A STUDY OF VRATA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO THE WORSHIP OF DURGA
FROM THE STANDPOINT OF DHARMASAstra.

INTRODUCTION:

The vratas do not need any introduction in India. Different types of vratas are observed and celebrated by different people whether belonging to the sophisticated cities or to remote primitive villages. Some of these vratas have played a very important role in the society and religion of India. It stands to reason that the root of these vratas have its germs in various earlier Vedic sacrifices. In fact, the Darsapaurpamasa, Caturmasya, Agnistoma and other sacrifices may be regarded as the repository of the crude form of the vratas. Thus although modern vratas have been enumerated in the ancient Dharmasastras or in the Nibandhas their earliest forms can be had in those Vedic sacrifices.

The Dharmasastrakaras and the Nibandha writers have left no stones unturned in defining and explaining the vratas. Beginning from Manu and Yajnavalkya right up to Raghunandana of Bengal, numerous acaryas have dealt with these vratas. Raghunandana in his Ekadasi-tattva has discussed the question of accepting Ekadasi as vrata. Sridatta Upadhyaya the famous Nibandha writer of Mithila and predecessor of Raghunandana has also taken up the conception of vrata and has been able to formulate from principles by which the true character of a vrata can be ascertained. His famous work Samayapradipa is a
doyen of such vrata treatises. Still earlier the names of Hemādri and Lakṣmidhara attract our attention. In fact they are the persons of our obligation and reverence in this connection. The two monumental works namely Caturvarga-cintāmaṇi of Hemādri and Krtyakalpataru of Lakṣidhara are the mines of information regarding the diversity of vratas, their time, period and development - their influence on the people and the society - their classification - the detailed ceremonies of their observations - their efficacy and as well as their limitations.

The worship of Durgā in eastern India has been most popular. In fact it is the greatest vrata here. The eastern Indian Nibandha writers on Dharmasastras have admitted that this Durgāpujā is undoubtedly the greatest of all the vratas. As this Durgā worship requires a thorough knowledge of Vedic, Tantric and Purānic texts, it was possible for the seasoned and experienced writers to take up this topic. So the principal Dharmasastrakaras and some of the important eastern Indian Nibandha writers like Jumūtavāhana, Srināthācārya-cūḍāmaṇi, Vācaspati Mīra, Śulapāṇi, Raghunandana and others have both theoretically and practically contributed to their mite in the educative and illustrative discussion on the Durgā worship from the standpoint of the Dharmasastras. Thus the importance of the Durgā worship as a vrata may never be underestimated. In fact, it unfolds the mystery of many manners and customs which are associated with this worship and which may throw fresh light on the medieval social and religious history of eastern India.
The present dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is named "Conception of Vrata - Its Age and Antiquity". Here along with the traditionally accepted views with regard to the antiquity of vrata, the countries which rose into prominence at the very dawn of human civilization have also not been lost sight of.

The second chapter is "Various Vedic Sacrifices - the earliest form of the Vratas". An attempt has been made there to explain the crude form of the vratas in a number of Vedic sacrifices. Asvala-yana and Katyāyana, the two most successful Srautasūtra writers have also something to say in this regard. The conception of the vrata according to their standpoint has been brought to light.

The third chapter bears the heading "Historical Evolution of the Worship of Durgā - a Vrata". Durgā worship as is seen today was not like it during the days of its earlier beginning. The present paraphernalia of the Durgā worship is the result of many inclusion and exclusion of different mantras from different Dharmasastras and different Purāṇa texts. Moreover, a great change in its proceedings can also be observed. The worship of Durgā has been historically evolved in this eastern part of India.

Chapter four is entitled as "The Dharmasastras and Their Bearing on the Durgā Worship." As this worship is of unique importance both socially and culturally in the lives of the people of eastern India, there arose a steady advent of quite a number of celebrated Dharmasastra writers, Nibandha writers in particular, who have
written many good and original texts and digests on the Durga worship in its various forms. Of these numerous writers five have been selected on account of their popularity, superiority and influence on their successors. These are Kalaviveka of Jimitavahana, Durgotsavaviveka of Srinathacaryacudamani, Durgotsavaprakarana and Krityaacintamanii of Vacaspati Misra, Durgotsavaviveka of Sulapani and Durgapuja of Raghunandana. In selecting these their different providences have been borne in mind. Thus, particularly Bengal and Mithila have been taken into consideration.

At the end there is a brief and selected bibliography of the major important reference books used in the present dissertation.

I would be failing in my duties if I do not express my heartfelt gratitude to my guide Dr Asoke Chatterjee, Sastri, M. A. (Double), Ph. D. (Cal.), D. Phil. (Burd.), D. Ger. (Marg.), D. Lit. (Benaras), Pancatirtha of the Department of Sanskrit, Calcutta University. He as my 'Guru' has not only encouraged me and helped me in all possible ways but has thoroughly examined the whole of the present work step by step. It is but for his illuminating guidance it would not have been possible for me to penetrate on this untrodden path.

(Bharat Chandra Chakrabarty)