
Six Women

Banaras, also called Varanasi and Kashi (the "city of light"), is an ancient and densely populated city of over one million situated on the banks of the holiest of India's rivers, the Ganges, in the eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. All over the country Gaṅgājal, or Ganges water, carefully brought home by pilgrims or purchased in the bazaar in sealed copper pots, is used in home *pūjās*. As the Ganges is the holiest of India's rivers, Banaras is the holiest of Hindu India's many *tīrthas*, literally, "sacred crossings," that is, pilgrimage centers.¹ It is a commonly held belief among Hindus that to die in Banaras is to achieve *mokṣa* (liberation) instantly, or at least a sure place in Śiva's heaven, since he presides over the city. Consequently, there is an unusually large number of elderly pilgrims who come from all over the country to spend their last days in Banaras. There is also, at any one time, a large number of ordinary visitors who have come to take "auspicious viewing" (*darśan*) at the better known of Banaras' innumerable temples. As the city of Śiva, the preeminent ascetic god, Banaras also hosts a high concentration of resident and visiting male and female ascetics of various orders, as well as ascetic institutions. Many famous "renouncers" (*sannyāsins*) and learned gurus have lived in Banaras or have regularly passed through, offering public discourses. A good number of the Hindus I became acquainted with in the city had either heard these gurus directly or were keenly aware of their life-styles, if not of their teachings. Comments about gurus and ascetics often came up in my conversations with women about *vrats*, leading me to speculate that the general population of Banaras may be more affected by the ascetic tradition(s) than the populations of most other Indian cities.

The antiquity of Banaras and its ancient status as an important *tīrtha*, as well as center of traditional learning and the arts, have given the city a richly diverse resident population. In addition, Banaras now houses a large national university, with students and faculty from around the country. For these reasons

many of the women I met and some of those I interviewed, while having lived in Banaras throughout their lives and speaking Hindi, came from families originating in other parts of India.

The majority of the fifty-eight Hindu women with whom I conducted formal interviews in Banaras and its environs were Brahman, about one-sixth were of Kshatriya castes and the remainder were from other classes and castes.² The women's ages ranged from seventeen to seventy-two years, and their educational backgrounds ranged from illiterate to a doctorate level. Just over two-thirds of the women interviewed were married, and the others were either unmarried or widowed. Nine of the women had no children.

Interviews usually took place in women's homes, after appointments were scheduled in advance. Not infrequently appointments were cancelled or indefinitely delayed or interrupted by the demands of small children, husbands, or by any number of situations requiring the immediate attention of the woman I was interviewing. It was not always possible to complete my interviews or to speak exclusively to one woman. In particular, husbands who happened to be present in the home during the interview found it difficult to restrain themselves (no doubt from lack of practice³) from adding comments, interjecting a response to a question, or simply answering on behalf of their wives. By force of habit, inculcated through years of socialization, wives often deferred to their husbands' views. There was also a concern that I, the visiting foreign "scholar," should be sure to get the "correct version of the facts." This concern, and the belief of many women that they did not know anything about *vrats* worth communicating to me, made it difficult for me to persuade women that I genuinely wanted to talk to them, rather than to "panditji" down the street (or in the next room), or to some professor at Banaras Hindu University. Some women were also shy and unaccustomed to reflecting on their beliefs and practices and articulating those reflections to a foreigner. In these cases, a certain amount of encouragement, prompting and rephrasing of questions was required. Overall, however, I was pleasantly surprised at the willingness and in some cases eagerness of women to answer my questions and to allow me to look at their places of worship, watch their rituals, and from time to time, participate with them in their *vrat* observances.

I learned something new about the lore, practice and function of *vrats* with each interview, and it became clear to me that this

learning could go on indefinitely. Almost every time I formed a conclusion or a generalization about some aspect of *vrats*, it would be challenged in the next interview. Information I received from a woman one day might be contradicted by her in the next interview. These experiences contributed to my privileging the particularity of individual voices in the context of individual lives. Thus, while I have drawn general conclusions from my fieldwork, I have sought to do so without losing sight of the rich complexity of women's religious experience.

To begin examining the place and function of *vrats* in the lives of contemporary Hindu women, six women of various ages, castes and marital statuses from Uttar Pradesh are profiled below. In each profile I have included information about the woman's family and religious background, her education, and her religious activities such as daily worship practices, visits to temples, pilgrimages, and, of course, her performance of *vrats*. The interviews I conducted with these six women constitute my "core" interviews such that in the ensuing chapters, while describing and discussing women's views on various issues—from the question of the difference between a *vrat*, a fast and a festival to the meaning of *vrat*—the responses of some or all of these six women will be provided. Material from the remaining interviews will be drawn upon more selectively. Throughout, I have preferred to quote a woman directly rather than paraphrase or construct a summary in order to hear as much as possible from the women themselves, and, in the case of these six core interviews, to provide continuity in the remaining chapters.

A number of the topics and themes concerning Hindu women's religiosity and their performance of *vrats* which emerge perhaps fleetingly and without comment in this chapter will be pursued in greater depth later. Nevertheless, I have also taken the opportunity in each profile to consider a particular point or issue in more detail and, in the process, bring in the voices of other women interviewed.

Important in the selection of women to profile was the presence of a rapport between myself and the woman interviewed.⁴ The establishment of such a rapport or sense of friendship and openness in our relationship was important because it gave me greater confidence to extrapolate later from the material at hand (drawing out implications from what was said or not said), and to form some general conclusions. A sense of confidence is essential when one cannot go back to the field to double-check

one's findings. At the same time, I am conscious that in one sense I have also "created" these women, even as they "created" themselves to me as they talked about their lives and reflected on my questions. Whatever the "reality" of their lives is, it is refracted through several lenses—their lens, my lens and the lens of the reader. That does not mean, however, that we cannot learn something that approximates a truthful vision of some aspects of their lives, and the significance of *vrats* to these women, even while, as James Clifford has described, such ("ethnographic") truths are "inherently partial—committed and incomplete" (Clifford and Marcus 1986).⁵ I can only hope that the women profiled here would easily recognize themselves in these chapters.

KAMALA

Kamala is a highly educated and religious middle-class woman who identified her caste as "Parmar Kshatriya." She was thirty-eight when I interviewed her, and her main occupation was looking after her household and three children. She was one of the first women I interviewed in Banaras and also one of the most articulate. Her answers to my questions were often expansive and thoughtful. Kamala welcomed me warmly into her home, took a genuine interest in my project and quickly grasped the meaning and intent of my questions. Although she had travelled little outside of Uttar Pradesh, her education and keen sense of sociological observation lent her responses an unusual perspicacity. She was more aware than most women whom I encountered of the possible cultural and ideological differences of our respective backgrounds, and this awareness had an influence on the way she answered some of my questions. She built analogical bridges to "my world" as I tried often to do with all the women I interviewed. For example, aware that I came from North America—"the land of science and technology"—she made statements like "in other respects *vrats* are very scientific," and she proceeded to outline their scientific aspects. With respect to women's roles and gender arrangements, however, Kamala expressed conservative views. On the topic of "woman's duty," for instance, she explained that:

Stridharm begins at the point at which we become married. The meaning of this is that one should give support to one's husband

and family. She should give all respect to her mother and father, she should run the family, bring up the children and educate them. Then she must fulfill the duties of arranging marriages. As long as we are in the householder stage (*gṛhastha āśrama*) we should fulfill it properly, which is *strīdharm*. . . . [Yet] *strīdharm* changes according to [one's] stage in life. In old age we do work for society. Now I am fully devoted to my husband and family, but when the children grow up and stand on their own then I will have the time to do a little for my country and society [like Lakshmbai,⁶ one of her heroines].

We met over several days in her white-washed cement bungalow in a relatively new section of Banaras. I interviewed her on my own over biscuits and tea, sitting on a hard sofa, underneath the ubiquitous rotating fan. Since her Hindi was impeccable, it was easy to understand her and she graciously offered corrections to my own phrasing of questions, which assisted me in later interviews.

Kamala was born in Banaras but her family was originally from Malwa, in northern Madhya Pradesh. Though she was married young—at age sixteen—her husband encouraged her to continue her studies in Hindi, which she did, up to the Ph.D. level. Despite her high level of education, there did not seem to be any thought that she should find employment or seek a career outside the home. It was not financially necessary and she had the important responsibility of looking after three young children. And, as she intimated above, she was thinking of doing some sort of volunteer social work after her children married. It appeared that both Kamala and her husband (who worked in administration at the university) considered education valuable for its own sake and both were proud of her educational accomplishments. At one point I was shown some of the books on history, religion and philosophy they kept prominently displayed in the living room. Kamala's husband was also pleased to have me interview his wife, and on the first afternoon I visited, after showing me the books and sharing tea and formalities, he slipped away after telling us to "carry on."

Kamala's parents' family protective deity (*kuldevtā*?) is Durgā and that of her husband's family is Śiva. She identified herself as a Sanātani, and said that this meant belief in and worship of all the deities. But the place where Kamala does daily *pūjā* in her home bears only Hanumān's image, her own personal or

preferred god (*iṣṭadevā*). Her husband performs a daily *pūjā* as well, but separately, as is commonly the case. For spiritual instruction and inspiration Kamala tries to read a little from the *Gītā*, *Purāṇ* or epics daily, as time permits. She visits various temples on inclination or on some special occasion, but favors the largest Hanumān temple in Banaras, Sankat Mochan. She has been on pilgrimage with her husband's family to Rameshvaram (southern India), Puri (eastern India) and Haridvar (northern India). These three sites are known and venerated across India.⁸ Kamala said that she does not believe in the existence of unhappy ghosts and spirits (*bhūt-pret*),⁹ or at least not in their capacity to interfere in human affairs. Like the vast majority of Hindus, Kamala does accept the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth (*punarjanma*).

Kamala observes fifteen different *vrats* and celebrates nine additional annual festivals, so her year is frequently punctuated by religious fasts and feasts, observances and celebrations. We went through a pocket calendar I had listing all the religious holidays, observances and *vrats* and she briefly explained what she knew about them. Like many women I encountered, she had an impressive storehouse of knowledge about the details of many rites and rituals beyond the ones that she actually observed herself.

Kamala started observing the family *vrats* (that is, those *vrats* which the whole family observes)—Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī, Śivarātri, Naurātri, Rāmnaumī—when she was very young, "two or three years old." "Haritālik Vrat I started at the age of eleven . . . because mother did them, grandmother also does them—so girls also start to do them." She began most of the other *vrats* she now keeps after her marriage: Vaṭ Sāvitrī, Ṛṣi Pañcamī, Karvā Cauth, Śravaṇ Somvār, Mahālakṣmī, Kārtik Pūrṇimā and Ānant Caturdaśī. After the birth of her children (two boys and a girl) she began to keep the Halṣaṣṭhī, Gaṇeś Cauth and Jīvitputrika Vrats—each of which is traditionally directed to the well-being of children.

Since she observed so many *vrats*, I asked Kamala which ones were the most important to her, and she responded:

All the *vrats* I do are important. Haritālikā is for one's husband, Gaṇeś Caturthī and Jīvitputrika are for one's sons. In my view all my *vrats* are important in their respective places. Therefore I want to do the maximum number of *vrats*. The effect of each

vrat is different. Somvar (Monday) Vrat is for Śiv, Maṅgalvār (Tuesday) is for Hanumān, Ravivār (Sunday) is for Sūrya—so each [*vrat*'s] effect, significance and its results are also different. [Yet] from every *vrat* the *ātma* (Self or soul) receives contentment. *Vrats* are such that one would not get angry [as one might ordinarily]. One does not bring problems to others. The heart becomes pure. Mere fasting does not constitute a *vrat*.

In her response, Kamala began by saying that she considered *all vrats* to be important because, as eventually became apparent, it is the effect of observing *vrats* on *herself* that is of lasting spiritual and personal significance to her. She next mentioned the conventionally laudable reason for women to keep *vrats*, that is, for husbands and sons, and stressed that, therefore, one (a woman) *should* observe as many as possible. Then she stated that the effect of each *vrat* is different, and by the examples she gave it is clear that she was referring to the week-day *vrats*—those which are usually taken on or prescribed for specific reasons, including protection from the malefic influence of certain planets. Her final comments returned to the results that each *vrat* produces on the person observing it—peace of mind or contentment, the restraint of negative emotions, the cultivation of purity of heart—regardless of who is keeping the *vrat* or why. As I noted earlier, Kamala was among the first women I interviewed, and comments such as these on the personal spiritual benefits arising from the performance of *vrats* alerted me to this dimension of women's relationship to the *vrat* tradition. Clearly, for some women, it was the self-disciplinary features of the *vrat* tradition, the ascetic values, that they found most meaningful.

Towards the end of our second interview I asked Kamala if she thought that women are naturally (*prakṛtik rup se*) more religious (*dhārmik*) than men. This question was asked because I had often come across statements to that effect in articles or books written by Indians and I also had heard such assertions from both Indian men and women. For example, from A. S. Altekar we hear that, "Women are by nature more religious and devotional than men. They can visit temples with greater regularity, perform sacred rites with higher faith and submit to religious fasts with more alacrity than men" (1956, 206). I wanted to explore what this meant and wondered what bearing it had on women's performance of *vrats*.

In my question about women's natural religiosity, the term *dhārmik* (for "religion" or "religious") was usually equated by my respondents, including Kamala, first with *pūjā-paṭh*—meaning the multitude of religious rituals and related observances (*pūjās* to household deities, *vrats*, hymn [*bhajan*] singing, observances of festivals, temple visitation, the sponsoring of sacred story [*kathā*] recitations) that occupy the religious praxis of many Hindu householders. "*Dhārmik*" was only secondarily equated with "*dharm*" in its moral dimensions or in its sense as duty to god, one's family, *jāti*, and so on. The question I asked women about *strīdharm* brought out this distinction because in this case "*dharm*" was understood as the person and gender specific code of morally and socially responsible behavior.

The question concerning the differential religiosity of men and women was posed to the majority of women interviewed. Three-quarters felt that women are naturally more religious than men. Among those women who felt that women are not naturally more religious than men, each had male family members who were very pious or observant, or a husband who was a *pandit* or *pūjārī*. Thus, as one woman put it: "Women are not necessarily more religious than men. It depends on the individual and (his or her) families. . . . My father-in-law is extremely religious." Yet some women who had told me about observant male relatives nevertheless put personal familial experience aside and reflected on their impressions of the larger social picture. "Yes, women are more religious than men—look all around you," said one. Who stays at home? Who has more time? Who does the *vrats*? Who goes to the temple to hear religious discourses? Who goes to the *bhajans*? "It is women, after all," summarizes the statements of several others. For many, then, being "religious" was a matter of having the time—and of being at home. What does this mean?

It should be noted at the outset that in these responses the "naturally" part of the question was disregarded. Women are viewed as being more religious than men as a matter of social fact. First, for women especially, the locus of their religious praxis is in the home—tending the place of *pūjā*, worshipping, performing the *vrats*, celebrating the festivals, and observing the purity/pollution codes. Much of this activity revolves around the kitchen—the place one often finds the household shrine, the place where the *pūjā* items and special fasting and feasting foods are prepared. The kitchen is the place from where women govern the household. If men (or women for that matter) are not at

home—because they are “at work”—then they are not able to “be religious.”

Second, do women have more time than men? Certainly that was the perception of the women I talked with, even when women tend to get up before the men and children, are busy all day long, and go to bed after them. Again, what was understood by “time” (in this urban setting) was that men had the allocation of their time dictated to them by the constraints and demands of their work, whereas women saw themselves as having greater freedom to allocate their own priorities. This meant that they could “take the time” to focus on their religious or ritual activities, if they so desired. But further, as one woman put it, “men go about here and there; women remain in the home—so they follow the rules (*niyam*).” Some *vrats*, for example, must begin and end at a certain *tithi* (defined as the time or period required by the moon to gain twelve degrees on the sun to the east) which may arrive at any time of the day or night. Time is by no means homogeneous for Hindus. Women, being at home, can follow the rules; they can attend to the discrete and qualitatively appropriate times or moments when the performance of certain rituals will render them more auspicious and efficacious.

These remarks may help to explain why several women suggested, as one put it, “though women today are still more religious than men, both (men and women) are less so than in times past.” She attributed this fact to a “lack of religious instruction” and the intrusion of “the modern world” with its imposition of an imperious secular time. “There are fewer religious activities and they are less effective,” she concluded.

Kamala’s response to my question about women’s natural religiosity, below, reiterates some of the points made by other women, but it also introduces further dimensions. She felt that women are more religious than men because “they are more emotional.” She paused and then continued:

From childhood we are socialized [within the home] this way. We have seen that grandmother and mother kept *vrats* but “fatherji” did not. The girl remains more in contact with her mother so her influence must be the strongest. So even from childhood the traditions have been created in such a way that girls become religious. But the category of men’s activities is mostly outside [the home]. Women’s [activities] are mostly linked with the home. . . . That is where the major portion of her time is

spent. Therefore everything is connected with the home, for instance, *vrats*, festivals; [women] learn and [they] do [them] all. Thus the influence of religion continues to affect mostly women, [and] so we are more religious than men. Then, in old age—because no work remains—how are we to spend our time? So we turn ourselves towards God.

Initially, I had thought that Kamala was going to pursue the theme that women are more "naturally" religious than men because they are inherently (or have a stronger proclivity to be) more emotional—as other women were to tell me. Instead, Kamala suggested that women's "emotionalism," as their greater involvement in *dhārmik* activities, was a result of the way girls are brought up and the sociocultural reality of women's lives being centered in the home. Women are *encouraged* to be more religious (than men) in Hindu society, and so women become more religious. Nevertheless, Kamala has introduced into the women: home: religion equation the idea that women are more emotional, whatever the source of this difference from men, and that being emotional is significantly relevant to being religious. I shall pursue this dimension in some of the following profiles and chapters.

SARITA

Sarita is a pious middle-class Kanyakubja Brahman housewife. She was fifty when I interviewed her and her widowed, childless, older sister-in-law, Rani. The two women are close (or, it seems, dependent on one another) and they visit each other frequently. Over several visits to Sarita's home I had the opportunity to interview both women. While asking questions to one, the other would interject comments from time to time, although it was usually the elder sister-in-law "correcting" Sarita. It was Sarita, however, who appeared most interested in answering my questions, and who had the most definite opinions. For example, when I asked her such questions as when a formal *saṅkalp* was necessary or which *vrats* required the reading of or listening to a *kathā* she had quick answers. She also readily distinguished between "men's *vrats*" and "women's *vrats*" and between "*laukik vrats*" and "*śāstrik vrats*." Certainly not all women I interviewed had such decisive views on these questions.

Sarita was deferrent to her husband. He was present in the house during my visits "doing *pūjā*," but I never actually met him because he remained in his study—his *pūjā* room. Nevertheless, he was frequently making demands on her ("Bring tea!," he would shout), and did not seem happy or comfortable with the idea of my interviewing his wife and sister-in-law. Our first meeting was cut short because he required his wife's full attention for some apparently urgent matter. Sarita told me that "he does eight to ten hours of *pūjā* a day . . . mostly in sitting meditation." She characterized her husband's *pūjā* as "*dhyān*" and "*samādhi*" (both terms refer to meditation) oriented. I expressed surprise that he would engage in such a lengthy *pūjā* every day—but she insisted that this was so. Evidently he could spend his time in this fashion because they received sufficient rental income to keep them comfortable. For all his meditative *pūjā*, he remained a domineering and cantankerous husband.

Hearing about how much *pūjā-paṭh* her husband performed, I asked Sarita if *she* thought that women were naturally more religious than men and she replied in the affirmative, arguing that:

Women are more emotional [*bhāvuk*]. They are kind-hearted; women always have compassion in the heart [*man*]. Where there is compassion there is *dharm*. In men there is hardness (or severity). If the hardness were not there then a man will not be called a man. Therefore, men could not be more religious [than women].

For Sarita, being religious is a quality of the heart, manifested in one's ability to show compassion to others.¹⁰ This quality is inherently greater in women than in men. Though her husband was engaged in religious practice to an unusual degree for a householder, this kind of practice did not seem to her to constitute being "religious." While Sarita was not the only woman who expressed the view that women were more religious than men on the grounds that they were more emotional, it was especially poignant to hear it from a woman whose life experience (and marital experience in particular) apparently so strongly supported this view.

Since Sarita had said that men can and do keep *vrats* as well as women, I asked her what the difference was. She answered succinctly: "It is like this. Women take the desires of

their husbands and sons (into account) when they do *vrats*, and men do *vrats* for God; they do *vrats* for *mokṣa*." Why don't men observe *vrats* for their wives and daughters?, I persisted. "Men are capable of doing what they want," Sarita answered. "Men are men. [But] it is wives who do *vrats* for their (men's) own well-being. For men it is not necessary [there is no need] to perform worship for their wives. Men and women are different." This perceived difference in function and duty between the sexes and its manifestation in the performance of *vrats* was echoed time and again by men and women I encountered in India.

Sarita was born in Allahabad (about 100 miles west of Banaras) and received her matriculation there. She moved to Banaras when she was married at the age of twenty-four. She has two married sons who live outside of Banaras. Her parents' lineage or family deity was Rām; her husband's family's deity is Śaṅkar (Śiva), to whom her husband directs his *pūjā*, and for whom he observes a weekly Monday Vrat (fast)—the only *vrat* he keeps. Sarita's own favored deities are Śiva and Śakti (or, Durgā). She also performs a daily *pūjā*, slotted in before her husband begins his own worship. Her *pūjā*, done in front of images of the "Sanātan *devas*," she characterized as "*mantrik*" oriented, which she explained by saying that she had been initiated in a mantra some years earlier from a guru¹¹ (named Paravajrakacarya) of the Udāsin order. He gave her a *śakti* mantra, to be kept secret. She uses the mantra in daily prayer and also whenever she feels the need. She affirmed that women can say all mantras.

Sarita also reads the *Rāmāyaṇ* every day, and goes to the Sankat Mochan and Durgā temples on special occasions. When I asked her if she had gone on pilgrimage, she was the only one of the women I interviewed in Banaras who said, "I live in a *tūrtha*—Kashi; there is no need to go anywhere else." In fact this is what the Kashi Mahātmyas (texts extolling the city of Kashi—Banaras) insist on. Since Banaras is *the* pilgrimage center (*tūrtha*) par excellence, there is no reason to go anywhere else for those who already live in "the abode of the gods."

Sarita said that she accepts the doctrines of karma and *purnarjanma*, but she does not, however, believe in the existence of *bhūt-pret*. She occasionally consults an astrologer; he had prescribed a *vrat* for her three years previously, the Tuesday Vrat, because "the planet Maṅgal was too strong in my ruling house." *Maṅgal* also means "auspiciousness;" but too much of a good thing can become a bad thing, and this, she felt, was the case with

her. Auspiciousness in her family life had been replaced by discord and tension. Women see themselves as being responsible for maintaining auspiciousness in the home and the *vrats* they perform are a means to achieve this end. When Sarita was told by the astrologer that the planet Maṅgal (Mars) was exerting a negative influence on her, she felt she had found the source of the discord, the inauspiciousness, in her family life. It was her responsibility to remedy the situation and so she gladly took on the Tuesday Vrat. She observes the *vrat* in the conventional way—offering a simple *pūjā* with flowers, lights and incense to a picture of Hanumān at home. (Hanumān is one of the principal deities associated with Tuesday.) She then goes to a small Hanumān temple¹² for *darśan* (auspicious sight of the deity). For her fast she abstains from salt, and eats mostly *phalāhar* (literally, “fruit-food”) and sweets. The benefits of observing this *vrat*, she said, have been that there is more peace in her home; “less argument or problems with my husband.”

Altogether Sarita has observed eleven different *vrats*, including several before her marriage. As three of these have been weekly *vrats* and one is a semi-monthly *vrat* (Pradoṣ), Sarita’s yearly total of *vrat*-observing days is fairly high. In addition to some family *vrats*, she kept the Monday Vrat before marriage “for the pleasure of Śaṅkarji,” her favored deity. The Monday Vrat when kept by unmarried girls is usually observed to secure a “good husband”; but Sarita did not mention anything about a good husband. The only premarriage *vrat* which she continues with is Śivarātri. Other regular *vrats* which she does now (yearly and semi-monthly) were “started all at once right after marriage.” Her mother-in-law (now deceased) instructed her. Sarita said that she had not felt pressured by her mother-in-law to keep *vrats* for she believed in them already. In answer to a question about the issue of taking permission for observing *vrats* from one’s husband (which the Dharmaśāstra texts require), she replied: “I have kept *vrats* since childhood when I hadn’t even seen my husband’s face! . . . I have followed my *own* heart.”

At several points in our conversations Sarita stressed the importance of, indeed the necessity of, having confidence or belief (*viśvās*) in the *vrats* that one keeps. “It is *viśvās* itself that is fruitful,” she said.

A *vrat* is . . . that in the name [of a god] on that [particular] day one lives according to a rule [*niyam*]. For example, assume you

did a Monday Vrat—that day is Śaṅkarji's day; you believe in Śaṅkar, you will do his *pūjā*; you will make a food offering (to him). . . . Any *vrāt* should be observed with *viśvās*. . . . Whether you do a *pūjā* with the *vrāt*, or not it doesn't matter . . . you [make] a resolve that "today I will give up salt," "give up grains," [or] "give up water"—the meaning of this is just this that by that name [in the name of such and such a deity] something is given up.

Because the terms *viśvās* and *śraddhā* ("faith") came up frequently in my interviews with women about *vrats*, I want to comment on how these terms are used. Women usually used one or both of the terms *viśvās* and *śraddhā* sometime in our conversation. Initially, I assumed that the two words were being employed interchangeably (and sometimes they are). But, on closer scrutiny, I realized that there were differences in usage. The word *viśvās* was used more often than *śraddhā* and seemed to have the freest meanings. Though the word *viśvās* is often used in a religious context, this is not always the case. (I heard Hindi speakers use *viśvās* in relation to "belief" in actions [*karya meri viśvās*], in science, in a political philosophy, or in oneself. A phrase meaning self-confidence is "*ātma viśvās*.") The word *śraddhā*, on the other hand, was always used by women in a religious context, to indicate relationship to God. *Śraddhā* is thus "faith" in the sense of piety, veneration, devotion; and *viśvās* is "belief" in the sense of confidence, trust.¹³

One way in which the distinction became clearer as I examined women's usage of the two words in relation to *vrats* is that when a few women spoke of stopping particular *vrats* because they lost belief in them—it was the word *viśvās* that was used. None spoke of "losing *śraddhā*" in particular *vrats* because *śraddhā* is something larger. If one spoke of losing *śraddhā* it would mean losing one's religious faith (one's connection to God, and to one's family traditions) altogether. In this case, *vrats* would also largely lose their meaning; unless, that is, *vrats* had become a *niyama* only—a form of discipline independent for meaning of its mooring in faith.

Under what circumstances did women "lose confidence" in particular *vrats*? "I stopped observing several *vrats*—Santoṣī Mā Vrat, Monday Vrat, Thursday Vrat, Pūrṇimā—because I lost belief in them," said Savitri, a forty-three-year-old mother of five, and wife of a temple attendant (*pūjārī*). "Observing *vrats* comes from the heart," she continued. "You have to follow your heart." When

I asked her why she lost confidence in these *vrats* (all of which, significantly, were not part of her family tradition, natal or affinal, but were ones that she tried on the advice of friends for various reasons), she said that in one case "something bad" kept happening on the *vrat* day, and she was afraid to continue it. In the other cases she was not getting "good feelings" about the *vrats*. As she became half-hearted about them, she realized that she should just drop them. "There are many reasons for keeping *vrats*," Savitri concluded. "Sometimes without any reason except devotion [*bhakti*] people do *vrats*."

Indeed, for many women, *vrats* (or, certain *vrats*) are preeminently an expression of *bhakti*—a demonstration of faith in God, and a means of getting "closer to God." "Vrat is a kind of worship of God," said twenty-nine-year-old Archana. "It is like this," explained fifty-seven-year-old Siddheshvari. "By keeping a *vrat* I will be closer to God. On the *vrat* day meditation on God is heightened, for one eats little, so we remember God more often. The heart remains pure that day."

Some of Sarita's remarks about her observance of *vrats* made it clear that for her too some of the *vrats* that she performs are an important means of expressing her faith and devotion to God, a faith that in turn is a source of solace and strength. When discussing the importance of faith and of adopting the right attitude while keeping a *vrat*, Sarita quoted from the *Bhagavadgītā* to provide a scriptural explanatory context. Such discussions further enlarged the dimensions of Sarita's *vrat* observance beyond those circumscribed by a *pativratā* ideology.

MIRA

Mira, like Sarita, is a Kanyakubja Brahman. Her family originally came from the Lucknow area, but moved to Banaras before she was born. She was married at the age of fifteen. When I met her, Mira was seventy-two and had been a widow for twenty years. While she was educated up to middle-school level, her three children, two boys and a girl, all have university degrees. She lives alone on the second floor of her large, older two-storey house which surrounds an inner courtyard. Mira rents out the first floor and this provides her with sufficient income for her needs. She employs a sweeper woman, but otherwise looks after herself. She lives simply, always wearing a white sari without any ornamentation, and eats plain food twice a day, which she

cooks with care and full consideration of the various purity rules. (She was careful not to let me enter her kitchen.) From all appearances she is a model Brahman widow.

I met with Mira on several occasions. Two of those occasions were spent interviewing her at some length. During another meeting I had the opportunity to interview her daughter, Jyoti, who was visiting from Delhi and whose profile follows. I found Srimati Mira to be somewhat formal and initially a little suspicious of me. The formality remained, but her natural warmth soon emerged. Like most women I met in Banaras, she wanted me to wear a sari which, since it is the conventional dress of Hindu women, seemed to make her feel more at ease with me. Wearing a sari, demonstrating appropriate manners and speaking in Hindi were often met with verbal appreciation by women and helped to dissolve some of the barriers that separated us. Wearing a sari also has the effect of rendering one more invisible to men.

Mira's parents' lineage deity was Katyāyanī Devī (Kṛṣṇa's sister) and "Kanyakubja Brahmā." Her husband's lineage deity was Durgā, and her own favored deities are Sītā and Rām. She identified herself as a "mostly Vaiṣṇavite Sanātani." She has thus retained her natal family's Vaiṣṇavite leanings. Indeed, Mira observes all twenty-four Ekādaśīs as any devout Vaiṣṇavite (and widow) should. She performs a daily *pūjā* in her home—in front of pictures of the five *sanātani devas* (Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Gaṇeśa and Devī), as well as a picture of Sītā and Rām. The *pūjā* consists of salutation (*praṇam*) to the deities, decorating them with flowers, lighting incense and meditating briefly. Like Vaiṣṇavites all over India, she keeps a *tulsī* (basil) plant on her balcony, from which she periodically takes leaves, using them in her *pūjā* and putting them in her food "to increase its purity." She also celebrates Tulsī Vivāha (the marriage of the goddess Tulsī and Viṣṇu), for which occasion she draws a ritual diagram (*ālpanā*) under the plant and performs *pūjā* to it (see plate 3).

Each day, Mira reads from the *Rāmcaritmānas*—Tulsi Das' famous version of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, and Hindi translations of the *Bhagavatapurāṇa* or the *Mahābhārata*. She visits several temples in Banaras, particularly during festivals celebrating occasions devoted to Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa or Rām. Several times in conversation she emphasized that all the deities are the same. "Any person at all can do *pūjā* to God and do *vrats*—whatever *jāti* or religion they belong to—God is one, but God's forms are many. I give respect to all forms of God—whether [He] be Rām or Kṛṣṇa,

whether it be the Muslim's God, or the Christian's—why not? These are all the many forms of the one God." This affirmation of the essential oneness of God underlying a multitude of forms is common among Hindus, and was reiterated by several of the women I interviewed.

Mira accepts the doctrines of karma and *punarjanma* and has a practical "reap what you sow" understanding of them. "What I do in this life, I will reap in the next; what I did before I reap now." And so, from one point of view, her widowhood was foreordained.

Thirty years previously, while on pilgrimage to Brindavan (the place where Kṛṣṇa supposedly spent his childhood), Mira took "*mantra dīkṣa*" (was initiated with a mantra) from a guru there. Her husband, who accompanied her, was not himself initiated—but his permission for her to take *dīkṣa* was required and he obliged. Mira sees her mantra as a kind of protective amulet. She said that with her mantra (recited in her mind) no *bhūt-pret* can harm her. This is different from Sarita who viewed her mantra as a kind of meditative and calming aid. As for the guru who initiated her, Mira said she rarely saw him after her trip to Brindavan, unless he happened to come to Banaras. Because this guru lived far away, Mira did not develop any kind of personal relationship with him. However, she mentioned later in the interview that she went to hear "many famous *svāmīs* [learned holy men] who came to Banaras." She would most often go to Malviya Bhavan at Banaras Hindu University to listen to them. She said she received much inspiration from them, but now she is old and weary and does not go much. Based on these statements and on the fact that she was widowed for so many years and lived alone, it seems likely that if she had found a guru with whom she could develop a rapport she would have established a close relationship, even becoming his disciple, as so many older women do.¹⁴

Besides initiating her with a mantra, Mira's guru gave her general instructions on how she should conduct her life. He prescribed four *vrats* for her to follow. Mira had already been observing two of these—Rāmnaumī and Kṛṣṇa Janmāṣṭamī—since childhood. The other two—Vāman Dvādaśī and Nṛsiṃh Caturdaśī—are currently rarely observed. Mira herself said that "Nṛsiṃh Caturdaśī and Vāman Dvādaśī have almost vanished. Here very few people know about these *vrats*." The central rite of Vāman Dvādaśī involves feeding a Brahman boy and giving him gifts.

The day of the *vrat*, the boy represents Viṣṇu in his dwarf *avatār* ["descent" or incarnation]. Mira described it this way:

[We fast on that day and then] any young boy, between eight and ten years old, who has gone through the sacred thread ceremony (*upanāyaṇ saṁskār*) [from] a Brahman family is called to our home and having cleaned his feet with our own hands we put a sandalwood *tīka* (mark) on his forehead and make him sit on a [handwoven pure cotton or wool] mat—and we do *pūjā* to him. We put a garland on him and place in his right hand a *kamaṇḍal* [brass vessel used by mendicants] and in the left hand a staff [*daṇḍa*]. Then we give him at least twenty-one rupees. We believe that Vāman god has come [in the form of the young boy]. . . . One time Lord Viṣṇu went to King Bali and took the form of a dwarf in order to deceive him and went to his palace to ask for *dān*. To remember that story we do this *vrat*.

Mira has observed seventeen different *vrats* during her life, including the ones mentioned above. When I asked her when and how she learned them she said she began to do *pūjā* when she was very young. Her grandparents told her to go into the house with the older ladies and do *pūjā*. Thus by observation and practice she learned from her own family the significance of *vrats* and how to perform them. She recalls:

I started to do Rāmnaumī in my childhood because when I was very small on the Rāmnaumī day the elders of the house said to the children, "Today you will get a meal only after 12:00 because at noon Rāmcandraji took the form of an *avatār* [on the ninth day of Caitra]. So children were given fried bread and rice pudding to eat—and the older people sustained themselves on just fruit and milk. . . . Lord Rāmcandraji took the form of an *avatār* on the earth in Ayodhya because at that time the tyranny of the Rakṣaṣas was excessive. He came in order to protect the Brahmans and the cows. So all the people celebrated happily and did a *vrat* in Lord Rām's name. People especially go to Ayodhya because it is the birthplace of Rām. They take a bath in the Saryu River there; it is very meritorious. They stay there eating fruit.

Mira went on to recount in more detail the story of Rām, and she ended, "This is our belief. I sometimes go to Ayodhya too."

When she was a little older, her grandmother encouraged Mira to start observing the Sunday Vrat in the month of Māgh for

seven consecutive Sundays with the other women in the family. A couple of years before her marriage was arranged, she started the Tīj Vrat, as her socialization into her impending wifhood was augmented. After marriage, she took on several more *vrats*—"for my husband's welfare; so that he'd be respected, blessed, prosperous and healthy." After her first child was born (when she was sixteen), she began *vrats* for children: Gaṇeś Cauth, Bahulā Cauth and Lalahī Chaṭh. She said that, in her day, all married women observed *vrats* as a matter of course. She said that widows usually stop keeping (most) *vrats*. Their "job is to teach young girls [about *pūjā* and *vrats*]—especially with regard to marriage preparation."

Concerning men and *vrats* Mira said that, "Men aren't involved with the different *vrats* and *pūjās*—they only worship God and read religious books." "So are women more religious than men?" I asked. Mira felt that women have more interest in worship than men. She said it is women's nature (to be more religious). God gave it to them. From this worship women gain success (*siddhis*). Mira explained that a *siddhi* is the outward manifestation or fruition of a wish expressed in a sincere prayer (literally, "what is prayed for on the inside will appear on the outside").

When I asked Mira on another day about consulting astrologers, she replied that she did consult them, but only well-reputed ones. "There are a lot of quacks around," she told me; a sentiment echoed by many of the women I interviewed. Mira explained to me that she consults astrologers when bad circumstances arise. With the astrologer's help she finds out what stone she should wear and what mantra she should say. "But God, after all, knows what my wishes are. I don't need to specifically ask." This last, somewhat gratuitous comment reflected Mira's growing unease or perhaps impatience with astrology, or any elaborate rituals. She puts greater weight now on the efficacy of personal faith in God expressed in the simplest of devotional rituals—especially since her husband died. "Since the death of my husband I don't have that much belief [in rituals]. Now I believe only in God." And yet there was a slight sadness in her voice when she was commenting on the apparent gradual disappearance of *vrats* in the modern world. "My grandparents did more (*vrats*) than my parents did; my parents did more than I; I have done more than my daughter—and my daughter-in-law doesn't do any at all."

JYOTI

Jyoti, the forty-six-year-old daughter of Mira, lives with her husband and one of her four children in Delhi. She was born in Banaras and married at nineteen but continued with her studies, finishing with two master's degrees, in philosophy and in music. Her husband is a government servant and his work has taken them to several places in India, including Chandigarh and Madras. Like Kamala, despite her education Jyoti did not express a need or a desire to work outside the home. Even with a servant or two, there is plenty to do in the home and she feels that this work is a woman's primary duty. I found Jyoti to be commonsensical in her attitudes toward religion and *vrats* and something of a realist. For example, she said she does *vrats* to please her husband and the gods "and because this is a male-dominated society."

Jyoti told me that she does not have a preferred deity. Nor would she care to identify herself in any sectarian way. She has a shrine in her home with images of Śiv, Rām and Kṛṣṇa, and she performs a simple *pūjā* daily at this shrine. The rest of her family, Jyoti said, does not take much interest in religion—with the exception of her father-in-law in Lucknow who does a three-hour daily *pūjā*. Jyoti has been quite impressed with this demonstration of piety and discipline. She tries to read a portion of sacred text every day "but time is sometimes a problem." As for visiting temples, aside from special occasions, she goes to a Hanumān temple on Tuesdays, often accompanied by her daughter-in-law. She goes to this temple because she has taken on the *vrat* that was prescribed to her husband; a *vrat* which he had given up observing after a few weeks. He had long days at the office and was getting headaches from the partial fasting required. "Women have more resistance," she explained. As well, although she did not say this, it is typical for women to take up *vrats* for male family members who are unable to perform them. In several such cases that I encountered, the *vrats* that the women assumed had been prescribed to their male relatives upon examination of their horoscopes by pandits or astrologers.

With regard to pilgrimage, Jyoti mentioned that she saw many famous temples in the south of India on a tour she took with her mother, brother and daughter.¹⁵ Jyoti has also been to the famous Vaiṣṇo Devī temple near Jammu. Her husband had taken