

Festivals and Fairs of Bengal in Kāśī

Dr. Pranati Ghosal

Festivities and ceremonies of Bengal include three types of ritual function, viz. *vrata* (vow), *utsava* (festival) and *yātrā* (festive train). Although they are shown by three names, yet on account of their mixed character it is difficult to make a watertight compartment division. By name they are shown in one group, but by nature they assume a different character.

The discussion on *vrata*, etc. requires a clear definition of them. The word '*vrata*' being derived from the root *vṛt* 'to resolve' with the suffix *ac* means a practice or following a course of conduct. The word may also be derived from the root *vṛ* 'to chose' or 'to will' with *uṇādi* suffix *atac* or *ta*. P.V. Kane also liked to derive it in the latter way. In that case, meaning of *vrata* becomes 'what is willed' or simply 'will'.

The will of a person in power/authority becomes a law/command to others. According to Monier Williams, *vrata* means law/command also. Devotees believe that gods have laid down certain commands to be followed by all beings. Thus, comes the sense of law/ordinance. A command of a superior imposes a corresponding duty to obey. When commands are obeyed or duties are performed in the same way for a long time, they become customs or practices. When persons believe that they must perform certain acts as ordained by gods, then arises the sense of religious duty, i.e. worship/vow. The *Amarakośa* (2.7.30) has defined *vrata* नियमो व्रतमस्त्री तच्चोपवासादिः। The commentator Kṣīrasvāmin has clarified it further: “वृत्यत वर्ज्यतेऽन्नादि यत्रेति तद्व्रतमुपवासकृच्छ्रचान्द्रायणादिकम्” In order to win favour of God, if a man imposes upon himself certain acts and restrictions regarding his food and other behaviours, that becomes a sacred vow or *vrata*. Sometimes, these *vratas* on account of their popularity are performed in a large scale among the mass of public, e.g. *śivarātri* or *janmāṣṭamī*, etc.

When performance of *vrata* or *pūjā* requires involvement (both financially and physically) of different people from society and a long preparation is required, that may be called *utsava* or festival, e.g. Śrī Śrī Durgā *pūjā*; and on the festive occasions, when images of deities are taken away from one place to another with a grand procession and different rituals that is called *yātrā* or festive train. e.g. *rathayātrā*. Kṣīrasvāmin in his commentary on the *Amarakośa* (3.3.75) states देवोत्सवेऽपि यान्त्यत्र इति यात्रा।

Let us start our discussion with *yātrā*. How many *yātrās* are there? MMP G.N. Kaviraj in his *Kāśī kī Sārasvata Sādhanā* refers to one *Yātrāprakaraṇapaddhati*

composed by some Vidyanivas Bhattacharya, which records twelve *yātrās* of Lord Jagannātha*. Among these twelve, some are very popular and celebrated with a great enthusiam; we will discuss these prominent rituals.

- (1) **Candana-yātrā:** It is celebrated on the bright third day of Vaiśākha, i.e. *akṣaya-tṛtīyā*. In Orissa on this day, image of Lord Jagannātha is carried to Candana Sarovara and there coronation of lord is celebrated. In Bengal, it is however, a different ritual. The image of Lord Kṛṣṇa (in some cases Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa together) is besmeared with sandal paste and worshipped for three weeks. The purpose of this festival is most probably to provide the Lord some comfort in the terrible heat of summer.
- (2) **Puṣpābhiṣeka-yātrā:** Flower festival of Lord on Vaiśākha full-moon day. More or less it is celebrated in all the Vaiṣṇava shrines and families. In Bengal, this festival is known as *phuladola yātrā*.
- (3) **Snāna-yātrā:** Bathing festival of Lord on Jyaiṣṭha full-moon day. On this day, image of the deity is taken out from His own seat and placed on the bathing altar. Everybody gives bath to the deity.
- (4) **Rathayātrā/Guṇḍicā-yātrā:** Celebrated car-festival of Lord Jagannātha on the bright second day of Āṣāḍha. On this day, He starts for his मातृष्वसा भवन and stays there for a week.
- (5) **Punar-yātrā:** After a week, on the 8th day, Lord Jagannātha returns back to his own place. His return journey is called *punar-yātrā* or in Bengali, *ulṭā-ratha*. Although this is known by the name *yātrā*, but it is so popular that it takes the shape of a week-long *utsava*. In Bengal, people take a great interest to join this festival. In their belief, one who manages to have a *darśana* of Vāmanadeva, i.e. Jagannātha seated in the chariot, will be relieved from the chain of rebirth “रथे च वामनं दृष्ट्वा पुनर्जन्म न विद्यते।” Even children get excited to purchase a wooden toy chariot and three earthen images of Jagannātha, Balabhadra and Subhadrā, decorate the chariot with flowers and leaves and start to travel in the streets. Some play their flute (made of leaf) while some others ring bells with great passion.
- (6) **Hindola-yātrā or Jhulan:** This is swing festival of Lord and His Beloved Rādhā. It starts from bright eleventh day of Śrāvaṇa and is continued up to the full-moon day.
- (7) **Rāsa-yātrā:** Actually it is a festival of Lord's get-together with his near and dear

* These *yātrās* started in Jagannāth temples, but in later ages, all these rituals started to be celebrated in other Vaiṣṇava shrines also.

ones. It starts on the Hariprabodhinī Ekādaśī and is continued up to Kārttikī Purnimā.

- (8) **Dolayātrā/Holī:** Colour festival of Lord on Phālguna full-moon day. Celebration and duration of this festival varies in different region according to peoples' own custom and convention.

Apart from these eight ceremonies, the *Yātrāprakaraṇapaddhati* records four other names; those are *navasasyotsava*, *pārśvaparivartana*, *prāvaraṇotsava* and *madana-bhañjana*. Now, how far these are celebrated in Kāśī? Some of these are very popular and celebrated not only by the Bengalees, but irrespective of all communities. In this context, we may refer especially to *dolayātrā/Holī* and *rathayātrā*. Rathayātrā in Varanasi is a remarkable festival. On this occasion, images of Lord Jagannātha, Balabhadra and Subhadra are carried away in a palanquin from Assi temple to Rathayatra, placed there in a chariot and worshipped for three days for this festival. On this occasion, whole area is decorated with different shops, stalls and takes the shape of a big fair. Local people call it '*Lākhā-melā*'.

Some of them are celebrated with great passion, but in limited area/pockets, e.g. *snāna-yātrā*, which is celebrated in Assi Jagannātha Temple since long days. The *candana-yātrā* (continued for 21 days), *hindola-yātrā* and *rāsa-yātrā* are celebrated as grand festivals in the Sanatan Gaudiya Math, Bhelupur and Gopal Mandir, Chaukhamba. Nowadays, Tulsi Manas Mandir and Marwari Seva Sangha, Assi also celebrate *jhulanotsava*. Others, namely *navasasyotsava* (offering of newly harvested corns to the deity) in the bright half of Mārgaśīrṣa and *puṣpābhiṣeka* (coronation of Lord with flowers) in the Vaiśākha full-moon day, are celebrated extremely in personal level, i.e. these are limited within peoples' own family. Similar is the case with *pārśvaparivartana* (change of side by Lord during His four months' sleep), *prāvaraṇotsava* (providing the deity with winter clothes) and *madana-bhañjana* - these are less known.

Utsava: Now, *utsavas* can be divided into three classes, viz. religious, social and seasonal; e.g. (1) Viśvakarmā-pūjā, Durgā-pujā, Lakṣmī-pūjā, Kālī-pūjā, Jagaddhātṛī, Sarasvatī and Vāsantī-pūjā are religious; (2) *navavarṣa*, *vijayādaśamī* and *bhṛātr̥dvitīyā* are social celebrations, while *navānna* is purely a season festival. Again they can be grouped in another way also. Some of them are celebrated in family level; some are meant for a limited group of people and some are meant for all (i.e. these are public festivals); of course some exceptions are always there.

Social:

Navavarṣa: Bengali calendar opens with *navavarṣa/pahlā Vaiśākha* (i.e. 15th of April).

On this day, all the Bengalees meet their near and dear ones and greet one another. Exchange of letters, sometimes greeting-cards are conventional for people at distance. Only business people are concerned with its ritual part, i.e. worship of Lakṣmī-Gaṇeśa and then opening of their New Accounts Book for the New Year lying ahead. On this occasion, they invite their customers and entertain them.

Vijayādaśamī: It is the occasion of social get-together of all the Bengalees at the end of four days' *Durgāpūjā*, especially after the immersion of images. People feel it necessary for the development of friendship and fraternity. On this occasion, everybody greets the other. They exchange regards, blessings, good-wishes and sweets as well.

Bhrātr̥dvitīyā: It is a festival of brothers and sisters. On the bright second day of Kārttika, all the sisters (may be elder or younger) meet their brothers and celebrate with them this ritual with sandal-paste, lamp, conch, *dūrva* and rice-grain for long life, good health and prosperity of their brothers and then satisfy them with delicious foods according to their taste.

Celebration of these festivals and its ecstasy of joy are limited in the Bengali pockets of Varanasi.

Navānna: It is the festival of offering the first fruit or corn in harvest to the deity. Normally, it is celebrated on any auspicious day in the bright half of Mārgaśīrṣa. Sometimes, this day varies according to family tradition. Being happy with new prosperity, people celebrate with relatives and friends. It is purely a season-festival, which may be called a modified version of Vedic *Āgrayaṇeṣṭi**.

Religious: All the *pūjās* come under this heading.

Viśvakarmā-pūjā: Viśvakarmā, being Divine Engineer, is the presiding deity of all sorts of machinery and technological devices; therefore he is worshipped mainly by the people who handle machinery and technological tools. On the concluding day of the month of Bhādra, the factory workers and mechanics worship this deity. This day becomes a holiday for them and everybody joins in the kite-festival. In Varanasi also this deity is worshipped in each and every factories, especially in motor-garages.

Durgāpūjā: *Durgāpūjā* is the main festival not only for Bengalees but for all the countrymen (may be within country or abroad). Everybody awaits this festival with

* Viṣṇubhaṭṭa's *Vṛtti* on the *Āśvalāyana Śrauta Sūtra* (2.9.1) says "agre ayanam bhakṣaṇam yena karmaṇā tadāgrayaṇam". The tradition of performing *Āgrayaṇeṣṭi* with newly harvested corns was in practice since the period of Brāhmaṇa Literature. The *Śāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa* (4.12-14) prescribes to perform it thrice in a year - (i) in the Rainy Season with millet (*Śyāmāka*), (2) in Autumn with paddy-corn (*vrihi*) and (3) in the Spring with barely (*veṇuyava*).

great interest. Better to say, it is National Festival of India. Although *pūjā* commences from the bright fifth day of *Āśvina*, but its arrangement requires a long time and involves many people coming from various ranks of society, viz, Brahmin priest, traders (especially *gandhavaṇik*), decorator, carpenters, electrician, potter, drum-player, flower-supplier, etc.

As already mentioned, *pūjā* starts from the evening of *pañcamī* with *bodhana* (awakening of devī. In the *ṣaṣṭhī* evening *āmantraṇa/āvāhana* (invitation) and *adhivāsa* (invocation and consecration of *devī*) rituals are performed - these three are preparatory rites. Actual *Pūjā* starts in the *saptamī* morning with the entrance and bathing of *navapatrikā* (actually an assemblage of nine leaves, viz. *kadalī*, *haridrā*, *kacvī*, *dāḍimba*, *jyantī*, *dhānya*, *bilva*, *aśoka* and *mānaka*), then *pūjā* continues for three days. A special *pūjā* of *Devī Cāmuṇḍā* is arranged at the juncture (last 24 minutes of *aṣṭamī* and first 24 minutes of *navamī*) of *aṣṭamī* and *navamī*; this is known as *sandhi-pūjā*. In some places, a little girl (of about 6 to 8 years) is worshipped as a representative of Divine Mother; this is *kumārīpūjana*; normally it is arranged in the *navamī* morning. *Durgāpūjā* ends with the worship of *aparājitā* in *daśamī* morning. In the afternoon, married ladies perform some rituals, e.g. *varaṇa*, before the departure of *Devī* and then she is immersed in *Gaṅgā*. After having enjoyed three day entertainment in the Father's place, the married daughter has returned to her own place. To avoid this moroseness, is the arrangement of *Vijayā* celebration.

As regards celebration of *Durgāpūjā* in Varanasi, it is found that *Durgāpūjā* is celebrated here also with great enthusiasm both at the family level and in the public *pandals* as well. Total number of *Durgāpūjā* in Varanasi is about 150.

Some of them deserve special mention, *Durgāpūjā* at Hathwa Market and Vishveshvar Ganj are famous for their *pandals*, that of Jagatganj, Teliabagh and Matsyodari Park are well-known for creating novelty in light-work and *Durgāpūjā* held at Jaitpura Bagishvari Temple campus has earned a great reputation and popularity for its image. Every year they create something novel, which remains forever as a showpiece. Another *Durgā* image is placed for worshipping and at the end of *pūjā*, they donate it to some Institute instead of immersing in *Gaṅgā*. In the year 1997, they prepared *Durgā* image of American Diamond and after the *pūjā* festival, they donated it to Bharat Kala Bhavan, B.H.U. *Durgāpūjā* of Bharat Sevashram Sangh, Sigra, Ramkrishna Mission, Luxa Road and Mata Anandamayee Ashram, Bhadaini deserve special mention for their wholehearted devotion and technique of *pūjā* rituals.

Lakṣmīpūjā: Lakṣmī, being the Goddess of wealth, prosperity and fortune, holds a prestigious position in the Bengali society, especially in their inner apartment. Because

she embodies peace and happiness of the family, she is worshipped throughout the year at different times.

- (1) First of all, Bengalees (specially the residents of East Bengal) have a custom of worshipping Lakṣmī on every Thursday; because Thursday is assigned to *Devaguru* Br̥haspati and Goddess Lakṣmī, In majority of families, women perform this ritual in the evening. After having cleansed the room, they draw the footprints of Lakṣmī all around, place goddess Lakṣmī (drawn on an earthen pot) on a higher seat, light a lamp (*dīpa*), offer flower, incense sticks, etc. and main ritual is to read out glorious achievements of Lakṣmī.
- (2) They celebrate another *Lakṣmīpūjā* on the Āśvina full-moon evening also; this is known as *Kojāgarī Lakṣmīpūjā*. On this day, Lakṣmī is worshipped not only in family enclosure, but in public *pandals* also. After the completion of *Durgāpūjā*, people do not remove *pandals* and altar. On the full-moon evening, image of goddess Lakṣmī is placed on the same altar and worshipped. Thus, *Lakṣmīpūjā* has taken a shape of *sārvaśānti pūjā*. In the family enclosure, ritual is more or less similar. Here Goddess Lakṣmī is worshipped in the form of *devīpaṭa* (Lakṣmī drawn on an earthen pot), a boat made of banana-spathe is kept in front, housewives draw Her footprints and ear-corn of paddy, and invoke Goddess of Fortune by reading *pācālī*. Main ingredients of this *pūjā* are crushed rice (*cipiṭaka*), coconut and its products. At the end of *pūjā*, everybody shares *prasāda*.
- (3) Residents of West Bengal are habituated to worship Lakṣmī thrice a year, i.e. on the Thursday of bright fortnight in the month of Bhādra, Pauṣa and Caitra. The dates may vary according to family tradition. On these occasions, Goddess Lakṣmī is conceived as a little girl (actually a heap of rice grain and cowries* kept in a cane vessel - *kunke* and decked with red silk-sari and ornaments). The ingredients (*bhoga*, *naivedya*) and style of worship also differ in different families.
- (4) Further, some families have a convention of worshipping Goddess Lakṣmī in the evening of Kārttika new-moon, i.e. on the day of *Kālīpūjā*. On this occasion also, people cleanse their house and decorate with *ālīmpana* (decorative paintings with rice-paste and colour) prepare images of Lakṣmī, Nārāyaṇa and Kubera with rice-paste, place them in a piece of the spathe of Banana tree and worship. At the end of *Lakṣmīpūjā*, they give an offering to a cow-dung image placed outside the door and throw it away. This known as invocation of Goddess Fortune and removal of Misfortune.

* Rice being the main wealth as well as food and cowrie being a monetary unit (of ancient days) embodies goddess Lakṣmī; therefore are worshipped as Goddess of Fortune.

Kālīpūjā: Next to *Lakṣmīpūjā*, another important festival is *Kālīpūjā*, otherwise named as *Śyāmāpūjā*, to be held on the night of Kārttika new-moon. Mata Anandamayee Ashram and Navasangha Varanasi celebrate this *pūjā*.

Apart from this, some Bengali families celebrate two more *Kālīpūjās*; once on the new-moon night of Jyaiṣṭha, i.e. *Phalahāriṇī Kālīkā* and once on the new-moon night of Māgha, i.e. *Raṭantī Kālīkā*. But these two ceremonies are celebrated and rituals are followed according to the worshipper's family tradition.

One more occasion related with *Kālīpūjā* is *annakūṭa*, i.e. offering plenty of *anna* (various foods) in the shape of a heap to the Divine Mother. This is very popular in Varanasi and celebrated with great enthusiasm almost in all the *devī* temples.

Jagaddhātrīpūjā: In some Bengali families, *Jagaddhātrī* (the Foster Mother of Universe), another form of Durgā** is worshipped for four days, from the bright sixth day of Kārttika up to the ninth day of the same. On the tenth day, the worshipper immerses Her in the Gaṅgā. According to family tradition, some people accomplish the *pūjā* within one day (*saptamī*, *aṣṭamī* and *navamī pūjās* are done collectively in abridged form). This *pūjā* is generally celebrated as family festival. But in Bengal, it is celebrated somewhere as public festivals. *Jagaddhātrīpūjā* of Chndannagar, Hoogly, is famous. In Varanasi, this *pūjā* is celebrated in Mata Anandamayee Ashram.

Sarasvīpūjā: Another *pūjā* festival, which has gained very much popularity, that is *Sarasvīpūjā/Srīpañcamī* to be held on the bright fifth day of Māgha. As because Sarasvatī embodies knowledge (ज्ञानाधिष्ठात्री), so students are mainly concerned with this *pūjā* and it is held mainly in educational institutions with great enthusiasm. However, recently other institutions also have started to celebrate this occasion and it has become a general festival. Even in the corners of streets, Sarasvatī images are placed and worshipped.

Vāsantīpūjā: At the end of Bengali Calendar, we find another big festival, i.e. *Vāsantīpūjā*, *Durgāpūjā* in another form started by King Suratha - so says the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. It starts with the bright sixth day of Caitra and continues up to ninth of the same. Each day of this festival has separate names, e.g. sixth day - *Aśokaśaṣṭhī*, seventh day - *Vāsantī-saptamī* and eighth day - *Annapurnā-aṣṭamī*, etc. As a whole, the festival is called *Vāsantīpūjā*. In some families, ceremonies start with the very first day of Caitra bright fortnight; it is called *vāsanta navarātra*. The rituals and ceremonies are almost same as *Durgāpūjā*. On the tenth day, the image is immersed in the Gaṅgā.

** However, the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* identifies her with Sarasvatī.

Vratas: The list of *vratas* recorded in the *Meyeder Vratathā* provides at least one hundred varieties of *vratas*. It is a remarkable point that all these are *kāmya/aicchika vratas*, not compulsory. Normally, women observe these *vratas* according to their desire. But some of them are general (can be observed by male or female).

As regards classification of *vratas*, we find that the *Varāha Purāṇa* (37.4-6) has taken the word *vrata* in a wider sense and has classified them into three groups, viz. mental (*mānasa*), physical (*kāyika*) and those of speech (*vācika*). P.V. Kane, while discussing on *vratas*, classified them under 9/10 heads on the basis of (1) *tithi*, (2) *vāra*, (3) *nakṣatra*, (4) *yoga*, (5) *karāṇa*, (6) *saṅkrānti*, (7) *māsa*, (8) *ṛtu*, (9) *saṁvatsara* and (10) *prakīrṇaka*. However, we will try to handle those according to the Bengali calendar.

Vaiśākha :

Akṣayaṭṛtīyā: On the bright third day of Vaiśākha, people observe the vow of *akṣayaṭṛtīyā*. It is mainly the ritual of making gifts to the Brahmin (normally family priest) for the peace and welfare of the deceased ancestors. Generally, earthen water pot (full of water), hand-fan, cloth and food-grains are given in the gift.

Apart from this, there are several other *vratas*, which Bengali women observe throughout whole Vaiśākha to fulfill their various desire. As for example, *jalasaṅkrānti* to be observed on the day of *Mahāviṣuva saṅkrānti* for four years in order to remove scarcity of water; *ādarasimhāsana vrata* to be observed by a married woman on the same day in order to become favourite to her husband or daily worship of Śiva for one month (starting from *Caitra Saṅkrānti* to *Vaiśākha saṅkrānti*), etc.

Jyaiṣṭha:

Ṣaṣṭhīvratas: Throughout the year women having children observe *ṣaṣṭhīvratas* for safety and security of their babies. Numerous names of *ṣaṣṭhī* are recorded. Among them 4/5 are very popular - (1) *luṅṭhanaṣṭhī/aranyaṣaṣṭhī*, also known as *jāmāiṣaṣṭhī*, to be observed on the bright sixth day of Jyaiṣṭha, (2) *carpaṭāṣaṣṭhī* on the bright sixth day of Bhādra, (3) *Durgāṣaṣṭhī* on bright sixth day of Āśvina, (4) *śītalāṣaṣṭhī* on bright sixth day of Māgha and (5) *Aśokaṣaṣṭhī* on the bright sixth day of Caitra.

On these days, rituals are more or less the same. Mothers keep fast on these days, give some offerings of water, flowers, incense sticks and worship *Ṣaṣṭhīdevī* with a desire of long-life and strong health of their children. Mainly, they observe restrictions on their regular meal. Among these *ṣaṣṭhīs*, *jāmāiṣaṣṭhī* is a remarkable occasion to be held on bright sixth day of Jyaiṣṭha. It has become a grand festival to be celebrated in the favour of son-in-law of the family. Main rituals are to invite the son-in-law and

satisfy him with delicious food, clothes and other gifts. Special care and attention is provided to him who is a newcomer; others also are satisfied.

Maṅgala Caṇḍī: Besides *ṣaṣṭhīvrata*, the vow of *maṅgala caṇḍī* is observed on every Tuesday of entire Jyaiṣṭha. This vow may vary according to family tradition. Some people observe it on Tuesday of Mārgaśīrṣa. Main ritual is to worship Mother Goddess (*Caṇḍikā*) in the Tuesday morning, to read glorious acts of *devī* (*vratakathā*) and to maintain restriction on food during the day.

Gaṅgā Daśaharā: On the bright tenth day of Jyaiṣṭha, people worship Gaṅgā, the River Goddess. This vow is known as *Gaṅgā Daśaharā*. According to the story of *Garuḍa Purāṇa* Gaṅgā being moved by Bhagīratha's rigorous fervour descended on this on this earth on this day.

Besides *Gaṅgāpūjana*, in order to remove the fear from snakes, Bengalees (West Bengal) start worshipping *Manasā* (the presiding deity of Snakes) and other snakes from this day and this *nāgapūjā* is celebrated on every *pañcamī* up to *Śravaṇī śukla pañcamī*. Some people worship a branch of *snuhī* tree (Lat. *Ligularia Euphorbia Antiquorum*) or draw figures of snake in the courtyard and worship those with sandal-paste, vermilion, milk and pieces of banana.

Āṣāḍha :

Ambuvācī: It is the time in solar Āṣāḍha, when the Sun is in the first quarter of *Ārdrā nakṣatra*. According to *Tithikalpataru* (p. 434), it is the period of three days and twenty hours from the weekday on which the Sun enters the sign of Gemini, when Mother Earth and rivers as well are deemed to be impure and unclean. Therefore, during this period sowing of seeds and study of Vedas are not allowed. In Bengal, Assam and Orissa tradition, some special restrictions have been prescribed for widows, monks and observers of vows. In Assam tradition, it is believed that this is the period of impurity of Divine Mother (*Devī Kāmākhyā*).

Vipat-tāriṇī: Goddess *Vipat-tāriṇī* is a manifestation of Kālī. She is worshipped either in Tuesday or in the Saturday occurring in between *Rathayātrā* and *Punaryātrā*. People observe Her vow with the belief that if a person in danger observe this vow, *devī* protects her from danger and removes it from her way. Main ritual is to keep fast the whole day and worship *devī* in the evening, offer Her bundle of *dūrva* tied in red thread (number of bundles will be according to the number of family members), which the observer and her family members will wear on their right arm. After the *pūjā*, the observer breaks her fast by taking some fruits. Use of salt is totally prohibited and only a single meal is allowed.

Bhādra:

Janmāṣṭamī: The dark eight day of Bhādra is the birthday of Lord Śri Kṛṣṇa and therefore named as *janmāṣṭamī*. According to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Lord appeared in the midnight of *Kṛṣṇāṣṭamī* of Bhādra under the domain of Rohiṇī constellation. So, the people, who observe this vow, have to keep fast and wait up to that time of night when *Rohiṇī nakṣatra* is connected to *aṣṭamī*. At that auspicious moment, they worship, show Him lamps and blow conch to welcome the newly born Kṛṣṇa. Some people observe this *pūjā* with their family deity Nārāyaṇa (Śālagrāma). It is so popular that more or less all the people observe this occasion.

Rādhāṣṭamī: Just after a fortnight, Rādhā's birthday is celebrated on the bright eighth day of Bhādra. It is called *Rādhāṣṭamī*.

Āśvina:

Pitṛtarpaṇa: The dark fortnight of Āśvina is assigned to the Manes (deceased Fathers) and named *pīṭṛpakṣa*; therefore, this is the time of offering water-libation to the deceased ancestors. It starts with *Āśvina kṛṣṇa pratipadā* and ends with an ancestral rite called *Mahālayā śrāddha* on the now-moon day.

Kārttika:

Bhūta Caturdaśī/Naraka Caturdaśī: On the dark fourteenth day of Kārttika, people observe a rite of giving lamps (*dīpadānavrata*). People observe it to remove the evil effects of ghosts/evil spirits, so it is known as *Naraka caturdaśī* also. Another type of *dīpadāna*, i.e. offering of light to the ancestors starts from *Āśvina saṅkrānti* and continues up to *Kārttika saṅkrānti*. On every evening, a lamp is lighted, keeping it in a cane box people hang it on a high place in the open air to show honour to the ancestors. This is called *ākāśadīpa*.

Mārgaśīrṣa:

Itupūjā: Main vow of *Mārgaśīrṣa*, otherwise called *Agrahāyaṇa* is *itupūjā*. It is the worship of Sun god, controller of agriculture in the form of corns. It starts with *Kārttika saṅkrānti*. People sow some corns (or rice, wheat, barely, pigeon pea and mustard) in an earthen pot and place two small water pots on it. Everyday, the observer waters the plant and worships it in the Sunday morning with sandal-paste, vermilion, flowers and offers some fruits, and especially rice products. A special feast is given to the deity on the concluding day. It is actually a ritual of agriculture.

Pauṣa:

Makara Saṅkrānti: The name itself implies that the purpose of this festive is to

celebrate this day. On this day, when Sun enters the sign of Capricorn, people try to manage a bath in the holy Ganges. Some people worship Goddess Lakṣmī according to their family tradition. But the main festive of this day, which more or less all the families celebrate, is to prepare various types of cakes (*apūpa* or in Bengali *piṭhā*), offer those to the family deity and then enjoy those with near and dear ones. In Bengali it is named as *piṭhā-pārvaṇa*.

Phālguna:

Śivarātri-vrata: The dark fourteenth day of Phālguna is well-known as *Śiva Caturdaśī*. Actually, it is the occasion of Śiva and Pārvatī's marriage anniversary. Both the male and female members can observe it. According to *Vrata-kathā* (the manual of rituals), the observer should follow some restrictions on the previous day. On that day (*śivarātri*), he/she should keep fast and remaining awake, should worship Śiva four times in the four quarters of night. Milk, curd, ghee, honey and water (specially Ganges water) are the ingredients of worship. Giving a bath with these things, the observer offers leaves of wood-apple (*bilvapatra*), thorn-apple (*dhustura*), flowers of swallow-wort (*arkapuṣpa*) and *bhang* (*siddhi*) to satisfy the deity. Next morning, at first he/she should entertain a guest (if possible a Brahmin) and then take his/her own meal.

Caitra:

Śrīrāmanavamī: On the bright ninth day of Caitra, is the birthday of Lord Rāmacandra, hence named as *Śrīrāmanavamī*. Both the male and female members of a family can observe it. He/she should keep a fast. In the morning, the observer should worship Rāmcandra and his family members; in the mid-noon, they should meditate on Rāma and mutter his/her own *iṣṭamantra*; and after that he/she should break his/her fast.

Nilapūjā: The day before *Mahāviṣuva saṅkrānti* is called *nīla*. Though it is the worship of Nīlkaṅṭha Śiva, but mainly mothers observe this vow for the welfare of their babies. The mother keep fast for the whole day and in the evening they worship Nīlakaṅṭha Śiva and his beloved Līlāvatī, and offer a lamp to them. Then they offer homage to *ṣaṣṭhīdevī* and break their fast. Obviously, they take restricted foods.

Caitrasaṅkrānti/Caḍakpūjā: It is otherwise named as *Mahāviṣuva saṅkrānti*, in some place it is known as *chātu saṅkrānti*. On this day, people according to their family tradition, worship Lord Nārāyaṇa and offer Him flour-meal of barley and pigeon-pea.

The celebration of this day is a vow itself. This is the concluding day of a month-long *ṣannyāsa vrata*. On this occasion, many people take a vow of physical hardship for the whole month of Caitra. During this month, they keep fast during the daytime, subsist on begging and take meal once in a day and that also after the evening. Use of

non-vegetarian items in food and sexual pleasure are totally prohibited. Use of oil (for body massage), soap, combs, luxury clothes, shoes are not allowed. He should wear *gairika* only. Shaving is totally prohibited. Sleeping during the daytime is not allowed. At that time, he may meditate or go through the religious texts. On the last day, they worship Śiva; a show of tough physical performance by the observers is arranged and then they complete their vow. This is known as *sannyāsa vrata*. i.e. living a hard life of monk. The purpose of this *vrata* is to control over the senses, inclination of which remains very strong during the period.

Ekādaśī-vrata: Apart from these, throughout the year some people observe *ekādaśī vratas*. Some of them are very prominent, viz. *nirjalā-ekādaśī* (bright eleventh of Jyaiṣṭha), *devaśayanī-ekādaśī* (of Āṣāḍha), *pārśva* (of Bhādra), *hariprabodhinī* (of Kārttika) and *bhaimī* (of Māgha). Ritual of this *vrata* is to keep daylong fast and the next day, having entertained a Brahmin, breaking of fast. In Kāśī, majority of people observe this *vrata*. However, in Bengali tradition *ekādaśī vrata* is prohibited for married women, whose husband is alive. On the contrary, they are advised for this day to take fishes in their meal compulsorily.

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