

## A STUDY OF A FEW ŚRĪ – LAKṢMĪ VRATA-S IN THE PURĀṆA-S.



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Vows form a significant and integral part of Purāṇic religion. In fact, a voluminous bulk of the Purāṇa-s abounds in the descriptions of a number of vows. The persistent pronouncement of these texts, regarding the importance of vows (vrata-s) indicates the utmost significance attached to them by the authors of the Purana-s.

Kane, P.V., Dange, S.A. have discussed this topic at full length, explaining their socio-religio-mythical importance, in the ancient as well as medieval society. Religion is one of the significant parts of culture. From sociological point of view, anything that man learns while interacting with other members of society is culture. Hence, the belief and value systems cherished by humans also form integral parts of culture and even religion. The practice of observance of vows (vrata-s) has been shaped by the belief system of the people in the Purāṇic age.

The word vrata occurs in some of the Saṁhitā-s as well as Brāhmaṇa texts, either as a single word or as a compounded one. The concept of vrata-s is as old as the Samhita-s. Kane has presented the etymological explanation and the changing connotation of this word, over the years. According to him, the word vrata, is to be derived from the root √vr – to choose / select. He has stated that the concept is linked with two other thoughts – (i) ṛta, which represents the immutable, unsurpassable cosmic law, (ii) dharman, to be derived from the root √dhṛ -used in the sense of upholding, nourishing, sustaining etc. Kane has rightly pointed out that the sense of the word vrata is seen to be merging into the sense of dharman, which in the course of time, stood for an overpowering and all-engulfing concept. Later on, it represented the sacred vows and rules of conduct to be observed by a person interacting with fellow members of the society.ii

The term vrata, stands for a religious performance observed while honouring the chosen deity with a specific intention in view. It was to be observed at the specific time and day, following the instructions regarding the food to be consumed and behavioural patterns to be followed by 2

the observer of that vow.iii The vrata-s, as described in the Purāṇa-s are in multitude, having a distinguishing range and a wide variety of objectives.

The goddess Śrī or Lakṣmī has been eulogised in a singular hymn occurring in the appendices, viz., Khila-s of the RV (RV.Kh.II.6). The word śrī and the various grammatical cases of the word occur in different hymns of the RV. Those words connote meanings such as the state of well- being (RV. I.88.8), prosperity of various types, richness (RV.X.45.5, III.44.2, VIII.92.20, I.139.3), vigour, benefit

(RV.IX.94.4, IX.102.4, VIII.26.4, X.1.5), fortune (RV.VIII.8.17), welfare (RV.VI.26.8), splendour (RV.I.85.2), beauty (RV.VI.63.5, 66.4, X.77.2), pre-eminence (RV.II.8.3, VII.69.4, VIII.13.28); the great ruling power (RV.VI.55.6), power of a group (RV.I.64.9), excellence of the sacrificial performance (RV.X.36.8). The word is also seen to have been used in the sense of benevolence, guidance, libations, progeny as well as food.<sup>iv</sup>

The word 'śrī' has also been used in the other Vedic scriptures i.e., the remaining three Veda-s (i.e., YV, SV & AV), Āraṇyaka-s i.e., the forest texts, Brāhmaṇa-s i.e., the sacrificial texts and in some of the Upaniṣadic texts as well as some Sūtra texts. In a few of the earlier texts, as has been pointed out earlier, śrī has been dealt with as a concept, whereas, the later texts, hailed her as a deity. A number of references can be noted, from the archaic epics, Purāṇa-s as well as many texts of the classical Sanskrit literature, venerating her as a deity.<sup>v</sup>

Moreover, the Vedic scriptures have used the word Lakṣmī, from the Sanskrit root √ लक्ष् to denote, 'a mark or sign or a distinctive feature', which conveyed the meaning of abundance as well as the attainment of good fortune. In some of the Vedic texts, Śrī and Lakṣmī, have been mentioned separately, conveying their distinct identities in the remote past.<sup>vi</sup> Gradually, owing to their similar shades of meaning of the original concepts, both these deities seem to have been merged into each other and eventually came to be recognized as a single deity.

Furthermore, Śrī / Lakṣmī, came to be linked with the god Viṣṇu as his consort, in the religious traditions of the Purāṇa-s and even those of the Vaiṣṇava Āgama-s. Therefore, for a long time, she has been venerated as the power of the Lord.<sup>vii</sup>

The paper aims at studying a few vrata-s narrated by some of the Purāṇa-s, worshipping the goddess Śrī/ Lakṣmī either, singly or conjointly – with the Lord Viṣṇu.

The vrata-s which have eulogised Lakṣmi with the Lord and deliberated upon, in this paper are representative in nature :- 3

**1). Aśūnyaśayanavrata** – has been described in the Vā.P.(XVI.21 -23), Mat.P.(LV. 24, 26) and also in the Ag. P. (176.3 -12).

(i) DEITY: - The vow was to be observed in the honour of the Lord Viṣṇu, naturally, he was eulogised. It must be noted that, Viṣṇu, here was extolled as an ideal householder. The accompaniment of the goddess Lakṣmi with the Lord Vishnu implies her worship, as well.

(ii) DURATION: - The observance of this vow was to commence on the second day of the dark half of the month of Śrāvaṇa. The duration of this vrata was either of one full year (Ag. P. 176.5) or of four sacred months (Cāturmāsa). (Vā.P. XVI.21-23).

(iii) PROCEDURE: - On the first day, the Lord Viṣṇu was to be propitiated along with the goddess with fragrant flowers, sandal wood pastes etc. An idol of the god with four arms, lying on a couch with the

goddess, having the Śrīvatsa mark on his chest, was to be worshiped. Then, the worshipper had to request the Lord, "As you are never separated from the goddess Lakṣmī, my residence should also never be bereft of my wife and I should always be able to share my bed with her." viii

After this appeal, ceremonial offerings were to be made in honour of the Lord. On the next day, i.e., dvitīyā, a learned Brahmin was to be duly honoured.

(iv) DĀNA: - When the vrata was complete, the vratin was supposed to give away, a bed along with linens, covers and cushions, lamp, food items, footwear, seats (āsana-s) etc. as dāna.ix It's important to note that, the vratin was also expected to offer an idol of the Lord, which has been significantly termed as Lakṣmīdhara.(Va.P.XVI.28)

(v) REWARD: - The vow aimed at the fulfilment of the intense desire of the vratin-s and vratinī-s to be always in the company of their respective spouses, and never to be grieving for the 'the loss of one's wife' for the male and in return 'not having widowhood' for the female observers.x

While describing this vrata, the Ag. P.(176.4), also has termed the Lord Viṣṇu as Śrīkānta, Śrīdhāman, Śrīpati, Lakṣmīdhara. These names are epithets of the Lord, underlining His eternal union with the goddess. It is obvious that the vratin here, requests the god to bestow a continuous, unbroken pleasure of being a householder, (gṛhastha) upon himself. This vrata is unique as it was also supposed to be observed by a male member. Ancient Indian traditions advocated that the attainment of the four goals of human life (puruṣārthacatuṣṭayam), to be the 4

ultimate objective of human life. Among the four prominent stages of human life, the second stage i.e., the stage of a householder was supposed to be the most significant one, as it was the stage of new creation in the form of progeny. Also, it acted as a firm support for all the members of society belonging to the three remaining stages of life. This stage of human life was considered to be the backbone of social structure, responsible for leading to continuity of the rotation of the societal wheel. It is remarkable that in some of the ancient Indian religious texts, Viṣṇu was considered to be responsible for the growth of plants and abundance of food and continuity of human race.xi

Therefore, propitiation of the Lord along with the goddess for the attainment of continued conjugal pleasures seems very natural.

## 2). Viśoka dvādaśīvrata –

(i) DEITY: - While observing this vow, the Lord Keśava and the goddess Lakṣmī were eulogised and worshipped.

(ii) DURATION: - This vrata was to be observed on the twelfth day of the bright half of the month of Āśvina. The duration of the vow was of one full year.

(iii) PROCEDURE: - The preceding rites, were to commence two days before the actual commencement of this vrata. On the tenth day, the devotee had to resolve to keep fast on the eleventh day and accordingly the fast was observed. On the twelfth day, while propitiating the Lord Keśava, a four cornered

altar was to be constructed. The image of the goddess Lakṣmī made up of river sand, was to be placed on a winnowing basket and worshipped. She was termed as Viśokā, i.e., the one who was able enough to drive away all sorts of worries and sorrows. In fact, she was believed to be the source of perpetual happiness.<sup>xii</sup>

(iv) DĀNA: - On the completion of the vrata, a few couples belonging to Brāhmaṇa class, were expected to be invited and honoured with donations viz., food, clothing, unguents etc. Even the winnowing basket placed on the altar while worshipping the goddess was to be given away as an item of dāna. Moreover, the vratin was also supposed to please those couples by giving away besteads, a cow made of molasses and an idol of the goddess Lakṣmī.<sup>xiii</sup>

(v) REWARD: - By observing this particular vow, a vratin wished to free himself from all sorts of sorrows, and attain not only prosperity but also salvation. 5

During the observance of this vrata, the fundamental drive of human beings, to seek an all-round happiness, was aimed at. One cannot miss that the concept of an overall happiness, has two aspects, individual as well as communal, as a peaceful life, nourishment and plenty of rainfall etc., can never be an individual need.<sup>xiv</sup>

3. A) As per the vrata named **Anaghāṣṭamī**, the person observing this vow was expected to worship the images of the Lord Vāsudeva and the goddess Lakṣmī, made up of darbha grass. The divinities were to be considered as Anagha and Anaghā, respectively. Aghas means a sin. Anagha means sinless. Since both of them are described to be sinless and epitomes of virtues, they are rightly termed here as Anagha and Anaghā. Here, the goddess, is also portrayed as having many children.

The vrata was to be observed on the eighth day of the dark half of the month of Mārgaśīrṣa. The vratin was supposed to offer fruits, roots, grains, cash and such other things and also recite Vedic hymns in honour of the Lord Viṣṇu. The Purāṇa assures that the devotee observing this vrata, either for a year or for many more will free himself from the sins committed by him. He will never have any health problems; his family lineage will continue to exist and he himself would even attain salvation.<sup>xv</sup>

3.B) There can be found the description of one more vrata, by the name of **Lakṣmīnārāyaṇavrata**, which was to be performed on the full moon day of the month of Mārgaśīrṣa. This vrata, as described by the Purāṇa, can fulfil all the desires of all those who observe it, ardently; irrespective of caste and sex differences.<sup>xvi</sup>

**3. C) Dvādaśīvrata**– This vrata expected the vratin to worship the Lord Keśava and the goddess Lakṣmī or Mahālakṣmī. This vrata was to commence from the twelfth day of the bright half of the month of Mārgaśīrṣa and end on the same day of the month of Kārtika, of the next year; thus, the duration of the vrata, was that of one full year. For this vrata, an idol of the Lord, either in gold or silver or even in copper was to be created for carrying out proper rituals, on it, for the entire year.

During this vrata, in each month, a different aspect of the Lord Viṣṇu , e.g., Mādhava, Govinda, Madhusūdana etc. was to be propitiated. Every month, the vratin was expected to invite a few learned

Brahmins for partaking food. These people, belonging to priestly class, were to be felicitated with different offerings viz., rice and wheat grains, sesame seeds, apūpa-s ( a type of flattened and fried lentil bread), honey, milk, curd etc. This practice was believed to free the 6

vratin from all sorts of sins and he would obtain all the desired objects. Also, all sorts of inadequacies in his life were supposed to get fulfilled by the performance of this vrata. The Purāṇic text assures that by worshipping the Lord along with the goddess, for a full year, the vratin would attain fruits of various elaborate sacrificial rituals.<sup>xvii</sup>

**4) Śrīprāptivrata or Śrīlabdhivrata** - This vrata was expected to commence from the subsequent tithi of Vaiśākha full moon day. It lasted till the advent of the month of Jyeṣṭha. While worshipping the deities Nārāyaṇa and Lakṣmī, the devotee was supposed to bestow white flowers, lotuses upon these divinities and offer a lamp with clarified butter, milk & curds etc.; recite a hymn in honour of the goddess, perform homa with the offerings of lotuses or leaves of Bilva tree.

The devotee was expected to feed the priest with milk and milk products and give away gold as well as garments. It was believed that this vrata will enable the vratin to attain supremacy over other men, ancestral blessings and reach the heavenly world. <sup>xviii</sup>

#### **5.A) Śrīpañcamīvrata-**

(i) DEITY: - In the Puranic age this vrata was observed in honour of the goddess Lakṣmī. Although, nowadays, this vrata has been observed, in honour of the Goddess Sarasvati.

(ii) DURATION: - This vow was to be observed on the fifth day of the bright half of the month of Māgha. This day is also known as Vasanta Pañcamī, marking the advent of spring (Vasanta) season. As per the details in the Bha. P. (II.37.1 ff) the vow was to be observed on the fifth day of the bright half of the month of Mārgaśīrṣa. However, later religious texts, like Nirṇayasindhu as well as Vratarāja are in agreement with Hemādri who considered the fifth day of the month of Māgha, to be appropriate for observing this vow.

(iii) PROCEDURE: - The text recommended many items like milk, jaggery, clarified butter etc. to be given away. Among them, the offering of sprouted grains was considered to be of prime importance. On this day, the devotee was supposed to create an idol of the goddess Lakṣmī either of gold or of silver or copper. It is significant to note that being aware of the unaffordable expenditure to be incurred in making such idols, the author suggested an option of drawing the picture of the goddess, with lotuses in her hands and with elephants representing quarters, showering her with water poured from golden pitchers and then worship the same. <sup>7</sup>

(iii) DĀNA: - On the completion of this vow, items like rice grains, a pot full of clarified butter, a footwear, an umbrella, utensils, seating, a cow with a calf were to be gifted.

(iv) REWARD: - The vratin was sure to get an enormous amount of wealth which could not only be spent to serve his own purpose but could also be utilized by the members of his twenty-one succeeding generations.

Later religious texts like Tithitattva, Tantrasāra etc., consider the goddesses Śrī or Lakṣmī and Sarasvati, identical to each other. Śrī was considered to be a form or an aspect of Sarasvati and Sarasvati was looked upon as one of the powers of Śrī.<sup>xix</sup>

5.B) Lakṣmīvrata – In this vrata, which was celebrated on the fifth bright of every month, the devotee was supposed to observe a fast. On this day, a proper ceremonious worship of the goddess was to be performed. A golden lotus along with a cow was to be donated to a suitable Brahmin. It was believed that the observance of this vrata enabled the vratin to attain wealth and even Viṣṇuloka.<sup>xx</sup>

This Kāmya vrata and was to be followed for twelve months in a year.

6). **Śrīvrata**: - (i) DEITY - In this vrata, the deity to be propitiated was Goddess Lakṣmī . It was to be observed on the third, fourth and the fifth days of the bright half of the month of Caitra. The vratin was expected to observe it every month. He was supposed to have a bath in the pond full of lotuses and was expected to subsist on rice and clarified butter. He was supposed worship the idol of Lakṣmī which was to be placed at the centre of a lotus flower. On the third day, of the duration of the vrata, the vratin was expected to arrange for a ceremonial feast in honour of the goddess and recite the Śrī sūkta.

(iv) DĀNA: - The vratin was expected to offer people belonging to the priestly class, milk as well as different milk products and gold coins, on the first and the last days of this vrata, to be observed every month.

(v) REWARD: - It is significant to note that the author of this Purāṇa has specifically stated that on the completion of this vrata , the vratin was entitled to get the fruit which is secured after performing some significant sacrifices i.e., Rājasūya or Aśvamedha, described in the sacerdotal texts. As per these texts, the person who performs these two sacrifices, is able to establish his unobstructed rule over this entire earth and gain immeasurable regal prosperity. 8

Similarly, a person who carried out this vrata, was said to be achieving great bounty, excellent strength, beauty along with health.<sup>xxi</sup>

7). **Mārgaśīrṣavrata** – This vow was to be performed on every Thursday, of the month of Mārgaśīrṣa, in honour of the goddess Lakṣmī. Idols of the Lord Viṣṇu and goddess Lakṣmī were to be installed. An offering of food and sweets (naivedya), was to be served. The vratin was expected to honour the priest with various fruits, food items, clothes, ornaments etc. A didactic narrative supporting the practice of this vrata about a king named Bhadrāśravā and his thoughtful daughter is found in the Purāṇic text.<sup>xxii</sup>

Presently, this vrata is known as Vaibhavalakṣmī vrata, it is widely popular in Maharashtra and other parts of the country. A vrata named Mānabāsā which is observed in Odisha, can be traced back to the Purāṇic vrata belonging to the month of Mārgaśīrṣa. In this vow, the practice of worshipping a fully filled up measure of corn, is a significant part, prevalent even today.

In both the above-mentioned ritual practices, prevalent in different parts of the country, certain symbols e.g., a pitcher, a heap of rice grains etc. are common. These objects are linked with the goddess, denoting abundance and fertility.

**8). Śukravāravrata or Varalakṣmīvrata** – Also known as Varadalakṣmī vrata or Varamahālakṣmī vrata was observed on the second Friday of the bright half of the month of Śrāvṇa, either preceding the full moon day or on the full moon day, itself. Details of the origin of this vrata, can be traced back to a mythical account, narrated in the Bha.U.P. As per this account, a person named Citranemi was cursed by the goddess Pārvatī, who was annoyed by his improper behaviour. Consequently, he suffered from an incurable disease. As per this account, he could get rid of that disease by observing this vow, as per the advice imparted by the Lord Śiva.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The observance of this vow enables the vratin to have a favourable and flourishing stroke of fate. While worshipping the goddess, the vratin was supposed to place a small pitcher which significantly represented the goddess Lakṣmī. He was expected to keep a heap of rice grains while worshipping and tie up an amulet (dorakabandhana) around his wrist. The usage of an amulet (doraka), by a vratin could be traced back to its usages recommended in the Atharvaveda.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Here, an Atharvaṇic concept is found to have been percolated into a Purāṇic tradition. 9

**9). Śrīvr̥kṣavrata**, also known as Śrīvr̥kṣanavamī has been mentioned in the Bha.U.P.(II. LX. 8).

The deity here is a Bilva (commonly known as Indian Bael, Aegle marmelos) tree. The vow was observed on the bright ninth of the month of Bhādrapada. The tree was to be ceremoniously worshipped and the material used for worshipping the tree i.e., clothes, different types of grains, unguents, garlands etc. were to be given away to the persons belonging to the priestly class.

The vratin was supposed to worship Bilva tree, seven times, at the time of sunrise. The devotee was expected to have uncooked eatables and food without oil or salt. On this vrata day the Bilva tree was regarded as the tree of the goddess, and therefore, was highly adored.<sup>xxv</sup>

It was believed that this vow would free the vratin from all sorts of pain and enable him to attain wealth.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The text further expected the vratin-s to widespread and popularize this vrata.

As concluding remarks, the following observations can be made: -

- i (i) **POPULARITY AND PRACTICE:** -Quite a few vrata-s mentioned above are still observed. Navarātrī, Lakṣmīpūjana, Kojāgara Pūrṇimā etc. revere Śrī / Lakṣmī and are considered to be festivals. They are celebrated with pomp and glory not only in Maharashtra, but all over India. Likewise, the Varalakṣmī vrata as well as Vaibhavalakṣmī vrata are enthusiastically observed in the months of Śravaṇā and Mārgaśīṣa, respectively, in many parts of India, by a large number of womenfolk. The popularity of these vrata-s, speaks volumes of the significance of the goddess and her cult which is still cherished by the masses. A few of the vrata-s, have been pushed into oblivion, in the march of time. Also, in the vows, which are still practised, the orthodox religious zeal is missing, turning them into mere religious programmes or occasions of socializing. The reasons behind the observance

of these vrata-s are multiple; a number of women are found to be undertaking them with the sole aim of being positively engaged, to give vent to their emotions and feelings, to maintain the family tradition etc. It is also found out that the distinct nature, separate ritual procedure or intended achievable, is not properly understood by all.

It is observed that, through these vrata-s, vratin-s and especially vratinī-s aimed at achieving an overall well-being, while fighting the 'fear of unknown'.<sup>xxvii</sup> 10

- i (ii) The Śrīsūkta (RV.Kh. II.6) has portrayed the goddess being associated not only with gold, gold and silver ornaments, horses, elephants and also men (in ṛc-s- 2, 3 of RV.Kh. II.6), but also with the Bilva tree, (ṛc -6). She has been pronounced to be associated with Kardama, (ṛc – 11) i.e., mud or mire, suggesting a piece of land ready for sowing the crops. The goddess has been linked with water and termed as ārdrā as well, meaning wet, tender or moist, again indicating the procreative powers of the earth (ṛc- 13,14). She is eulogised for banishing all sorts of deprivations such as hunger and thirst among many others. (ṛc. 8) These descriptions certainly hint at the state of an all-round abundance, prosperity bestowed by the Mother Earth. Here, a subtle implication, is that the goddess Śī/ Lakṣmī and earth are looked upon as identical. The vrata-s in honour of Śrī / Lakṣmī also help us understand the intended harmony even among the members of society and natural forces. The attempt of the composers of the Purāṇa-s, to blend the feeling of gratitude towards the environment through the practice of vows, cannot be overlooked.
- ii (iii) Moreover, Purāṇic descriptions of these vrata-s have reaffirmed the importance of lotuses, elephants, Bilva tree. Purāṇa-s have suggested the usages of these items in the ritual procedures of the above-mentioned vows; thus, establishing them as symbols of the goddess. Lotus flowers stand for purity and beauty. They also signify the fertile, life-supporting power of both, the soil as well as water.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Similarly, elephants are believed to be protectors of quarters; in the archaic epics, they are described to be linked with Indra, 'the god of rains.' Therefore, they are understood to be an ancient emblem of water cosmogony. Also, in the later Sanskrit poetic tradition, they are found to be equated with rain bearing clouds, indicating possibility of rains, leading to richness, prosperity and satiation.<sup>xxix</sup> The goddess has been also identified with Bilva tree (as in Śrī-vṛkṣanavamī) In various ancient texts, the Bilva tree has been equated with Viṣṇu (Ṛgvi. 3.42).

Some sacerdotal texts, have recommended the usage of a sacrificial post made up of this tree, by those desiring pre-eminence and prosperity.<sup>xxx</sup> The relation of this tree with the Lord Viṣṇu, is evident from many instances. Hence, its association with the goddess as a symbol of continuation of one's own family, wealth and bounty can be known. The symbol of this tree marks the principle of vegetation. The Purāṇic texts, have incorporated the Vedic



symbols, to establish the significance of the vows, for the observers. This also underlines how systematically the cults of the Lord as well as the goddess were being created and strengthened.<sup>xxx1</sup>

- i (iv) The above discussed vrata-s explain the association of the goddess, with the Lord; they also bring forth different aspects of her persona highlighted by the Purāṇic texts. She was beseeched as the woman of the house, bringing into light, her personality trait as a Gṛhalakṣmī. In the Anaghāṣṭamīvrata, she is understood as Guṇalakṣmī, in the Viśokadvādaśīvrata, she can be understood as Dhanalakṣmī as well as Dhānyalakṣmī. The vows discussed above do not propitiate the goddess by these names, still, their attempts to unfold her manifold greatness can be envisaged.
- ii (v) A few of the above-mentioned vows, recommended the recitation of the Śrī- sūkta eulogising the goddess, with the accompaniment of the ritual observance. It can be surmised that the recitation of this particular Vedic hymn was believed to lend perfection to the observance of the ritual procedure. Chanting of the sūkta at the time of ritual observance, enhances the significance of the practical application of the same. The usage of the hymn also underlines the continuity of the Vedic thought with an aim to lend authenticity to the later ritualistic tradition.
- iii (vi) Yearning for the desired objects and warding off of the undesired ones have always been universal cherished objectives of human beings. The Vedic seers propitiated and invoked various divinities to have good rains and harvest, heroic sons, longevity; they are also found to be always wishing for the defeat of their enemies and destruction of their fortresses.<sup>xxxii</sup> According to them, those deities presided over various phenomena or powers of nature who could bless them and even fulfil their desires. The same undercurrent of thoughts is unmissable from the observance of vratas, in general and from the above-mentioned vows, in particular.
- iv (vii) Chronologically speaking, the Purāṇic texts succeeded the sacrificial texts, i.e., Brāhmaṇa-s which stressed the importance of rituals to be performed with utmost rigidity and incurring enormous amount of expenditure. They formed Karmakāṇḍa part of ancient literary tradition. They were succeeded by the Upaniṣadic texts, advocating philosophical knowledge, stressing the importance of the knowledge of the Supreme Reality. However, this Reality was abstract and hence beyond the reach of sense organs. For the same reason, the vast majority of people could neither follow ritualistic, Karmakāṇḍātma, texts nor could they attempt to pursue the path of attainment of the Highest Knowledge to free themselves from the cycle of births and deaths. The authors of the Purāṇa-s highlighted the importance of the observance of various kinds of vows and mention that even the vratin could achieve the fruit which could be secured by a person performing sacrifices like

Aśvamedha or Rājasūya etc. Popularization of vows was a deliberate attempt, undertaken by the authors of the Purāṇic texts to replace sacrifices and transform Hinduism into a mass religion. It cannot be gainsaid that the basic three principles behind the performance of sacrifices and observance of vows were the same, i.e.,

- (1) Invocation and propitiation of deities in order to get once own desires fulfilled,
- (2) the principle of charity, which was always considered to be a pious deed as has been reflected in different statements from the Vedic literature
- (3) the principle of gathering of people together to participate in the proceedings of the rituals. Thus, the concept of vow is seen to be reiterating the salient features brought forth by the concept of yajña, as pronounced by the definition of the word— yaj-devapūjā-saṅgatikaraṇa-dāneṣu|| or 'devatoddeśena dravyatyāgaḥ-yāgaḥ|'.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

v viii) In the Rāmā. (II.110.19) the goddess has been depicted as the faithful wife of the Lord Viṣṇu. The Mbh. through a number of stories, brings her union with the Lord into forefront, contributing in building the cult of the God.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

vi ix) The vows discussed above, indicate the presence of the god Viṣṇu/Keśava/Nārāyaṇa/Vāsudeva by the side of Lakṣmī, during the worship. The Purāṇa-s are seen to be emphasising the importance of Lord Viṣṇu's accompaniment with the goddess. They also reflect the thought that their company with each other enhanced the significance of vows and ensured the devotees the attainment of the rewards in view. Both of them, conjointly signified Primaeval Couple whose unique power was assumed to be leading to the well-being of the entire society. No wonder, the goddess came to be recognized as the better half of the Lord, ardhāṅginī, the consort who was inseparable from Him.<sup>xxxv</sup>

It is obvious, that the depiction of their enriched mutual companionship induced both the sections viz., male and female sections of the society to observe these vows.

In the remaining vrata-s i.e., the Śrīpañcamīvrata, Guruvāravrata etc., however, the independent role of the goddess can be identified.

- i x) While laying down the details of the observance of vows, the authors of Purāṇa-s have presented a list of articles such as food, cash, gold, cows, bulls, horse, horses with chariots and the likes, which were to be given away.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Obviously, this was an attempt on the part of the priestly class to keep their means of livelihood intact. Some vrata-s were to be observed in the presence of the priestly class and some others were to be observed with the help of their guidance. However, many people might
- i have found these gifts unaffordable. Consequently, some of them had to deviate from the norm of vratapālana.

Purāṇic vrata-s formed an integral part of Indian belief and value systems and in turn that of Indian socio-religious structure. The vratin-s believed in the efficacy of these vows and hence they kept on following them with hopes of getting their desires fulfilled. They also thought that the observance of these vrata-s would enable them to ward off their difficulties and mental agonies and have peace and solace. The vratin-s therefore continued observing them faithfully and fervently. The practice of observance of vows, thus, has influenced the behavioural patterns of Indian people, in the past and has been continuing influencing it, till today.

At the same time, it is well-known that, a society in a stable state finds the inherited religion satisfactory. However, during transitory period, the existing system of thoughts and values no longer serves its needs and different changes start taking place. For the same reason the practice of observing Mahalakṣmīvrata or Varalakṣmīvrata with the help of other alternatives such as Cassettes or CDs with recorded mantra-s or assistance from the printed texts or some such material is seen to have incorporated, in present times.

As stated by Nottingham, Elizabeth, sociologists hold a long-standing discussion regarding whether religion leads to changes in society or whether society brings about changes in religion. She has further stated that sociologists have rightly arrived at the conclusion that both these aspects of civilization, interact with each other and are brought about by a "chain of causation".xxxvii

A study of Śrī /Lakṣmī vrata-s put forth by the Purāṇic texts, when compared with the modern-day scenario, strengthens this view.

#### Abbreviations:-

1. Ag.P. – Agni Purāṇa,
2. Āhir.Saṁ. – Āhīrbudhnya Saṁhitā ,
3. AV – Atharva Veda ,
4. Bha. P. - Bhaviṣya Purāṇa ,
5. Mbh.- Mahābhārata ,
6. Mā.Gṛ.Sū. – Mānava Gṛhya Sūtra ,
- i For more details; see, Bakre Alka, Religion in Social Flux (as seen in the main Purana-s), Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, 1998, pp. 209,
- ii Kane, P.V., History of Dharmashastra, 1974, BORI, Poona, Vol.V, Pt. I, pp.1 -21,
- iii Ibid., p.22 -29. Also see, Dange, S.A., Encyclopaedia of Puranic Beliefs and Practices, Vol.V, Navrang Publications, New Delhi, 1990, pp.1525 – 1527,
- iv RV. IV.36.7, VI.16.26, VI.51.10 etc.,
- v Dhal, U.N., Goddess Lakshmi: Origin and Development, Oriental Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 1978, Ch.I, pp. 1- 46 ,

- vi Tai.Ā. 3.13.2; Śat.Br. 14.9.3.8; Mā.Gr.Sū. 2.13.6,
- vii Āhir.Sam. III.7. – Jagattayā lakṣyamāṇa sā Lakṣmīriti gīyate |,
- viii Vā.P. XVI. 22-23 – Yathā hi lakṣmyā na viyujyase tvam trivikramānanta jagannivāsa I tathā tvaśūnyam śayanam sadaiva tvamasmākameveha tava prasādāt II,
- ix Ag. P.176.12,
7. Mat.P. – Matsya Purāṇa ,
8. Nā.P. – Nārada Purāṇa ,
9. Pad.P. – Padma Purāṇa ,
10. Rām. - Rāmāyaṇa ,
11. RV - Ṛgveda ,
12. Ṛgvi. Ṛgvidhāna ,
13. Ska.P. – Skanda Purāṇa ,
14. Śat. Br. - Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa ,
15. Tai.Ā. – Taittirīya Āraṇyaka ,
16. Tai.Sam - Taittirīya Samhitā ,
17. Vā.P. – Vāyu Purāṇa ,
18. Vi. P. - Viṣṇu Purāṇa ,
19. Vi.Dh.P. - Viṣṇu Dharmottara Purāṇa .

### ENDNOTES :

- x Ibid., 176.5, Gārhashtyam mā praṇāsam yātu dharmmārthakāmadaṁ | agnaya mā praṇāsyantu mā praṇāsyantu devatāḥ ||
- xi Tai.Sam. V.2.8.7; Śat.Br. VII.4.2.15, IV.5.10.5 etc. Also see, Gonda J., Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism, MLBD, Delhi, Reprint, 1993 (1st, London, 1954), Ch. I, pp. 11- 21.
- xii Mat.P. 81. 16, 17 – Namaḥ devayai namaḥ śāntyai namo Lakṣmyai namaḥ śrīyai I Namaḥ puṣṭyai namaḥ tuṣṭyai vṛṣṭyai ḥṛṣṭyai namo namaḥ II ,
- xiii Ibid., 81. 25, 26,
- xiv Ibid., 81.1 - ... Vibhavodbhavakāri bhūtaleSsmin bhavabhīterapi sūdanaṁ ca puṁsaḥ ||,
- xv Bha.P. II.58.1-71 ,
- xvi Nā.P. I.18.2 - Brāhmaṇakṣatriyaviśāṁ sūdrāṇāṁ yośitāṁ tathā | Samastakāmaphalaṁ sarvavrataphalapradaṁ ||,
- xvii Nār. P. I.17. 10 – 113 ,
- xviii Vi. Dh.P. III. 211 - Mānuṣyamāsādyā vivruddhatejāḥ śrīyā yutaḥ syāj jagati pradhānaḥ||
- xix See, Chaudhuri, N. N. Sharma, Purāṇa, Jan., 1962 , "Bhagavati Lakṣmīḥ" All India Kashiraj

- Trust, Ramnagar, Varanasi, pp. 103 – 111 ,
- xx Pad.P. I. 20, 63-65,
- xxi Vi.Dh.P.III.154.14- Nityameva śriyaṁ devī śriyamāpnotyanuttamām | Balamāpnoti rūpamārogyameva ca|| ,
- xxii Pad.P. III.11.34ff,
- xxiii Bhaviṣyottara Purāṇa, A Descriptive Catalogue of the Sanskrit Manuscripts, Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras, Vol.XVI, pp. 8470 -8485.
- I thank wholeheartedly, Dr Vanamala Partasarathy, Former Deputy Director, Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, Mumabi, for sharing with me the necessary information regarding this vrata.
- xxiv AV.III.30; IV.8; V.22, VII.12 etc. The knotted thread certainly reminds us of the ritual of gaṇḍābandhana, which is usually observed by performing artists working in different fields of expression. In this ceremony, a taught determines to be a pupil of a specific Guru and decides to tread on the path of his teachings for the rest of his life. Similarly, in this case, the devotees declare themselves to be loyal to the path of the goddess. It may be observed that in the use of amulets (tāvizs or tāitas), threads sanctified by certain types of recitations as well as rituals are used. They are believed to be protecting the wearer from bad influences and further ensuring unobstructed progress and prosperity.
- xxv Mat. P. (179.71) lauds Bilva tree as Mother. Śat.Br.(1.3.4.1) takes into account its being evergreen and therefore praises it as being vigorous and strong. Sk.P. (VI.250.14-17) too, hails it as being the abode of a number of goddesses.
- xxvi Bha.P. II.LX.58 - Evaṁ yaḥ kurute pārtha śrīvṛkṣasyārcanaṁ naraḥ | nārī vā duḥkhaśokābhyāṁ mucyate nātra saṁśayaḥ ||The Bilva tree and fruit are closely linked with the goddess. The Vā.P. has narrated an account of springing up of this tree from the hands of the goddess. Also see, Devi.Bh.P. LXXVIII.7 -10; Bha.P. III.10; Also see, Rao, S.K.Ramachandra, Sri Sukta: Text with Translation and Explanation, Divine Books, Delhi, 2002, (1<sup>st</sup>, 1985), p. 56 -57.
- .xxvii McGee, Mary, "Derived Fruits: Motive and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women" Roles and Rituals For Hindu Women, ed.by Leslie Julia, MLBD, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 71 - 87.
- xxviii The relationship of the goddess with lotus flower is very significant. She is described to be standing on a lotus flower, having either the colour of a lotus or she has been described to be born of lotus. In the Vi.P. (I.9.100) she is portrayed as arising from the churning of ocean, on a fully bloomed lotus; also holding a lotus in her hand. The flower of lotus signifies excellence as well as fertility of the soil and water.

- xxix Ska. P. (1.1.11.67) portrays the goddess, at the time of the churning of the milky- ocean, appearing from it, seated on a white elephant.
- xxx Ait.Br. II.1; Āp.Śr.Sū. 7.1.15,
- xxxi RV.Kh.II.6, the famous Śrīsūkta, also see, Dhal, op.cit. Ch. II, pp.47 -62.
- xxxii Gupta, Uma, Materialism in the Veda-s, Classical Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1st, 1987, pp. 37-74.
- xxxiii For more details, see, Bakre, Alka, op.cit., pp.225ff,
- xxxiv Rām. II.110.19; Mbh. I.55.34, III.186.86, V.115.10 ,
- xxxv Vi.P. (I.8.15) - Nityaiva sā jagannmātā viṣṇorśrīranapāyini | yathā sarvagato viṣṇuḥ tathaveyam dvijottamaḥ ||
- xxxvi Bra.P. 218.11 - Sarveṣāmeva dānānāmannaṁ śreṣṭhamudāhṛtam ||,
- Also, Acharya, Kala, Purāṇic Concept of Dāna, Nag Publishers, Delhi, 1993, pp. 28 -51. 17
- xxxvii Nottingham, Elizabeth, Religion; a sociological Review, Random House, New York, 1971, pp. 142-182.

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