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Gender Construction and Performativity in Religious Folklore-Insights from Hindu Vrat Kathas


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Abstract: Gender has proved to be an important category of analysis in religious studies. Religions have been criticized by feminists over the decades for the oppression of women. Hinduism, the world's third largest religion, with a strong story tradition, has a wide cast of characters, both men and women, who display normative views on what it is to be a woman or a man in Hindu society. The Hindu story tradition dates back to Upanishads written during 500 BCE. Today's vrat kathas are Hindu stories that are a part of the rich folklore tradition. During the last four decades, written pamphlets consisting of vrat kathas have become popular and reading them out-loud in group or alone is central to the widely practiced vrat ritual. Hence, these texts are a major touchpoint for many practicing Hindus. While, a lot of gender-analysis textual research has been conducted on the classic Hindu epics, the textual research on vrat kathas is scarce. Using qualitative thematic content analysis, and lens of *karma* and *dharma* along with Butler's theory of performativity, this study explores gender construction and gender performativity in vrat kathas. Data for the thesis is a set of weekly vrat kathas, which consist of ten different stories. This study concludes that binary categories of women and men are constructed in contrast to each other, where on one hand women are depicted as compassionate and obedient while their desires are limited to the family members and household. Men on the other hand are depicted as individualistic characters having ultimate authority while being detached from their families. The results indicate that vrat kathas mirror the Hindu dharmic value system. However, it is essential to note that even some independent and empowered women stand out in the studied texts.


Keywords: Hinduism, karma, dharma, performativity, gender construction, vrat, vrat kathas

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# Glossary

- Aagya: to order or seek permission
- Aarti: Hindu prayer
- Apastamba Dharmashastra: a text about *dharma*
- Artha: attainment of economic success (one of the four goals)
- Amasya: day of no-moon
- Asramadharma: *dharma* based on the four life-stage of a person.
- Baudhyana dharmashastra: a text written about *dharma*
- Bechaari: helpless woman
- Bejhar: combination of barley and lentils
- Bhaktins: female devotees (in reference to *bhakti* tradition)
- Bharya: one whose responsibility has been taken by husband.
- Bhagwad Gita: A Hindu book of conversational verses between Lord Krishna and Arjuna
- Bhagwan: god (refers to both *ishwar* and *devta*)
- Bholenaath: a name for Lord Shiva
- Budhiya: old woman
- Bhukti: objects or enjoyment
- Brahmins: the upper most caste in Hindu caste-system
- Brahmachari: student phase of *asrama dharma*
- Dara: one who gives pleasure.
- Dev: deity
- Devlok: world of gods/deities
- Dharma(s): a way to understand duties and responsibilities in Hinduism (Refer to section 2.1 (p. 10)
- Dharma-shastra: The texts about *dharma*
- Dharma-sutra: series of texts written about *dharma*
- Dharmic: related to *dharma*
- Devta: local deities, gods other than ishwar
- Grihastha: the life-stage of a householder
- Hoi: a *vrat* observed by mothers for their children
- Ishwar: supreme god (p.6)

- Jati: caste

- Jaya: one through whom husband is reborn.

- Karma: a way to understand actions, in Hinduism (refer to section 2.2)

- Karmic: related to *karma*

- Karvachauth: a *vrat* that women observe for the long-life of their husband

- Katha: story

- Kramamukti: in serial order to salvation (used in context of women attaining salvation, Instead of attaining salvation at the end of life, women get liberated from woman hood. In next round of life they are born as a man, where they can work for salvation)

- Kshatriya: the caste of kings and warriors (The second caste in the caste system)

- Kumkum: Hindu vermillion

- Kutumbni: one who takes entire responsibility of family.

- Maa: Mother

- Mata: Mother

- Manusmriti ('s dharmashastra) : an ancient text that is one of many other text written on *dharmashastra*. It was majorly used by british to create law in India, during the colonial period.

- Moksha: salvation

- Mrityulok: earth (literally: world of death)

- Narmada smriti: Hindu scripture with ideas for liberties for women

- Navratri: the nine day festival for mother goddess

- Nibandhas: Hindu texts complied of essays.

- Patita: degenerated

- Pati: owner

- Pati-dev: God like husband

- Patni: one who is an equal partner in religious activities.

- Patni-dharma: dharma of a wife

- Pooja: a Hindu way of worshipping

- Pran-nath: owner of life (referred to husbands)

- Pujari: Hindu priest

- Punya: good *karma*

- Puranas: ancient Hindu scriptures

- Purnima: the day of full moon

- Purush: Man

- Purush-dharma: (purush (man) + *dharma*) *dharma* of a man

- Ramayana: a Hindu scripture

- Roli: sacred red Hindu thread

- Sahadharmini: One who is equal partner in *dharmic* activities.

- Saptvaar: weekly

- Sanyaasi: renunciant (the last life-stage for men)

- Sattvic: a specific category of food (includes mostly fruits and vegetables)

- Satya Narayana: lord Vishnu

- Seer: Indian unit of weight measurement; one Kilogram equals to approximately one seer

- Seth: merchant

- Sethani: wife of merchant

- Shudra: fourth caste in Hindu caste system

- Stri-dharma: (stri (woman) + dharma) An important part of the whole discourse of dharma. It lists the behaviour and codes of conduct appropriate for women.

- Suhag: to preserve the auspicious married state

- Saubhagya: marital felicity

- Stri: woman

- Svadharma: dharma of self

- Swami: owner/possessor/master (used to refer to husbands)

- Rajasic: specific category of food (includes coffee, tea etc.)

- Tamasic: specific category of food (includes meat, onion, garlic etc.)

- Tryambakayajvan's Stridharmpaddhati: *dharmashastra* text about *stri-dharma*, written in 18th century.

- Upanayana: traditional ritual of acceptance of a student by a teacher. A sacred thread called janeu is given to boy (student) in this ritual. The thread is worn all life after that.  Head-shaving, bathing and wearing new clothes are a part of the ceremony.

- Upanishad: Hindu scriptures dating back to 800 BCE

- Upaya: remedy

- Vaishnava: a Hindu tradition

- Vaisya: caste of merchants and farmers (third caste in the caste system)

- Vanaprastha: the life-stage of forest-dweller (the third life-stage)

- Varna dharma: duties and responsibilities related to caste
- Varna: caste
- Vedas: foundational Hindu scriptures
- Vedanta: series of Hindu texts written post *vedic* age
- Vedic: related to *veda*
- Vrat: Hindu ritual
- Vrat katha: story read out loud during the vrat ritual
- Yagna: A Hindu ritual
- Yagya: A Hindu sacrificial ritual
- Yoga: A Hindu practice
- Yuga(S): ages

# Contents

# 1 Introduction

This master thesis focuses on two significant areas of human life: gender and religion. Gender is a useful category of analysis in religious studies. One reason for this is that studying religion provides an opportunity to explore the most basic ideas shaping and affecting the lives of women (Baker, 2014). Religion shapes people's ideas concerning their identities and communities (King and Beattie, 2005). These ideas of identities and communities are formed, maintained, and revived through rituals and stories (Jones, 2014). That is to say, religious stories educate and provide a sense of morality through the performative acts of its virtuous and non-virtuous characters. These characters perform acts in the stories and get rewarded or punished through supernatural divine or through others. Therefore, it can be argued that through these performative acts and rewards, gendered characters are constructed in the stories. People often emulate and mimic these acts in their lives in order to feel a sense of belongingness to their religious communities. This has implications regarding how gender is understood and acted upon in the context of a particular religion. Hence, it is important to conduct interdisciplinary studies of religion and gender to understand how these stories might influence the lives of people from the gender point of view (Jones, 2014).

Recently, interdisciplinary studies of gender and religion has commenced in the academia. These studies have been useful in pointing out how religious traditions shape the normative ideas regarding what is it to be a woman or a man. For instance, several studies have pointed out that religion and religious traditions are oppressive for women, where women need to be dependent and are weak. In contrast, men are the protectors and providers (See Kishwar (1990) ;Padfield (1896)). Several feminist studies have however analysed religious stories and texts from the perspective of women characters mentioned in these stories and against the patriarchal grain and have found empowering elements in the religious stories (Jones, 2014). This debate provides the question regarding what kind of gendered notions are constructed by these religious stories. Hence, to understand how religion shapes gendered norms of any given society, it is important to analyse widely-read religious texts, such as *vrat kathas* (stories read aloud during *vrat* (a Hindu ritual)) in this study.

Hinduism, the world's third largest religion, has a long tradition of religious stories (Suri, 2017). These stories have existed in written and oral forms, transmitting worldviews to people (Gonda, 1975, 114-115). Scholars have analysed these stories and have given detailed and varied descriptions concerning how the stories in ancient scriptures shape gender in Hindu societies. For

instance, several feminist studies have criticised Hindu traditions and scriptures for oppression of women (Leslie, 1989). In contrast to that, the studies in recent era have shifted their focus from looking at women as passive recipient of oppression to looking at them as active agents of positive constructs (Jones, 2014). Hindu stories dating back from scriptures such as The *Upanishads* (Hindu scriptures dated back to 800 BCE) have continued to the contemporary times through *vrat kathas*. While gender research has been conducted on written classic scriptures like *Vedas (foundational Hindu scriptures)*, *Upanishads* and *Manusmriti's Dharma Shastra (Hindu scripture)* (see Doniger, 2014; Altekar 1956), research on the more contemporary, and widely read, *vrat kathas* remains insufficient.

This research focuses on gender construction in *vrat kathas*. *Vrat kathas* are part of religions such as Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism (Suri, 2017). A few of these *vrat kathas* like *katha* (story) of *Sri Satya Narayana* (Lord Vishnu) are mentioned in ancient scriptures like *Puranas* (ancient Sanskrit scriptures written in 4 CE). However, most *vrat kathas* are quite new, and have been written in the last four decades (Wadley, 1983, p.150).

Several reasons can be listed for why it is important to study the *vrat kathas* from a gender viewpoint. Importantly, the ever-increasing literacy in India, has led the newly literate people to prefer written scriptures over oral traditions (Wadley, 1983). However, "traditional inaccessibility" (Wadley, 1983, p. 150) of ancient scriptures, due to the Sanskrit language use, limits their choices to *vrat kathas* which are written in colloquial, easily accessible languages such as Hindi. As a result, *vrat kathas* are one of the few texts that connect people to their religion on regular basis. Additionally, *vrat kathas* are one of the only texts that directly educate people about normativity of their religion. Therefore, it can be argued that *vrat kathas* might be highly influential in shaping people's ideas about gender. In addition, since, these *vrat kathas* are supposed to be read aloud, it doesn't just influence the reader but also the people around the reader, including children. Lastly, from a gender perspective it is important to note that these folklore stories are more popular among women than the *Vedic (related to Veda)* texts (Rambachan, 2001, p.17).

Most of the extant literature have focused on anthropological and ethnographic studies of *vrat* (see McGee (1996); Pearson, (1992)). Less attention has been given to the textual content of the *vrat kathas* themselves. Studies that have focused upon the content briefly, have focused on *vrat* performed only by women (See Suri, (2017); Caughran (1999)). *Vrat* performed by men and women both have not been the focus of research. Hence more gender analysis of *vrat kathas* is required.

The purpose of this study is to explore how *vrat kathas* construct gendered categories of men and women. Accordingly, the following research question and corresponding sub questions are formulated.

    1)  What kind of gendered norms do *vrat kathas* construct?

It is followed by the following two sub questions.

    1.a) What kind of norms do *vrat kathas* construct for women?

    1.b) What kind of norms do *vrat kathas* construct for men?

To answer these questions, a set of Hindu weekly *vrat kathas* (ten stories) published by Manas Publication in New Delhi, India, are analysed through thematic content analysis. Using Butler's theory of gender performativity as a lens, attention is paid to the acts performed by the characters and language used to describe the characters. Further, the lens of *dharma* and *karma* has been used in order to ground the analysis in the context of Hindu society. My ontological approach is constructionist and epistemological approach is interpretivist.

In order to focus this study, several decisions regarding the scope were defined. The vrat katha literature is diverse, and the gender construction amongst those stories might vary. The study focuses on ten weekly *vrat kathas*. The scope of the thesis is limited due to the use of Judith Butler's theory of performativity observed through the theory of *karma* (acts) and *dharma* (duties and responsibilities). Additionally, it is important to note that this study interpretivist study focuses on the content of the *vrat* texts and not on the perception a sample of readers might have upon reading the texts.

## 1.1  Setting the research context

In order to understand the research area of the thesis, it is important to understand the background of the research. This section has two sub sections to it. The first section discusses Hinduism and the second section explains *vrat* ritual and *vrat kathas*. The Hinduism section discusses the concepts of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism'. It further informs about the diversity in Hinduism and contrasts it with what unifies Hinduism. The section explaining *vrat* ritual and *vrat kathas*, first discusses the etymology and meaning of the term '*vrat*'. Further, it explains the categorisation of *vrat*, and the rituals of vrat along with the ritual of reading *vrat katha*. These concepts have been explained to give an idea to the audience about the cultural knowledge for understanding the situatedness of the thesis.

### 1.1.1 Hinduism

Hinduism, the third largest religion in the world, is a complex concept. In addition to religious connotations, Hindu is originally a geographical term that was first used by the Muslim traders and settlers in Indian subcontinent to refer to the people, who lived near Sindhu (the river Indus) (Narayanan, 1999, 25). However, the river Sindhu is now in Pakistan. Hence, the word 'Hindu' based on 'Sindhu' is not relevant if understood geographically. In French and Persian, the word for Indian is Hindu (Tharoor, 2018). The word 'Hindu' legally covers not only Hindus but also the communities that do not necessarily recognize themselves as Hindus. The legal system of India includes the Buddhists, Jains and Sikh community under this umbrella term (Narayanan, 1999, p.26).

Like Hindu, the term Hinduism, is complex as well. Flood (1996) defines it as a term that "denotes the religions of the majority of the people in India and Nepal" (p.5). It was at first used for the non-Muslim people and was used to differentiate between Hindus and Muslims (Flood, 1996). The term 'Hinduism' as used to denote religion, is new and is a European construction (Doniger, 2014). Tharoor (2018) points out that word 'Hinduism' did not exist in any of the Indian language before foreigners used it (p.3). "Hinduism is thus the name that foreigners apply to what they saw as the indigenous religion of India" (Tharoor, 2018, p.4). This is all to say that the umbrella term Hinduism conceals a wide variety of beliefs and practices under the apparent simplicity.

This diversity is reflected upon the Hindu texts and textual sources. Hinduism does not have one specific holy book or a founder. Hindus look to multiple sources to guide their lives. It embraces diverse practices and beliefs. These beliefs range from pantheism to agnosticism, from a belief in *karma* and reincarnation to following caste system (Bleeker and Windgren,1971). There are no single obligatory requirements or dogmas for being a Hindu (Tharoor, 2018, p. 4; Bleeker and Windgren, 1971). There is no central institution or a leader who can speak to all Hindus with an authority. Hence, the religious customs and tradition differ across the geographical stretch of Hindu communities. The uniformity across Hindus is not insisted upon, in this regard it is very different from Abrahamic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Rambachan, 2001, p.18). However, from an orthodox point of view "*Vedas* are understood as the supreme source in matters pertaining to religious belief and observance" (Rambachan, 2001, p.17).

However, different Hindu traditions are marked by different scriptures and texts (McDaniel, 2012). For instance, *Vedic* tradition is named after the four *Vedas*, which are collection of sacred

hymns and stories. It is supposed to be dated around 3500 BC. The language of these books is *Vedic* Sanskrit. Rigveda one of the four *Vedas* in this tradition, this is the book that introduces the caste system that still prevails in the Hindu society. Second, is *Vedanta*, which literally means end of *Vedic* age, *Puranas* were written in this age, these are written in simple Sanskrit (Doniger, 2014). The various *vrat* pamphlets widely available in Indian markets today signify the popularity that folk traditions enjoy in the country.

Another factor that adds up to the diversity is the pantheon of gods and goddesses in the religion leads to have different faiths. Hindu temples and shrines in a Hindu home often have multiple pictures, idols of various gods. It is interesting to note that god and goddesses in Hinduism are regularly taking birth and dying. These gods are not dying of any reason of theoretical immortality, but they are forgotten by people (Jain, 2004). Santoshi Maa, a goddess, her name literally means goddess of satisfaction, can be understood as a recent addition to this pantheon. Jain (2004) speculates that she might be a counter-move to materialism.

The number of gods and goddesses amount to 330,000,000 (Briggs, 1927, p.189). These gods can be categorised to *ishwar* and *devtas*, *ishwar* is "eternal, otherworldly, celestial and capable of making appearances (avatar), *devtas* have physical form" (Bhatt as mentioned in Singh, 2011, p.362). *Devtas* can refer to the local deities worshipped in a community. This relationship between *ishwar* and *devtas* is hierarchical. This distinction includes goddesses (often referred to *maa/mata* (mother)) and *devi (feminine form of devta).*

However, there are some elements that unify Hinduism. For instance, the goals of life are shared by most of the Hindus. Hindu believe in pursuing four main goals in life. This doctrine of goals has been summarised in Figure 1.

Brahminisation can also be argued for unifying Hinduism. Brahminisation is a tendency amongst caste groups to adopt values and behaviours of Brahmins *(upper most caste)* (Rambachan, 2001). Brahminisation has been linked to British-Raj in postcolonial studies (See Narayanan, 1999; Young, 1994). As a need to regulate law and order in the country, male-brahmins were asked to translate the scriptures that they deemed to be important (Narayanan, 1999; Patnaik, 2018). Brahmins*,* an uppermost caste, came up with the Manusmriti (an old scripture) that was a part of their traditions. The colonial power aligned their British laws with Indian laws by using this scripture of Brahmin-laws (Young, 1994; Patnaik, 2018).

**Liberation from *samsara* (world and worldly concerns)**

**Kama**

Satisfaction of the desires of the body and mind in the form of passions, emotions, and drives.

Right ness sponsi and moral conduct in accordance

**Four Hindu Goals**

Attainment of economic success, wea and power in order to raise a family and maintain a househo
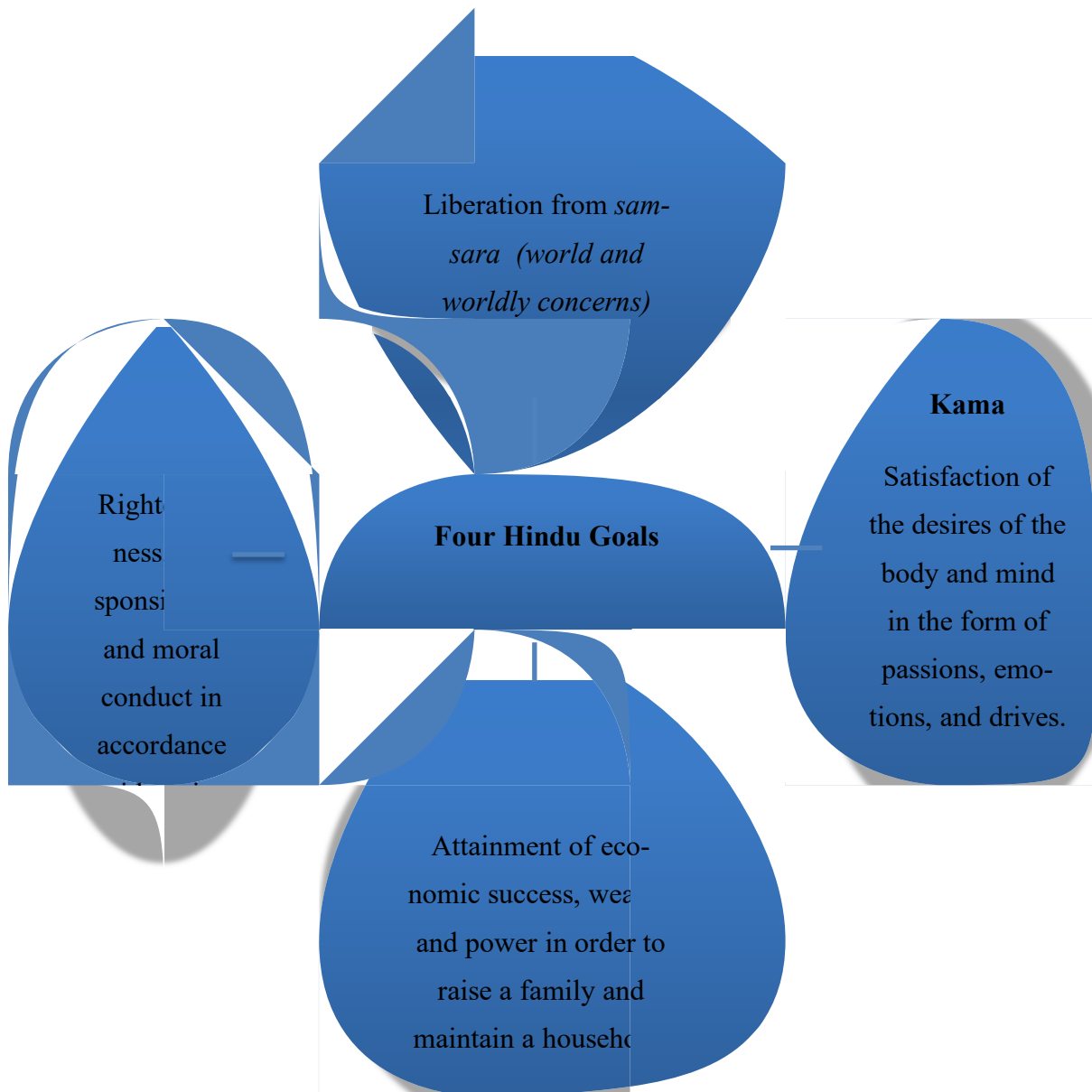
**Figure 1. Four goals of Hindu Life (based on Chakkarath, 2005)**

Through this process of identifying one book, the other castes and their scriptures, literature got ignored and subsided (Narayanan, 1999). For instance, books like *Narmada-Smriti* (Hindu scripture) that has liberal attitude towards women couldn't get its stardom (Young, 1994). Certain traditions lost their significance and/or became illegal such as the traditions of temple dancers. The ritual of *vrat*, commonly mentioned in *Manusmriti,* has become popular in the recent times and remain popular to this day.

## 1.1.2 Explaining vrat kathas

*Vrat* is a Hindu ritual that has been defined and described differently over the history of Hinduism and academic scholarship. This varied scholarship includes debates over the etymology of the term '*vrat*'. However, the first detailed and translated account provided by Kane (1958) concludes that *vrat* has roots in 'vr' which refers "to choose or to will" (p.25). This etymology has later been used in most scholarship (See Wadley, (1983); Pearson, (1983); Mcgee (1996) ; Suri (2017)). *Vrat* hence is a noun which means 'what is willed' or 'will'. It can be literally translated as religious vow or fast. The meaning of the term ranges from command to vows (Wadley,1983). On one hand, where the meaning command is associated with obligation of *vrat*, the word vow gives an idea of *vrat* being optional. Obligatory *vrat* have been mentioned in the old texts like *Manusmriti*. However optional *vrat* are more popular in contemporary practices (Wadley, 1983). These obligatory and optional *vrat* count up to total 175 *vrat* (Laksmidhara as cited in Wadley, 1983).

Further, these obligatory and optional *vrat* can be categorised into different categories. These categories can be understood on the basis of (1) time that the *vrat* begin, (2) duration of *vrat*, (3) deity to whom the *vrat* are directed to (Pearson, 1983). The time of *vrat* is dependent on Hindu lunar calendars. *Vrat* are performed for the different position of moon like no moon *vrat* (*Amavasya vrat*), full moon vrat (*Purnima vrat*). Similarly, other *vrat* that are performed yearly or weekly like *karvachauth* is also observed based on moon's position. The *saptvaar* vrat are based on the Gregorian/ Julian calendar. Secondly, the duration of some *vrat* like *navratri* can be of 8 consecutive days and some *vrat* are just observed weekly or yearly. Thirdly, different *vrat* are performed for different deities. The Monday vrat for instance can be observed for Lord Shiva and *Purnima vrat* is observed for the Moon God.

*Vrat* can be performed for multiple deities and gods, and for multiple reasons. Some *vrat* are performed to resolve woes of life and getting what one desires. *Vrat* like these aim at bettering a person's life by pleasing the deity being worshipped for *vrat* (Wadley, 1983). These *vrat* can be observed by a person by their own will and faith in a particular god or can be recommended as a *upaya* (remedy) by priests and astrologers. Other religious purposes can be to gain *bhukti* (objects or enjoyment), *mukti* (salvation) and the destruction of sins (Miśra, 1973, p.61). Psychoanalytically *vrat* are considered to be important tool for cultural socialisation (Wadley, 1983).

While there exists some amount of diversity regarding *vrat* practices, several constituents remain the same for the most of them (Suri, 2017, 11). Importantly, most of the *vrat* include some

kind of abstinence from food. To understand this abstinence, we need to understand the concept of three different categories of food. These are 1) *Sattvic*, 2) *Rajasic* 3) *Tamasic* and they are all said to have specific properties and proper and improper uses. Firstly, *Sattvic* food, that supplies human body with purity, goodness and calmness (Chakraborty, 1987, p.76), includes fruits, water, vegetables, dairy products etc. (AnoopKumar and Balodhi, 2016). Secondly, *Rajasic* food, includes coffee, tea, hot spices etc. (AnoopKumar and Balodhi, 2016). Thirdly, *Tamasic* food, that leads to death, darkness, destruction and ignorance (Mishra, Singh and Dagenais, 2001), includes meat, onion, garlic, alcohol and stale food (AnoopKumar and Balodhi, 2016). During *vrat*, there is a prohibition on *tamasic* and *rajasic* food and *sattvic* food is allowed with different restrictions during different *vrat*. For instance, although citrus fruits are sattvic, their consumption on Santoshi *maa* (mother) *vrat* (*Friday vrat)* is prohibited.

Along with abstinence, ritual of *pooja* is common to all the vrat. *Pooja* includes auspicious items such as bangles, toys, *kumkum* (vermillion), *roli* (a red sacred thread), flowers. Moreover, it includes lighting oil lamp, singing *aarti* (pray-songs), and importantly reading the *katha* related to the fast. Details about these prohibitions and other rituals to be done during a *vrat* are usually written in thin pamphlets, available for specific *vrat*, that can be bought from temples and street markets. These thin pamphlets are instructional and educational in nature. These pamphlets explain who can perform the *vrat*, and how to perform the *vrat*. Hence, performativity is clearly included in the conceptualisation of *vrat*.

Importantly, these pamphlets also have narratives (*vrat kathas*) that are supposed to be told or read out loud during the *pooja* ritual of vrat.  These narratives often portray a person taking part in the *vrat* ritual itself for particular reasons. If not read aloud, it is supposed that one might not get the fruit of *vrat* (Wadley, 1986, 229). The mere hearing and reading of the stories is aid to be able to provide health, wealth and prosperity. Menzies (2007) mentions a few narratives where he saw and heard people talking *vrat kathas* aloud, even if they were alone. On being asked they said that this is how it is supposed to be done. The assumption underlying it is that holy stories or a part of it might be heard by someone passing by and hence they might get the results of the karma.

*Vrat kathas* usually have an aim of providing the information about *vrat* in an entertaining way (McGee, 1996). These *kathas* give practical information (What to wear, eat etc.) and educate regarding moral conduct (how to behave). Moral conduct is conveyed through values about *dharma*, family and responsibility (McGee, 1996). These stories postulate the relationship between the *karma* and their results. This causal relationship can relate two different *yugas* (ages)

from ancient times to the contemporary eras. This causality is not a part of *kahaani* (fictional stories) (Chatterji, 2006, p.104).

## 2  The key concepts of karma and dharma

Theory of *karma* and *dharma* can be used to understand the moral performativity in Hinduism (Bhangaokar and Kapadia, 2009, p.99). The two words are not just in rhyme to each other but are also connected to each other (Sharma, 2016). To understand the context of the gender construction, this thesis uses lens of *dharma* and *karma* to analyse the performative acts that create gendered categories. Firstly, I will discuss *dharma* and how *dharma* allots separate duties to women and men. Secondly, I will discuss *karma* and further the relation of *karma* and *dharma* will be discussed.

### 2.1  Dharma

The term *dharma* can be understood both through its etymology and its literal translation. Etymologically, *dharma* has Sanskrit roots. It is derived from the root 'dhr' which means "to sustain, support, uphold" (Paramahamsa, 2007, p.1). It is the order that supports, sustains and upholds the world from the nature to conscience.  *Dharma* can be literally translated as "religion, law, order, duty or ethics" ('Dharma: The social order', 2018, p.6). Using this etymology and literal translations, *dharma* can be defined as " nature, the law of nature which supports, virtue, ethical law, the ought, the merit, the potency of ethical actions, the right action, the law or the body of the doctrines of any faith, quality, the law of the universe, reality, element and category" (Paramahamsa, 2007, p. 1). Hence, *dharma* as law, makes all activities meaningful, and not just the ones that are to be done at a specific place at a specific time. In other words, it can be understood as a moral and religious duty that regulates the social order.

Hinduism has been described as religious practice rather than a set of religious beliefs (Gavin Flood quoted in Alexandru, 2015). This religious practice is based on the law of *dharma*. For a Hindu, actions are more important than beliefs. Hence, adhering to *dharma* is not only about accepting beliefs but about performing duties as well. As a result, *dharma* is the guiding principle for Hindus for their moral conduct including the educational aspect of human life. *Dharma* can include myriad of rituals such as naming a child, initiating education of the child, and the ritual of lighting one's parent's funeral pyre.

These dharmic rituals have been mentioned in several Hindu texts. *Dharma* is broadly discussed in the very popular Hindu scripture *'Bhagavad Gita'*. In the book, which is a poetic conversation between lord Krishna and Arjuna, Lord Krishna dictates the superiority of *dharma* over internal morality. When Arjuna has a moral dilemma of not killing his own brothers in the war,

for the kingdom, lord Krishna explains how killing them is his *dharma* (duty) (Alexandru, 2015). He explains this through the idea of body just being a cover of the soul. Hence killing the bodies for *dharma* is not immoral. He suggests that *dharma* is the utmost morality (Mascaró, 2011). Similarly, several *dharmashastras* such as *Apastamba dharmasutra, Baudhyana dharmasutra, Gautam dharmasutra, Manusmriti dharmashastra* etc. through multiple verses explain the concept of moral conduct, righteousness and duties (Olivelle, 2002). In this thesis, majorly *Manusmriti* will be referred, as this is one dharma text that became popular during the colonial era and remains popular to this day (Patnaik, 2017a).

*Dharmashastras* describe *dharma* as an ideology that if neglected, has punitive consequences both on a social and on an individual level (DeJonge and Tietz, 2015, p.56). These scriptures cite verses that describe fruits one gains from adhering their *dharma* or violating it. "*dharma*, being violated, destroys; *dharma*, being preserved, preserves: therefore, *dharma* must not be violated, lest violated *dharma* destroy us" (Bühler, 1886, verse 8.15). A person who does the good *karma* (takes appropriate actions) of following their *dharma*, gets fame (Bühler,1886, verse 2.9), obtains all the desires that one may have conceived (Bühler, 1886, verse 2.5), wealth (Bühler, 1886, verse 4.156), long-life (Bühler, 1886, verse 4.158). Similarly, *Manusmriti* says that the one who does not follow their duties face misfortune, has a short-life, and is tormented in hell in the after-life (Bühler, 1886, verse 4.157). *Manusmriti* further states that such a person is born in a lower-status position, such as a woman or an animal. in their next-life.

If one does their dharma, one takes a step forward in completing the four goals of life and a step towards salvation and liberation from the cycle of life and death (Heizman, 2011). However, it is important to note that under this worldview, women do not attain salvation. Instead, they get in the *kramamukti* (in the queue of salvation). By doing their *dharma*, women get to become a man in their next round of life, where they have an opportunity to perform their *dharma* in order to attain salvation (Mcgee, 1996, p.76). As we can see, *dharma* is allotted differently on the basis of gender, caste, and life-stage. The boundaries of these *dharmas* are distinct. This is illustrated by following verse from *Bhagavad Gita*: "Better one's own *dharma*, though imperfect, than another's *dharma* well-performed, by doing one's innate duties, a person does not incur sin" (Mascaró, 2011, Verse 47). In this way it relates *dharma* and one's duties to one's birth order. Duties done by individuals are supposed to maintain an order in the society.

### 2.1.1 Ontological and normative dimension of dharma

The concept of *dharma* can be categorised into two categories. Ontological and normative (Holdredge as cited in Heizman, 2011, p.4). Ontologically, *dharma* refers to the cosmic order of the universe. It is an ordering power that maintains order and cosmos at different levels. Human activity and activities of all other constituent elements (animals, divine, cosmic bodies) is related to the ontological dimension of *dharma* (DeJonge and Tietz, 2015, p.56). Hence, *dharma* at the ontological level, can be understood as a "cosmic ordering principle" (Holdredge as cited in Heizman, 2011, p.6). The normative dimension of *dharma* refers to actions that support the cosmic order (Heizman, 2011). These include actions both on an individual as well as on a personal level (Heizman, 2011, p.4). These actions are specific to one's gender, caste (*varna/jati*), and life stage.

**Table 1. The ontological and normative dimensions of dharma**

| Ontological Dimension | Normative Dimension |
| --- | --- |
| <ul><li>Etymologically derived from root 'dhr' that means to uphold, support and maintain.</li><li>It is a cosmic order principle, that has different categories to it: *Varna-dharma*, *asramadharma*, *stri-dharma*</li></ul> | <ul><li>Does not have an English equivalent. It can be understood as moral duty, religion, law.</li><li>On a human level, it is an obligation assigned on the basis of birth order (caste, life-stage, gender)</li></ul> |

Considering the two different dimensions of *dharma*, this thesis focuses on the normative dimension of *dharma.* This requires the analysis of the narratives and the actions taken by the individuals in those narratives in this dharmic framework. This thesis focuses upon a set of vrat kathas that have multiple male and female characters. I analyse what actions are being performed by these different characters and if they relate to *dharma* or not. Next, I will discuss *dharma* from the perspective of the sex-gender system viz. *dharma* of men vs *dharma* of women.

### 2.1.2 Purusha- dharma: normative dharma of men

*Purushdharma*, can be literally translated as *dharma* of men. *Purush* (men) have been commanded to follow *varnashrama dharma* (Mittal and Thursby, 2009), that interweaves *varna dharma* and *asrama dharma*, through multiple verses of *Manusmriti*. Where *varna dharma*

refers to the duties assigned to *varna* (castes) and *asrama dharma* refers to duties assigned a per life-stages.

*Varna Dharma* includes the duties of four different *varna*: *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra* (Holdrege, 2004). A *kshatriya* has a different set of duties than a *brahmin* and similarly, a *vaishya* has his business duties unlike s*hudra* who has the duty of serving all the other varnas. *Manusmriti* clearly commands out dharma of the different varna:

> "To *Brahmins* he assigned teaching and studying (the *Veda*), sacrificing for their own benefit and for others, giving and accepting (of alms)" (Bühler, 1886, verse 1.88). "The *kshatriya* he commanded to protect the people, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the *Veda*), and to abstain from attaching himself to sensual pleasures. The *vaishya* to tend cattle, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the *Veda*), to trade, to lend money, and to cultivate land. One occupation only the lord prescribed to the *shudra*, to serve meekly even these (other) three castes." (Bühler, 1886, verse 1.89-1.90)

What is permissible and what is not permissible concerning these duties have been explained in various other verses of Manusmriti. These verses explain what kind of sacrifices should be made, when and how to read *vedas* etc. It can be inferred from these quoted verses that other than their *varna* duties (e.g. *brahmins* to teach; *kshatriya* to protect people), education is important for all the three upper *varnas*.

*Manusmriti's four asrama dharma: duties for men*

*Asrama dharma*, refers to the duties assigned to life-stages. These four *asrama* (life-stages) are of: *brahmachari* (student), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest-dweller), *sanyaasi* (renunciant). These *asrama dharma* are affected by the *varna dharma*. For instance, the student life starts at different ages for different *varna*. *Manusmriti* says "In the eighth year after conception, one should perform the education initiation of a *brahmin*, in the eleventh after conception of a kshatriya, but in the twelfth that of a *vaishya*" (Bühler 1886, verse 2.36). Similarly, all other duties assigned, such as how to dress, how to act etc., are similar yet different. *Manusmriti* presents the *asrama dharma* as the ideal way to live by for men born in the first three varnas: *brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya* (Mittal and Thursby, 2009).

Manusmriti discusses the four *asrama dharma* in in five different chapters (chapter number 2-6). Chapter 2 discusses the duties of a *brahmachari*, chapter 3-5 outlines duties of a *grihastha*, chapter 6 focuses upon the life of *vanaprastha* and *sanyaasi.* Similarly, Manusmriti describes the conduct of a student before, during, and after the lesson "At the beginning and at the end of

lesson, he (student) must always clasp both the feet of his teacher, he must study, joining his hands." (Bühler, 1886, Verse 2.71).

Chapter 3 starts by mentioning the transition from the stage of *brahmachari* to *grihastha* life: " ...who has studied in due order the three *vedas*, or two, or even one only, without breaking the rules of being a student, shall enter the order of householders" (Bühler, 1886, Verse 3.2). Further, chapters 3-5 have verses dictating *grihastha* duties for men. One important duty for a man is to choose a wife. Manusmriti describes what kind of a woman should a man choose on the basis of physical features and family features: "...avoid the following families, be they ever so great, or rich in property...one in which no male children are born, in which veda is not studied...one who has red hair...one who has no body hair, or too many body hair…" (Bühler, 1886, Verses 3.5-3.8).

Men are employed as bread earners and have been asked to protect their wives. Men have been told to guard the women of their households. It has been mentioned strictly that a woman should not become independent and it is the duty of men to protect her and assist her. Employing women is the best way to guard them from falling prey to their evil and sexual nature. For example, one verse from the householder life says "Let the (husband) employ his (wife) in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfilment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils" (Bühler, 1886, Verse 9.11). Men have been told to employ their wives in various ways.

*Manusmriti's view of men in relation to women*

*Manusmriti* points out the crucial importance of employing wives. One verse says that "Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; thinking, It is enough that he is a man, they give themselves to the handsome and to the ugly" (Bühler, 2011, verse 9.14). Women are not only considered highly sexual but are at the same time considered feeble and too weak to control themselves. Hence the responsibility of controlling women lies upon men. One verse states, "Let him always wander alone, without any companion, in order to attain final liberation, fully understanding that the solitary man, who neither forsakes nor is forsaken, gains his end" (Bühler, 1886, Verse 6.41).

The description of men and women is in stark contrast to each other. These descriptions provide a functional view of society. A functional society, where attachment is strictly prohibited for men. In *Manusmriti*, men have been asked to not attach themselves to their family members. It

has been dictated that a person should focus more on gaining spiritual merit rather than on their attachments to their families. One verse illustrates this idea succinctly:

> For in the next world neither father, nor mother, nor wife, nor sons, nor relations stay to be his companions; spiritual merit alone remains (with him)...Single is each being born; single it dies; single it enjoys (the reward of its) virtue; single (it suffers the punishment of its) sin...Let him therefore always slowly accumulate spiritual merit, in order (that it may be his) companion (after death); for with merit as his companion he will traverse a gloom difficult to traverse. (Bühler, 1886, Verse 4.39, 4.240, 2.42).

In addition to detachments from others, men are asked to be detached from their own bodies as well. In *Bhagwad Gita*, it has been advised to avoid getting attached to one's own bodies, since they are just covers for soul, and soul changes its cover in every life-cycle (Mascaró, 2011). Similarly, in Manusmriti men are guided to be self-controlling in regard to their sexuality. For instance, one verse states the following: "Through the attachment of his organs (to sensual pleasure) a man doubtlessly will incur guilt; but if he keeps them under complete control, he will obtain success (in gaining all his aims)" (Bühler, 1886, verse 5.40).

Similarly, for the last two stages of life, Manusmriti has total 97 verses in chapter 6. Like *Grihastha* chapter, the first verse mentions the transition from *grihastha* to *vanaprastha* and *sanyaasi* life. Other verses suggest the man to stay alone and study *vedas* in forest. For example, verse 6.41 says: "Let him always wander alone, without any companion, in order to attain (final liberation), fully understanding that the solitary (man, who) neither forsakes nor is forsaken, gains his end" (Bühler, 1886, Verse 6.41).

### 2.1.3  Stri-dharma: normative dharma of women

Male *shudra* and women are excluded from *asrama dharma*. Women, however have their own set of *dharmic* duties (Holdrege, 2004). *Shudra* and women are often linked in *dharmashastra* in connection to their exclusion (Holdrege, 2004). For instance, the ritual of *upanayana* is restricted to the upper three *varnas* (male); male *shudras* and women are not participants of it. Similarly, women and *shudra* were excluded from the student *asrama* and other two *asrama* stages (*brahmcharin (*student)*, vanaprastha* (forest-dweller and *sanayasi* (renunciant)).

Getting married has been considered to be the *upanayana* for women (Holdrege, 2004 and Stridharma, 2014). Serving husband for a woman is equally appreciated as the act of studying *vedas* is for a man (Stridharma, 2014, p.109) Marriage of a woman points to her complete transfer

from natal to conjugal family (Holdrege, 2004). Marriage transforms a girl into a wife. Over the history of Hindu scriptures, there have been several different words that have been used for a wife. These different words have different connotations. This usage shift refers to the shift in the *dharmic* duties of wife over history. The words that were economically and socially significant have been replaced with words that denoted dependency and utilitarian status of woman. For instance, words like *patni, kutumbni, sahadharmini* are replaced with *Jaya, dara, Bharya* (Stridharma, 2014, p. 109). The word like *patni* are still in use. However, the connotations around it have changed from an equal participant in the religious activities of a husband to that of a legally wedded wife (Stridharma, 2014, p. 109). Wife has lost her independence. She has now become dependent. One of the most famous verse of *Manusmriti* dictates this dependence; "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Bühler, 1886, Verse, 9.3).

*Tryambakayajvan's Stridharmpaddhati* is one of the major texts that talks about righteousness and duties of women. It is a Sanskrit text of eighteenth century. Leslie (1989) cites a few translated verses from it as follows:

> There are prohibitions on wearing no blouse during the day (section IIA), prohibitions on wearing heavy earrings during love-making (section IID). The injunctions betray the idea of utopia: a woman should always wake before her husband (p.52); she should herself attend upon her husband instead of delegating such duties to servants (pp. 64-5); she should only think of her husband, worshipping him as her god (pp.273). (Leslie, 1989, p. 3-4).

These norms include duties as well as restraints. These norms give us an idea of what these texts considered as the perfect wife, by mentioning them as *dharma* of wife. Not just by telling what to do but also by declaring what happens to the woman, who do not follow their *dharma*. Manusmriti while focusing upon the fidelity of woman, says that woman who are not loyal to their husband "are born in jackal's womb and are tormented by the diseases born of her own evils" (Stridharma, 2014, p.110).

Like *Tryambakayajvan's Stridharmpaddhati, Manusmriti* also focuses on the *dharma* of obedience. It emphasises women's obedience to their husbands as the highest *dharma* of women (Holdrege, 2004). It states that women can attain salvation through faithful devotion to their husbands. Where on one hand it compares a woman's obedience to her husband to student's devotion to her teacher, on the other hand her domestic duties have been compared to the spiritual offerings of a student (Holdrege, 2004, p. 235). These *dharmic* (normative) roles are being constructed through both the fear of severe punishment as well as the hope of being rewarded.

Apart from duties, *Manusmriti* emphasises the need for restraining women. These restraints start from her girlhood and continue all the way through to her widowhood. The foremost restraint has to do with sexuality. Controlling women's sexuality has been found to be a major concern in establishing social order in multiple societies (See Lerner (1986); Yalman (1962)). One crucial attribute for a girl is her virginity. However, the girls are supposed to be weak, feeble, and evil by nature, hence the onus of protecting girl's virginity is on her parents (Stridharma, 2014, p. 108). Other major scriptures like *Ramayana*, address women as weak and sinful, who do not care for a family nor good deeds and are inconstant (Chakravarti, 1993, p.581). In *Ramayana*, Agastya (a sage) refers to women as fickle natured people who stay with a man only when he is prosperous and wealthy (Chakravarti, 1993).

In the history, there have been women who chose not to conform to *brahaminical dharmic* duties (See Narayanan, 1999). If a woman did not conform to the ideals of a woman as dictated by Manusmriti, she was accused of being bad or at times devilish. However, these women had a role model because they showed what an ideal woman shouldn't be like. *Stri-dharma* is an interesting aspect, as it is one of the only *dharma*, that goes against the description of one's innate nature (Chakravarti, 1993). Unlike *varna*, where dharma has been explained as per the innate nature of people born to the *varnas*, the dharma of women, of being loyal and obedient to their husbands, goes against their innate nature, as described by Manusmriti, of being overtly sexual and evil (Chakravarti, 1993).

This conflict of *dharma* and the inherent nature of women, and *dharmashastras* putting restraints on women have been questioned by Sharma (2016). Sharma (2016) points out that *dharmashastras* like Manusmriti are one of the first texts that talk about inheritance rights for women and criticises dowry. Sharma (2016) further points out the verse: "Another husband is ordained for woman in five calamities, viz. when the husband has died, has become a *sannyasin*, is impotent or is *patita* (degenerated) (p. 32)" that ask for divorce rights for women. Sharma (2016) asks to look at the whole set of *dharmashastras* to understand the gendered view of Manusmriti.

As I see it, Manusmriti is reflecting the reality and addressing the problem with these norms. Still, the norms for men and women are in contrast to each other and it can be directly seen that *manusmriti* dictates that girls should be virgin, women should be loyal and obedient to their husband and the domestic duties are solely a woman's responsibility.

## 2.2  The related concepts of karma and dharma

*Karma* as a concept is prevalent in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Etymologically, *Karma* is derived from Sanskrit root 'kr' which means 'to do'. *Karma* as defined by Oxford bibliographies refers to actions that produce predictable results (Tull, 2017). Good *karma* (acts) produce favourable results, and bad *karma* produce undesired, bad results.

The cosmic law of *karma* governs cause and effect. Since, *karma* is not limited to one life cycle, the consequences of good and bad karma go on to the next life as well. If a person would born into an upgraded status or degraded status in the next life depends on if person does the good *karma* or not. *Manusmriti* in its 12.3 verse states "Actions that proceed from mind, speech and body are conducive to good or bad results; The high, low and intermediate positions of men are due to their actions" (Olivelle and Olivelle, 2005, p.10; Holdrege, 2004, p. 236). This verse is popularly known as 'fruits of action'.

It can be interpreted as that a person's *karma* (actions, thoughts, bodily acts, speech), lead to results. These results can be good or bad depending upon the karma. It further says, that a person's rebirth status depends upon the *karma* of this life. This rebirth status includes gender, *varna*, family, socio-economic class, and also the community in which a person is born. The law of karma doesn't just determine the birth status for next round of life, but also the *karmic* residues shape the inherent character of the person, influencing their choices, aptitudes and inclinations, to make sure that *dharma* is suitable for the person's inherent characteristics (Holdrege, 2004).

The ontological and normative dimension of *dharma* can be linked in two different ways. First, according to this view as has been discussed in section 2.1, *varnas* are not socially constructed but are given by the cosmic order. Secondly, *svadharma* according to a person's gender, caste and life-stage is determined by the law of *karma*, so that it is ensured that a person's *dharma* (circumstances of birth and social status) is related to their nature (Holdrege. 2004).

To understand the relationship between *karma* and *dharma*, it is important to focus on the second aspect of the relationship between ontological and normative dimension of dharma. A person's *karma* decides what will be their birth status and hence *dharma* for the next round of life. Law of *karma* doesn't just determine the birth status for the next round of life, but also the *karmic* residues shape the inherent character of the person, influencing their choices, aptitudes and inclinations, to make sure that *dharma* is suitable for the person's inherent characteristics for their next cycle of birth (Holdrege, 2004).

Manusmriti says that the one who does not follow their duties are born in a lower status in their next-life to lower castes, as women or animals. If one does their *dharma*, one takes a step in completing the four goals of life and a step towards salvation and is liberated from the cycle of life and death (Heizman, 2011). However, women do not attain salvation. They however get in the *Kramamukti*. Women by doing their *dharma*, get to become a man, in their next round of life, where they can perform their *dharma* to attain salvation (McGee, 1996, p.76).

Hence, it can be concluded that the relationship between *karma* and *dharma* decides the life-events. A person needs to perform their *karma*, in adherence to the *dharma*. If not, they might be born as a woman. It can be argued that a woman is not just born a woman but is a woman because of not following her *dharma*. Being born a woman is already a form of punishment. Thus, a woman performing their *dharma* diligently has the opportunity become a man in her next life where it is possible to attain salvation.

# 3 Literature review

This section deals with the gender research done on Hinduism and *vrat* (*kathas*). The section is divided in two sections. First section is about the synthesis of the debates around gender hierarchies in Hinduism. It summarises the studies that debate how Hindu scriptures, Hindu rituals construct gender. Second, I discuss the gender research done on *vrat* (*kathas*).

## 3.1 Hinduism and gender hierarchies

Hinduism can be viewed as both enforcing gender hierarchies as well as empowering women through certain traditions. Different vantage points might lead one to have different views about how Hinduism constructs gender. In academia, there have been several stands of research regarding Hinduism and gender. Some scholars have criticised its scriptures and rituals of Hinduism for strengthening patriarchy and oppression of women (Kishwar, 1990; Padfield, 1896). A few others have read Hindu epics with a perspective of women and have discussed that how Hinduism actually provides agency and helps women to survive in a patriarchal society (Patnaik, 2017a).

One view argues that in Hinduism, religion and the quest for religion has liberated women. Most important of these, have been said to be the marks that women left in the history of the religion. A few important marks are of 1) *Bhakti* (devotion) tradition 2) Hindu goddesses. First, the *Bhakti* tradition, that liberated women from their subservient gender roles by collapsing *grihastha* and *Sanyasin* life, originated in 6th Century (Chakravarti, 1993).

Narayanan (1999) points out multiple episodes of the religious liberation for *bhaktins* (women devotees). For instance, she cites the example of Andal-Goda, an eighth century poet, who refused to get married and rather than considering her husband as god (as *dharmashastra* of *Manusmriti* dictates) instead she considered god her husband (Narayanan, 1999). She freed her body of embarrassment or any other impediment. Example of one poem can be seen here:

> Only if he will come
>
> to stay with me
>
> for one day
>
> if he will enter me
>
> so as to leave

> the mark of his saffron paste

> upon my breasts (Andal as cited in Chakravarti (1993), p.580)

This poem reveals that Andal through her poems makes her body a medium to convey her *bhakti* (devotion) to god (Chakravarti, 1993). It is through this *bhakti* that both men and women could attain salvation. This tradition as a result liberated woman from the idea of *Kramamukti*, where a woman couldn't attain salvation at the end of this life, and only serving her husband and other dharmic duties made her eligible to be born as a man in the next birth and work for salvation. Women were now free from religious duties of serving their husbands, as now they had a new path to salvation.  Other examples of *bhaktins* (Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi etc.) have been discussed in detail by Narayanan (1999) and Chakravarti (1993). Mirabai who declared herself to be lover of Lord Krishna, gave up the traditional female roles.

Secondly, the Hindu goddesses are seen as a model of empowerment. The dichotomous category of goddesses as controlled vs. uncontrolled is something that women over the years have looked up to. Wadley (1980) talks about the dichotomous categories of Hindu Goddesses. One category includes controlled wives of God. These goddesses are supposed to have inferior powers to their male counterparts. Another category is of uncontrolled, unmarried, dangerous and destructive goddesses (Caughran, 1999, p.516).

Wadley (1980) extends this discussion to say that goddesses are kind and forgiving is worshipped properly but become destructive if gets displeased (p.33). These goddesses are looked upon as role models. In a case study in Faridabad, India, participants pointed out that how these goddesses help them to take decisions, when needed. One participant reported "Durga (A goddess) gives me inner strength (Hedman, 2007). She does not tolerate everything and she gets aggressive when people are dishonest and disrespectful" (Hedman, 2007, p. 22).

Another view blames Hinduism for enforcing a strict gender hierarchy and continuous oppression of women. For instance, Agarwal (1999) argues that women in Hinduism through its *vedic* and *vaishnava* (one of the Hindu traditions) traditions have been getting tormented, and the only way to protect women is to attack Hinduism. Basharat (1994) states Hinduism disrespects women and that it is in a Hindu society that women are considered worthless. Similarly, Chakravarti (1993) points that gender hierarchy is central to the *brahmanical* social order. She further says that Hindu traditions legally sanctions the oppression of women and force them to face humiliating conditions.

One major criticism of gender hierarchy in Hindu societies can be understood through the preference of son over daughter, where in contemporary time sex-selective abortion has become a major social issue, since the preference of son over daughter has been a part of Hindu traditions. The idea of son-preference can be traced back to *vedas*. One verse in Atharva *veda* says "May he (*prajapati/*god) elsewhere afford the birth of a female, but here he shall bestow a man!" (Pande and Astone, 2007, p.2). In fact, the idea of daughter is despised so much, that women giving birth to only daughters have been asked to be abandoned by their husbands (Stridharma, 2014, p.124).

Moreover, In Hindu families, women don't have any autonomy since childhood. Daughters lose their autonomy between ages six to ten, and they are socialised into feminine roles in contrast to her brother who can retain his autonomy (Kakar, 1978). These feminine roles may include giving responsibility of younger siblings, helping the female elders in tasks like cooking and preparing for worshipping. The religious rituals can be argued to be other reasons for this gender preference, as one important ritual to salvation is to have a son light the funeral pyre. Women are understood as weak, lustful whose virginity needs to be protected (Stridharma, 2014).

These gendered preferences continue through gendered roles and strict gender distinctions. To understand these distinctions, I will here discuss the critiques of it with two different aspects of Hinduism: 1) Scriptures 2) Rituals.

### 3.1.1  Critique of Hindu scriptures

First, Hindu scriptures have been considered to be creating strict gender categories and controlling for women (Basharat (1994); Agarwal (1999)). Basharat (1994) reports that *Vedic* scriptures construct women as worthless by commanding them to be subservient to their husbands. She further cites that Hindu scriptures command a strict punishment for a wife who is aware of the high status of her relatives and still, violates the duties that she owes to her husband. One scripture that has been repeatedly mentioned in the critique of Hindu epics is Manusmriti's *dharmashastra*. It has been criticized by different scholars (see Padfield 1896, Kishwar, 1990; Basharat (1994)). One verse of Manusmriti has been repeatedly mentioned:

> In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. (Bühler, 1886, verse 1.148).

This verse has been cited by multiple authors to prove the patriarchy and lack of freedom for women in Hindu society (see Padfield (1896); Basharat (1994); Kishwar (1990)). There are other verses that allocate distinct duties to men and women. Where women have been asked to look after the domestic duties, men have been told to do their caste duties. These verses have been discussed in detail in the section 2.1.

On the contrary, many other scholars, argue that Manusmriti is a text that empowers women. These scholars have argued to read Manusmriti at its full length (See Sharma, 2016). In his essay 'How to read Manusmriti', he points out that Manusmriti is the first ever Hindu text that has talked about inheritance rights of women and the Hindu epic is full of verses that claim a respectful environment for women. Similarly, Swapna (2018) points out the verses from Manusmriti that explains the good karma of respecting women:

> Yatra naryastu pujyante ramante tatra devata,
>
> Yatraitaastu na pujyante sarvaastatrafalaah kriyaah. (Manusmriti as cited in Swapna (2018), p.90)

This verse can be translated as: "Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards." (Bühler,1886, verse 3.56). It can be argued after having read both the arguments about Manusmriti, that Manusmriti does divide the duties of men and women but does not intend to dishonour women as argued by Agarwal, 1999 and Basharat 1994.

### 3.1.2 Critique of Hindu rituals

Secondly, Hindu rituals have been critiqued for creating gendered distinctions and creating gendered practices through rituals (Chakravarti, 1993, p.579). Hindu rituals have been evaluated to be significant for contributing to the gender hierarchy. Jackson and Nesbitt (1993) states that rituals do not just affect adults but also reinforces gender distinction amongst children. These rituals have an ideological implication of subservience of women to their husband and other paternal relatives (Dube, 1988). This can be understood in the light of Hindu rituals in the festivals that women are reminded of being weaker and hence to be protected by men, no matter how physically strong and independent the woman is (Bhasin, 2014). Women are told to be ideal wives through the acts of subservience (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993).

The counter argument points out the significance of these rituals for women. Certain rituals, such as *ashwin navratri*, however only performed by women have elevated the category of feminine (Rodrigues, 2005). While elevating the feminine, hierarchies within feminine are maintained, for instance virgin and married women are on a higher pedestal than unmarried and widows.

Having looked at these arguments, it can be concluded that that Hinduism has several rituals that create and support gendered distinctions and at the same time, through its scriptures and rituals, it does put women/feminine at a higher pedestal. Women over the time have been inspired by the many aspects of Hinduism and have themselves become a role-model for many others. However, these rituals mentioned in *vedic* texts cannot explain the religious activities of Hindu women (Smith, 2001). The *vrat* tradition has gained much more popularity with women than *Vedic* traditions (Rambachan, 2001, p.17 and Wadley, 1983). In next section, I will discuss the research done on the *vrat* rituals and *vrat kathas*.

## 3.2   Research on vrat and vrat kathas

One of the earliest references made to *vrat* has been made by Alberuni in eleventh Century (Pearson, 1983). Vrat have also been mentioned in the writings of eighteenth-nineteenth Christian missionary writings (Ward (1817) and Dubious (1978) as mentioned in Pearson 1983). However, the first translated and detailed account about the meaning and history of *vrat* ritual has been provided by Kane (1958). Kane brings up various definitions and explains the term *vrat* through its etymology and social understanding. He overviews the history of *dharmasastra* in the first 80 pages of his work and in the rest 100 pages he forms a list of *vrat* as written in *Puranas, Nibandhas* and *dharmashastras*. Through his historic work he provides a preliminary chart of *vrat* landscape. Like Kane, McGee (1996) surveys the meaning of *vrat* in traditional texts like *puranas*, *nibandhas*, *dharmashastras*, *Manusmriti* as command, religious duty and aims. She provides an extensive work on *vrat* and debates on the Sanskrit origin of word '*vrat*'. Similarly, Luschinsky (1962) focuses on the set of ten *vrat* in the context of daily and yearly lives of women in Uttar Pradesh. Tewari (1991) provides a detailed account of fifty-five different *vrat*, however she provides a brief analysis of these *vrat*.

Interestingly, the popularity of *vrat* ritual has increased in recent times (Wadley, 1983, Rambachan, 2001). *Vrat* ritual that have an ultimate goal of spiritual liberation, are observed by a large proportion of Hindu women as an obligatory ritual (McGee, 1996). McDaniel (2012) cites an example from her classroom where a student claims that she prefers *vrat* tradition over the

other Hindu traditions. The student states that "*Vedanta* is too philosophical, *Yoga* takes a lot of effort, *dharma* had too many rules to remember and *bhakti* tradition needs a lot of prayers, hence she prefers the *vrat* tradition, where people care about good health, wealth, getting a husband and children" (p.11). The purpose of *vrat* is to educate people about "*dharmic* values and socially responsible behaviour" (p.79). Ritual of *vrat* have been criticised for being a means of subordinating and disempowering for women (Kishwar, 1990).

While focusing on *vrat* and gender studies, state of Uttar Pradesh has received the most attention from scholars. Relevant studies include Pearson (1983, 1997), Wadley (1976, 1980, 1983), McGee (1996). Pearson (1997) with her ethnographic research focuses on Banaras area to understand the motives of women for observing *vrat*. She describes that women in Banaras perform *vrat* because it helps them to have 'peace of mind'. She explains that as per puranas and *nibandhas* anyone can perform *vrat* irrespective of gender.

One interview excerpt from Pearson (1997) cites the other underlying reason for women being the solo-performers of *vrat*. On being asked that why men do not perform *vrat*, she states:

> "…for women the first (husband) is the divine marriage blessed by the gods. If a man loses his wife he can get another without too much problem; if a woman loses her husband it is much more difficult. If she does get another husband, she might be called a concubine - he might have other women …. Women perform vrat for *suhag* (to preserve the auspicious married state)" (Pearson, 1997, p. 344).

This response can be understood as the underlying gender ideology in the Hindu society, where a woman is told that she must perform the *vrat* for her husband's long life, to lead a smooth life herself, without the hardships of being a widow in a patriarchal society. This response is a reminder of dependency of women on men. It is reflection of the prescription of *Manusmriti* that women must never be left alone. Hence it can be said that women and men both perform the *vrat* but just the purposeful performance of *vrat* creates the gendered categories. The *vrat* through its promises privileges the men by asking women to perform *vrat* for their husband's long life.

Another reason for *vrat* being majorly, a woman's ritual can be understood through looking at the link of *vrat* to domestic rites (Ray, 1961). To understand it further, we can look at the rituals that are part of *vrat*. Many *vrat* include kitchen utensils, such as mortar and pestle, as a part of the ritual (Togawa, 2001), thus it can be argued that the usage of the kitchen articles, makes it central to women, as women in a Hindu household are supposed to be taking care of kitchen.

Secondly, unlike other temple rituals, most of the *vrat* can be performed within the home boundaries (Wadley, 1983). Hence, it is easier for women to perform the ritual who are suggested by Manusmriti to stay within home boundaries and not communicate with strangers (Kakar, 1978; Bühler, 1886) and contribute to prosperity at home through the ritual of *vrat*. Since many *vrat* give control to women to pray for the long-life of their husbands (*Karvachauth)* and vrat for son's healthy life (*Hoi).*

### 3.2.1 Purposes for performing vrat

There has been attention paid to understand the purposes for which people perform *vrat*. Pearson (1997) gives a list of reasons for which people perform *vrat*. She makes a distinction between the reasons of men and women for performing *vrat*. She reports that the *vrat* and reasons for *vrat* performance are shared by men and women, women do have additional *vrat* and reasons to perform *vrat*. This addition is due to the word '*saubhagya*' (marital felicity) attached to a few *vrat* that makes it obligatory for women to perform certain *vrat*.

In addition to that, Wadley (1976) and McGee (1996) report that *vrat* are a way for women to contribute to their *stri-dharma* and hence unlike *nibandhas* explain the *vrat* to be optional, women understand *vrat* as obligatory. More than an obligation *vrat* can be understood as providing psychological support to women (Wadley, 1994). This psychological support is a result of cooperative participation and also the active control the *vrat* ritual provides to women (Wadley, 1983). Since, as per the ritual it is only the women's performance of *vrat* that can save her son, brother and husband from death (Wadley, 1976). Suri (2017) supports the claim of women being solo performers of *vrat*, by a functionalist point of view. She reports that *vrat* are concerned with family roles and code of conduct and hence for a functional society, motivation, for *vrat* performance, provided to women is of husband/family concern.

McGee (1996) also explores the reasons of women to perform *vrat*. With the help of interviews with Maharashtrian women, she finds out that Maharashtrian women perform *vrat* to attain heavenly bliss. As a man can attain salvation by adhering to *dharma,* and women can't, *vrat* become a way to attain the heavenly bliss as women can line themselves up in the queue of salvation (*kramamukt*i) through the *vrat*. She calls *vrat* "primary vehicle available to women for the recognized pursuits of religious duties and aims" (p. 98).

### 3.2.2 Gender hierarchies in vrat (kathas)

Some scholars that have focused on *vrat* and gender (See Mazumdar, 1981) have described *vrat* as normative practices that reproduce the cultural values of subservience of women to men. An Indian journalist Kishwar (1990) describes *vrat* as purveyors of subordination of women. Kakar (1978) also criticises the *vrat* by saying that women do not have autonomy. He points out that married women are not allowed to perform *vrat* without the approval of their husbands. If done without prior permission, the husband's life is supposed to get shorter and the woman goes to hell (Kakar, 1978). He describes *vrat* as practice that socialise women to be subservient to their fathers, husbands and sons.

Not just the ritual, but the narratives (*vrat kathas*) read during the *pooja* ritual of *vrat*. contributes to gendered categories as well. *Vrat kathas*, through its episodes necessitate that women perform *vrat*. As, not just in the social reality even in the *kathas* it is women that perform *vrat* (Jain, 2004). Similarly, Menzies (2010) has described *vrat kathas* as Hindu women's domestic literature.

A few researchers have looked at *vrat kathas* for gender analysis. Relevant studies include: Jain (2004) and Suri (2017). Where Jain (2004) focuses on a few popular *vrat kathas*. Suri (2017) analyses *vrat* and *vrat katha* studies done in the recent times. Other studies like Wadley (1983) and Caughran (1999) focus on *vrat kathas* from a non-gender perspective. Wadley (1983) explains the karmic relationship in the narratives and Caughran (1999) explains that reading and telling *vrat kathas* builds up characters differently. Here I will talk about these studies in a bit more detail.

Jasbir Jain (2004) focuses on popular *vrat kathas* from north India to "analyse the power that these narratives exert over popular imagination" (p.95). He calls these narratives life narratives and compares them to typified blueprints, for living, based on traditions and social structures, which help people to cope with the real-life crisis situations. He states that *vrat kathas* are illustration of a contract between the devotee and the god, a contract if broken can lead to unpleasant circumstances and if observed carefully leads to rewards. A similar claim is made by Wadley (1983). She points out that *vrat kathas* she researched upon, have a clear relationship of actions and result. Where good acts lead to happiness and bad acts lead to sorrows. This relationship can be understood as *karmic* relationship.

Gender inequality in *vrat kathas* is another claim made by Jain (2004). He claims that the ka-thas, he analyses, do not project individual aspirations for women outside their family and pro-creation. Suri (2017) makes a similar argument that in *vrat kathas*, women only exist as wives, sisters, daughters and mothers. In contrast to Suri (2017), he says that *vrat kathas* do not have subversive tendencies, they rather teach the values of patience, obedience. However, it is im-portant to see that what kind of gender hierarchy these values create. In other words, are these values gendered? And if they are gendered then what value is ascribed to what gender?

A few scholars have focused on the empowering elements of *vrat kathas*. For instance, with a focus on *vedic vrat kathas*, Menzies (2010) reports that *vrat* performance by women ritualists in *vrat kathas* is more effective than men. This effectiveness can be understood as superiority of women and women's rituals over men and men's rituals. Moreover, in *vrat kathas*, women are depicted as the effective ritualists (Menzies, 2010). They know the details of *vrat,* discuss it with other and perform them with utmost devotion. In addition to that, when Menzies (2010) describes *vrat kathas* as "Hindu women's domestic literature" (Menzies, 2010, p.139), the su-periority of women and women's rituals over men's rituals and men is posited.

Moreover, the occasion when *kathas* are read out loud in groups, in the community areas of villages, it is one of the rare occasions for many women to get out of their household boundaries and listen to these *kathas* with their friends and relatives (Wadley, 1994). This is the time when they can be without men, on their own. It is like the small freedom celebration where women meet and read out *kathas*. It is also the time when women can talk about their individual issues with each other. Caughran (1999) gives an interesting claim. She points out that not just the content of *vrat kathas* but a composite art like *vrat kathas* have a strong emphasis on reading and telling of the story as well. Caughran (1999) points out that listening and telling *vrat kathas* makes the meaning of the *kathas* more nuanced. This telling and listening of *kathas* changes the meaning of *kathas*. For instance: In a case study done in Banaras, it was found that the individualities of readers and listeners affect the actual and received meaning of *kathas*.

Caughran (1999) while working on a *vrat katha* based on *Shiva* and *Parvati* characters, points out that relationships constructed in *vrat kathas* work as a backdrop for the real relationship issues like adultery, power discourses between men and women, parenting and support. One particular example that she cites is of a potter woman named Aarti (p.514). Aarti while narrating the *katha* to a group speaks the line of Lord Shiva's line in a mock-male voice, which helps the audience to recognise the mockery of their own subordination to men. It can be argued that this

mockery and realisation are the coded hints of how men treat women. This process of coding and perceiving changes the meaning of *vrat kathas* for the teller and listener.

It is crucial to note that how this *vrat katha* space can be used for resistance to patriarchal values by addressing the personal and ideological issues. Similarly, Raheja and Gold (1994) also, working on Uttar Pradesh, disagree that women have fully accepted the idea of female subordination as constructed in the *kathas*. They emphasize women's voice as self-affirming, having their own notions of the good life and trying to attain them.

The previous scholarship has focused on the people who observe *vrat*. They have chalked out the purposes and motivations of people. The research focusing on gender aspects have discussed gendered distinctions of these motivations and research. It can be argued that where *vrat kathas* are typified blueprints for living, their performance gives agency to women. Similarly, *kathas* where have hierarchical values, the women are constructed as more effective ritualists and hence superior to men. Moreover, listening and reading *vrat kathas* is much more nuanced, women do not relate themselves to the idealised women characters in the *kathas*. They rather mock the male voices in the stories as a realisation of their subordination to the males.

All the research above has focused in different yet limited cultural contexts. Another thing that is missing from the current scholarship is the emphasis on men. This can be because of the understanding of *vrat* performance as a women ritual. Researchers do agree that men perform *vrat*, but the interviews on why they do it are missing. Similarly, the research on male characters in *vrat kathas* is missing as well. This thesis focuses on *vrat kathas* from the manual published and sold in Delhi. It focuses on both male/men and female/women characters. The previous scholarship motivates this thesis, as the scholarship proves the significance of the topic. Moreover, scholarship that looks at gendered aspects of *vrat kathas* in different cultural contexts give anchor points to what kind of gendered categories *vrat kathas* constructs. For instance, the researchers have pointed out that the gendered values in *vrat kathas* are hierarchical, where women do not have any identity of their own. This contrasts with the argument that *vrat kathas* constructs women, superior to men. Such debates are basis of this research.

Moreover, the literature discussed on Hinduism helps to provide an understanding of what it is like to be a man or a woman in Hindu society. It helps to understand where the woman and men characters of the data for thesis are based, and what is expected of them.

# 4 Theoretical concepts

This thesis aims to explore the normative gender construction in the vrat kathas. Hence, it is important to understand the research terms: normative, gender and gender construction. In the following paragraphs, I discuss these terms and their relevance and implications to the thesis. Firstly, I discuss what is gender as per different philosophical schools. Gender construction is further discussed through two important concepts of performative acts and performative language. Further, I discuss the concept of normativity and its relation to gender performativity.

Different schools of thought understand gender differently. Social constructionists see gender as a construction on a natural anatomical facticity of sex. Biological determinists understand sex and gender as conterminous (Mikkola, 2008). Socio biologism claims that social construction causes the differences in the anatomy of bodies (Hubbard, 1990). Recently the gender performativity school has theorized sex and gender both to be unnatural (Butler, 1990, 1999).

In the first paragraph of essay written by Judith butler in 1988, Butler mentions influence of different phenomenologists (Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. George Herbert Mead), and speech act theorists (J.L Austin and John Searle) on her theory of gender performativity. She also mentions Lacanian psychoanalysis and anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz as influences on her work, in her 1999 book 'gender trouble'. Felluga (2002) points that these above cited anthropologists, phenomenologists have one thing in common that they all explore different ways in which social reality is not given but is constructed as an illusion through language, gestures and other symbolic social signs. One example of this can be given through J.L Austin's concept of "to say is to do" (Claeys, 2007, p.). In the following paragraphs, I will explain this concept.

## 4.1 Performative language

Speech act theorists like John Searle and J.L Austin and Louis Althusser have contributed to the field of performative language. This concept which has also been known as speech acts in their work, has been taken further by Judith Butler to explain that how performative language constitutes and constructs gender. In the following paragraphs I will discuss performative utterances and interpellation calls in the respective order in order to explain the statement 'to say is to do'. At the end of this section, I will point out the implications of performative language for this thesis.

J.L Austin is well known for his much-acclaimed work 'How to do things with words'. In this book, he makes a distinction between constative and performative speech acts, where constative refers to statements of facts, performative refers to accomplishing an act through the very process of enunciation (Salih, 2002; Claeys, 2007). For instance, the statement 'I pronounce you man and wife' in a marriage ceremony is not just a statement. In that very statement, status of a couple changes from 'unmarried' to 'married'. Those words do what they say. Similarly, Butler explains that a performative utterance produces what it names (Butler, 1996, p. 13).

Interpellation call is another important concept of the performative language. The concept of interpellation call, introduced by Louis Althusser, deals with how subjects come to be recognised. Althusser claims that through the interpellation call one comes to be recognised and is put in a position. A call is made and responding to the call, put the subject in the position. One classic example is when a cop hails 'Hey you!' and a person turn around to the call, it is that very turning around that puts the person in the position of the subject. Butler emphasises that interpellation cannot be one-sided (Butler, 1990). A call can only be effective, if the hailed subject metaphorically turns around (Butler, 1990).

Another example can be a doctor's interpellation call 'It is a girl/boy'. This call changes the status of the child from 'it' to 'she/he'. If the child will be recognised as a man or a woman depends on their genitals (Claeys, 2007). The genitals of the child are given significance and are sexed (Butler, 1999). Here, the interpellation call 'it is a girl/boy' is not just a factual description but is a performative one. It constitutes and constructs like a performative utterance (Butler, 1988). In this light, Salih (2002) changes the Simone De Beauvoir's statement "One is not born a woman but becomes a woman" to "One is not born a woman but rather is called a woman" (p.78).

It can be argued that unlike the man turning back to the cop's voice, an infant cannot respond to the doctor's interpellation call. Claeys (2007) reports that this interpellation does not just end with the first call. It is reiterated over the lifetime of the individual and gives an illusion of being natural. The naming is the beginning, after which the normative acculturation takes place through repeated utterances (Butler, 1988). Hence, we can conclude that the girling/boying does not occur in one interpellation call and leaves room for agency for the individual through the repeated utterances in the rest of the life. Derrida refers to it as "mis-citation" (Claeys, 2007, 37). The question that arises out of this discussion is 'can the interpellation start before the birth of a child as well?'.

To answer the above question, I will explain the Althusser's idea of ideological apparatus, in this paragraph. Marx in his theory of historical realism has talked about the state apparatuses. Marx' state of apparatuses include government, army, police etc. (Claeys, 2007). However, Althusser call these apparatuses repressive state apparatuses and draws on Marxian idea to explain ideological state apparatuses. Where he says that repressive state apparatuses, are public, and keep the subject in their position through fear and force and ideological state apparatuses, are part of private sphere, appear natural, and keep people in their position through the use of ideology. For instance, ideological apparatus of family ensures that before the child is born, it already bears the father's name and other identity characteristics associated with it.

These identity characteristics appear as natural and obvious, people attach themselves to it. This process comes in a sort of ideological recognition. It becomes familiar and something that people recognise. Althusser gives an example to illustrate the point:

> "We all have friends who, when they knock on our door and we ask, through the door and we ask through the door "who's there? Answer 'it's me. And we recognise that it is him or her. We open the door, and it's true and we recognise that it is him or her. We open the door, and it's true, it really was she who was there.' (Althusser, 2001, p.72).

These recognitions make subject a part of everyday life. The gesture of calling someone by their name, hailing or interpellation, a subject comes into existence. The question that arises is that if every utterance is a performative utterance.

Austin explain that performative utterances are embedded in context (Austin, 1955). Austin remarks that if one is stopped in the street and is told that I take you to be my lawfully wedded wife, the utterance fails as a performative. Similarly, if one is already married this statement would fail in specific contexts. Hence, it can be concluded that the utterance is based in a context. Butler takes this argument further and explains that an utterance is only performative if it refers to the law (an accepted social norm or contract), which is reiterated and repeated.

This thesis uses the concept of performative language. The understanding is to say is to do. Through the use of interpellation call and ideological apparatuses, the thesis explores hailing of the characters (description) in the stories. The thesis looks at the words used to describe the characters in the stories. These descriptive words are claimed not to be just descriptive but performing an act. For instance, calling wives *'bharya'* is not just a descriptive act but an act that while makes the husband responsible for the wife, it puts the wife in a subservient position

as well. Hence, it is a performative act. In a similar manner, this study looks at other words, to understand the construction and constitution of normative men and women.

## 4.2 Performative acts

Performative acts constitute and construct gender as much as performative utterance. Judith Butler explains performative acts as repeatedly stylized acts that construct gender. (Butler, 1988, 1990, 1999). She rejects gender as an ontological noun but emphasises that it is an ongoing process of reiterated acts. She describes gender as an act or sequence of acts, which is inevitably occurring. Her rejection of the argument that gender is not an ontological state leads to the claim that gender is something one does:

> "Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a repeated set of acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural state of being" (1990, p.33).

In a 2011 interview she states, "we act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or woman'. The stories that are being analyzed in this thesis have multiple men and women, in which the 'doing' is emphatically mentioned (Butler, 2011). Hence, it is important to know what these doings are and how these doings and actions are constructing the normative idea of being a man or a woman. This thesis explores the pattern of these repeated acts to understand what kind of normative gender identities are constructed in the *vrat kathas*. It observes the repeated acts and puts them together to have a normative picture of what it is to be a man or a woman as per these *vrat kathas*.

Here it is important to note that gender is not just a process but a "set of repeated acts that happens in a highly regulated frame" (Butler, 1990, p.33). I have repeated this particular phrase to point out that while Butler suggests that a person can choose what gender they want to enact. This choice is limited within the regulated frame. Hence the subject has limited number of choices to make a constrained choice from.

Butler further argues that gender identity is a "performative accomplishment compelled by social sanctions and taboos" (1988, p.520). She argues that the performance is informed by what historically constitute as gender and has been performed by the individual through the acts of the body. Given that the data of this thesis is situated in Hinduism, this thesis uses the concept of dharma and karma to inform the historical constitution of men and women for the analysis, as it can inform what does it mean to be a man or a woman in a Hindu society.

Judith Butler explains that a gender identity is constructed through acts and hence a different identity can be constructed with a change in the act (Butler, 1988). However, there are restrictions. Such exclusionary acts are discouraged from playing through social expectations and taboos. Any act that deviates from its socially intended gender is subject to punishment (Butler, 1988; Butler 1990). Along with theory of *karma* and *dharma*, the analysis derives from this crucial point to understand what acts have been punished to explore the construction of socially intended gender through the exclusionary (socially-deviant) acts and models.

## 4.3 Normativity: historical constitution and exclusionary model

This thesis aims to explore the normative gender roles in the *saptavaar vrat kathas*. It is important to explain what I mean by normativity and how do I aim to explore the normative gender roles within society. In the first paragraph, I define normativity. Further I explain the concept of normativity through theory of *dharma and karma*, in connection with gender. At the end, I explain the concept of exclusionary model.

Wade (2016) explains the concept of normative by differentiating it from norm and normal. Normativity can be understood through the term 'norm'. Norm refers to something that is common and happens frequently (Wade, 2016). For instance, celebrating Diwali in Hindu societies is a norm. These norms build up the idea of normativity, which can be understood as the morally endorsed ideals. It establishes facts and ways for societies. It can be understood as class of facts that have less to do with the empirical bodily facts but more to the societal constructed facts.

Normativity exists everywhere. However, these ideals and facts differ in different societies (Wade, 2014). Every society has their norms. At times these norms are written and on other times they have been part of the society for long enough that they appear to be natural. Norms within societies portray the binary categories of acceptable and unacceptable. Margaret Mead points out that how gender norms differ in various societies (Bhasin, 2014).

In Hindu societies *dharmashastras* can be understood as the rulebooks of the normative roles based on caste, age and gender/sex. They explain what the norm is for being a man or a woman. While people do not read these texts commonly, the concepts from these shastras have been orally passed and terms like *patni-dharma* or *stri-dharma* are commonly used on daily basis. For instance, the widely observed ritual of *karvachauth* vrat is called to be an important part of *patni-dharma*.

Hence, *dharma* along with *karma* helps to understand the historical constitution of performative acts and language. As it has been pointed out by J.L Austin (1955) and Judith Butler (1988, 1990, 1999), performative language and acts are performative only if they are reiterated as per the context and norms of the society. The language out of context, fails as a performative.

The stories of this data are situated in Hinduism; hence the lens of dharma helps to explore what are the norms in the society. What acts are exclusionary and what acts are acceptable. What acts are normal and what acts are abnormal. It explains who will be rewarded and who will be punished. What acts or language if repeated constitute gender and what acts represent the agency for women and men characters in the stories.

# 5 Methodology

## 5.1 Research paradigm

It is important to state my assumptions as researcher, as researcher's assumptions can clearly have major influence in conducting qualitative researches. This research is based on an interpretivist paradigm. It has a view that reality is subjective and can differ from person to person (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.110) and does not exist independently of our knowledge of it (Grix, 2004, p.83). Knowledge is a societal product and is a medium of power and hence the academic research cannot be about discovering one ultimate truth but about constructing the truth (McBride in Andreotti 2007, p. 18). I do not claim that there is no truth rather I claim that researchers carry their biases (both personal and cultural) with them. Hence, academic research cannot reach one single and ultimate truth but rather is limited to the time and social context of research (May 2011). In the league of interpretivist paradigm, the ontological assumption understands that any social phenomenon is a subject to a constant change rather than a single reality or truth. Hence, the epistemological approach means interpreting the reality.

Since, the aim is to understand the construction of gendered notions in *vrat kathas* through interpretivist paradigm, the theory that best suits this is the theory of gender performativity. As this theory argues that gender is not an ontological state or single truth, instead gender is constructed, hence we can say, gender is what one says and does. Moreover, to understand the societal and cultural context the religious-philosophical theory of *dharma* and *karma* will be used. These theories and their application for thesis have been discussed in detail in the third and fourth chapter of this thesis. Given the research paradigm the next question is what methodology can be used to answer the research questions. After the introduction of the analysis method, I shall describe the selection of data and which steps were taken in the actual analysis procedure.

## 5.2 Thematic content analysis

The question of which methodology will help me answer my research was ubiquitous. I had considered various ways of analysing my data, like discourse analysis, hermeneutics or thematic content analysis. Most of the papers, analysing religious texts had used hermeneutical methods. However, as theory of gender performativity claims that gender is constructed through repetition of stylised acts, I needed a methodology to look for these repetitions of performative

acts in order to understand the construction of gender. To meet this requirement, I chose thematic content analysis, as it helps to identify the patterns and repetitions. Thematic content analysis is of qualitative and interpretivist nature. Qualitative research fits into the paradigm of this research and lets the researcher interpret data based on the contextual situation of the data, and it is flexible and reflexive (Schreier, 2012).

Thematic analysis is a method which focuses on a text or other meaningful matter and makes replicable and valid inferences from it. Thematic analysis is understood as direct analytical approach for analysing narratives (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013). The use of content analysis is not limited to text, as said above. 'Other meaningful material' refers there to the use of the methodology to interpret art, images, clips, maps, sounds, signs, symbols and numerical records etc. (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18-19). The sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research defines content analysis as categorising the qualitative data into group of small entities, based upon the patterns and relationships between variables and themes (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2002).

Thematic analysis is based upon involvement and interpretation of the researcher. It identifies and describes themes in the data on the basis of implicit and explicit ideas within the data. Codes are further developed to represent the formed themes.

Thematic analysis reduces the amount of material, by making the summaries of text under categorised themes, by the use of pre-existing categories and emergent themes. Its systematic nature demands for the analysis of every part that is relevant to the research question (Cohen, Morrison & Manion, 2002, p.565). Content analysis has three main characteristics: "an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent". Empirically grounded means that content analysis shows the relevance, validity, and applicability of theoretical events (Krippendorff, 2004, p.17-18). With these characteristics, content analysis examines data, in order to understand what they mean to people.

## 5.3  Detailed flow of analysis

As per Cohen et.al (2002), the process of content analysis can be divided into the following eleven stages, which I have followed in my own analysis as will be explained below.

1) Defining the research questions to be addressed: The research question is 'What kind of gendered notions do *vrat kathas* construct?'. The sub questions that follow are 'What kind of norms do *vrat kathas* construct for women?' and 'What kind of norms

do *vrat kathas* construct for men?'. Consequently, this study analyses the acts performed by the characters in the stories and language used to describe the characters, to explore the construction of gender in the stories. The research question would be analysed using the theory of performativity and the context of *karma* and *dharma*.

2) Defining the population from which unit of texts are to be sampled: The data has been chosen from the widely available pamphlets of Hindu *vrat katha* literature, available in multiple languages, across the Indian subcontinent, often handed or sold outside temples.

3) Define the sample to be included: The data for this research is a set of weekly *vrat kathas* published by Manas publication, published and available widely around New Delhi, India.

4) Define the context of the generation of the document: A set of weekly *vrat kathas* were requested from the vendor at the largest temple market of Rohini(north-west) district of New Delhi. Therefore, the sample chosen mirrors the way *vrat kathas* would be acquired by a majority Hindu today, particularly in North West district of New Delhi area. The stories are published by 'Manas Prakashan'. This publication is one of the two big publications available across New Delhi, India. It is not clear where these stories have originated from, as they are part of folklore traditions.

5) Define the units of analysis: From the given set of weekly *vrat kathas*, the stories have been chosen. There are ten stories in the set and all ten of them have been analysed. The acts and character descriptive language have been used to make codes.

6) Decide the codes to be used in the analysis: These are ten stories for the *vrat* for eight different deities. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, pp. 177-178) suggest rereading text, and noting patterns, unexpected features and inconsistencies, to be familiar with the text and then coming up with codes for analysis. The text has been read and reread, over and over again to find patterns in the acts performed by the characters and language used to introduce and describe the characters. The patterns and themes have been observed - tabulated as codes and further codes have been grouped to form themes.

7) Construct the categories for analysis: There are two kind of categories: codes and themes. The codes emerge from the data. Codes are instances that occur in the stories. These codes are grouped together on the basis of similarities to construct themes. Themes are broad form of gendered norms for men and women, found in the stories.

8) Conducting the coding and categorising of the data: During the coding process, multiple readings of the text were done. The coding has been done manually and in an iterative fashion. Further these codes culminated into themes. The final themes and codes have been summarised in the table 4 and table 5

9) Conducting the data analysis: After finishing the coding, frequency of codes has been counted. This would lead to understand intensity of each category/code. If a category would have a high frequency, then that would mean that it is an important message or value being emphasized upon and hence needs to be looked upon further for deeper connections.

10) Summarising: Here, I make inferences and discuss the values being promoted or discouraged through these stories. I talk about the important features of these stories.

11) Drawing the conclusion: After summarising the finding, I make conclusions based on my findings and talk about the significance of the findings and discuss the scope of further research.

## 5.4   Selecting and categorising the data

As earlier said, there are various kinds of vrat. However, given the limitations of time and scope, I have chosen the set of *saptvaar vrat kathas* from the immensely rich *vrat katha* literature. This set contains rules and narratives (*kathas*) for the *vrat* of seven days in the week. The *vrat kathas* for individual weekdays can be obtained separately, however, different publications have their own versions.

These different versions are remarkably consistent: apart from dialectical distinctions, they have similar rules and stories. They are almost standardised (Wadley, 1983, p.151). In Hinduism or generally in Hindi, the weekdays are usually associated with the names of the celestial bodies. These celestial bodies are worshipped on these specific weekdays. The *vrat kathas* also include these celestial bodies as deities. This table presents the details regarding what deity is worshipped on what day.

**Table 2. Association of deities to weekdays**

| Celestial Body | Hindi Name | English Name |
|---|---|---|
| Sun (Ravi) | Ravivaar | Sunday |
| Moon (Som) | Somvaar | Monday |

| Mars (Mangal) | Mangalvaar | Tuesday |
|---|---|---|
| Mercury (Buddh) | Buddhvaar | Wednesday |
| Jupiter (Brihaspat) | Brihaspatvaar | Thursday |
| Venus (Shukra) | Shukravaar | Friday |
| Saturn (Shani) | Shanivaar | Saturday |

Apart than the celestial bodies, days are also associated to certain gods. These gods vary around the different regions, for example: Tuesday in a few North Indian regions is associated to Lord Hanuman and in a few Southern Indian regions can refer to Lord Kartikeya. Also, these books vary in a specific region as well as per their publications. The structure of stories across various publications is usually the same, a person is either devotional or with all the sorrows in life seeks a path and hence becomes devotional.

I have chosen a particular publication 'Manas Publication' on the basis of that this book is being sold in one of the biggest temples of north-western district area of Delhi. Also, the same stories are also online, and these are the only stories online, that people who do not have access these markets can read.

There are total eleven stories, dedicated to nine deities: Six (Sunday *vrat katha*; Tuesday *vrat katha*- II; Wednesday *vrat katha*; Thursday v*rat katha*- I and II; Saturday *vrat katha*) to planet deities, Three (Monday *vrat katha* I, II, and III) to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, one (Tuesday vrat katha- I) to Lord Hanuman; one (Friday vrat katha) to Goddess Santoshi. This book does not have all the deities as celestial bodies rather 5 out of the 8 deities are celestial bodies and three are the gods and goddesses associated to the day. The following table shows what deities are presented in this book.

**Table 3: Association of deities to weekdays in the data**

| Day | Associated deity | Number of vrat kathas |
|---|---|---|
| Sunday | Surya (Sun) Deity | Sunday (1) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Monday | Lord Shiva and *Mata* Parvati Monday *vrat Katha* - I, II, and III) | Monday (3) |
| Tuesday | Lord Hanuman (Tuesday *vrat katha* -I); Mangal (Mars) Deity (Tuesday *vrat katha*-II) | Tuesday (2) |
| Wednesday | Buddh Deity (Mercury Deity) | Wednesday (1) |
| Thursday | Brihaspati (Jupiter) Deity: (Thursday *vrat katha* -1 and II) | Thursday (2) |
| Friday | *Mata* Santoshi | Friday (1) |
| Saturday | Shani (Saturn) | Saturday (1) |

These eleven stories associated to nine deities, is analysed using thematic content analysis. In the following section, the analysis and findings of the thesis have been discussed.

# 6  Analysis and findings

In this section, firstly, I would mention a few literary observations regarding the *vrat kathas*. These observations are important for understanding the nature of this literature, and also for answering the set research questions. Further, I list down the normative roles for women and men, firstly through a summarised table and later depict results with the help of quotes from the stories. Quotes within the paragraph have been italicised to separate them from the rest of the text. The block quotes however have been written as per the thesis standard requirements.

## 6.1  Literary observations

While reading the text, I observed a few features of the *vrat kathas*. These features are important to understand the result. There are three main literary observations. First, the stories are written without punctuation marks. This feature gives a sense of oral tradition to these written stories. Hence, when I quote the stories, I have tried to maintain the similar style, however, keeping in mind that they should be understood by English speakers. Second, sentences of the stories are usually declarative of the protagonist of the story. These declarative sentences set the stage for the rest of the narrative, for instance, "Once there was an old woman" (Sunday *vrat katha*). These sentences declare the person's caste, profession, age, gender. These declarative sentences begin the story and lead to a linear narrative through various episodes and then ends with a happy ending.

Characters in most of the stories have no name, except two names in two stories out of ten stories with multiple characters. Both of these characters Anshumati and King Vikramaditya, in Thursday *vrat katha*, are renowned characters of Hindu Mythology, mentioned in *vedas* as well as in stories of Indian elementary school textbooks. It can be argued that not naming the characters, but their age, caste, and profession, expands the construction of norms, from the characters in the story, to specific groups of gender, age and profession mentioned in the stories.

Thirdly, the stories are mainly focused upon women characters. In most of the stories, it is the women who perform *vrat*. Men express their religiosity by praying in temples and charity.

These three features: 1) The oral writing style 2) descriptive introductory sentences and nameless characters 3) Majority of women characters, are building blocks for the results and for reading the results. As, the oral tradition is reflected through the style of writing in the stories without naming the characters, stories make them non-personal and rather the acts performed by the characters are understood by their age and gender.

## 6.2 Normative roles

This section talks about the normative roles constructed for gender of men and women. These roles have been found to be constructed through repetition of performative acts, exclusionary models, and performative language. It has been observed that men and women have been constructed in contrast to each other. There are some similarities in the normative roles of both genders, they will be discussed at the end of this section. Below is a table that summarises the codes and themes of the normative roles for men and women in the *vrat kathas*.

**Table 4: Themes of normative roles and codes of behaviour for women**

| Themes | Codes of behaviour- performed duties |
|---|---|
| Domestic Chores Lady | <ul><li>Cleans herself and home on a regular basis</li><li>Doesn't clean on restricted days</li><li>Gets upset about not being able to do (in uncontrollable circumstances) her domestic duties</li><li>Cooks various delicacies for guests, family and god</li><li>Gets rewarded by god for doing domestic duties</li><li>Gets reprimanded by family and god for not doing duties</li></ul> |
| Obedient and permission seeking women | <ul><li>Virtuous women seek permission from husband to do daily acts</li><li>Virtuous women, in absence of husband seeks permission from religious sages</li><li>Virtuous women obey even when tormented</li><li>If doesn't obey gets punished by family and god</li><li>Performative language puts husband as the owner of woman's life (*pran-nath, pati etc.)*</li></ul> |
| Dependent and Helpless | <ul><li>Adjectives used for rewarded women depict their helplessness</li><li>Dependent on men for seeking permission to do daily acts (both human and goddesses)</li><li>Faces harsh circumstances without men</li><li>A god/goddess or religious sage replaces men, in the absence of men</li><li>Getting a male-figure as a reward</li></ul> |

| | |
|---|---|
| Independent women | • Widow and women character whose husband left them<br>• Manages everything including finances in absence of men<br>• Support of god, sages, priests and *vrat*<br>• Fight against and implore men to get what they desire (mostly powerful figures like princesses and goddesses) |
| Family centred women | • Merit transfer of *karma*<br>• Yearns for and observes *vrat* for getting son and husband (back) |

### 6.2.1 Normative roles for women

There are specific and clear roles for women. Images of women are constructed to be similar irrespective of their age, caste. A young girl and an old woman has similar duties. Women are constructed as cleaners, cooks, obedient, compassionate, helpful, dependent, helpless and family centred. Goddesses, royal women and nymphs share many of these constructions as well. However, they have been constructed to be more powerful and independent in comparison to the other women.

*Chores of lady of the house: cleaning and cooking*

This section explains how women are being constructed as cooks and cleaners. Images of women have been constructed as responsible for domestic duties: cleaning, cooking and serving food. Domestic duties are being performed by women throughout the stories. Sense of guilt is shown when, due to unpredictable circumstances, they cannot do their duties as desired. Regular cleaning is as important as not cleaning on religiously restricted days. Similarly, cooking is an important ritual for women. They cook for their family, guests and god. This cleaning and cooking role is encouraged through rewards. The normative role is further encouraged through punishing the character both by human and god, when one does not take upon the roles naturally and is unwilling to perform the 'naturally gendered acts.

Women are repeatedly cleaning the home and cooking the food in the stories. Rituals of cleaning and cooking are part of multiple stories (five stories) that has a woman protagonist. Some stories introduce the characters in the first few lines by mentioning that they cleaned their house on a regular basis, for instance Sunday *vrat katha* begins with the sentence: "There was an *old*

*woman. Her ritual on every Sunday morning was to take a bath, plaster the home with cow dung, prepare food, and eat only after offering it to the god (p.2)".*

In the cases where the protagonists cannot clean the house due to unnatural and unpredictable circumstances, they feel guilty and give up food. This guilt makes them give up food for a day or multiple days. For instance: In Sunday *vrat katha* when the woman cannot plaster her house because she doesn't have any cow-dung to plaster it with, she gives up food till the time, god asks her the reason and blesses her with a cow and a calf, so that she can always have cow-dung to plaster the house (p.3). Similarly, in Tuesday *vrat katha*, when woman protagonist cannot offer food to god, in given time, she gives up food for six days and gets rewarded for her dedication, towards her duties, with a son:

> She observed *vrat* every Tuesday. Once because of some other *vrat* on Tuesday, she couldn't make food and offer it to god. She thought she will now eat only after she can offer food to god on next Tuesday...Lord Hanuman saw her faith and dedication. He told her that he is very pleased with her and hence will reward her with a beautiful son, who will serve her a lot. (p.22-23)).

On one hand, where repetition of cleaning regularly is emphasized. Cleaning is restricted on specific days. The virtuous women do not clean on these restricted days. They get rewarded for following the rules and avoiding the cleaning on that day. For instance, in Tuesday vrat katha-I, when the sage asks and insists on having a plastered floor, the woman pleads and asks for some other service that she can offer apart than plastering:

> Sage said "I am very hungry, I have to make food. Hence, if you clean some area with plastering it, it would be a *punya* (good *karma*), Hearing this, woman said "today I am performing Tuesday *vrat*, I cannot put a stove today (cannot plaster) today. If you say, I can sprinkle some water. You can cook on that. She further said if there is any other way, I can serve you, I am ready to do that. (p. 24)

She later gets appreciated and rewarded for following her duties perfectly. This can also be understood in the light of obedience norm discussed at length in section 6.2.2 of this thesis.

Similarly, cooking food for family, guests and god is another repetitive ritual in the stories. Like cleaning, cooking is a part of introductory sentences of stories as well. In Tuesday vrat katha, the woman protagonist is introduced in the following way*: "She performed vrat every Tuesday. At the end of Tuesday, she prepared food, offered food to lord Hanuman and then ate (p.22)".* Women characters cook and serve the food repeatedly. In Friday vrat katha, the mother serves

food to her sons with different kinds of delicacies. She serves this food on beautiful *asanas* (seats) that she spreads for them. She further requests and insists them to eat more:

> *There was an old woman. She had seven sons. Six earned and one didn't. Old mother would make food for six sons, feed them…mother spread beautiful asanas, served seven different kinds of food and instead to serve.* (p.46)

Women are taking care of their sons not just at home but also at their workplace. In Thursday vrat katha, a woman goes to her farmer son with food: "*...his(farmer's) stomach started aching, at that very time his mother came to the field with chapatis. She asked her son about what happened" (p.42)).*

Additionally, women are good hosts. When their family members visit them, they serve food. In Thursday vrat Katha-I when King arrives at her sister's place, she treats him with *"a great hostship"* (p,42). Not just one's own family but women are taking care of meals of the guests outside the family as well. In Thursday vrat katha and Saturday vrat katha, women serve the guests that their husbands bring along: *"When they both reached home, shopkeeper's wife welcomed them well and made special food for the guest"* (p.60)

This normative role of cooking and cleaning is further encouraged through the exclusionary models. Women who do not 'naturally' take upon the roles of cleaning and cooking are punished. Women when refuse to take care of the guests or family, they are pestered. For instance in one episode of Tuesday vrat katha sage that comes as a guest to woman's house demands a plastered surface for cooking:

> Sage said, I am very hungry, I have to make food. Hence, if you clean some area with plastering it, it would be a *punya* (good *karma*), Hearing this, woman said "today I am performing Tuesday vrat, I cannot put a stove today (cannot plaster) today. If you say, I can sprinkle some water. You can cook on that she further said if there is any other way, I can serve you, I am ready to do that. (p.24)

On being denied the hostship asked for, they are reprimanded by asking for cruel favours like death of their child*: "sage said, "call your son and ask him to lie down on his belly, I will cook on his back" (p.24)).* Not just by religious sages, this pressure is also exerted by one's own family, through regular explanations and scoldings. Thursday vrat katha-II 's episodes of the woman getting ridiculed *by her husband and daughter (Oh mother! Wake up early morning, take bath and worship Lord Vishnu (p.38); his (brahmin's) wife lived with filthiness.... Poor brahmin said so much* (to his wife) but there was no result (p.36)). This pressure turns into

severe punishments, if they are not listened to: *One day her daughter got very angry. She emptied out the closet and locked her mother inside it...early morning took her out and made her take bath, worship (p.38).*

These duties if not done by the women then they get daughters who take care of these chores. One instance that can be quoted is from Thursday *vrat katha*, where the woman is not following a behaviour expected of her (cleaning and worshipping), her daughter takes care of the cleanliness and worshipping god. As a result, their poverty-stricken life, *"A brahmin lived in ancient times. He was very poor" (p.36), gets* changed to a life of prosperity through daughter's karma:

> The girl child took bath early morning, worshipped Lord Vishnu and performed Thursday *vrat*. After finishing her prayers, on the way to school, she dropped the barley grains on the path. When those barley grains turned into gold, she picked them up on her way to home. (p.36)

They also get rewarded for their domestic duties. In Sunday vrat katha, god tells the woman she will be blessed with an incredible gift, since she has been doing her duties regularly and punctually: "*...then Bhagwaan (god) said Mother, I will give you such a cow, that will fulfil all your wishes. Because on every Sunday, you plaster your house, with cow dung, make food and offer it to me, before you eat. "(p. 3).*

Further, merit transfer of *karma* makes sure that it is woman who takes care of food and cleaning. Merit-transfer of karma refers to the idea that the merit for one's karma is transferred to their family members as well. This concept has been associated with women. For instance, If a lady does not take care of her domestic duties, the entire family leads a poverty-stricken life: "*In ancient times there lived a brahmin. He was very poor and had no child".* When the virtuous lady leaves the house, the merit of her karma goes along with her. One such occurrence is mentioned in Thursday vrat katha-II, the home, which got prosperity and wealth with the karmas of daughter, becomes poverty-stricken as soon as the daughter leaves *the house: "After the daughter left the house, Brahmin's household again became poor as before"* (p.38).

*Obedient women*

Obedient women have been constructed through several reiterated obedience performativity acts, rewards, punishments and performative language. Not just obeying the orders but seeking permission for daily activities has already been mentioned. It is to be noted that the Hindi word for seeking permission and giving commandments both is *aagya*. *Aagya* has been repeated multiple times in the context of women obeying, disobeying or seeking permission. For instance, the word is repeated in Monday *vrat katha*- I: "*his wife did not obey his orders (aagya)" (p.*

*16).* Similarly, the word is used in Monday *vrat katha*-II: *"old brahmin woman, took permission (aagya) from the sages…" (p.11).* The word is repeated again in Thursday vrat katha, when the sage comes to the woman's house, she says: *"I will obey your orders (aagya)"* (p. 24).

The authority of husband over wife has been constructed through performative language. These authoritative words give a sense of ownership to husbands over their wives. The words used for husbands are "*pran-nath*" (p.15) (owner of life/breath), "*swami*" (p.49, 52) (possessor/master), "*maharaj*" (p.7, 10) (supreme king), '*pati-dev*" (p.30) (god like husband) and "*maalik*" (owner). These words are performative in the sense that calling someone by these words, does not just iterate the fact of them being spouses but rather gives them an ownership over the other's life and breath and makes them subservient.

This subservience can also be seen through acts of seeking permission. Women are constructed as permission seekers. They need permission to do their daily acts from higher. In Monday vrat katha-II, the woman everyday takes permission from sages before leaving for begging: *"...in ancient times, a widow brahmin woman took permission from sages, before she left for begging with her sons"* (p.11). They take permission from sages, for reuniting with their husbands. For instance, in Monday vrat katha-III, the queen that was abandoned by the king, and was given a shelter by a priest, seeks permission from the priest to reunite with her husband: "...priest gave *permission to the queen to go back with the king. With the permission of the priest, the queen got happy and came to the city with the king (p.20).*

Not only religious sages, but family member's permission is constructed to be important as well. In one episode of Thursday vrat katha-I, a woman seeks permission from their mother in-law to leave their house for a short trip to her brother's home: "…*king asked his sister* "Oh *sister! I am going to my home, you come too. King's sister asked her mother in law. Mother in law said "Go! But do not take your children with you, because your brother cannot have a child"* (p.43). She obeys her order and tells her brother that she cannot bring her child with her: "*Sister told her brother "oh brother! I can come with you, but the child wouldn't.* (p.43).

The orders have to be complied to, by the women. These orders, even if lead to sufferings and tormenting are followed. In Friday vrat katha, where the mother in law asks the woman protag-onist to do all the domestic duties, the woman does all of it. She is made to do all the household-work and in return is given food-leftovers and tattered clothes:

> Her in-laws made her suffer. They made her do all the household chores. In addition to that, she
> was sent to jungle to gets some wood-fuel. She was given the leftovers of the food and was given
> water in a broken coconut shell. (p.47)

Similarly, in Tuesday vrat katha-II, the woman on the order of the guest sage, follows the order of getting her child being burnt alive: *Sage said "put your son down on his belly. I will cook on his back.... remembering Mangal deity she put her child on his belly and put a stove on the back (p.24-25).* She is tormented by it: *"please do not even remind me of my dead son" (p.24) but* does it anyway.

Disobedience to the orders, can lead to the banishment of women. In Monday vrat katha-III, when the woman doesn't comply with her husband's orders, he banishes her from the kingdom:

> Brahmin's son (king) asked his lover to come for the prayers with worshipping materials. But his wife did not care about his orders. She sent all the worshipping materials along with the maids and didn't go herself...king banished his wife from the kingdom. (p.17)

She doesn't just gets banished by her family but gets punished from god as well. In the same story, when the husband abandons his wife, she is left alone to survive on her own without any footwear or extra set of clothes. She goes through a tough time on this banishment period:

> sorrowful condition of queen...Helpless old woman told the queen to stay away from her. After this the queen went to oil-man's house. With the anger of Lord Shiva, all the pots of oil-man broke. Oil man threw her out of his home as well. Extremely sad queen, when went to a bank on a river-side, the entire river dried up. After that, she went to a forest and descended down the steps to a pond, with the very touch of her hand, the beautiful water of pond, became full of worms. She cursed her destiny and drank some water from it. She now wanted to sit under shade of some tree, but whenever she went under any tree, all the leaves fell down from the tree. (p. 18)

There are two significant points to be noted in this instance. First, through repeated instances of people suffering because of even being in proximity of the disobedient and hence cursed queen, a sense of societal disliking towards disobedient women is constructed. Second, by making this an exclusionary model through punishment, obedience to husband is being encouraged.

In another instance, family punishing a woman for being disobedient can be noted, in Thursday vrat katha -II, a daughter tells her mother to take bathe, clean and worship every day, and when the mother doesn't act as being told. She is rebuked by being locked inside a closet:

> her mother didn't listen to her, she (mother) ate the leftovers of her daughter each morning. Once her daughter got really furious and took everything out from the closet and locked her inside. (p.38)

It can be concluded that women are constructed as obedient to their husbands, elderly, religious sages and priests. The repeated acts of obedience and severe punishment to disobedient women

constructs the norm of obedience for women. Moreover, the regular usage of word '*aagya*' (giving orders/ seeking order/permission), in context of women, and the performative language used for husbands,  enforces obedience and subservience upon women.

*Dependent and helpless women*

In the studied material, women are portrayed as being dependent on men not just for seeking permission, but also for respect from the family. In the absence of men, women cry helplessly to deal with the crisis. Moreover, in multiple stories, women are dependent on sages, priests and gods, in absence of their husbands. Their helplessness and dependency are pointed by calling them *bechaari* (helpless)*.* Further, repeated acts of crying and disrespect from family and society construct the helpless women in these stories.

One major act is of disrespecting women in absence of their husbands. One such instance occurs in Friday vrat katha, when after the husband leaves, woman protagonist is given all of domestic duties and in return is given leftover food in broken dishes:

> Listen to what happened to bahu (a daughter in-law/wife). After making her do all the domestic chores, they would send her to get firewood from the jungle. Amidst all this, they would give her chapati made of leftover flour husk and water in a broken coconut shell). (p.47)

Similarly, in Monday vrat katha-III, when the queen is thrown out of her home, she is helpless and cannot manage by herself. She gets to face a disaster after a disaster:

> …sorrowful condition of queen...Helpless old woman told the queen to stay away from her. After this the queen went to oil-man's house. With the anger of Lord Shiva, all the pots of oil-man broke. Oil man threw her out of his home as well. Extremely sad queen, when went to a bank on a river-side, the entire river dried up. After that, she went to a forest and descended down the steps to a pond, with the very touch of her hand, the beautiful water of pond, became full of worms. She cursed her destiny and drank some water from it. She now wanted to sit under shade of some tree, but whenever she went under any tree, all the leaves fell down from the tree. (p. 18)

It can be argued, that women in absence of men are helpless both financially and socially.

Amongst all this disrespect, woman yearns for her husband to come back home.  She only gets respected again, when her husband arrives as a fruit of her vrat performance. Her husband gets her the respect back as he supports her when his mother blames her for being crazy:

> (Hearing the voice, her swami came out and got worried to look at the ring (he had gifted, before parting ways). He asked from his mother: "who is she?". Mother said "she is your wife. For last

twelve years, she has been wandering around the village and jungles like crazy". Son said "Okay Mother! I know you both equally. Give me the keys to the other house, we will settle there" (p.52).

This is when they settle into a new house and she has royal comforts and she gets free from the tormenting duties imposed upon her. This shift from the tormenting life to a life of comfort, due to absence or presence of a male-figure denotes her dependency on her husband. In the absence of men, women become dependent on sages, priests, gods and goddesses. For instance, in Sunday *vrat katha*, the woman has been shown to have no family. However, she worships Sun deity on a regular basis. Sun deity takes care of her daily-life issues such as cleaning and rescues her when needed. When the woman cannot find cow-dung to plaster house, Sun deity gifts her a cow with a calf: *"Old woman, could not plaster her house, because she could not find cow dung ...then god said, "now I will give you such a cow that fulfils all desires" (p. 3).*

Later when the soldiers of king take away this miraculous cow, old woman cries helplessly. She prays to god, to get her cow back. God comes to rescue her. God warns the king by filling the king's palace with cow dung and tells the king to return the cow to the old woman. "*Entire palace seemed to be full of cow dung...at night, in king's dream, god told the king "it is good for you, if you return the cow to the old woman. I gave her the cow, pleased by her devotion*" (p.4).

In another story (Monday *vrat katha*-II), where the woman character is introduced as a widow, which denotes absence of a male figure, she takes permission from the sages to go for her daily tasks: *"In old times, a widow brahmin woman too permission from the sages...for begging*" (p.11).

Not just human figures, but goddesses also have to implore their husbands to get the desired. For instance, when Mother Parvati, in Monday vrat katha-I wants to give the wishful to the the merchant, she has to implore her husband Lord Shiva to do it: *"...Maharaj! When he is such an eternal devotee of yours and he has some kind of sorrow, then you must take his sorrow away" (p.7).* In the same story, when one of the character dies and one of the family members is crying over it, she (Mother Parvati) wants to help them but has to do it through her husband (Lord Shiva): *"Oh Maharaj! Give this child more life, otherwise his parents would die of sorrow"* (p.10).

Moreover, the language used for describing virtuous women encourages the helplessness of women. Usage of word *"bechaari"* (helpless) is often a part of describing the woman who gets rewarded at the end of the story and hence can be argued to be the virtuous woman. For instance, in Friday *vrat katha*: "*...here bechaari (helpless) woman went to get woods from the jungle" (p.*

*51).* In addition to that, the act of crying helplessly, in times of crisis, is often associated with women. For instance, in Sunday vrat katha, the old woman cries helplessly, when her cow is taken away by king's soldiers: *"...king's soldiers took the cow away. The old woman cried a lot."* (p.4). Similarly, in Friday vrat katha, when the husband of the woman is taken by king's soldiers, the woman cries: *"king's messengers came and took her (protagonist woman's) husband with them...she went crying to the Mother temple"* (p.53).

The boons that are granted or are talked about, also involve getting a male figure such as husband or son. In one episode of Friday *vrat katha*, when the woman asks the other women about what *vrat* are they performing and how do they perform it. They explain the rewards of the *vrat*: *"The son-less woman gets a son, if lover has gone out of town, he comes back soon, and unmarried girl gets a husband of her choice"* (p.48). Similarly, in Sunday *vrat katha*, when Sun deity announces a boon to the woman, he explains that he also blesses infertile woman with a son: *"I take sorrows away by giving...son to infertile women"* (p. 3).

Most women characters have been described by their marital, motherhood status or by their relation to men: *"infertile woman"* (p.3) *"widow brahmin"* (p.11) "wife" (p.7, 17, 19, 22, 23, 27, 36), daughter*"* (p.9,19). Women's identity has been constructed on the basis of their relation to men. They are wives, daughters, mothers, widows, infertile etc. If not men, then they are just referred by their age "*budhiya* (old woman)". These referring words are important to look at, since they are not just referring to the woman, but are performative in the sense, that they explain characters' function in the society. For instance, the word 'wife' implies the duties and roles of a wife.

There are certain other words referred to when addressing women. For instance, wife of a *seth* (merchant) is referred as '*sethani'* which can be debated to be the socially and economically significant feminine form of the masculine '*seth*' or it can refer to 'of *seth ('-ani' suffix refers to 'of')*. Another argument that can be made is that it denotes the descendence from a specific family and hence refers to the wife of *seth*. Both the arguments have one thing in common that woman is known by her husband's profession/caste. Hence, once again it denotes the marital status of women and thus the social status of women is dependent upon the social status of men.

*Compassionate and helpful women*

Female characters are constructed as compassionate and helpful. They repeatedly help people through advising, offering work and in case of goddesses through miracles as well. They celebrate other's success and happiness. The performative language used to describe other goddesses enforces compassion as a norm. Moreover, the rewards for compassion and punishments

for non-compassionate further constructs women to be compassionate. Value of compassion is encouraged through both supernatural characters (goddesses and nymphs) and human characters.

Compassion is encouraged as a norm through descriptive and performative language. Where male gods are called," *bhagwaan, ishwar, devta*" (all referring to supernatural); *"Mata"* (mother) has been used to refer to goddesses. This usage of that automatically makes a relationship between worshipper and the divine. The divine with the usage of this word becomes a family member. Hence this family member has to fulfil the demands of the other family members. Especially, the connotations around the term 'mother', in Hindu society and dharmic traditions are of a nurturer, a compassionate and forgiving family member.

Moreover, the acts of compassion are repeatedly performed in the case of goddesses. They show compassion to devotees in pain and if they can't take their pain away, their compassion leads to implore the ones who can. For instance, in Monday *vrat katha*-I, Parvati requests Shiva multiple times to help the devotee, after Shiva explains that it is all because of *karma*, she beseeches him by reminding him how kind he is:

> Looking at his(merchant's) devotion Parvati said to Shiva "Maharaj! This merchant is your eternal devotee. He always worships and performs vrat for you. You should fulfil his desires. Shiva says, "This world is a karmic area…." Parvati says, "You are always kind to your devotees…." Shiva looking at the requests of Parvati says ".... Even if he does not have a son in his destiny, I will give him a son. (p.6-7)

In another episode, Parvati sees a crying man and feels compassion for him, she again pleads to Shiva against his explanation of world being a *karmic* area: "*When Parvati and Shiva reached, they saw a boy was lying dead. Mata Parvati said to Shiva "Oh Maharaj! Give more life to this boy, otherwise his parents would die in agony". On repeated requests of Parvati, Shiva gave him the boon of life" (p.10).*

Goddesses that are unmarried, show their compassion in direct communication with their devotees. In Friday *vrat katha*, *Santoshi maa (Goddess Santoshi)* even after being displeased by wrong vrat rituals shows her compassion. She shows this compassion by giving the devotee what she asked for and more. She shows this compassion to a crying devotee, whose husband has been captured by the King:

> Mother goddess got angry. King's soldiers arrested her husband...She went crying to the temple of Santoshi *maa* and said, "why did you make cry after all the happiness that you blessed me

with". *Maa* said "you disrupted the *vrat udyapan*" …. She (woman protagonist) said "*Maa*! Please forgive me. I will do the *udyapan* ceremony again". *Maa* said "don't make a mistake again" ...." Go your husband would meet you on the way back to home" ...With the grace of the Mother she gave birth to a moon-like (beautiful) son. (p.53-54)

Nymphs are represented as compassionate figures as well. In one occurrence, when a group of nymphs visit a temple, they see the priest's sufferings and suggest him the ways to get rid of his pain:

Looking at the Leprosy sufferings of the priest, she (nymph) asked him compassionately the reason of his condition. Pujari told them the entire matter. The nymphs said "Oh Pujari! Don't worry anymore. Lord Shiva would take away all of your sufferings. You should perform vrat of sixteen Monday. (p.12)

They (the women performing the *vrat*) further explain minute details for performing vrat.

Helping through advice is also common amongst strangers. They help each other by suggesting *vrat* to get rid of their woes. For instance, in Friday *vrat katha*, when the woman protagonist sees the women performing *vrat* and asks them about what they are doing, women explain the entire process of performing *vrat*:

One day when she was going to get the wood, she saw a lot of women on her way performing vrat. She asked them "What god are they performing *vrat* for? what is the reward for this *vrat*? How can one perform this *vrat*? She said if you can tell me the method of performing this *vrat*, it will be a great beneficence. One of the women replied "Listen! this is Mother Santoshi's *vrat*. By performing this *vrat*, poor gets money. It maintains prosperity at home. One gets happiness and peace. Son-less woman gets son...she asked how to do the *vrat*. The woman said take jaggery and grams of one *rupee* (Indian currency) and twenty-five *paisa* (Indian currency)…follow the rules diligently...In three months Mother blesses and gives the reward. (p.48)

In addition to that women help their family members by going miles for them. One of the episodes from Thursday *vrat katha*-II can be jotted to explain it further. In this episode, queen sends her maid to her sister, to ask for some food. Since, the sister is busy in her prayers and hence couldn't talk, she comes all the way back to queen's palace to help:

Queen told her maid "Oh maid! My sister lives in the nearby town. She is very rich. Go to her and ask her for five *seer* (Indian unit of weight measurement; one Kilogram equals to approximately one seer) of *bejhar* (combination of barley and lentils) ...she couldn't answer her as she was listening to Thursday vrat katha at that time...She couldn't answer...she thought my sister's

maid came and I couldn't talk. This made her sorrowful and after finishing her prayers to Lord Vishnu, she left for her sister's place. (p.32)

After reaching there, she listens to her sister's sorrows, gives food and suggests *vrat* to get rid of the poverty:

Queen said "Sister! We didn't have food…. hence, I had sent the maid to your home to get five seer (kilos) of food. Sister said Brihaspati deity fulfils everyone's desires. Go look inside your home, there might be some food.

When the queen went inside the house, she found one pot full of food. She further explains the rituals of the Thursday *vrat*. *Vrat* later helps the queen and the maid to have a prosperous life. (p.32)

Not just through advice but women also help through providing work opportunities to the needed. In one episode of Monday *vrat katha*-III, when the queen is thrown out of the palace, without money, clothes, shoes, and she is struggling to survive, an old woman offers her a job:

King threw his wife out of the palace...without shoes, in torn clothes, starving, she reached a village. There she found an old woman who used to sell cotton after spinning it. Looking at the sad condition of queen, she said "You can help me to sell my cotton. (p.17)

Similarly, women support each other. Maids stay with their queens and princesses through the unpleasantly rough times. They share their food and guide them when needed.  In one occurrence, when the woman does not want to worship, her maid guides her to overcome her laziness:

Queen started acting lazy again. Then the maid said "Look Queen! you used to be lazy like this before as well...give food to the hungry...make wells, ponds, stepwells so that your family gets fame. (p.33)

In another episode, of Thursday *vrat katha*-I, King, to accomplish his vow, looks around for someone empty-stomach to tell a Thursday *vrat katha*. He cannot find anyone. His sister offers to help in finding someone and goes around the village to find the person:

King said to his sister "is there anyone who hasn't eaten anything to whom I can tell Thursday *vrat katha*? The sister said … "should I go and find someone in the village?" After saying this, she went around the village. (p.42)

In addition to these repeated acts of compassion and helpfulness, punishing jealousy is another way to encourage the required behaviour. In Sunday *vrat katha*, a neighbour woman does not want to share her cow's dung with the woman protagonist of the story. The old protagonist woman suffers without the cow dung: "*the neighbour started thinking that old woman always takes her cow's dung and hence she started tying the cow inside...old woman didn't get the cow dung and hence couldn't plaster her home. She didn't make food. Hence couldn't offer food to god or eat herself....*" (p.2).

In addition to that, when she sees the golden dung giving cow, of the old woman, she informs the king about the miraculous cow, old woman goes through the agony yet again. Later the neighbour woman is punished:

> When the neighbour saw the very beautiful cow and calf, she felt jealous...she went to the king and informed him about the cow...she said "Maharaj! In my neighbourhood there is old woman who has a cow that should belong to only nobles like you." ...Old woman cried and cried, she couldn't eat anything that night.... Her neighbour was punished appropriately. (p.4)

Through these repeated acts, punishments, the norm of helpfulness and compassion is constructed. Women are shown to be helping each other and in case of not being able to help practically, they advise each other to find ways to get rid of the woes.

*Family centred women*

Women in the stories have been constructed to be family focused and specifically focused on their husband. Their desires revolve around getting a child or getting a husband. They want to have a child and further protect them. Similarly, they yearn to get a husband, when not married. Once married, and husband leaves home, they yearn for them to come back. Moreover, the merit transfer of *karma* makes sure that women's actions are centred around family.

As mentioned in section 'dependent and helpless women', women are known as wives, mothers and daughters. The boons granted revolve around getting sons or husband. In multiple stories, women yearn to get a son or husband. They perform *vrat* as a vow, to give birth to a son. For instance, in Tuesday *vrat katha*, the woman performs *vrat* to get a son: "...*wife performed Tuesday vrat to get a son*" (p.22). Similarly, in Monday *vrat katha*-III, woman impresses from the reward stories of *vrat*, performs *vrat* to get a son: *"...she also started performing vrat with a desire of getting a son"* (p.16).

In addition to that other stories explain the reward of a child (mostly a son) for a woman. This has been discussed in some detail in the section 'dependent and helpless women'. Gods and people explain how by performing *vrat*, infertile and childless woman will get a son. "*The son-less woman gets a son*" (p.48). Similarly, in Sunday vrat katha, Sun deity announces that he "*... takes sorrows away by giving...a son to infertile women*" (p.3).

They want to protect their sons from danger. When they cannot, they are ready to sacrifice their lives. For instance, in Monday vrat katha, when the mother suspects death of his child, she is waiting for him on the roof-terrace, and has pledged to commit suicide, if he doesn't return back: "*mother and father had pledged, if the son would return home safely, they would come down otherwise they would give up their life by jumping off the terrace*" (p.10).

Moreover, the yearning to get a husband is repeated across the stories. Women want to get married. For instance, in Saturday *vrat katha*, the princess falls in love with a man, and wants to get married to him: "*When princess heard the song in king's melodious voice, she lost her heart to him (fell in love) ...she told her mother that she will marry only this singer*" (p.61).

Merit-transfer of karma makes sure that women performs her *dharma* of being a wife, daughter, sister and mother. Women, if do not perform their dharmic duties, the entire family suffers. For instance, in one episode of Thursday *vrat katha*-II, when the woman does not do her dharmic duties of cleaning, her whole family suffers of poverty: "*Once there lived a very poor brahmin. He was very poor and had no child. His wife was filthy.*" (p.36). It is when his wife, starts taking care of cleanliness, their fate changes: "*She became wise...she became very rich and also gave birth to a son and with the blessings of Jupiter Deity left for heaven and her husband also after receiving all kinds of comfort and happiness, left for heaven*" (p.38-39).

Similarly, in Thursday *vrat katha*-I, sage tells the queen that if, on Thursdays she washes her hair, plasters the house and gets clothes washed by a washer man, the king will lose all the wealth:

> Sage said, "On Thursday, plaster the house with cow dung, wash your hair, while washing your hair, take shower...By doing this all the wealth would vanish" (p.31). She does these acts, they lose all the wealth and the king becomes poor: "Queen did as suggest by the sage, only three Thursdays had passed, all their wealth vanished, and the family struggled to get food. They suffered through multiple sorrows. (p.31)

The yearning for husband and son is indicative of women desiring a family. This desire of family is taken further through the merit-transfer of *karma*. It holds woman responsible for the

well-being of the families and makes women accountable for the prosperity of family. Women do not have scope of not performing their *dharmic* duties. If they do, the whole family suffers.

*Independent and empowered women*

As discussed in section 'Dependent and helpless women', women are constructed as dependent. This section takes a few examples from that section and argues how those similar incidences can also be understood to be an act of independence and empowerment. In addition to that it adds more examples to it to make a stronger case. Instances of women fighting and imploring the men around them to get what they desire and the dependence on god and sages in absence of men have been discussed. In addition to it, the unmarried and uncontrolled goddesses and discourses of Shiva and Parvati are added to it to make the argument.

The discourses of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati are important for this argument. In *vrat kathas*, Parvati gets better off her husband. She implores him to do things that he is not willing to do and make herself heard by him and get what she wants:

> Parvati said "*Maharaj*! This merchant is your eternal devotee…you should fulfil his desires". Shiva said "Oh Parvati! This world is a *karmic* area…a man gets the results as per his *karma*. Parvati said "*Maharaj*! He is your eternal devotee and if he has any kind of sorrow then you must take it away. You are always kind and compassionate to your devotees and you take their sorrows away. If you won't do that then why would humans' worship and perform *vrat* for you. (p.6-7)

Shiva agrees to these imploring of Parvati. In the same story Parvati asks Shiva again to help the devotees, and Shiva stands on the ground of *karma*. Shiva finally gives into the pleadings of Parvati:

> When they (Shiva and Parvati) heard the loud cries, Parvati said "*Maharaj*! Some hapless person is crying, please take his sufferings away. When Shiv and Parvati reached there, they saw a dead boy…...Shiva said "Oh Parvati, he had this much life only...Parvati said "Oh *Maharaj*! Give this child more life, otherwise his parents would die of agony. After repeated appeals of Parvati, Shiva gave him the boon of life. (p.10)

Parvati desires to not be subservient to her husband, rather the hierarchy of husband being the authority and wife being subservient is absent from their discourses. She plays game as an equal with her husband and expects to win over her husband "...*Pujari ji (respected priest)! Tell who would win this round of game amongst us (Shiva and Parvati))*" (p.13).

Parvati takes her own decisions and doesn't obey her husband. When angry, she does not listen to her husband's explanations, and curses people with dreadful diseases:

> Parvati ji won the game. Parvati ji got very angry and wanted to curse the Priest for telling a lie. Bholenaath (another name for Shiva) tried a lot to explain things to her, but she cursed the priest with leprosy anyway. (p.13)

Unlike goddess Parvati, the unmarried goddess Santoshi, has no husband to be dependent upon. She grants the desired on her own. She helps her devotee by guiding her with every small detail:

> "...make three bundles of wood, put one next to the river, one at my temple and one on your head, when your husband comes, When your husband would see the bundle, he will feel to make some food for himself…take the third one to your home and say….." (p.51).

Apart than goddesses, princesses also get what they desire. If they desire to get married to someone from the other caste and class, they do, irrespective of resistance from the family. For instance, in Saturday *vrat katha*, when the princess wants to get married to the oil-man, she fights with her family to be married to the man that she desires:

> When princess heard the song in king's (in disguise of oil-man) melodious voice, she lost her heart to him (fell in love) ...she told her mother that she will marry only this singer...when king (her father) got to know about it, he got very angry. He got the arms of the oil-man cut and got them thrown to a jungle. When the princess got to know, she became more determined about getting married to him. Looking at her girl's persistence, he became obligated and got his daughter married to the oil-man in an ordinary way. (p.61)

As argued in section 'dependent and helpless women' that women in absence of men, become dependent on gods, sages, priests and especially *vrat*. This dependence on *vrat*, gods, sages and priests can be argued to be empowering for women. They can manage finances and at times can do better than what their husband managed to do. In Thursday *vrat katha*-I, when the king after losing everything leaves for another town, the queen and maid struggle to survive. However, through performing the Thursday *vrat*, they become rich. The wealth this time is much more than what king ever had:

> As advised by the guru, King left for his city. When he reached close to the city, he got very surprised. The city had many more ponds and wells than before. It had a lot of innards, temples etc. King asked who does these gardens and innards belong to? Then all the people in the city told him that they belong to the queen and the maid. (p.48)

Moreover, the widows who do not have a man to be dependent upon, go around for their daily acts with the blessings of sages.

These sages, gods and *vrat* make sure that a woman can survive on her own in a patriarchal society. They provide a support system, on which can rely for their protection. In vulnerable times, god comes to take care of their devotee. In Sunday *vrat katha*, when woman has no one to rely upon, when even her neighbour is not supportive and hides her cow's dung. It is god who takes care of her by gifting her a cow.

> Once there was an old woman...after a few days, her neighbour whose cow's dung the woman used to plaster her home, thought that this old woman always takes my cow's dung. She started tying her cow inside. God said to the old woman that after being pleased with your devotion, I am gifting you such a cow that will fulfil all your dreams. (p.2-3)

Moreover, the god helps her when her cow and calf is taken away by the king's soldiers. Since, she couldn't fight with king's soldiers. God himself visits king in his dream and tells him to return the cow to the woman.

> At night, god said to the king in his dream "Oh King! It will be good for you, if you return the cow to the old woman. (p.4)

As a result, king returns the cow to the old woman, along with a lot more wealth and respect.

Similarly, in Tuesday *vrat katha*-I, when the husband doubts his wife. God himself visits him in his dream and tells him not to doubt her. God says, *"I have given this child to your wife, why do you call her an adulteress"* (p.23).

Moreover, in Friday *vrat katha*, in absence of husband, and through the tormenting of the in-laws, the woman protagonist finds solace with the goddess. She discusses her sorrows and worries with the goddess. First time she goes to the temple of the goddess and says: *"Mother! I am poor, entirely foolish and I don't know the rules of vrat. I am very sad. Oh, Mother creator of the World! Take my sorrows away. I have come to you"* (p.49). After she prays, she starts getting letters and money from her husband but gets tormented and taunted by her in-laws. These comments make her cry and with tears in her eyes, she goes to express her grief about these comments and to ask for her husband to come back. She says *"Mother! I did not ask you for money. What will I do with Money? I want my husband. All I desire is to see and serve my husband"* (p.49). Here, the goddess replies and assures the woman *"Go Daughter! Your swami would come"* (p.49).

The goddess keeps her promise by visiting the woman's husband. She asks him to visit his wife. Their dialogue goes as following:

> Mother (goddess) appeared in his dream and said "Merchant's son, are you asleep or awake? He said "I am neither asleep nor awake, I am in the middle. Say what is your order? Mother said, "Don't you have a home?" He said, "I have everything, mother! mother, father, brother, sister, wife, nothing is lacking?" Mother said- "son! Your housewife is suffering". He said "Yes Mother! I know that! But how can I go It is matter of a different place, there is no account of transactions (of the shop). I cannot see any way to leave, how can I leave? Mother said "Listen to me, in the morning go to your shop, all freshened up and post-praying. All your transactions will be accounted for, you will be able to sell all the goods in your shop. And by evening you will have heaps of money. (p.50)

This is how, in this case goddess personally takes care of the woman devotee, by helping her husband with transactions and asking him to visit his wife. Moreover, goddess helps the woman to make welcome arrangements for her husband:

> Make three bundles of wood. Keep one on the river-bank, second at my temple and third one on your head. Your husband would feel like making and eating some food when he sees the bundle of wood at the river-bank. After eating the food, he would come to meet the maa (goddess). (p.51)

Through the above cited examples, it can be concluded that deities and women devotee share a friendly relationship. Devotees talk their heart out to the god and ask for support. This support from god, during the tormenting and other vulnerable situations, is empowering for women. Women can financially support themselves and lead a happy life without relying on a man.

6.2.2  Normative roles for men

**Table 5: Themes of normative roles and codes of behaviour for men**

| Emotionally distant men | <ul><li>Keeps secret</li><li>Abandons family if they don't obey</li><li>Conflict of caste and family duties</li></ul> |
| --- | --- |

| Dutiful men | • Do their caste duties |
| | • Doing life-stage duties |
| | • Feed brahmins and spend time in religious acts |
| | • Bread Earner |
| | • King as a father to their daughters and daughters of poor |
| Controlling wives | • Punish wives for not adhering to *dharma* |

As compared to women, there are fewer men characters in the stories. One can ask whether it is assumed that this is because women 'need more guidance' in their lives or is it that most readers are expected to be women; these questions would need more scrutiny than is possible to undertake in this thesis. Men are majorly known by their caste and are constructed dutiful towards their caste duties. In regard to *varnasrama* dharma, men are doing duties relevant to their caste and life-stage. Most of the men belong to the *grihastha* ashrama stage. Other constructed norms are of being successful which is limited to the families of kings and merchants. In a few stories, brahmins express the desire to become a king or to be a part of the royal courts. Moreover, men are the inheritors of wealth, which adds to their success. In addition to that, men are mostly away from home and are pictured as dutiful and having control of their emotions as well as their wives.

*Emotionally controlled and distant men*

Male characters are constructed as being distant from their family and as hiding secrets from their family. In situation of distress they leave their homes. At times while staying away from their homes they forget about their families. They don't talk about their distress with their families or anyone. In conflict of caste and family duties, they choose their family.

Men keep their secrets, even when it is a sorrowful secret related to the family. For instance, in Monday *vrat katha*-I, lord Shiva and mother Parvati discuss how the son that they will be blessing the merchant with, would not live long. The merchant hears this conversation and is aware that the son would die at the age of twelve. Merchant keeps it a secret from his family. moreover, he shows no change in his behaviour:

> Lord Shiva said "…. I will bless him with a son. However, that son would live only for twelve years. After that he would die. Merchant was listening to this conversation. He was neither pleased nor sad. He kept praying Lord Shiva like he did. After a while, Merchant's wife got pregnant and in the tenth month she gave birth to a very beautiful son. Merchant's family celebrated it. But Merchant knew his son would only live for twelve years. Hence, neither he expressed any happiness, nor did he tell the secret to anyone. (p.7)

He does not tell the secret in the next eleven years or more. He hides the secret by suggesting other ideas. When the child turns eleven, the merchant's wife suggests that they should now get their son married. However, he suggests another idea and changes the topic:

> When the child turned eleven, then the mother of the child asked her husband to get him married. Merchant said "I won't get him married now. I will send my son to Kashi (a town in North India) for studies". (p.8)

Similarly, in Saturday *vrat katha*, the husband doesn't tell his wife that he is a king and not a poor oil-man that she understands him to be. He doesn't tell that he has been cursed by Saturn Deity. He only tells her and all the other people, after his curse-period gets over, as a result his cut arms grow back:

> Once, when Vikramaditya was asleep, he saw Saturn Deity in his dreams. He greeted him and apologised/pleaded to him. Saturn deity blessed him and said your curse of seven and a half year is over now. King said "Forgive me for my mistakes. Saturn deity smiled, and the cut arms of the king grew back. King didn't wake up his queen and slept with his arms around her neck. When the princess woke up in the morning, and saw his arms around the neck, she got shocked and got up. However, king soon told her everything. (p.61-62)

In another episode of Monday *vrat katha*-I, when the child dies, the uncle is busy offering food to *Brahmins*. He keeps the secret of death to himself, till the time he is offering food.

> On the day, when the child turned twelve, the uncle had organised a yagya. The boy told his maternal uncle that he is not feeling well. Uncle said, "Go inside and sleep". Boy went inside and slept. In a while his breath stopped. When his uncle saw him, he felt very sad. He thought if he will bemoan now, then the *yagya* ritual wouldn't get completed. Hence, he finished the *yagya* quickly and after the brahmins had left, he bemoaned." (p.10)

Male protagonists have been constructed as distant from the family. They leave their families in the time of distress. In Friday *vrat katha*, when the man gets tormented by his mother for not

earning, he leaves the house to earn and does not return in the next twelve years. It has been suggested in the story that he does not think about his wife at all:

> Woman said "I want my husband. I want to see and serve my husband". Mother (goddess) said "Go daughter! Your husband would come "…. Now Mother thought "I promised this innocent daughter, that her husband would come. But, how would he? He does not think of her even in dreams. (p.49-50)

Similarly, in Thursday *vrat katha*-I, when the king loses all his money, he leaves the queen behind while he tries to manage his livelihood in another city. However, he is not able to make money for himself and as a result cannot send any money to his family. He does not come back or send any message to the queen. Instead, he goes to visit his town only as a way to obey the orders of god. Even when the god ask him to visit his family, he makes a general remark about women's role in men's life:

> At night *bhagwan* said to him in his dreams "Oh King! Get up your queen thinks of you. Go back to your country. King got up in the morning and thought that women are companions for food and clothes, but then he thought of the orders of god and left. (p.34-35)

In another episode of Monday *vrat katha*-I, the boy gets married to the princess. He leaves right after the marriage, saying that he is going to Kashi for studies. It is later implied that he has forgotten about the marriage. While the princess and her family wait for him to come back, but on his way back, he does not visit the palace, but is recognized by the king (father in-law) and it is only then that the princess and the boy are departed together for boy's home:

> After completing the studies, boy and his uncle reached the city, where the boy had got married to the princess. They started *yagya* there. His father in-law recognised him and took him to the palace and welcomed and hosted him well. They (boy and the princess) were departed with a lot of maids and servants. (p.11).

Men don't discuss their emotions, they rather act and can get violent to the extent of killing people. In Tuesday *vrat katha*, when the *brahmin* doubts his son of a product of his wife's adultery, he does not talk about it to his wife and rather throws the son in a well, as an intention to kill him:

> Husband asked, "Who is this child?". Wife said, "Lord Hanuman has given him to me, by being pleased with my *vrat* performance". He thought this adulterous woman is lying to me to hide her adultery. One day her husband was going to the well, the wife said "take Mangal (the child") with

you". He took Mangal with him and came back home after throwing him (Mangal) in the well. (p.23)

Men throw their family members out of home, without any aid or support, and do not inquire about them for multiple years. In Monday *vrat katha*-III, the king abandons his wife and only starts looking for her after multiple years:

> King threw his wife out of the palace...without shoes, in torn clothes, starving" (p.17). "King though it has been a long time that queen went, she might be wandering around helplessly and should be looked for. With this though he sends his messengers to look for her. (p.19)

*Controlling wives*

One of the norms allocated to male characters is of the act of controlling their wives, which is repeated in the stories. As discussed in the section of obedient women, men are addressed with the words, such as *pati-dev*, *swami* etc., that give them a sense of ownership. Moreover, men make sure that their wives behave in a particular manner and follow their womanly duties, that is, fulfil expected set for female members of the society.

Men punish their wives, to discipline and control their wives. For instance, men insist on their wives to be obedient. In Monday *vrat katha*-III, the man throws his wife out of the palace when she doesn't obey him: *"Queen did not obey his orders…king threw her out of the palace"* (p. 17). Similarly, in Thursday *vrat katha*-II, the *brahmin* husband, asks his wife to keep herself and the house clean. At the end of the story, he along with the help of his daughter instils "wisdom" in his wife:

> His wife did not take bath, cleaned the house. She used to eat food as the first thing in the morning. The brahmin husband was very unhappy with this. He would say a lot to his wife, but it didn't result in anything. (p.36)

Further, in Tuesday *vrat katha*, the husband is suspicious of his wife having committed adultery, to teach her a lesson, he throws the son in the well:

> Husband asked, "Who is this child?". Wife said, "Lord Hanuman has given him to me, by being pleased with my vrat performance". He thought this adulterous woman is lying to me to hide her adultery. One day her husband was going to the well, the wife said "take Mangal (the child") with you". He took Mangal with him and came back home after throwing him (Mangal) in the well. (p.23)

In another episode of Thursday *vrat katha*-II, the husband along with the daughter lock the wife in a closet to teach her a lesson. She learns her lesson and now keeps herself clean: *"They locked the woman inside the closet. In the morning, they took her out. They made her take bath and worship. This taught her a lesson"* (p.38).

*Dutiful men*

Duties of men are heavily emphasised upon in the studied stories. A man is introduced by their caste and wealth. Men are engaged in their caste duties. In case of conflict between the caste and family duties, men choose the former. Another norm that is common to the wealthy men, is of sharing the wealth and looking after their immediate community and even larger society.

In the following paragraphs, I will detail out the normative description of male characters based on their caste and profession. Firstly, I list out what professions have been mentioned in the stories. Later, I will through multiple quotes the performative acts carried out by men from these castes and professions.

Male characters are introduced by their caste, profession and wealth. words used to describe the male characters are. Moreover, in multiple instances, male protagonists are introduced with relevant descriptive characteristics related to their profession or caste. For instance, in Monday *vrat katha*, the story and the character are introduced with the following sentence: *"A very rich merchant lived in a city"* (p.6). Similarly, in Thursday *vrat katha* the king is described as *"magnificent and generous king"* (p.29). In Saturday *vrat katha* the king is introduced as *"extremely just king"* (p.57). These characteristic descriptions are markers of their duties. A king is generous and just and a merchant is doing his business well and hence is rich.

Men are engaged in their professional tasks. Kings' soldiers are following his orders and maintaining law and order. For instance, in Monday *vrat katha*, when the king asks his messenger to get the cow from the old woman. They follow the order and go to get the cow, irrespective of pleadings by the old woman. *"King sent the messengers to get the cow from the old woman. The old woman was about to have food after offering the morning food to Ishwar. King's messengers untied the cow from the post and took it with them"* (p.4).

In Monday *vrat katha*- III, the king's messengers are mentioned briefly as working for the royalty: *"…The messengers of the old king of the country, chose the man as a match for the princess"* (p.16). In Friday *vrat katha*, the king's soldiers take the man away with them: *"King's*

*soldiers took her husband with them"* (p.53). It is later revealed that they had arrested the husband because king wanted the man to pay his taxes: *"Wife asks "Where did you go? Man says, "King had asked for me to pay taxes, for all the riches that I earned".*

Similarly, in one episode of Wednesday *vrat katha*, the king's soldiers maintain the law. In this story, there is a conflict between a man and an impersonator of this man. They look the same and are fighting about who is the real husband of the woman in the horse-cart. Here the king's soldiers come and try to sort out the situation: *"Both men started fighting. King's soldiers caught the man with pot. They asked the woman who is her real husband?"* (p.27).

Kings have tasks of spreading religion, to sing praises of god and ask their subjects to worship god. They ask their subjects to perform *vrat*. This order is often given at the end of stories. For instance, in Sunday *vrat katha* the king announces that subjects should perform this *vrat* to fulfil all their wishes: *"That day king ordered all the people in the town, to perform the vrat to fulfil all their wishes and desires"* (p.4). Kings announce in their cities that god is to be worshipped and respected. Similarly, at the end of Saturday *vrat katha*, the king announces: *"Saturn deity gives the desired and is supreme amongst all nine planets"* (p.63).

Kings are generous and provide the people with money and food: *"Nobody ever returned empty-handed from his door"* (p.29). *"King helped the poor"* (p.29). Kings are suggested to do charity with their money. In Thursday *vrat katha*-I, the sage suggests that if the family has extra money they should *"feed the hungry, make public water points, give donations to brahmins, make innards, wells, ponds, stepwells, parks, gardens, get the daughters of poor married, organise religious sacrificial rituals"* (p.30). They give expensive items to others as a gesture to say thanks. In Saturday *vrat katha*, when the king has lost his way, a herdsman helps him. In return, king gives his ring to him:

> In the evening, when the king lost his way and was thirsty. He started shouting out loud. A herdman was passing by... the herdsman took him to the nearby river and helped him to get water. After drinking water, the king felt healthy again and gave him ring from his finger. (p.60)

Kings are described being just. The legal matters reach to them and they provide justice. For instance, in Saturday *vrat katha* the king Vikramaditya is popular in *devlok* (world of deities) as well as *mrityulok* (earth) for his extreme justice. Indra dev in Saturday *vrat katha* suggest the deities: *"In mrityulok, an extremely just king rules an empire"* (p.57). In the same story, when Vikramaditya is accused of theft, he is taken to the king of that city. The king delivers justice: *"The shopkeeper took the king (Vikramaditya) to the KING of the city. When the KING of that*

*city looked at the innocent face of the king, he declared that this man can never steal anything from anyone"* (p.60).

Another norm for king is to be a marriage-arranger and dowry-giving father to daughters. Where on the other hand, characters from other castes don't have daughters. Kings have daughters of marriageable age and are looking for a suitable match for them. In Monday *vrat katha*, the king sends his soldiers to find a match for his daughters: *"soldiers of the country's old king chose the man as a match for the princess. King was happy to find such a good match for his daughter"* (p.16). In Monday *vrat katha*-I, the king gets his daughter married and departs her with a lot of wealth and maids-servants: *"King took him (his son in-law to the palace, welcomed and hosted him well. With a lot of maids and servants, they were departed"* (p.11).

Similarly, in Saturday *vrat katha*, the king does not want his daughter to be married to a poor oil-man. He gets angry to hear the choice of his daughter and gets the boy's arms cut: *"Queen told the king that their daughter has fallen for an oil-man and wants to get married to him. King got furious to hear that. He called him (oil-man) and got his arms cut and thrown in the jungle"* (p.61). Later when the city KING realizes that the oil-man is actually a king. City KING departs his daughter with Vikramaditya, with a lot of horses, elephants, maids, servants: "*KING departed Vikramaditya (with his daughter) along with the elephants, horses, maids, servants and a big procession"* (p.62).

Not for just their own daughters, but the responsibility of marrying daughters of others also lies upon kings. In Thursday *vrat katha*, the sage suggests if the royals have a lot of money, they should get daughters of poor married: *"if you have a lot of money, feed the hungry…. build innards…. get the unmarried daughters, of poor, married"* (p.30). In the same story, the maid suggests that royal family, with their money, should get the unmarried girls married: *"…feed the hungry, build water points, donate to brahmins…. arrange weddings of the unmarried girls"* (p.34).

Similarly, merchants are dutiful towards their varna dharma. Merchants are emphasized to be involved in trade and earning money. When they do not earn, they are told to earn and are treated badly. Mostly merchants are either rich or end up becoming rich by the end of the story. There are total three main merchant characters. One, in the Monday *vrat katha*, is introduced as a very rich merchant: *"A very rich merchant lived in a city". He didn't have any lack of wealth."* (p.7). Second merchant character is in Friday *vrat katha*, who belongs to a merchant family. He is the only man in the family, who does not earn: *"There was an old woman. She had seven sons. Six earned and one did not."* (p.46). He is ill-treated by his mother for not

earning: *"The old woman, would cook for the six sons, and would give the left-overs to the seventh son"* (p.46). When the man gets to know about this, he leaves the house to earn. He finds a job and gets promoted in his job:

> He (male protagonist) reached the shop of a merchant. The man asked the merchant for a job. The merchant said, salary would be decided on the basis of your work. He took the job. He would work from 7:00 in the morning to 12:00 at night. Just in a few days, he started maintaining the accounts of the ship, could sell things to customers. Merchant had 7-8 servants. They all were surprised to see his work. He had become so good at his job. Merchant also looked at his job and just in three months, he made him partner of the half of the profit from the shop. In twelve years, he became a well-known merchant. (p.47)

It is after the man has started earning that he gets respected at home. His mother talks to him with respect and also follows his orders. It is not just the man, but even his wife gets respected after twelve years of tormenting. *"Oh, daughter in law! Your owner has come. Sit, eat sweet desserts. Wear good clothes and jewellery"* (p.52).

Other merchants in the stories are working at their shops or are selling things. One merchant in Friday *vrat katha* has a big shop with multiple servants: *"it was a merchant's shop…he had 7-8 servants"* (p.47). One merchant is selling horses to the king. Another merchant has a shop, where he sells sweets. It can be concluded that merchants are busy handling their business and earning money. Considering the nature of their tasks, it can be concluded that they all belong to the life-stage of *grihastha asrama*.

Brahmins are portrayed as the respected caste. In multiple stories, people donate and arrange feasts for brahmins. For instance, in Monday *vrat katha*-I, the merchant tells his brother in-law *"take this child (merchant's son) to Kashi for studies. On your way, organize yagna (Hindu ritual) regularly, feed and donate to brahmins"* (p.8). In the same story, the feast for brahmin is organised several times: *"they (merchant's son and his uncle) organised feasts and donations for brahmins on the way"* (p.8); *"After finishing education, the boy and his uncle organised feasts and donations for brahmins, on their way back"* (p.10). Similarly, in Thursday vrat katha, the king is introduced as *"He regularly visited temple. He served Brahmins and teachers…Every day, he helped poor"* (p.29). In the same story, it is again mentioned that *"one should feed the hungry…donate to brahmins"* (p.34).

They are not just respected through donations and charity but are also at an authoritative position. They advise people what to do, in the times of crisis. For instance, in Thursday *vrat katha*-I, the sage advises the king and queen about their duties for society. The sage says ""*feed the*

*hungry, make public water points, give donations to brahmins, make innards, wells, ponds, stepwells, parks, gardens, get the daughters of poor married, organise religious sacrificial rituals"* (p.30). Similarly, in Monday *vrat katha*-II, old widow takes permission from sages (belong to caste of brahmins) before leaving to beg: *"In ancient times, a widow brahmin would take permission from sages, before leaving to beg with her sons"* (p.11). They can look  at people's sorrows and suggest remedy to overcome the crisis. In Monday *vrat katha*-III, the queen has been thrown out of the palace, she meets several people on her way. However, it is the priest in the temple, that can understand that she has been cursed by god: *"By looking at the face-glow and the body brilliance, the priest knew that she is a noble woman, who has been marred by destiny"* (p.18).

## 6.3 Summary of the findings

The norms constructed for men and women are largely constructed in contrast to each other. Further, a strict societal hierarchy is reflected in the stories. There is hierarchy amongst men and women and also amongst men, shown in occupations and the social status of the caste system Reflection of dharmic values can be observed in the stories. In this hierarchy, men are at a higher pedestal than women. Amongst men, it is the kings and brahmins that are most respected. Hence, reflection of *dharmic* values can be observed in the stories.

In the studied stories, women obey men and female characters are constructed as dependent on men. Women are portrayed as helpless in the absence of women and get men as a reward for performing the vows appropriately. On the other hand, male characters are constructed as the authoritative figures at home. They are depicted as owners, who control their possessions (i.e. wives). Controlling includes making sure that women follow the gendered *dharmic* norms. In order to do that, men can rely on severe punishments as well.

Two different spheres for men and women are portrayed. Women with their household chores and family concerns are busy in the private sphere of the house. Femininity is constructed to be primarily concerned about family members. They desire the well-being of their families, yearn for children and their husbands to return back. On the other hand, masculinity is constructed to be not too emotional (apart from anger) about life-events or family members. Men mostly hide emotions and facts from their families. They leave their families in stressful times and sometimes even forget about them without any mentioning of possible remorse. In a few cases, they don't come back home at all, unless it is ordered by the god.

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Duties of men and women are distinct from each other. Women are engaged in the household chores of cleaning and cooking while men perform their caste duties. For instance, kings work for the society, especially by building infrastructure. Their other main task is to spread religion. Kings are also constructed as wealthy fathers (to their own daughters and others' daughters) who will give a great dowry to the chosen boy and his family. All the kings belong to *grihastha asrama* as per *asrama dharma*.

All in all, caste duties are more important to men than the family duties. It can be concluded that *vrat kathas* prioritise caste duties for men over familial engagements. Hence keeping the caste system intact is a priority issue for these stories. However, the inter-caste cooperation reflects a sense of collective responsibility for the society. People help each other in bad times and otherwise as well. They build infrastructure, help the daughters get married and also help each other in sickness.

In most part, findings reflect the *dharmic* values of *Manusmriti's dharmashastra*. However, the category of independent and empowered women stands out as well. The portrayal of women characters, who run finances without the help of men is in contrast to the principles of *stri-dharma*. The idea of merit-transfer where it on one hand holds women accountable, it also gives them agency to maintain family prosperity.

Hence, it can be concluded that these *vrat kathas* are situated in Hindu *dharmic* belief system. However, with a major focus on women characters and the theme of independent and empowered women, these stories can also serve as an empowering tool for women in their daily lives.

# 7 Trustworthiness and ethics

Doing Qualitative research, it is important to understand the underlying assumptions and biases that I bring as a researcher to this piece of research. It is difficult and rather not possible to be aware of all the personal biases as a researcher. However, it is not even possible and meaningful to detach oneself completely from these biases. Hence, I am attempting to be transparent about my assumptions. I have already talked about my standpoints, in the research paradigm section of this thesis. Here, I will address the trustworthiness and ethics criteria of this study.

As discussed in my research paradigm, I follow the interpretivist approach to the thesis. I have the assumption that with an interpretivist approach, it is not possible to make the findings, completely transferable to other researches, nevertheless this is what I have aimed at. The findings of this research are unique to this thesis. Similarly, Rolfe (2006) argues "We need to recognize that each study is individual and unique, and that the task of producing frameworks and predetermined criteria for assessing the quality of research studies is futile" (p.304).

As for the validity of this study, I have taken several steps to ensure it. Firstly, the material to be studied was chosen based upon the way a typical reader would acquire these texts. Namely, I bought the text from a Hindu temple from north-western district of New Delhi. This ensures that the text to be analysed is a text still being sold in the marketplaces and being read by the people in the particular district of New Delhi. Additionally, it represents a typical text and not an exceptional case. In sum, the idea behind the material selection was to provide a representative sample still widely read by everyday practicing Hindus.

Another way I aimed to increase the validity of the research was to make sure to provide a sufficient amount of textual material for the reader. Considering the original text is in Hindi, I have translated the text trying to keep the 'voice' of the texts as authentic as possible. Further, I have provided extensive use of direct quotations from the text under study to increase both validity and trustworthiness of the study. This not only provides rich descriptions and samples of the textual content but ensures that the reader is able to follow the argumentation and content of this study without having to be familiar with the text or Hindi language.

In order to ensure that the results are based upon a firm grounding and the text itself, I have made sure to ground the analysis on theoretical underpinnings. The theory of gender performativity and qualitative content analysis is used to find patterns on the text that is, the use

of performative language, along with certain repetitive acts such as rewards or punishments grounded in the Hindu notions of *dharma* and *karma*. The text includes multiple stories and comparisons and patterns are examined and contrasted between these stories. Additionally, the findings are then placed in the wider context of the relevant academic literature.

As suggested by Cohen et. al (2002), I have looked upon the rival explanations of the data. Alternative interpretations of the data have been provided. For instance, the idea of shift of dependence from men to god, sages and priests, has been interpreted to be both making women dependent and helpless and also independent and empowered.

There are no ethical concerns in regard to the participants of the research, as this study is based on a textual analysis of the texts publicly available, hence there are no direct participants from whom the data is collected. As for myself, I have not taken a judgemental approach to the texts, instead I have taken a descriptive approach to the studied material.

As for the limitation of this study, it is due to language constraints. The stories are in Hindi and have been translated to English. Hindi language has a lot of performative language elements. These elements are context specific. Translating them is difficult and often takes their meaning away. Another language issue is my limited understanding of Sanskrit which led to limited reading of literature in Sanskrit. This Sanskrit literature is important to understand the historical context of various concepts used in the thesis such as *dharma*, *karma*, *vrat* etc. Due to this language limitation, I read the translated versions of these texts and learnt from their citations in other academic papers. Moreover, the data for this thesis focuses only on the binary gender categories. Hence, the dharma for the cultural non-binary categories such as Hijras, could not be explored.

# 8 Conclusion

In Hindu societies several religious stories and religious texts, through the concept of *dharma* and *karma,* have encouraged and discouraged specific gendered norms. *Dharma* is different for both men and women of different castes. Using the lens of *dharma* and *karma*, and gender performativity theory, this study has analysed what kind of gendered notions and norms *vrat kathas* construct. This question is followed by two further sub questions namely 'what kind of norms do *vrat kathas* construct for women?' and 'what kind of norms do *vrat kathas* construct for men?' I will first answer the sub questions and then answer the main question. Finally, I shall discuss the significance and implications of this study.

## 8.1 Discussion of the Findings

Finding answers to the above questions, it is crucial to keep in mind that the data in this study consists of certain type of religious texts meant to be studied by 'ordinary people'. These texts can shape people's understanding of gender and how gender is 'practiced', or 'performed'. Hence, all religious texts and stories are an influential medium regarding the worldviews and beliefs of the believers.

Multiple women characters repeatedly perform similar acts and get rewarded or avoid punishment. Through the acts of punishing the women, who do not adhere to *dharma*, it is made clear what kind of behaviour patterns are not part of the gendered norms that are encouraged in a Hindu society. In addition to these actual deeds, performative language constitutes and constructs the notions concerning what it is to be a 'proper' woman.

Women in the *vrat kathas* are constructed as selfless beings bound inside the domestic boundaries. They are compassionate and help each other in times of crisis. They advise others by prescribing *vrat* rituals for coping with the crisis. Other times they travel miles to help others. Moreover, the words used to describe women and their feelings construct them as kind and compassionate. In the case of goddesses, the use of word 'mother' is commonly mentioned so that the divine with the usage of this word becomes a family member. In Hindu context, the connotation around the word 'mother' is that of a nurturing, compassionate, and forgiving family member.

The majority of *vrat*-performers in the stories are women. Women are bound inside the domestic sphere performing their devotional practices as daily acts to support their families through doing domestic chores such as cleaning and cooking. Additionally, they perform *vrat* for family concerns, mainly for getting themselves husbands or to give birth to a son. The virtue of dependence (financial and otherwise) places them in lower position to men. They seek permission from men to go somewhere while in the absence of men, they get helpless and yearn for them to come back. Moreover, they are known as daughters, mothers, or wives by their marital status. The concept of merit-transfer of *karma* makes them responsible not just for their own life but also for what will happen in the lives of their family members.

To answer the second sub question, related to what gender notions and norms are constructed for men, the results indicate that male characters are constructed in contrast to women. There are fewer men characters, as compared to women characters. However, a few normative values for men are constructed through repeated acts and language used to describe them and events in their life. As family members, men are emotionally distant and secretive. They hide sorrowful details from their family members. Moreover, the norm of controlling their wives, is constructed through detaching oneself from their families. One important family duty for men, especially for the kings, is of being a marriage-arranger and dowry giving father to their own daughters and even daughters of others.

In contrast to women, men are mostly introduced and identified through their profession or caste. They are portrayed to be dutiful towards their caste. A king is a just and generous king and a merchant is a hard-working and rich merchant. One of the important things to note is that stories revolve around the upper three caste. The rich men from upper caste, further serve the uppermost caste of *brahmins*. They organise feasts and charity for *brahmins*.

To sum up, and answer the main question, it can be argued that the gendered categories constructed in the stories are binary and contrasting. These contrasting categories build and support each other. For instance, the category of obedient women also helps to construct the category of men as authoritative figures that controls their wives. These binary categories construct hierarchical gender structures and hence mirror the traditional *dharmic* values.

An important feature to understand the constructed differences is to look at what men and women characters really desire. The stories focus on the desires of women. Women are constructed to desire to be able to do their house hold tasks. Additionally, they want their husbands to come home. When they have a husband, they desire a child, preferably a son. This is in contrast to men who desire to be breadwinners of the family. In addition, they desire to be a

productive member of the society, through donations and charities. They desire education and power through money. It is interesting that *brahmins,* the uppermost caste, desire to be in a royal court either by becoming a minister or a king.

Nothing but religiosity is common to both genders. However, there are differences in the ways of being religious. Where women's religiosity is constructed as performing *vrat*, offering food, cleaning the house, men serve the poor, make donations and do charity to the *brahmins*.

Within these hierarchical gender structure, the category of independent and empowered women is significant. It can be argued that stories are based in a patriarchal context, while providing women with agency and support. This agency through merit transfer of *karma*, hold women accountable as well as providers of prosperity in the family. As a result, their choices can affect the whole family. Their acts decide if family will be wealthy or poor, prosperous or unhappy, together or divided. Hence, the karma of women helps women gain significance in the patriarchal society that these stories are set up in. They gain power and authority over what happens in their family. Similarly, the support of *vrat* and gods, and a shift of dependence from men, during the times of crisis, provide confidence to women. The powerful, independent characters such as goddesses and princesses can be expected to have stronger influence on the readers than characters with lower status.

These norms that have been constructed and constituted through performative (repeated) acts and performative (descriptive) language constitute as discussed in the results section. During analysis, the concepts of theory of *karma* and *dharma* have helped to understand the historical constitution of these performative acts and language. In this section, I will discuss how *karma* and *dharma* constitute these gendered norms.

As discussed above, the results reflect the dharmic values as ascribed by *Manusmriti*'s *dharmashastra*. Some of the norms can be directly traced back to certain verses in *manusmriti*. Basharat (1994) and Agarwal (1999) discuss the strict gender categories in Hinduism. The analysis of this thesis also depicts strict compartmentalization of norms for men and women. For instance, the norm of domestic chores is heavily emphasized in *manusmriti's dharmashastra. Manusmriti* states that domestic duties are only woman's responsibilities. Woman's household duties have been compared to the student's spiritual offerings (Holdrege, 2004). This idea of domestic chores being only woman's dharma is clearly depicted in the *vrat kathas*.

Kakar (1978) discusses that in Hindu societies women have no agency since childhood. Similarly, *manusmriti*, clearly states that a woman should never be independent. Instead, they should

be dependent on the men. This norm of dependence along with helplessness of women has been constructed in the *vrat kathas* through repeated association of this behavior to virtuous women who get rewarded.

Similarly, the norm of obedience for women can be understood in the light of the verse discussed in section 2.1.2 which cites that obedience to husband should be of highest importance to the woman and that it is through their obedience and faithfulness to their husband that they can attain salvation.

However, amidst these dharmic values, various depictions of empowered women can be understood as an addition to the dharmic traditions. These depictions portray strong, independent women capable of taking care of themselves and those close to them. The idea of empowerment of women has also been discussed by Caughran (1999), where she shows how discourses of Shiva and Parvati are empowering for women. Similarly, Wadley (1980) and Hedman (2007) point out the empowering elements of dichotomy in the nature of goddesses. These elements have also been found in the *vrat kathas* as discussed in section independent and empowered women. These elements prove to be empowering and providing agency to women. However, in most of the cases, it has been shown to be the case only in the absence of a man figure. Hence, while the women are capable and strong, the *vrat kathas* still maintain patriarchal hierarchy all the while giving some increased agency to women as compared to texts such as *Manusmriti*. This empowerment can, therefore, be argued to be a further attempt of providing the spiritual tools for women to sustain the patriarchal standards of the society.

In the case of men, the norm of being emotionally distant can be understood in the light of the idea that *Manusmriti* guides men with, to not get attached to familial relationship but earn spiritual merit (Section 2.1.1). It can be seen in *vrat kathas*, that men are gaining spiritual merit by doing their caste duties as they stay detached and distant from their families. When they conflict, the priority of caste duties over family duties and relationships is clearly portrayed in the stories. Men stay dutiful to their caste duties as ascribed by their *dharmic* status of birth.

It is clear that the underlying dharmic value system is reflected on the analyzed vrat kathas. This is not surprising considering the Hindu and *dharmic* background these stories are situated in. These stories can be understood to be an amalgamation of *dharmic* values, spirituality, and devotional practices. However, as discussed, the theme of independent and empowered women in the absence of men emerges strongly in these stories.

## 8.2 Significance and implications of the study

The results of this study are specific and significant for both academia and society. On the academic level, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary studies of gender and religion. The vague connection of gender and religious studies towards each other has been pointed out by several scholars (See, King and Beattie (2005); Woodhead and Montgomery (2002). p.77). This research is an important contribution towards the ongoing work of linking gender and religious studies. More specifically, this research sheds light on gender construction in Hindu context, by analysing widely read *vrat kathas*. Therefore, this thesis fills the research gap of modern religious texts and gender construction, as the majority of Eastern gender studies work has focused on ancient religious texts. This will increase our understanding on how contemporary Hindu texts construct gendered notions and norms and hence sheds light on the underlying gender assumptions that these texts hold.

Additionally, this research might serve as a starting point for further research of immensely rich *vrat katha* literature. It will provide tools to gender-analyse the other *vrat kathas* and other religious folklore traditions. The rich theoretical framework used in this study, can be utilised to study other relevant religious stories. The usage of gender performativity theory is new for analysing Hindu stories and specifically *vrat kathas*. Moreover, this thesis develops a theoretical lens of *dharma*, *karma* and gender performativity is new and hence can be used to analyse further stories.

On a societal level, the findings of this study will contribute to the benefit of the society considering that *vrat kathas* are a popular reading amongst Hindu population. For society these results provide a sense of that what gender roles do *vrat kathas* entails and what empowering elements they entail for readers set up in a patriarchal society. As *kathas* are told and heard in groups as well, this thesis can provide pointers to understand how these *kathas* limit the lives of and can give agency to the women, through the exemplary roles of women in the stories. Consequently, in future research, it could also be possible to link *vrat kathas* with the readers' perceptions of these texts.

The results of this thesis indicate that gender categories in these *vrat kathas* are binary. The non-binary categories such as *Hijras* and their religiosity have not been explored. What kind of *vrat* do Hindu Hijras observe and what is the content of their *vrat kathas*, their motivations for performing *vrat* could be further explore

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