coexist.

The occasions and purposes of Vrats: In Gujarat most of the folk *Vrats* are undertaken in *Shravan* (July–August) when the monsoon is vigorous, the rivers, lakes, ponds, pools, and wells are full, the countryside is green with food crops and foliage, and the gardens are gay with flowers. It is thus a month of worship, prayers, rituals, and rejoicing. Again, many *Vrats* are observed in one week on successive days in *Shravan*. In fact, in Jujarat *Shravan* is the month of *Vrats* and the *Vrat* cycle commences in *Shravan*. Most others that follow in the succeeding months continue the cycle thus commenced. Besides the yearly *Vrats* there are weekly *Vrats* of fasts, prayers, and rituals started on Mondays (*Shravani Somvar*) and on Saturdays. These activities continue for several months or years, or for a lifetime, depending upon the individual and the need. A middle-aged married woman may commence "Mondays" and continue it for a lifetime if her husband or son ails from some incurable disease such as diabetes, tuberculosis, cancer, or heart trouble. Or she may observe *Shravani Somvar* regularly just for the welfare of the son or husband or both.

Some of the *Vrats* of *Shravan* fall during the fortnight of the waxing moon, some in that of the waning moon. Each has its kind of performers, little girls, virgins, married women, and widows, and each has its purpose, and its ritual. The *Vrats* of the fortnight of the waxing

moon in Shravan are:

Veerpasali, a *Vrat* engaged in by young married ladies, commences on the first Sunday of this month and is continued for eight days. The purpose is to pray for the welfare and long life of brothers and husbands. And the ritual consists of making a string of several knots, symbolically representing the age of the male relative concerned, going to the river or lake, burning incense, narrating or listening to one tale a day, and tying the string to a *peepul* tree, an auspicious tree in India.

Noli Nom, participated in by the childless wife, is commenced on the ninth day of the waxing moon in *Shravan* and continued every year on the same day until the woman gets a child, and may be persisted indefinitely even after several children are born. The ritual consists of fasting for the day and eating, in the evening, a light meal of only one ear of cooked maize. The lady narrates or listens to the tale of *Noli* (mongoose), in which the motif is the same as in the tale of *Shitala Satam*, (see below), that of carrying a dead body to a shrine to making it come alive.

Phool Kajali is a *Vrat* performed by girls for acquiring husbands and by married ladies for the long life of their husbands, on the third day of the bright fortnight in *Shravan*, and for five years on this day. The ladies observe almost a total fast, except for eating some cucumber and a certain milk preparation. They hold a rose in their hand, smell its fragrance, meditate on and worship *Shiva* and *Parvati* (the consort of Shiva), and narrate or listen to the tale of these two divinities.

Chokha Kajali continues the preceding *Vrat* in the dark fortnight of *Shravan*, for the same reasons, but the ritual is different: the ladies gather one thousand grains of paddy and strip them with two fingernails, one at a time, keeping awake the entire night until all the grains have been hulled. They observe total fast, except to eat a little coconut in the evening, and listen to the tale appropriate to the *Vrat*.

Bhe Baras is undertaken by married women on the twelfth day of the waning moon is *Shravan*. They pray for the fullness of rivers, lakes, ponds, and wells. No food is cooked this day, but, as in *Shitala Satam*, it it is prepared on the previous day. The ladies go to the water, worship it, return, listen to or narrate the tale concerned, and eat the food cooked the previous day.

Gai Vrat lasts the entire *Shravan* month and is performed by unmarried girls for obtaining a good husband. The *Vrat* is continued for four or five years or until the girl gets married. The ritual consists of worshiping cows returning home from pasture in the evening. The

girls do not eat for the whole day, but, after the worship, eat lightly. This is the day when eating everything green is forbidden. The appropriate tale is narrated and listened to in the morning.

Bol Choth is a *Vrat* exceptional in character because both men and women observe it on the fourth day of the dark fortnight of *Shravan* for the welfare of cows. Groups of families can be seen cooking-out under the open sky, cooking only millet. No knife can be used this day. The congregation prays for the welfare of cows and calves, listens to the appropriate tale (in which a lion spares its prey, a cow, and venerates it), and then eat their meal.

Nag Pancham is engaged in by all ladies of all ages, on the fifth day of the waning moon in *Shravan*, to propitiate snakes. The ritual commences in the morning when the picture of a snake is drawn on an earthen pot and prayed to. The appropriate tale (see below) is narrated and food prepared from millet and cooked on the previous day is consumed.

Randhan Chat is no ritual as such, but is a whole-day cooking day, on the sixth day of the dark fortnight of *Shravan*, when food that cools the body is supposed to be cooked, but in actual practice spicy and fried food that would 'keep,' in that hot and humid summer for twenty-four hours is prepared. Every girl and lady participates in the cooking. After the culinary work is over, the earthen stove is cooled off and cleaned with dung, but the ash is not removed.

Shitala Satam follows *Randhan Chat* the next day and is undertaken by all ladies for the welfare of siblings, children, and other close relatives, and for their freedom from measles and small pox. The ritual of *Shitala Satam* is explained elsewhere.

Shravanio Somvar is participated in by virgins and married women on all the Mondays or *Shravan* for anywhere between four and forty years. Virgins pray for good husbands, and married women for children and the welfare of children. They go to the village temple of *Mahadev* (*Shiva*) in the morning where they listen to the tale narrated by a leader. There are four tales for the four Mondays. The ladies do not eat anything until the evening when they partake of light meals.

Shravan is followed by *Badarvo* (August–September) when the monsoon tapers off. Only one *Vrat* is seriously engaged in during this month and that is *Dharo Atham*, the eighth day of the waxing moon, in which all married women take part and pray for the long life and well-being of sons. The ritual consists of venerating *dharo*, green grass, and listening to the appropriate tale. The ladies eat once only, in the

evening, and partake of some light food cooked the previous day.

In the next month, *Aso* (September–October), also, only one *Vrat* is noticed, and even here it is shared by the next month, *Kartak* (October–November). The *Vrat* is *Ambardu*, and is the exclusive *Vrat* of very young girls. The ritual lasts twenty-eight days, fourteen in *Aso*, in its dark fortnight, and the remaining fourteen in *Kartak* in its bright fortnight. The girls wish for a large family for their parents, with plenty of siblings, then go to the village temple, pray there, and sing. In the *Vrats* of the little girls there is no tale.

In the next month, *Kartak*, technically there is no *Vrat*, but that which is commenced in *Ashad* (June–July) prior to *Shravan*, is continued for five months and completed in *Kartak*. This is the *Tulsi Vrat*, and we shall look into it when we come to *Ashad*.

Magsar (November–December) does not have any *Vrat*. *Posh* (December–January) has one: *Poshi Punam*, coming on the fullmoon day. It is intended for very young girls, when they bathe in the morning, cook in the open, fast for the whole day, but eat lightly in the evening. They feed their brothers, and sing and pray for their long life and welfare. There is no tale attached to this ritual.

Mah (January–February) does not have any feminine ritual, though spring arrives at the end of this month, and is in full swing next month, *Fagan* (February–March). In the latter we have one taleless *Vrat*, *Ahali Pahali*, engaged in by very young girls. The ritual lasts eight days from the eighth day of the bright moon. Groups of young girls of all castes, and this is unique, go from house to house, sing, ask for grains and dates, and bless those who offer the grains. The girls consume the dates at the end of the *Vrat*.

In *Chaitra* (March–April) when spring takes leave and summer arrives, there is only one Vrat, *Gana Gor*, performed by unmarried girls, on the third day of the bright moon, praying for good husbands. The girls take a sweetmeat, called *Gana*, prepared at home, to the goddess *Gauri* (consort of *Shiva*), in the morning. They sing and eat the sweetmeat at home. This is also a *Vrat* without a tale.

Vaishakh (April–May), when the summer is at its most intense, too has only one *Vrat*, the *Koyal Vrat*, undertaken by young married girls. Even though there is only one *Vrat*, it is performed during the entire month, for the married well-being of the girls. On this day these girls do not use any hair oil, nor do they make beds for their husbands. They themselves sleep on thin mats on the floor, and abstain from sexual contact. They bathe in cold water daily, and at early dawn, go out to

call the *koyal* (the cuckoo bird) and are delighted when the bird calls back. On these days, again, the girls wear nothing black, and abstain from food all day, and eat lightly once in the evening. There is also no tale for their ritual.

Jeth (May–June), like the previous month, has only one *Vrat*, performed daily, but by ladies of the lower castes alone, and especially when there is draught. The prayer is for rains, and the taleless ritual consists of the ladies carrying a small plank on their heads, with clay idols of the cloud-god perched on the plank. They go from house to house, sing, and ask for rain, as they sprinkle water on the heads of the ladies of the household.

Ashad (June–July), when the monsoon starts, brings us full circle in the celebration of *Vrats*, and since this month precedes the *Vrat* rich Shravan, it too has its full share of *Vrats*, for in this month we have five *Vrats*. The first *Vrat* called *Evrat* is engaged in by all married ladies. It commences on the new moon day of this month, and continues to be performed on the same day every month throughout the year, during the entire life of the ladies. Their prayer is for the long life of the husbands. The ritual consists of a holy bath and a journey to the residence of a priestly brahmin where the ladies pray to goddess Evrat *Jivrat*, whose picture the priest has. They fast the entire day, eat fruits and drink milk in the evening, and keep awake the entire night. They continue to celebrate the *Vrat* for five years. They narrate or listen to the tale of *Evrat Jivrat*.

On the fifth day of the bright moon in this month very young girls perform the taleless *Molakat Vrat*, and continue it for five consecutive days, wishing for a good husband. The ritual is simple. The girls sow grains (a handful of each kind of seven varieties) in an earthen pot, on the first day, and water the seeds regularly and religiously, singing and praying as they do. The seedlings show up, usually in five days, and the girls rejoice and sing prayers to them. During these five days the young ones eat only once in the evening.

On the third day of the declining moon in *Ashad*, married women perform *Kevda Trij* for the long life of their husbands. They sing prayers to *Mahadev* and offer gifts for the priest's wife, consisting of a blouse piece, some *kumkum*, a few bracelets, and so forth, which symbolize a married woman. The appropriate tale is listened to or narrated.

The *Surya Pandadu Vrat*, which is not widely prevalent in Saurashtra, but in the rest of Gujarat, is participated in by all women. It is observed on the eleventh day of the waxing moon in *Ashad*, and is con-

tinued for four and a half months, on every eleventh day (there are two in every month). It is intended for the general welfare of the entire family. The ladies eat once a day, on leaves, for four and a half months, listen to the tale of *Surya* and *Rannade*. They also totally fast on days when they cannot see the sun, but otherwise observe fast during the day time and eat lightly in the evening.

Tulsi Vrat, engaged in by girls before their marriage, commences from the eleventh day of the bright moon in *Ashad* and lasts five months, until the eleventh day of the dark moon in *Kartak*. The girls pray for a good husband. Since this is a long *Vrat*, several tales exist, and each tale is narrated by the girl concerned before a *Tulsi* plant (an evergreen plant with fragrant leaves. *Tulsi* is also a goddess). The goddess is prayed to for a good husband. The girls light an oil lamp before the plant, circumambulate it a few times daily, and salute it. They fast the entire day and eat lightly in the evening.

Besides these *Vrats* during these twelve months, women in *Kantha Gorya Vrat*, and ladies and men in another *Vrat*, busy themselves in the *Purshotam* month, which is believed to be the thirteenth month coming every four years. In *Kantha Gorya Vrat*, performed during the twenty-eight days of this extra month, ladies go to any river or lake, in the morning, bathe, and worship the clay idol of *Gauri*, on the banks of the water. They also listen to a tale, one for each day, and eat once a day, generally praying for the prosperity of the male folk and the family. In the other *Vrat, Purshotam Mas Vrat*, again performed all through the twenty-eight days of the month, men and women bathe in the river or lake, early in the morning, and worship the clay idol of goddess *Gauri*. They listen to the tale narrated daily by a priest, sleep on the floor, and abstain from sexual union. They worship the *peepul* tree and the *tulsi* plant, and eat lightly once a day in the evening. The ritual varies from region to region, as also the tales.

There are three other occasional *Vrats*, reserved for unmarried girls: *Muni Vrat*, which is observed all day until a star is seen. The girls break silence by singing on seeing a star, and then eat; *Jad Pan Vrat* (*Vrat* of trees and leaves) is also occasional, and any unmarried girl may perform it, if she so feels. The girl worships a *bordi* (berry bearing) tree and asks for cattle to enrich her brother's household; in the next, *Gorya Vrat*, performed on evenings, looking at the moon, no ritual as such is involved. The girl sings a song, imagining her brother coming on horseback, bringing flowers for her. In all these three *Vrats* there are no tales.

The participants in the folk *Vrat* rituals can be classified under three categories: (1) unmarried young ladies who, in their turn are sub-divided into two: (i) the very young, between the ages of three and thirteen; and (ii) marriageable young virgins; (2) married women, again, in two categories: (i) young married ladies, and (ii) adult married women; and (3) widows. The last, widows, are heard of only in one month, the *Pushotam Mas Vrat* month.

In most *Vrats* the performers wish, pray for, fast for men: good husbands, good sons, good brothers, wealthy fathers-in-law, loving brothers-in-law, the health of husband and sons, the wellbeing of husbands and sons in jobs and wars, and so on.

Vrats are not confined to the class of poor people. In fact where the family observes traditional rituals, even in royal households, among upper class families, and among the upper middle class of families, the folk *Vrat* ceremonials are observed in the same age old traditional manner. Again, the same *Vrats* are followed by all castes, except by the lowest and by outcastes.

For *Vrats* are held sanctimonious by men in Gujarat. Unmarried daughters are respected and encouraged on these occasions; young and adult wives are helped by their husbands—the latter have to fast, if nothing is cooked, but do fast willingly, if a certain *Vrat* enjoins fast. In *Vrats* where vows are important, abstinence from sexual intercourse on the day of the *Vrat* and on certain stipulated and mutually accepted days in the week or the fortnight, or for the entire *Vrat* period, is religiously observed.

Men, even princes and rulers, regard the *Vrats* of women so highly that when a man is about to molest a lady, if she says (and she may tell a lie) that she is observing a *Vrat* (she need not even name it), and that she should not be touched by males, the attacker would invariably withdraw, respecting the *Vrat*. There are several tales illustrating this feature.

Vrats are also observed, especially where resolutions or wishes are important, for moderation in eating or fasting on certain days in the week. Many ladies observe Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays, and so on, which means that they eat only once that day. They also observe *Vrats* for avoidance of certain foods, like onions, or for foregoing certain foods liked very much, e.g., certain sweetmeats, certain vegetables like the sweet potato. *Vrats* are undertaken for abstinence from speaking so as to observe silence on *Vrat* or on a particular day in the week which may also be combined with fast, or for fasting with only fruits. *Vrats* are

observed for abstention from certain activities like cooking, cutting vegetables, washing clothes, and so on, or for keeping awake on certain nights in the month or on a certain *Vrat* day, and so forth.

Besides tale-telling which is sandwiched between the ritual and the breaking of the fast, ladies also engage in meditation, in chants in chorus or alone, in singing, again alone or in chorus, or in just talking among themselves.

In *Vrat* tales, the protagonists are almost always women, and there are two classes of them: one, the meek, obedient, worshipful, devoted, who have faith in god and in goodness, and perform all duties in the interests of others either as ordained or by instinct, as in the story related; and the other is the antagonist, who has to be there to be punished, since the opposite of good has to be annihilated. But the punishment is human and equal to the offense or crime. The folk sense of justice does not permit inhumane treatment.

The protagonist is almost always a sufferer and a supplicant. She is either ill treated by a cruel mother-in-law or sister-in-law, or has some inborn defect owing to which she has to suffer. In many cases the protagonist is poor, and always belongs to a village. If she has lice on her head, and most seem to have, she has no hesitation to look for lice on the head of even a goddess, for the latter is brought down from her Himalayan height to hamlets, huts, wayside trees, and other humble places, and is made thoroughly human and even vulgar. The good of the protagonist consists of a gruel of porridge or unleavened, unbuttered, hardened, flat millet bread, and some adulterated buttermilk. In the end, if and when prosperity comes to her, she may have some gold, but she will still eat the poor man's rich food, millet bread and milk.

It is inconceivable that these characteristics of poverty, humility, obedience, and all the rest existed in the earlier versions of these tales. They seem to follow the rise and fall of the prosperity of a culture. For several hundred years the Saurashtran peasants were poor. This poverty is reflected in the tales too.

The goddesses of the *Vrats* have their own characteristics. There are those who test their devotees for their love and inner strength, and then reward them; others become the intimate friends of very young maidens and fulfill their wishes; then there are the goddesses who hurry to the rescue of the harried, insulted, and helpless ladies; there are others who are pleased by kindliness and benevolence, but are angered by unfriendly acts and impropriety; then we have goddesses who are pleased by the penitence and penance of sinners; and finally there are the spirits

of trees, plants, beasts and birds, which are helpful to mankind.

If we look closely at these characteristics, we come to the inevitable conclusion that the folk imagination created these goddesses as the custodians of the cultural welfare of mankind. Each tale has a goddess taking care of one particular form of well-being. Even when they are angry, when not prayed to or when disregarded, they are not considered, nor are they selfish. Their anger subsides instantly, and it is the anger of a mother for a naughty child. Their emotions are human, but serve pragmatic ends.

The credit for the pragmatism should go to the folk imagination, for it is practical enough to create goddesses and place them in charge as one or the other of social or domestic work. Since social work has to be done, and done cheerfully and at the same earnestly, the fear, love, respect, and worship of the unknown are exploited. Through such symbolic rituals social service is not only contemplated, enjoined, and insisted upon, but is actually performed. The rituals result in social action. There is a tale signifying this omnibus social function symbolized by one idol. A lady, in a fit of craze, breaks this idol. Since the idol stands generally for social welfare, breaking it signifies hostility towards social good. Consequently, the goddess becomes furious. Normally her anger could be construed as stemming from personal insult. But it does not. It is the anger of a large social concern against a selfish iconoclast.

Many of these *Vrats* may seem to be meaningless superstitions. But upon close examination, particularly from an historic point of view, we may discover that far from being superstitions they embody scientific explanations and functions holding true in those days and some even today. Take, for example, the *Vrat* on the *Shitala Satam* day. According to popular belief, *Shitala*, the goddess of pox and measles, protects children from measles and pox if she is kept pleased, at least annually. We noticed earlier how on the day of the *Randhan Chat* food for the following day is cooked and the stove cleaned and cooled off. The next day, on the day of the ritual, after the ladies had eaten and gone to sleep, the goddess is believed to come to every household and roll in the cool ashes in the stove. The superstition is that if measles should appear it should be covered with ashes. The 'scientific' explanation is that the ashes probably prevent the scores from spreading. Here the goddess herself is the incarnation of measles and she must be covered with ashes. Otherwise she is likely to impose a curse on the house that disregards this activity. Looked at from a scientific point of view, one may argue that this injunction was made because under the pretext of such ob-

servances and rituals, measles and pox could be kept under control, for these infections are rampant during the monsoon. Thus it is appropriate that *Shitala Satam* be observed. It is also appropriate that the whole *Shravan* month be spent in less or no cooking (and cooking produces and enhances heat, which in turn is an invitation to several infections) and more fasts, since fasting compels the household from consuming spicy food which, again, is a tempting invitation to measles and other infectious diseases.

On the *Shitala Satam* day, again, it is the practice all over Gujarat for every household to give the food (that was cooked the previous day and eaten on the day of the ritual) to the village folk. Each household has something unique. And the beneficiaries of this variety are the village workers such as the barbers, potters, sweepers, tanners, milkmen, farmers, and others. They too do not cook, but partake of the food cooked for them by the elders of the village. Thus the observance of this day results in social service also.

The North Indian women folk were given, in these *Vrats*, a coterie of goddesses who were the symbols or embodiments of morality, self-surrender, chastity, and other human values and virtues, and it is in this sense that these deities were taking care of the people. In fact the people themselves were taking care of themselves *via* these observances. It is the cultural and social consciousness of the folk, instilled into them and imbibed by them through the ages, a collective consciousness of social and cultural well-being, that becomes the presiding deity or the guardian angel of these social values and virtues. It is not only the social welfare of the people that is taken care of in the *Vrats*, but also the idea of peaceful co-existence among people of opposing ideologies. This is illustrated by a complex and symbolic snake tale. The snake in the tale may be construed to be the representative of all snakes, in which case the idea of peaceful co-existence extends to even the venomous insect kingdom; or it may symbolize another tribe with whom one tribe is at loggerheads, and the tale might thus signify the peaceful co-existence even among enemies.

There were seven daughters-in-law and the seventh was an unwanted girl even in her own parents' residence. At the in-law's residence she ate what was left over and did all the chores. She became pregnant and had the craving for some milk preparation. But none would cook it for her nor would anyone allow her to cook it for herself. However, one day that preparation was indeed cooked, but not for our heroine. Everyone ate it to his or her heart's content, leaving nothing for the

protagonist. However, she saw some burnt portions of it sticking to the pot which she had to scrub and clean. She removed the burnt food carefully and hid it, hoping that she would, after all had gone to sleep, eat it. As ill luck would have it, a hungry snake ate it away, and when she returned for it, it was all gone. She sighed but blessed the soul which had eaten it. The snake, who was indeed a princess of the Underworld, heard our heroine bless her, took pity on her, and took her home, to the Underworld, which from now became our heroine's 'parental' home. The snake princess became pregnant and was delivering her babies, when the protagonist was helping her, holding a lamp. But then, she noticed, to her horror, the snake princess swallowing the snakelets, her own offsprings. Frightened and petrified, the heroine dropped the lamp, and, in the ensuing darkness two snake offsprings escaped from their mother's mouth, but without their tails. Soon after this event, the human left the Snake Kingdom for her own earthly residence to have her baby. Several years passed by, and the two snake princes grew to snakehood, but lacking their princely tails. That was a stigma among snakes. Offended by this lacuna, the two knew who was responsible for it, and promptly made their way to the earth, in human form, to take revenge upon the offender, our heroine. As they entered her residence, one of them stumbled on the threshold and was about to fall when the heroine, recognizing them, said, "God save you! God bless you!" The snake princes did not expect to be blessed, and could not sting and kill one who had blessed them. Nonplussed, they lavished on her and her children (for, by this time she too had several children) with many rubies.

The moral of the tale, as understood by the common folk in Gujarat is, if a snake is fed with milk, no snake will ever bite that person. But the folk imagination that spun out the tale perhaps had other values in view. Some of these were touched upon above.

We also noticed earlier what were the characteristics of the protagonists and the goddesses in the tales, and how humanly human both the categories were. In the following tale, which is as rich with symbolism as it is complicated, much of what we discussed earlier comes out in bold relief. In the translation the writer has tried to be as close to the original dialect as is possible, but as it always happens in any translation, much of the flavor of the original has been lost in the present translation.

"There are two sisters-in-law. [Wives of two brothers]. *Shravan* has arrived, the dark sixth day has come. The [younger] sister-in-law has been cooking and cooking all day. By the time evening came, she

was tired and exhausted. That very night the stove had to be cooled off for *Shitala Satam.*

'Let me breast-feed my baby boy for a while; then shall I cool off the stove.' So thinking the [younger] sister-in-law takes her child in her lap. She is very tired and is dozing off. Suckling the baby she falls asleep. In the stove there are hot coals burning still.

Midnight comes and Mother *Shitala* arrives. Having come, she goes to the stove and rolls in it, but she gets burnt all over her body. Aggrieved, angry, and groaning, the Mother goes away cursing.

Morning comes and the mother sees her child dead beside her. The curse of the Mother goddess has fallen. Carrying the dead body of the boy, the mother goes out. As she walks, she looks for the Mother goddess. She meets a cow on the outskirts of the village. The cow asks, 'Lady, where are you going?' 'I am going in search of Mother *Shitala.* My son is stiff and dead.' 'In that case, would you take my message to her? Why don't I have a master? This calf eats away my udders.' 'Alright, lady [cow].' So saying the lady passes along and meets a river. The river asks, 'Lady, O Lady, please remove this obstacle [of dirt preventing the water from flowing.]' The lady bends over and removes the mound. The water in the river starts flowing. The lady goes forward walking and walking, and sees a carpenter cutting down a *peepul* tree. The lady asks, 'O brother! Today is *Shitala* Mother's auspicious day, and you are cutting down a *peepul?* Cut some *baval* [tree of thorns] instead!' So saying the lady brings down the carpenter from the *peepul,* places him on a *baval,* and goes away.

On the way two lakes meet her. Both lakes are full of water. The water of one flows into the other and the water of the other flows into the first. The water of each is thus emptied into one another. But not even a bird drinks their water. The lakes ask, 'Lady, O Lady, where are you going?' The lady answers, 'My son is stiff and dead and I am going in search of Mother *Shitala.*' 'Then lady, sister, would you ask of Mother *Shitala* our message? What sin might have we committed that no one drinks even a handful of our pearl-like water? Why not even a bird dips its beak in it?' 'Alright, sisters, I shall ask and return.' So saying the lady proceeds. On the way, as she walks, there lies a crocodile. The crocodile feels miserable lying in the sand. It cannot relax its soul. Seeing the lady the crocodile says, 'Lady, O Lady, sister, where are you doing?' The lady answers, 'I am going in search of Mother *Shitala.* My son is stiff and dead.' 'Then, lady, ask my message. What sin might have I committed that I am lying miserably in the

sand? Why does my soul not rest?' 'Alright brother, I shall ask and come back.' So saying she walks on.

As she walks on a dromedary meets her. Around the neck of the dromedary hangs a stone. Seeing the lady the animal asks, 'Lady, O lady, sister, where are you going?' The lady says, 'Sister, I am going in search of Mother *Shitala.* My son is still and dead.' 'Then lady, would you ask my message? What sin might have I committed last life that this stone hangs round my neck? And though I wander twelve miles a day why don't I find a master?' 'Alright sister.' So saying the lady goes further. As she walks she is met by a mango tree. The mango tree asks her, 'Lady, O lady, sister, where are you going?' 'I am going in search of *Shitala* Mother.' 'Then lady, would you ask my message? These are good fruits, a pound and a quarter each. These fruits, like coconuts, hang. Still none eats even a little of any. What is my sin then?' 'Alright lady, I shall ask your message also.' She proceeds.

Two he-buffaloes meet her. The two have been fighting each other and bleeding. None could separate them. One asks, 'Lady, O lady, sister, would you please ask our message of Mother *Shitala?* What sin might have we committed last life that we two fight each other throughout day, all the thirty-two hours?' 'Alright, brother!' So saying she proceeds. There under the trunk of a berry tree Mother *Shitala* is lying restless. The Mother asks, 'Lady, O lady, sister, where are you going?' 'I am going in search of Mother *Shitala.* My son is stiff and dead.' 'Lady, how will you recognize *Shitala,* by sight or by being blessed?' 'No lady, I can't recognize her by sight, but I can by being blessed.' 'Then, lady, examine my head [for lice], would you?' 'Here mother, one more belatedness added to my belatedness. Alright.' 'Place your son on my lap then.'

The Mother takes the boy on her lap. The lady starts examining the head of Mother *Shitala.* As she examines her head, the boy shows signs of life. After her head is examined, the Mother says, 'Sister, may your stomach cool off. Here, take your son and suckle him!'

As the lady takes the child in her arms, he comes to life. The lady realizes that the other lady is Mother *Shitala* and falls prostrate at her feet. She then asks about the message of the two lakes. The Mother tells, 'Those two ladies were sister-in-law [wives of two brothers] in their last life. They had plenty of milk cows. Still the two ladies mixed sour butter-milk and sold it to the neighbors. So they have been born as lakes this life. But none drinks their water. Now, you go to them and fill your hands with their water and drink it. Then all will drink

their water.'

The lady asks the message of the crocodile. The Mother says, 'He was a *Vedic* brahmin last life. He had committed to memory all the four *Vedas*, but he never let anyone listen to them. Therefore after his death he has been born a crocodile in this life. Imprisoned knowledge deteriorates. So he is miserable, lying down, this life. Now you go and whisper words in his ears, and then he will cease feeling miserable.'

The lady then gives the message of the stone-laden dromedary and the Mother says, 'She was a lady in her last life. She had a grinding stone in her house. But she never let anyone use the grindstone. Hence, on her death, she is born a dromedary. She has the grindstone hanging from her neck and she roams about twelve villages. Now you go and touch her. Then would she be free of the grindstone.'

The lady then asks her about the mango tree. The Mother says, 'The mango tree was a barren, childless man last life, but was very rich. But he did not give anything to his sister's daughters. So this life he is born a mango tree, and none eats his fruits. Now you go and eat one of his fruits. And dig out from under the tree seven barrels of gold. Then will all eat his mangoes.'

The lady then asks about the buffaloes. The Mother says, 'Those two, in their last life, were the village headmen, and were fighting constantly. Now they are born as buffaloes and fight each other. You go and touch them with your hand, and they will be freed.' The lady falls prostrate at Her feet and returns. On her way she plays with her milk-white son. She meets the buffaloes on the way, touches them, and they are freed. Proceeding further she meets the mango. She tells the mango, 'Brother, grow a little taller so that I could dig out the seven barrels of gold from under you.' The mango grows taller. The lady removes the seven pots of gold, eats his mango, and all the birds around start coming there and sit on his branches. The lady goes away with the gold. The dromedary meets her. The lady touches her neck and the grindstone is freed from her. Then she proceeds further and sees the crocodile suffering in the sand. She utters the word in his ears. He then feels cool inside his body. She then meets the lakes and drinks a handful of their water. And then animals and birds start drinking their water. At the outskirts stands the cow. The lady takes the animal home.

As she reaches home, the elder sister-in-law's eyes burst open in jealousy. 'Ohhhh, to this brotherless lady her son came back to life! She brings barrels of gold and a cow comes. What a miracle!' She asks her sister-in-law what happened. The lady tells her story. Hearing the

elder thinks, 'Well, let the next *Satam* come!'

The next *Satam* comes. The elder sister-in-law knowingly does not allow the stove to cool off. The Mother comes and curses. The lady's son dies and stiffens. The elder sister-in-law carries the body to *Shitala.* At the outskirt of the village stands the cow. The cow asks, 'Lady, O lady where go you?' "What's that to you, barren? I'm going for *Shitala!* 'Lady, would you recognize *Shitala* by seeing or by being blessed?' 'What? Nonsense! On sight I shall recognize that ugly alright. Why then on being blessed?' 'Then lady, would you take her my message?' 'You and your message. Go to, you whore, you idle! Can't you see, my son has stiffened and is dead?' Thus yelling the old lady goes. She yells at and answers the lakes, the dromedary, the crocodile, the mango, and all the others. She is unable to find *Shitala* Mother anywhere. She wanders the four frontiers and returns home with her child still and dead."

The moral of the tale is implicit. Infection does not spare anyone when a sanitation principle is consciously or unconsciously abrogated. Both the sisters-in-law are punished for their transgression. But the younger lady is rewarded by the restoration of her dead son because she performs the penance. The greedy older lady is punished for her conscious abrogation of the rule, for her greed, and for her haughtiness. In another organically connected tale the moral is explicit. This tale is also alternately narrated on the seventh day in *Shravan.* The tellers and listeners are not usually aware of the connection. Tho two seem to be part of an organic whole. The tale in brief is as follows:

A king's son and a poor man's son are both afflicted by small pox. The king observes the rigorous ritual connected with the disease as prescribed in the religious texts: brahmins raise sacred fires, pour butter into it, have elaborate, spicy meals cooked thrice a day, gorge on them, the while the prince is intensely suffering, but as the smell of food reaches him he craves for it, is supplied with it, and consequently suffers. The poor man observes the simple rules of the folk by cleaning the house, never going out, nor allowing anyone to enter his house or get out of it, posting a branch of a *neem* tree on the door in front of his house to warn people that someone is suffering from an infectious disease, and thus keeping the infection under control. He prohibits the cooking of any spicy or fried food, and the entire family lives on buttermilk and milk. The boy passes through the ordeal unscathed, and soon the king hears of the boy's recovery, becomes jealous, and complains to goddess *Shitala* that she had been unfair, inspite of his spending millions of silver in food, charity, worship, rituals, ceremonies, and so on, in that

his son was going from bad to worse, but that the poor worker's son, for whom nothing by way of worship or sacrifice was made, was saved. The goddess appears in his dream and admonishes him that he neglected the suffering boy but pampered the brahmins, did not observe isolation, strict dieting, and so forth. Next day the king ordered everything closed, and had the ritual performed on the outskirts of the city in the temple of the goddess. The prince was asked to observe all the sanitary and dietary rules, and soon he was also saved. The king then ordained that one day in the year should be set aside to pacify the goddess *Shitala*, that on the sixth day of *Chitra* (April–May), the food for the next day must be cooked and that no stove should be lit on that day, no food cooked, nothing spicy eaten. The food cooked on the sixth must be of a 'cooling' nature. Now the word for 'cool' and 'cold' is the same in Gujarati. Instead of cooking food that cools the system, the people cook fried and spicy food on the sixth and eat it 'cold' on the next day! The reason for it is in monsoon most food gets stale quickly due to the high humidity and heat, and only fried food 'keeps.' In any case a compromise is struck whereby the scientific import of the observance is set aside and the religious aspect is given blind importance. Here *Shitala*, the mother goddess, is taken for real, and superstition is substituted for scientific knowledge.

The tale of the younger sister-in-law becomes connected organically to that of the sons of the poor man and the king in another sense too. The king stands for society and his law is the social dictum that at least one day in the year be set aside in the appropriate month when measles and small pox are rampant, to keep the house clean and cool. But this injunction is reduced to some meaningless ritual where the appeasement of an angry goddess becomes the paramount concern in Gujarat.

The tale of the sons of the poor man and the king is usually confined to cities where it is narrated elaborately with particular emphasis on its scientific significance. It is patently didactic and moralistic. The tale of the two sisters-in-law is more common in the villages in Gujarat, though not confined to them. In cities and towns it is prevalent among those who have migrated from the villages, and who still hold on to the 'good old times.'

The tale of the sons of the poor man and the king has significance to the *individual*: how should be behave in times of an outbreak of measles and kindred infections. The other tale has *social* import in that the emphasis all through it is on service, rendered by the protagonist despite the 'dead' burden she carries, despite her anxiety, despite her

hurry to save her son. The motto is also service before self. This is true of most other folk *Vrat* tales.

Thus these intents were presumably the social, cultural, and psychological functions of the *Vrats*. The folk *Vrats* are performed even today, in more or less the same traditional manner, in rural areas of Gujarat, but in towns and cities whereas their purpose—a good husband, children, life and welfare of them and so on—is the same, the manner of their performance is becoming more and more symbolic. One perceives in cities the effects of Wemosutization, in that certain *Vrats* have been omitted, some truncated, some abbreviated, some substituted, some telescoped, and some changed beyond recognition and serve as mere symbolic, instead of religious function.

It has been conceded that some three or four decades ago ladies in rural Gujarat, from the youngest to the oldest, were engaged in more *Vrats* then than they are today and no lunar month passed without some rituals. Thus even in rural areas many *Vrats* seem to have been omitted due mostly to the education of the young who resent superstitions and insist that they be dropped. The *Vrats* we have enumerated above are residues, though there may be a few more minor *Vrats* practized in the villages. But the assumption is that some of those mentioned are not engaged in and many are slipping away, since the village folk to an extent, and urban people by and large, do not simply have the time for all these additional activities.

Gram Seva, rural service, is becoming more and more prominent in villages due to the influence of the ruling Congress party which believes in the redemption of the villages from useless superstition. Again, social service is preferred in villages, to private religious observances, since the former affords public exposure, importance, prestige, position, and power. There are *Gram sevikas* (workers) who have their feet in both social work and *Vrats* but those feet in *Vrats* are becoming colder gradually. Social work is a Western concept and even in villages some secularization is seen for ladies belonging to the brahmin, bania, and patel castes in Gujarat can be seen jostling together in social work. Such gatherings are also exploited to exchange information which usually turns to and against religious observances.

Westernized education has been responsible for the abrogation of some *Vrats* both in villages and cities. Elementary education is a requirement under the Constitution in India, and children have to be prepared for and be in school in the morning when most *Vrats* are performed. Not long ago, in deference to the religious sentiments of ladies,

schools in rural and urban areas were closed on many of the important *Vrat* days. Now such holidays have been curtailed to one or two annually which is drastic indeed and we see here Westernization, through education, going up and folk ritual going down!

Modernization has usurped many *Vrats*, particularly those belonging to *Purshotam* month, because it is not 'fashionable,' as in the *Koyal Kajali Vrat*, where ladies had to go out to the woods to call the cuckoos, as there are no more woods left in urban areas. Besides being unfashionable, the *Purshotam mas Vrats* seem to have acquired a nuisance value among the educated ladies in cities.

Secularization of *Vrats* is a taboo, but the Indian Republic is a secular state, and the Constitution provides for the opening of the temples to all castes and the casteless in India. The constitutional secularization that brings all people together on sacred precincts has brought in its train the ridicule of the observance of many *Vrats*. And only those *Vrats* that can be performed in the privacy of homes are partially observed in many towns and cities.

Urbanization does not apply to villages that remain in rural areas but people belonging to villages are not confined to them. Business, social calls, festivals, shopping, and sightseeing frequently lure them away to urban centres. Thus they get used to urban facilities such as buses, trains, taxis, rikshaws, supermarkets and department stores, and apartments and their conveniences such as city water supply, private toilets, and so on. This is contagious indeed and some of these have invaded the villages and spelled the death of some already slipping *Vrats*. Village residences come to have private toilets, without 'city water,' and once this is allowed, the incentive to go out into the fields for defacation is destroyed; from there it was a stone's throw to the river or lake to cleanse and bathe and engage in *Vrats*. Such rituals that necessitated visits to rivers and lakes are slowly disappearing.

By far technologization has spelled the most disastrous consequences for *Vrats*. It is not unusual for one to see a jeep parked in a 'garage' in a residence, a tractor in the field, and bicycles, and these are products of technology. Of course ladies are not involved here, but the assistance of men is vital for procuring grains, butter, and so on for their rituals. And when men abscond from home on their bicycles and jeeps and to man tractors in the field, *Vrats* suffer. And it is not unusual to witness a bevy of girls riding jeeps, joyous that some age old *Vrat* has not tied them down to the stove or homely shrine!

We can say much the same for truncation, abbreviation, telescoping,

total change, and substitution, in respect of *Vrats* in rural India. But it demands some intensive field research. However, an eclectical summary and umbrella treatment of Wemosutization of *Vrats* in urban areas is in order as a detailed discussion of each process under each kind of transformation needs vast and intense fieldwork. We may as well take the *Shitala Satam* in the urban areas for examination under the omnibus process of Wemosutization. The *Vrat* here follows the typical sequence referred to previously.

To begin with, on the sixth day all the food for the next day has to be cooked and the stove cleaned and cooled off. It is not unusual for many families to eat out, at picnics or restaurants, to avoid the cooking and the cleaning. Again, there are no coal stoves to be cleaned and cooled off. Most families have kerosene or gas stoves. They cannot be cleaned with cowdung, as the clay stoves can be. Secondly, ash, which is an important ingredient for *Shitala Mother* to roll in, is conspicuous by its absence. Here the compromise struck is to burn some incense sticks and gather their ashes, however meager they may be, and place them religiously before the modern stove. There is not much ash for the divine Mother to roll in, but it is there symbolically. If the rural folk really believed that *Shitala Ma* needed a whole stoveful of cool ashes to cool herself off, the urban folk know that after all *Shitala Ma* cannot visit every household at the same time, and there are thousands of such households in cities, and, again, *Shitala Ma* cannot be serious about the quantity of ashes! She understands the *intent*. Thus a thimbleful of incense-stick ash becomes a symbolic representation of the large quantity of real ashes.

The next day, on the *Satam*, the ladies are supposed to go out to a river, a lake, or a pond, for bathing and the performance of the ritual. In many cities and towns it is impossible to find rivers or lakes, and if found, they cannot be used for bathing because of government regulations. But the ubiquitous municipal water supply is there and the fawcet produces water at the turn of the handle, on demand. So why not bathe in the bathroom? This may also be symbolic, a few drops liberally sprinkled on the head, because water supply is rationed in many cities. But then the communal spirit is lost, as also the earnestness, seriousness, and the fun of performing the ritual. In apartments it is gone through hurriedly, as if some obligation *has* to be met.

The tale telling session is also communal but in cities this is not possible firstly because no one really knows his or her own next door neighbor, and thus a communal gathering is negatived, and secondly it

is difficult to find a place for the ritual. Thirdly, the population of a city or town is vast, unlike in a village, and precludes the possibility of a mass ritual. Hence what the modern city woman does is to turn to the pages of a book, *read* her story, and be content with it. And this activity too becomes symbolic, for the lady never reads the tale. It has been read over and over year after year, and it is the same, old, monotonous tale. In the loneliness of the apartment it is boring. If she reads the title and swishes through the pages, she has done her 'duty' whatever that may be. This again becomes symbolic, but without its social connotation.

In the village, the artisans are given their quota of food and clothing as charity on this day, but in the city no such artisans can be found going from home to home inquiring for work. They have their modernized workshops and people go to them. The question of charity thus does not arise in cities as the artisans are paid on the spot for their labor. Instead gifts are exchanged among relatives! And these gifts are also influenced by technology, for commercially mass-produced plastic merchandise is so omnipresent that the city people never even pause to think that there were days when the plastic, for instance, was unknown!

Since it is not mandatory to cook food the previous day, and food is not usually cooked, people resort to restaurants to eat ice-cream, unheard of even some fifty years ago, and other delicacies. Here again, not cooking at home on the seventh day, and eating what was cooked the previous day, take on a symbolic significance. But the same city folk, when they visit their relatives and friends in rural areas on this day, willingly and cheerfully follow the traditional ritual religiously. There it is real, not symbolic. And real or not, it is a welcome change, for it is rarely that they get to eat real home-cooked meal cooked on coal stoves!

It is interesting to notice that Indian women who are still religious and who are in the Western countries like Europe, England, and the United States of America, observe these rituals annually, though not all of them. The writer's sister-in-law observes *Kevda Trij* regularly and religiously though her husband is healthy, has a handsomely paying job, and does not care for the ritual. Many other ladies perform this or some other *Vrat* in the West, accepting whatever limitations the European culture may impose on the strict observance of these rituals. But then this also demands some intensive field study before we can make any meaningful statements about it.

Reference: M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi. Orient Longman, 1972.

General note: No publication in English exists on Gujarati *Vrats*. Several articles and publications in English have appeared on Bengali *Vrats*. The writer is indebted to Jhaverchand Kalidas Meghani's Introduction to the First Edition of his *Kankavati* (2 volumes), Ranpur, Saurashtra, Gujarat, India, 1927. Information on several *Vrats* was made available to him by his wife and her relatives.