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Separated by the text: Women and Nature in the *Ashoka Shashthi Vrata Katha* of Bengal

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Abstract: Ashoka Shashthi Vrata is a popular vrata practiced by women in West Bengal for the long life and well-being of children. Celebrated in the month of Chaitra, the vrata is dedicated to the Puranic goddess Shashthi. The vrata rites involve the ritual narration of a story (katha) associated with the vrata. The narrative moves around the life of an abandoned female infant named Ashoka, found under an Ashoka tree in a hermitage and her subsequent encounter with the benevolent and malevolent aspects of the goddess Shashthi. The present paper focusses on the relationship between Ashoka and the flora and fauna in the hermitage in an attempt to read the *Ashoka Shashthi Vrata Katha* as a narrative of empowerment achieved through bonding between women and nature.

Keywords: Women, Nature, Mother Goddesses, Puranas, Vratas, Motherhood

Women's vratas are simple rituals performed for wish fulfillment and are distinct from the other kinds of scriptural vratas. The present day women's vratas are remnants of primordial rites variously transformed through the puranic tradition. In Bengal, women's vratas are termed 'ashastriya' or 'meyeli vratas'. Ashoka Shashthi is a popular vrata practiced by women of Bengal for the long life and well-being of their children. Celebrated in the month of Chaitra, the vrata is dedicated to the Puranic goddess Shashthi. The vrata rites involve the ritual narration of a story (katha) associated with the vrata. The narrative of the *Ashoka Shashthi Vrata Katha* moves around Ashoka, an infant found lying under an Ashoka tree near a hermitage. The present paper

attempts to analyse the *Ashoka Shasthi Vrata Katha* in terms of the kinship between women and nature. The paper uncovers patterns of association between the child Ashoka and the flora and fauna in nature which are not given primacy in the narrative structure. The paper also attempts to show that the reciprocal relationship forged between the female protagonist and nature comes to her aid in difficult times.

Clifford Geertz, described religion as a "symbol system" created by human beings which is initially derived from social reality but later becomes a model for social reality (90-91). This symbol system permeates into human behavior and ideology and becomes an important reference point through which human beings seek to decipher the world they inhabit and their own position in it. Human beings then legitimize this "symbol system" as the only definitive truth about human existence through which the meaning of life can be comprehended. The figure of the mother is one such pivotal cultural icon through which socially dominant ideas have been promoted from time to time. In ancient as well as modern societies, the symbol of the mother has been incessantly used to engineer social aspirations.

In the Indian context the symbol of the mother is invested with special power. At the ideological level it occupies a prominent place in the pantheon in the form of Mother Goddesses. At the practical level it aspires to promote the Puranic codifications governing the lives of women. Thus there is a need to analyze the space that lies in between the above two formulations of the idea of motherhood. This space is populated by the day to day lives and aspirations of women and their engagement with the idea of motherhood. This engagement typically ignores the physiology of reproduction and its attendant knowledge base in terms of health and nutrition. Although each society has its own set of well established nutritional rules for expectant and nursing mothers, these are not promoted in the day to day life of women as vigorously as the glory of the idea of being a mother. For example *Kashyapa Samhita* while describing Shashthi as a fierce and malevolent deity who presides over the well being of the mother and child also gives detailed injunctions regarding care of mother and child. (Tewari 3, Sharma and Bhishajacharya 9) While the fearsome and malefic aspects of the goddess are drawn into the domain of the women's *vratas*, the nutritional, sanitary and developmental aspects are excluded. It is pertinent to observe that these aspects are accepted as primary source

for pediatric care in Ayurveda but are excluded from the puranic Shashthi narratives from which the women's *Shashthi vrata kathas* are drawn. *Kashyapa Samhita* associates Shashthi with the sufferings of mothers and children. It recommends that Shashthi be appeased through ritual worship and on the sixth day after birth of a child, failing which Shashthi may be provoked and harm the infant. (Singh 256-257)

The genealogy of goddess Shashthi is narrated in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* which recounts the story of the sudden appearance of Goddess Sashthi who introduces herself to King Priyavrat as the daughter of Brahma and the wife of Kartikeya. The king is pleased with the goddess for bringing his son back to life and undertakes the task of establishing her worship in his kingdom. N.N. Bhattacharya records the development of the goddess as follows:

In the Puranas Shashthi was...conceived as the sixth part of Prakriti and the wife of Skanda-Kartikeya. When Skanda was born, various kinds of terrifying phenomenon occurred. The gods having heard of the power of Skanda, advised Indra to kill him without delay. Indra sent the Divine Mothers to kill the child. But when they met Skanda, they were full of affection for him and became his protectresses. When Indra saw that his plan had failed he led a huge celestial army against Skanda. The gods were defeated and surrendered to him. Indra then hurled his thunderbolt at Skanda.... A number of female spirits came into being when Skanda was struck with the thunderbolt. By Skanda's blessings they became the protectresses of children. (47)

Shashthi is fair and beautiful like the champak flower, young, adorned with ornaments, merciful and benevolent. (Singh 257) *Kashyap Samhita* by Acharya Brihadjeevika composed during the Kushan period states that Revati pleased Skanda by practicing penance, was accepted by him as his sister and given the name Shashthi-the sixth one. The other five being Skanda, his three brothers - Guha, Kumar, Visakh, and the fifth Nandikeshwar. Skanda blessed Shashthi to be as powerful as her brothers. (Singh 257) Thus Shashthi is variously conceived as the mother/sister/consort of Skanda-Kartikeya. However her association with the sixth day, children and childbirth is universally accepted.

In West Bengal Shashthi is the unrivalled goddess of children. She helps childless women become mothers of numerous children and thus

gives them an exalted stature in society. She helps ward off diseases and saves the women and children from evil fortune. She is angered by carelessness of her devotees and punishes them so that they learn to venerate her with proper rituals and full dedication. She also tests her devotees from time to time. However she is easily moved if the errant devotee repents for her mistakes and although she restores happiness, she cautions them of the dire consequences that would befall them if they are ever found errant again. The origin of Goddess Shashthi is variously represented in literature:

Brahma giving a description of Matrutaks to Narada said that the most worshipful among them was Shashthi Devi. She is the one who looks after the infants in all lokas. She is a great ascetic and a devout of Vishnu and a consort of Kartikeya.... She is always motherly, merciful and a savior. She always comes in dreams of infants whether they are on land, water or horizon. (Singh 252) Shiva reportedly fashioned twelve grahas, five male and seven female, to assist Skanda. The female grahas are recognized as the Sapta Matrukas. Gradually, several mother goddesses worshipped around the fifth century AD came to be identified with the seven mothers, and soon they were collectively identified as a single goddess Revati. Revati is identical with goddess Shashthi, who is also Devasena, the beloved consort of Skanda. (Jain 200)

Revati is associated with the annihilation of the demon Dirghajeevi in course of which she took the forms of a female eagle, a female jackal and Jataharini- a destroyer of progeny. (Singh 253)

In the Kushan era the goddess is depicted as two-armed and six-headed. Several coins, sculptures and inscriptions that were produced from 500 BCE to 1200 CE picture the six-headed goddess. She is shown surrounded by Skanda and Vishakha. The central head is surrounded by five female heads. (Gupta 37) Shikha Sarkar points out that till date, only two images of Mother Shashthi, dating back to the 12th century AD, have been found in erstwhile Bihar. Both show her as a goddess with a child on her lap mounted on a black cat looking up at her. (Sarkar 171- 172) The folk worship representation of Goddess Shashthi is in the form of a

red-coloured stone that is placed beneath a banyan tree. These are often found on the outskirts of villages. Shashthi is also worshipped in the form of an earthen water pitcher, set beneath a banyan tree.

Veneration of the Goddess Shashthi starts with a woman getting married. The *Shashthi Vrata* is performed by married women to invoke the blessings of the goddess *Shashthi* to obtain the glory of motherhood and longevity of children. According to Sukumari Bhattachaji the twelve forms of the goddess worshipped in the twelve months are: Chandan, Aranya, Kardama, Lunthana, Chapeti, Durga, Nadi, Mulaka, Anna, Sitala, Gorupini and Ashoka. (66) However in popular practice shashthi worship is observed only in eight months on the 6th day of the bright fortnight.

Celebrated in the month of March, when the Ashoka tree starts blooming, Asoka Shashthi gets its name from a young girl Ashoka, found beneath an Asoka tree and raised by a sage. The *Shashthi vrata katha* does not make any reference to the *Padma Purana* but the striking similarities between the young Ashoka of *Asoka Shashthi Vrata Katha* and Ashoka Sundari of the *Padma Purana* cannot be ignored. Ashoka Sundari is born when Shiva and Parvati encounter the wish-fulfilling tree and Parvati asks for a daughter, to give her company when she is alone in Kailash. The wish is instantly granted. She is called Ashoka Sundari. In the *vrata katha* narrative a benign sage finds an infant lying beneath an ashoka tree. He takes the child. While in deep meditation it is revealed to him that Asoka, a beautiful, lotus like child was birthed by a female deer. In the absence of the sage the mother deer would come and nurse the infant. She grows into a beautiful young maiden and the sage does not want to leave her alone in the hermitage when he goes out. Therefore he decides to find for her a suitable husband. However all his efforts are in vain. Tired and irritated, the sage vows to marry the girl to the first person he sets his eyes upon the next morning. He is overjoyed to find a prince at his doorstep the next morning. He requests the prince to marry his daughter Ashoka and take her away with him. While bidding farewell, the sage gives her some ashoka flowers and seeds. He instructs her to drop the seeds on the way to her new home so that the row of ashoka trees that would grow would link her marital home to the hermitage. He asks her to come back to him using the ashoka tree path if she is ever in trouble. He also asks her to eat the ashoka flowers on the day of ashoka shashthi that is the sixth day in the bright fortnight in the month of *Chaitra* and forbids her from eating rice on that particular

day. As the years passed, Asoka prospered in her new home, she gave birth to eight sons and a daughter. Eventually the sons married and daughters in law began to care for Ashoka. One day while Ashoka was observing the *Ashoka Shashthi Vrata*, the daughters in law gave her the ritual gruel to eat. Unknown to anyone a grain of rice had fallen into the pot. Next morning Ashoka woke up to find the entire household dead. Unable to understand the reason behind this predicament and weeping profusely she ran along the ashoka tree path to the hermitage. There the sage went into meditation and revealed to Ashoka that goddess Shashthi was angered by her consuming gruel with a grain of rice that had fallen into it unknown and unnoticed by anyone. He gave her sacred water to sprinkle over the dead ones to bring them back to life. Ashoka ran back and did the same. Her family was restored and she narrated to them all that had happened. They were surprised. The entire kingdom came to know about the incident and started worshipping goddess Shashthi. The king ordered everyone to worship goddess Shashthi.

The omniscient narrator, invests power in the character of the sage and the young prince who eventually becomes the king. Ashoka although being the central character is shown to be without power. She is married to a prince and is a queen in later life but is significantly lacking in prominence during the turn of events that are narrated. In spite of being a dutiful follower of the sage's command she is shown to suffer through no fault of hers. In the latter part of the narrative power is invested in the sage who gives her the holy water and in the king, her spouse, who orders the entire kingdom to observe the worship of goddess Shashthi. The inadvertent falling of the single grain of rice into the pot of ritual gruel is given great prominence and it is impressed upon ashoka that she should be even more careful in her observance of the rituals.

In the *Shashthi Vrata-Kathas* the popularity of a woman is directly proportional to the number and longevity of her offspring. A childless woman or a woman whose children die in infancy is the epitome of misfortune. Motherhood determines the social status of the woman. While wealth and caste determine the position of the male, the female is valued for her biological capacity to reproduce. The male offspring is valued more than the female. Many other codes of behaviour for women are projected through negative reinforcement. Terrible predicament for the errant women characters serve to create a fear of breaking the moral code in the *Vratinis* or the women who perform the *vrata*. Thus

the narrative portrays Asoka as a worshipper of a malevolent goddess who when angered may take away from a woman her status of motherhood. The need for extra care and precaution in observance of *vratas* is advocated through the example of the hapless Ashoka.

However a close reading of the *vrata katha* text reveals a bonding between women and nature which is muted in the narrative. The depiction of ashoka trees occurs at two points in the narrative- first at the discovery of the abandoned newborn child Ashoka and later as she runs alongside the rows of the ashoka trees to the hermitage and back to her marital home. However this cyclic relationship between the ashoka trees and nature's child Ashoka is not given any prominence in the narrative. The tree sheltered the infant girl at birth, the girl when she grew up planted more ashoka trees, and these trees reached her to the natal home and back in times of need. The presence of the sage can be seen as an external imposition because the nurturing of the infant is carried out by nature in the form of a female deer. In fact the primary concern of the sage is to get Ashoka married and thus rid himself of care giving responsibility. Later the sage represents source of privileged wisdom and cultural dominance exercised over women in the name of religious practices. The bonds forged between a young girl and nature as she grew in the hermitage are not made a part of the narrative.

The relation between gender and nature is diverse and follows different trajectories across cultures. The relation between women and nature is drawn from the nature of interaction that takes place between them, which in turn is based on women's day to day activities and socially accepted codes of behavior. The place occupied by women within the socio economic hierarchy also determines the relationship between women and nature. In the present narrative the circumstances of birth make the infant Ashoka, the child of nature. Nature in the form of the female deer is shown to be capable of raising the child. The adoptive father in the form of the hermit is also fully satisfied to let nature take its course. However few years later, when the child is a young maiden, the hermit is ill at ease to leave her alone in the hermitage. The role of nature is obscured and the social anxieties take centre stage. The relationship between Ashoka and the natural surroundings of the hermitage is further severed by her marriage, the only link being the single row of Ashoka trees that link her marital and natal homes.

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