

# Fasts



**Paper: Cultures in the Indian Subcontinent**

**Lesson: Fasts**

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# Fasts

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## Vrats

The study of folklore has today moved towards a performance oriented perspective. Religious performance provides the most ideal opportunity for communication in traditional societies. Likewise, the anthropological study of religion requires investigation into both the content and the context of religious performances. This endeavour entails seeing religious activity as “event” – the doing of religion. Pilgrimages, festivals, rituals are such events which involve this ‘doing of religion’. As Susan Wadley puts it, “In the popular religion of north India, rituals are not merely a context in which the communication of the sacred takes place; rituals are also powerful transformers of one’s life path”.

Some of the most potent of the life-transforming rituals are vrats. It is a common belief that the performance of a vrat alters one’s destiny. Vrat is most commonly translated as a ‘religious vow’ or ‘fast’. In this chapter too, I shall be using the term vrats instead of fasts in order to address a larger issue, though the two terms differ in meaning. A vrat is not merely a fast (upavasa), the primary difference being that in a vrat, some food or fruits can be taken while in a fast, one must remain without food. Some kind of abstinence from food is not the sole requirement of vrats. It is enjoined with a ‘Puja’ and ‘Katha’ too. The basic aim of a vrat is to influence some deity to come to one’s aid as one struggles across the ocean of existence. The austerities associated with the vrat are signals to the deity of one’s faith and devotion. Some type of abstinence from food is not the sole requirement of most vrats. Usually a puja is also enjoined, and the devotee is told to read the katha associated with the vrat. The most popular is the Sri Satyanarayan Vrat Katha, usually to alleviate some difficulty, but sometimes to accrue merit. Most of the kathas associated with vrats set up a scheme of the world in which ritual behaviour is both right and necessary for human well-being in order to overrule karma. The object of vrat seemed to defy the principles of karma.

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## Interesting detail

There has been a shift in the meaning of the term 'vrat' from being simply an obligatory rite (often to atone for past misdeeds) to a rite for gaining something by pleasing the Gods. In early Vedic literature, the term refers to a routine practice of sacrificial service which the patron of the offering has an obligation to perform. To be in a God's vrata, was to follow the prescribed course of worship. In the Brahmanas vrats denoted milk, which was used by a person observing a vow or undergoing a penance. However, the Puranas offer a very different understanding of the term. For example, the Bhavisya Purana provides that a man crosses easily the deep ocean of hells by means of the boat of vratas, upavasas and niyamas, while others promise heaven and other worldly and spiritual rewards to those who performed vratas.

## Origins

The origins of the female oriented folk vrats is not exactly known, but they were greatly influenced by similar rituals that presumably belonged to the indigenous culture of India. Some believe that vrats possibly have their antecedents in the resolutions and rituals among the Dravidian people or more generally people who were referred to as 'vratyas'. These indigenous rites continued locally even after the advent of Aryans and were to a large extent subdued by the 'greater brahmanical tradition'. However, by the early centuries of the Christian era, Brahmanism came under severe attack due to conflict amongst various religious systems fighting for space. There were also several socio-economic factors because of which Brahmanism underwent phenomenal changes of which perhaps land grants were the most important. The Brahmana caste system itself had come to be hierarchically graded and Brahmanism had started moving out of its native places to regions inhabited by preliterate groups. The impossibility of following the policy of ethnic segregation is what explains the attitudinal change on the part of brahmanas towards people. For this, there was a need to develop a religious system which while catering essentially to the needs of the elite sections of society could still hold appeal for the simple minded tribal folk. The corpus of literature called Puranas evolved out of an interaction between the brahmanical tradition and local tradition and was composed with a view to revitalize the brahmanical social order which by now had been seriously undermined. The result was the creation of a composite, syncretic religious system which incorporated diverse rituals and beliefs without endangering the social supremacy of the brahmanas.

Vijay Nath's essay "From Brahmanism to Hinduism: Negotiating the myth of the Great tradition" talks of how with the help of Puranic mythology and certain ideological constructs such as those related to sin, hell, curse etc, which were meant to serve as moral deterrents, the emergent system aimed at making the natives

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conform to a new set of moral values and behavioural norms. Greater efficacy and spiritual merit began to be given to those ritual performances, which required group participation thus converting Vedic Brahmanism into an absolutely new avatar of Puranic Hinduism. For example, Ritual practices such as bathing in holy rivers (snana), taking out religious processions (ratha-yatra), celebrating festivals (parb), performing puja in shrines, collective singing (kirtanas) and listening to the recital of Puranic tales now became integral to the Brahmanical belief system and were instrumental in narrowing down the gap between Brahmanism and its tribal counterpart.

*Vrats* were chosen as an institutional channel through which the contents of the Puranas could be disseminated and regularly communicated. These non-brahmanical rites were assimilated into the Brahmanical fold and the simple folktales garnished with Puranic myths. The non-brahmanical rite may have been changed by Vedic elements, however the Puranas recommended that vrats would be performed by all members of the community including women and sudras, thus ensuring maximum participation and a larger audience who would listen to the Puranas. Even such an ostracized category of women as prostitutes had a special vrat called *Anangadana* prescribed for them in the *Matsyapurana*. However, as Kunal Chakrabarti discusses in "Textual Authority and Oral Exposition: The Vrat ritual as a channel of communication in Early Medieval Bengal", this apparently equal right granted to women was not unconditional. Rituals exclusive to women reveal a universe largely independent of male intervention. The stories they tell have themselves as the chief actors protecting their husbands and family from any disaster. Hence vrats became an occasion when women met and reinforced their roles in a male-dominated society. The Puranic vrat sought to destroy this very social domain by introducing the figure of a male brahmana priest to look after the management of the ritual. Thus vrats became more of a 'community festival' rather than a women's rite. The congregational nature and performance of vrats offered an occasion for the public exposition of the contents of the Puranas. Brahmanism did not however, destroy the indigenous rite entirely. Some vrats still continue to be performed by women in the seclusion of the household. It instead introduced brahmanical refinements to it and created a parallel structure with the local rite. It would be in this context that religious manuals, which I discuss later, become crucial. By the early medieval period, vrats were extremely popular and among the most frequent topics of the digest writers like Hemadri.

### Appropriation of the 'Local'

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## Interesting detail

### The Vata Savitri Vrata



Source: <http://astrobix.com/astroblog/post/vat-savitri-vrat-2012-vat-savitri-vrat-katha-puja.aspx>

In the vrat of Savitri, Savitri clearly snatches her husband away from his decreed death through her devotion. Asvapati, the king of Madra, being childless, makes supplication to the goddess Savitri for a son. The goddess, however, promises him a daughter who too was named Savitri by the king. The girl grows up and attains such matchless beauty that no suitor dare ask her hand. She eventually in her svayamvara chooses Satyavant, son of the blind old king Dyumatsena, who lives in exile in the forest. The rishi Narada discloses to her and her father that Satyavant was fated to die within a year. Nevertheless, Savitri abides by her decision and goes to live in the forest with Satyavant. As the year draws to a close she performs austerities and on the fated day accompanies Satyavant through the forest in search of fruits and fuel. It is here that Yama appears and takes Satyavant's life inspite of Savitri's supplications. Savitri follows Yama and by her persistence wins from him a number of boons including the restoration of life to Satyavant. In consequence then of Savitri's devotion, Satyavant is restored to life, Dyumatsena recovers his sight and his kingdom. Asvapati becomes father of a hundred sons, while Satyavant and Savitri also have a hundred sons and live four hundred years.

**Source: Original**

This vrat is a very popular Puranic vrat which is variously described in a number of Puranas. Kunal Chakrabarti expresses discomfort with this anomaly where one vrat is mentioned differently in different brahmanical texts. There is no uniformity in when and how it should be performed and even the story differs tremendously. According to Chakrabarti, "It is entirely possible that all these vrats independently existed in



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different names, but with a shared objective, much before the brahmanical adoption of them under the denominator of Savitri". This would explain why different regions of the country have different names and time for performance of vrats which otherwise share the same desired objective. While in Mahabharata, Savitri engages in a lengthy discussion, Yama for the most part remains silent. However in later Puranas, Yama replies to Savitri's questions on karma and how to transcend the fruits of one's actions. Now most of what Yama says is the essence that defines Brahmanism and the principal aspects of Brahmanism. "The Savitri vrat is a typical example of how the Puranas appropriated an indigenous rite with the help of a leading story, how inconspicuously they introduced brahmanical themes in its proceedings, and how an occasion was created for the propagation of these themes". The vata or banyan tree figures prominently in the Savitri rite as it is here that Savitri takes her seat while Satyavant is gathering fruit and fuel. The banyan's striking powers of self-perpetuation made it a symbol of fruitfulness to women desiring sons and hence it is not unnaturally associated with a rite which had the attainment of sons and grandsons as its object along with the avoidance of the awful curse of a Hindu widowhood.

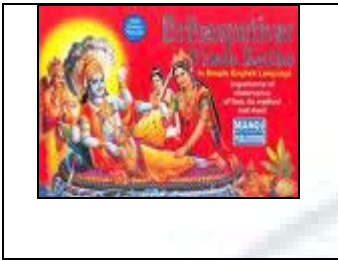
Vrats provided the most appropriate occasion for the transmission of brahmanical culture due to its congregational nature and its caste and gender neutral nature which meant reaching out to a large and diverse social nuclei. Vrats were taken as occasions to inculcate definite ethical norms and social habits amongst pre-literate groups undergoing acculturation. By focusing on forms of behavioural conduct, emphasizing on taking bath everyday and seeking to restrict the practices of drinking and meat eating, the Brahmanical ideologues hoped to strike at the very root of tribal tradition. It not only eroded certain deep rooted tribal habits, but it also tended to create a breach in the tribal belief and value-system. According to Vijay Nath, this was a step away from the tribal towards the Sanskrit pole. It also marked a gradual attitudinal change in the acculturated group. Such a change was necessary to facilitate the latter's transition from a hunting-gathering mode of production to a plough based agricultural system. The degree of acculturation through the exposition of Puranic vrats can be gauged from the fact that these stories very soon began to figure prominently in the tribal lore.

## Standardizing the oral tradition

It is here that the religious manuals became increasingly important. These manuals are found in markets, outside temples, at fairs, and on street corners. When Brahmanism appropriated parts of the local cultures with suitable modifications, these became extremely congealed and acquired an authenticity which the prevailing fluid oral traditions could not match. The brahmanical modifications became a standard version reigning supreme over the other local versions. Verbal tradition, both oral and written, play a significant role in the "religious performance". These manuals concentrated on detailing the rules for food, dress, and behaviour of specific

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vrats as well as on giving the correct rules for the associated puja and the katha that is the primary exegesis of a given vrat. The output of religious literature from small publishing firms increased dramatically in the last half of the twentieth century.



Source: [www.exoticindiaart.com](http://www.exoticindiaart.com)

According to Susan Wadley, there were several reasons for this. Increasing literacy allowed thousands to use texts where once they had relied solely on oral traditions. A more mobile population separates generations and deprives both men and women of their traditional religious mentors. Finally, texts are valued in Hinduism in part because of their traditional inaccessibility: to many newly literate persons, reading pamphlet is more authentic than reciting the stories passed on to them by elders. Written texts are gradually replacing the elders and act as a stand-in for the traditions of the guru. "The printed word has an authenticity lacking in the oral one: increasing literacy has allowed women access to written works and they are firm in their commitment to the correctness of them". These standardized brahmanical versions of how to perform a particular vrat along with the katha prescribed for it made inroads into most of the Hindu household. Today of course, even these manuals have been in many cases replaced with vrat katha CDs such that one can once again engage in the act of listening to the narrator. However the Brahman priest is still indispensable to some of the official Brahmanical kathas. The more female oriented folk vrats could do without the Brahman narrating the story, and it was here that these manuals replaced him. The overall presence of the priest however could not be avoided as it is he alone who decides dates appropriate for particular fasts and the one who must get a 'dakshina' after its udyapana.

Two very obvious things about vrats: the overall predominance of the male Brahman priest and women as major performers of these rituals. Karma of one individual affects himself and may also affect another and hence transfer of merit does take place. However, all instances of the transfer of merit gained through vrats are instances of the transfer of merit between kin. So transfers between parents and children are prevalent both ways. Transfers between husband and wife are also prevalent, but interestingly, in one direction only— from wife to husband. Does that say anything about the overall rubric on which such 'performances of religion' are based? Vrats were instrumental in reinforcing other aspects of Brahmanical ideology, such as a patriarchal social order based on gender differentiation. Self-Indulgence has been considered wrong both morally as well as physically, more for women than men. This perhaps explains the number of vrats a woman is expected to observe for



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their husband's longevity. It survives even today in the form of the very popular *karvacauth vrat* widely observed in most parts of northern India. Women keep various severe fasts around the year in order to bring prosperity to their household, particularly their husbands and children and not for themselves. Most of these vrats involve eating nothing throughout the day. Lower castes and women have been considered by nature 'disorderly' who needed to be controlled. A woman's vrat katha, her vow of fasting, is perhaps a tool to teach her more self control and drill into her the notions of patriarchy and gender construction time and again. Also while the observance of a fast remains voluntary, it sometimes becomes both compulsory and coercive especially for married women since a non-performance of a particular vrat or performance of it in any 'wrong' way is seen as bringing disaster for the family in the future.

### The 'Phuhari' and 'Jibwali': Turning 'Vrats' upside down

#### The tale of the 'Phuhari'

The tale is of a *phuhari* (disorderly) named Savitri who had the habit of tasting food while cooking. One day her mother-in-law had arranged for a Satyanarayan katha at home. In order to keep Savitri away from fouling the Prasad to be offered to the God and to keep her engaged long enough for the ritual to finish, the mother-in-law ordered her to go and wash a black blanket totally white in the Ganges. Realising that it would take long, Savitri packed some flour and jaggery. There was a Ganesh temple near the ghat and Savitri went there instead of washing the blanket. She cooked litti on the wood collected from the forest and smeared it with the ghee in the lamp that was lit near Ganesh's idol. When the ghee in the lamp was fouled, Ganesh covered his nose with his finger. The news of this change in position of Lord Ganesh spread and the king announced that he who will bring the idol back to its normal position will get half of his kingdom. Savitri heard of this and took up the challenge. She went near Ganesh's idol and said "Hey Ganesh, remove your finger or else! The first time round I merely fouled the lamp, this time round I'll slash with the knife and all your sweets will be spoilt". Ganeshji then removed his finger from his nose. Since she succeeded in the challenge, the king gave her half his kingdom.

**Source: Neema Caughran, "Fasts, Feasts and Slovenly Women: Strategies of Resistance among North Indian Potter Women".**

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This is a tale that Neema Caughran heard from potter women of a village bordering Benaras during the Jiutiya vrata. Jiutiya is an annual vrata performed by women of eastern U.P. and Bihar during the Hindu month of Kartik (usually October). It is one of a yearly cycle of women's ritual fasts undertaken to ensure the well-being of offspring. As prescribed by the fast, a woman can take no food, no water and not even swallow her saliva since sundown of the night before till the sunrise of the next day. What makes the tale interesting is that it is completely opposite to the tales actually narrated at such vrats by women. The typical kathas speak of women who by various austerities win over favours from Gods not directly for themselves rather for the well-being and success of male members in the family. However, the above tale speaks of a woman who is far from this 'ideal' image and in spite of this wins over half the kingdom for herself.

Such stories and personal narratives of women can give an insight into how women make eating, feeding oneself, fasting and oral discourse as resistance to the norms of socially sanctioned behaviour for women and to the often cruel and abusive treatment women receive from their husbands and families. The *phuhari* is a symbol of women's ritual stories told in several caste communities. Susan Wadley discusses a number of folktales in *Struggling with Destiny in Karimpur, 1925-84* (1994), one of which talks of a *phuhari* who brings ruin to the family because she created disorder in the family. A *phuhari* in most of the tales is seen reaping disastrous consequences of her actions. A *jibwali* (one who is driven by her tongue and talks a lot) and a *phuhari* are seen as threat to family harmony quite obviously because they do not behave according to the prescribed behaviour for women. But the potter woman's tale rewards the woman for her disorderliness and loose tongue. According to Neema Caughran, the story is about the power of disorder, of overindulgence in a cultural setting where control and moderation are the only options within the dominant paradigms of patriarchy and caste. The very act of moulding and telling such stories should be seen as acts of agency, of recontextualization and resistance deployed as necessary for survival. Women's personal narratives both in formal tales and informal speech need to be seen as functioning towards the construction of the self where that self is so often denied.

Ideas of appropriation and the subsequent sanitization of a culture by a hegemonic culture as seen in the case of vrats shall be discussed further in other chapters on ritual formations like pilgrimage and festivals.

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## Summary

- There is an increasing need to emphasize on the 'performance of tradition'. Vrats provide one of the several occasions where tradition and religion are performed.
- The context in which we use the term 'vrats' today differs immensely from that of the earlier times.
- Brahmanism came under attack by the early centuries of the Christian era due to several reasons which compelled it to become more accommodating to the pre-literate indigenous groups. In order to make Brahmanism popular among these people a new 'folklore' was created through acculturation garnished with ideological constructs.
- The shift from Vedic Brahmanism to Puranic Hinduism was marked by interesting features, one of which was the participation of the otherwise marginal groups i.e. sudras and women.
- However, this participation was not unconditional. Brahmanism changed the nature of the indigenous rite forever converting vrats from being a women's rite to being a community festival where the male figure of the priest was the most important.
- Religious manuals played a significant role in standardizing the Puranic myths and they were increasingly replacing the traditional guru in most of the vrats, though the priest still retains his hegemony in the performance of these vrats.
- In spite of the fact that Puranic Hinduism apparently treated women and sudras at par with regard to the performance of the ritual, the deep seated brahmanical ideology of varnashramdharma and a patriarchal social order is not hard to understand when one looks at the kind and number of vrats supposed to be performed by women for her husband's well-being.
- However, one may in these silent observances of the prescribed rituals, also find acts of resistances and agency by women. It is important to listen to such voices to understand the feminine response to the overall patriarchal structure of ritual formation.

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## Exercises

### Essay questions

- 1.1 What do you understand by the term 'acculturation'?
- 1.2 Trace the origin of 'vrats' and what role does its performance play in the study of folklore.
- 1.3 What role do religious manuals play in standardizing the oral tradition?
- 1.4 What changes did Brahmanism bring about in the observance and meanings of vrats?
- 1.5 Do you see the Brahmanical ideology of allowing both women and sudras in the participation of vrats as emancipatory?

### Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	Match the following	

#### Question

Match the following:

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| a) Fasts     | i) prescribed vrat for prostitutes                   |
| b) katha     | ii) vrat performed by women of eastern U.P and Bihar |
| c) Anangdana | iii) upavasa   |
| d) Jiutiya   | iv) puranic myth                                     |

#### Correct Answer / Option(s)

- a) and iii)
- b) and iv)
- c) and i)
- d) and ii)

#### Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

Fasts refer to upavasa, when one chooses to eat nothing. Hence a) matches iii) Kathas or tales that are read out during vrats are Puranic myths that place the origin of each vrat to earlier times and are extremely crucial in the process of ritual formation. Thus b) matches iv). The *Matsyapurana* prescribes Anangdana as a vrat to be especially observed by the prostitutes. Therefore c) matches i). Jiutiya is an annual vrat observed by women of eastern U.P. and Bihar. Hence d) matches ii).

#### Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

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Other combinations are false due to reasons mentioned above.

**Reviewer's Comment:**

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	True or False	

## Question

### True or False?

- What comes across as 'tradition' is constantly invented.
- Observance of vrats seem to agree with the theory of karma.
- Brahmanism transformed vrats from being a community festival into a more private ritual.
- Vrats are different from fasts (upavasa).

### Correct Answer / Option(s)

- What comes across as 'tradition' is constantly invented. : True
- Observance of vrats seem to defy the theory of karma: False
- Brahmanism transformed vrats from being a private ritual into a community festival: False
- Vrats are different from fasts (upavasa): True

### Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

E.J.Hobsbawm very rightly said that traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes 'invented'. They are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. In the Hindu tradition, vrats too are part of a process where ritual formation was necessary. Hence, though borrowed from local rites, they were filled in with Puranic myths which traced their origins to the earlier times. Thus a tradition was invented.

Fast is simply a restraint in eating, speaking etc. Vrat on the other hand, entails



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upavasa along with a puja and a katha. Fast is simply a part in the observance of vrats.

## *Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer*

The general rule of karma is that the results of past deeds cannot be gotten rid of except by enjoying or undergoing their consequences. A vrat katha, on the other hand, sends across the message that doing a vrat destroys past sins and changes the course of one's life. Hence the observance of vrats defy the theory of karma.

Most of the female oriented vrats when part of the indigenous rites were performed by women in the inner chambers of the household. However, Brahmanism changed its nature forever. Now vrats became congregational in nature involving the presence of a male priest.

## **Reviewer's Comment:**

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
3	Multiple choice	

## **Question**

**Choose the correct answer:**

- Which of these was not the prime reason for the changes adopted by Brahmanism in the early centuries of the Christian era (a) attack by other religious systems (b) landgrants (c) a sympathetic view of the society (d) movement towards non-brahmanical or tribal areas.
- The corpus of literature to revitalize Brahmanism through an interaction if the Brahmanical and local tradition is called as (a) Vedas (b) Aranyakas (c) Smritis (d) Puranas
- The Hindu tradition prohibits the observance of vrats by which of the following: (a) unmarried girls (b) married women (c) sudras (d) none of these

## **Correct Answer / Option(s)**

- Which of these was not the prime reason for the changes adopted by Brahmanism in the early centuries of the Christian era (a) attack by other religious systems (b) landgrants (c) a sympathetic view of the society (d) movement towards non-brahmanical or tribal areas.

Answer: (c)

- The corpus of literature to revitalize Brahmanism through an interaction if the Brahmanical and local

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	<p>tradition is called as (a) Vedas (b) Aranyakas (c) Smritis (d) Puranas</p> <p>Answer: (d)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Hindu tradition prohibits the observance of vrats by which of the following: (a) unmarried girls (b) married women (c) sudras (d) none of these</li></ul> <p>Answer: (d)</p>
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### *Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer*

The attitudinal change in Brahmanism was certainly not due to a sympathetic view of the society because once Brahmanism had revitalized itself through inclusion of newer groups, its overall patriarchal and non egalitarian structure remained and in fact became stronger.

Puranas were a response to the need to create a religious system which could both cater to the needs of the Brahmins and hold appeal for the simple minded local people. This it did by integrating the two traditions and creating myths.

The Puranic Hindu tradition does not prohibit any section of the society from the observance of vrats because it seeks larger and larger participation for the dissemination of the Brahmanical ideology.

### *Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer*

Only (c) is correct since all other alternatives were the actual reasons why Brahmanism needed to undergo a complete transformation. Attack by religious systems like Buddhism, Jainism which rejected the excesses of Brahmins was the prime reason for the decline in popularity of Brahmanism. Also, land grants and movement into newer areas meant that Brahmanism could not carry on with the ethnic segregation that it was used to.

(d) is correct as Vedas, Aranyakas and Smritis are completely Brahmanical texts and were not required to serve the purpose of bringing the Brahmanical and local traditions together.

Unmarried girls, married women and sudras are very much a part of vrats and do participate in the observance of it, though their participation is certainly guided by the patriarchal and varnashram notions. Hence (d) is correct and all others are wrong.

**Reviewer's Comment:**

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## Glossary

**Acculturation:** It is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviours of another group.

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**Sanskritization:** A process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes.

**Katha:** Katha is a mythological story usually recited or read in conjunction with a particular ritual form, the vrats.

**Udyapana:** the act of bringing to a conclusion, finishing, accomplishment.

**Phuhari:** the disorderly, slovenly.

## Further readings

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