

Sacred Togetherness: Women's Devotional Journeys and the *Kartik Vrata*

Surabhi Pandey, Assistant Professor
Department of History
Kamala Nehru College,
University of Delhi
Orcid id: 0000-0002-2767-6428

Abstract

Hindu women's participation in pilgrimage is often overlooked in scholarship, as it is typically associated with domesticity or seen as a subtle challenge to societal norms. However, pilgrimage is not merely an act of travel it serves as a transformative experience, bridging the familiar and the unknown while fostering cultural interactions. Focusing on women from Orissa traveling to Vrindavan during Kartik, this study examines their engagement in the *Kartik Vrata*, a month-long ritual emphasizing familial well-being. Drawing on ethnographic research, it highlights how women forge connections through ritual practices, extending beyond physical movement into visionary journeys. These pilgrimages not only revitalize traditions but also challenge normative gender roles. By immersing themselves in the sacred journey, these women embody their regional identities while fostering profound connections with both their deity and fellow pilgrims, illustrating the fluidity of religious expression.

Keywords: Women pilgrims, *Kartik Vrata*, domestic rituals, Vrindavan

In India's popular religion, rituals serve as both a means of engaging with the sacred and a transformative force in one's life. Women actively shape rituals as authors, performers, and participants, demonstrating their agency while reflecting broader social values. Hinduism idealizes qualities like fertility, prosperity, chastity, and motherhood, forming the essence of *stri-dharma*. However, scholarly focus on texts like *Manusmriti* has often sidelined women's lived religious experiences. This text-centric approach prioritizes domesticity over the diverse ritual practices women observe, narrowing the understanding of their devotional roles. By emphasizing normative ideals, it overlooks the ways women engage with spirituality beyond household religious duties.

As a methodological approach, this is where ethnography offers deep insights into religious practices by engaging directly with practitioners, uncovering meanings that texts alone may not capture. By immersing in lived experiences, it provides a nuanced understanding of how rituals and pilgrimages shape social and spiritual life. This study explores how pilgrimage and collective rituals foster social bonds, resilience, and interconnectedness while reshaping spiritual experiences and gender roles. Focusing on women from Orissa traveling to Vrindavan during Kartik, it examines their participation in the *Kartik Vrata*, a sacred month-long

observance dedicated to Krishna. Through vows and rituals centered on family well-being, these women actively shape and sustain religious traditions. The Kartik Vrata, celebrating Krishna as a transcendent figure of love and devotion, highlights processes of tradition-building and renewal. By bridging pilgrimage studies with gendered analyses of ritual practices, this study underscores the significance of daily rites, including the intricate art of alpanas, offering a deeper understanding of this enduring tradition.¹

Understanding Vratas

A *Vrata* or *Brata* is a religious vow undertaken to honor a deity, often with the hope of fulfilling specific desires. Deeply embedded in Hindu traditions, *vratas* follow the Hindu calendar, with nearly every month featuring multiple observances. These vows involve disciplined rituals and are closely tied to bhakti, believed to transform one's destiny by addressing past sins (Wadley 36). The term *vrata*, commonly translated as "religious vow" or "fast," is traced by P.V. Kane to the Sanskrit root *vr*, meaning "to choose" or "to will" (Kane 5). In *History of Dharmashastras*, Kane notes that 25,000 verses in the Puranas discuss *vratas*, linking the term to celestial paths and religious commandments. Unlike Vedic sacrifices, *vratas* were accessible and did not require a priest, emphasizing their folk-oriented nature and widespread appeal in medieval devotional traditions (ibid).

Most scholars agree that the meaning of *vrata* evolved over time. In early texts like *Manu*, it referred to obligatory rites, often performed as atonement for past misdeeds. However, in the later *Puranas*, *vratas* shifted in purpose, focusing on pleasing the gods to achieve desired outcomes rather than expiating sins

¹During fieldwork in Vrindavan in 2019, I observed a group of women from rural Odisha performing the Kartik Vrata at the Shri Goda Vihar Mandir. While widely practiced across India, their pilgrimage was unique as many had never traveled beyond their home districts, undertaking the journey to fulfill a vow. Such pilgrimages, increasingly organized by tour operators over the past two decades, highlight Vrindavan's role as a key destination for women from eastern India during Kartik. The group from Ganjam, Odisha, included both familiar companions and strangers who formed bonds along the way. Their rituals, guided by an Oriya priest reciting the Vrata Katha, reflected an affinity for Gaudiya Vaishnavism while remaining fluid in sectarian adherence. Their openness to participation and documentation underscored how pilgrimage serves as both a religious and social experience, reinforcing devotional traditions while fostering new communal ties. Guided by an Oriya priest who regularly recited the Vrata Katha, the group's rituals reflected an affinity for Gaudiya Vaishnavism while remaining part of a broader cultural phenomenon that has endured for decades. This study, based on two weeks of observation, documents their participation, underscoring the communal and inclusive nature of their pilgrimage practices. Despite the language barrier, Hindi-speaking members facilitated understanding, bridging traditions and explaining their unique Kartik Vrata practices.

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862

Vol.-4, Issue-I, 2025

(Ganguly 52). Although *bratas* often incorporate religious aspects of austerity and purity, their purpose is not to separate the performer from the physical world or bring them closer to Brahman or Ultimate Reality. Instead, the aim is to seek blessings and achieve a specific worldly desire (Daniel 29). In that sense, the term *vrata* encompasses a variety of meanings, ranging from command or law to any form of vow, with its modern interpretation focusing on vows linked to specific worship practices.

While some *vratas* are observed by men, the majority are prescribed for women. Men's *vratas* are typically more formal and aligned with Vedic traditions, whereas women's *vratas* often incorporate folk elements, passed down orally through generations. These practices often involve invoking local deities for family blessings and well-being. Although there is a general understanding of who performs which types of *vratas*, the distinction is not absolute, as women also participate frequently alongside their husbands in other *vratas* as well. The *Kartik Vrata* in Vrindavan stands out for its unique aspect: women pilgrims travel in groups, large or small, from across the country to perform these rituals. Beyond the domesticated purpose of *vratas*, the act of traveling to Vrindavan during this month holds special reverence. The month of Kartik is particularly significant in Braj, especially in Vrindavan, whose name literally means "Forests of Vrinda," referring to the sacred Tulsi plant. Tulsi is central to the elaborate daily rituals and *vrata* practices of this period, with *Tulsi Puja* widely observed across northern India. Additionally, Vrindavan is named after Vrinda Devi, revered as the chief goddess of the region, further emphasizing its importance.

The sanctity of the month of Kartik is emphasized in Rupa Goswami's *Mathura Mahatmya*, which highlights the profound significance of undertaking a pilgrimage to Mathura Mandala during this time. The text conveys that even worship performed in Mathura during Kartik—without the use of correct mantras, proper offerings, or adherence to specific rituals—is esteemed by the demigods as equivalent to worshipping the divine directly (Rupa Goswami 12).

Many British sources also highlight the sanctity of this plant. William Crooke (1848–1923) a prominent British civil servant and ethnographer who extensively studied the customs, folklore, and traditions of India during the colonial period mentions "The *Tulasi* or holy basil is closely associated

with the worship of Vishnu. The plant is specially worshipped by women after bathing and more particularly at the full moon of Kartik, if the bathing be in the Ganges”(Crooke 257).In the similar manner another British ethnographer mentions that “Most Vaishnava sects wear necklaces and carry rosaries made of this wood. Among the Amats of Bengal, if a person dies at a distance from the Ganges, the ashes are collected under a small platform on which a Tulasi plant is grown” (Risley 18).These references reflect the long-established nature of this practice that has been undergoing for many years.

The month of Kartik begins after the *Shukla Paksha Purnima* of Ashwin, commonly known as *Sharad Purnima*. This month includes Diwali, one of the most significant festivals in the Hindu calendar, and occurs during autumn, a transitional period between the monsoons and winter. Like other prescribed Hindu vows, the *Kartik Vrata* follows a structured format: it starts with *Sankalp* (a declaration of intent), followed by *Snan* (a ritual bath), *Puja* (worship of the deity), listening to the associated *katha* (stories), offering *dan* (gifts) to a Brahmin, and concludes with *Udyapan* (a closing ceremony)(Pearson 143-5).Throughout the month of Kartik, Tulsi is venerated alongside Vishnu. Krishna, the primary deity of Braj and a manifestation of Vishnu, is honoured in stages, from childhood to adulthood, culminating in the marriage of Vishnu and Tulsi on *Shukla Paksha Ekadashi*. This connection is a key reason why pilgrims travel to Braj, especially during Kartik.

Vaishnavism flourished across India during the medieval period, particularly in the early sixteenth century with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s devotional movement. His ecstatic worship emphasized collective expressions through sankirtana—chanting, singing, and dancing—bridging social divides. Bhajans and kirtans resonated widely, fostering a deep connection with Braj. This movement extended beyond Bengal, influencing neighbouring regions, including Orissa, where it merged with local philosophical and tribal traditions (Lahiri 143; Eschmann et al. 82).

Women traveling to Vrindavan thus serve as carriers of their regional culture that becomes evident in their ritual practices and artistic expressions. The depiction of Jagannatha in their *alpanas* symbolizes the transfer of these cultural elements to Braj. The Kartik Vrata grants women control over rituals, establishing temporal

boundaries within Vrindavan's sacred space. Intricate *alpana* designs and clay figurines, freshly created each day and erased by evening, highlight the transient nature of sacred moments. These artistic practices animate anthropomorphic depictions of deities, integrating seamlessly into ritual frameworks. While *alpanas* may seem decorative, their deeper significance lies in their ritual context. Diana L. Eck describes Hindu sacred images as "visual texts" conveying sacredness within specific rituals (Eck 12). The cyclical process of creating and erasing *alpanas* mirrors the temporal nature of devotion, where the deity is invoked, worshipped, and bid farewell, only to return in the next day's rituals.

Identifying Gopi: Women's Ritual Bonds

The concept of *Sakhi* and ritual friendships among these women represents a form of religious practice that fosters lasting friendships, extending beyond the ritual itself. These ritual bonds, which resemble human marriages, form lifelong connections between two women. This paper examines a tradition practiced by women traveling from Eastern regions to Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, where the *gopis* (the cowherd girls from Krishna mythology) serve as models for female friendships grounded in ritual. The *gopis*, also known as *sakhis* or "female friends," inspire this tradition, where the term *sakhi* commonly refers to a woman's close friend. The ritual process of "becoming" a *sakhi* leads to a lifelong bond. For many women, this relationship mirrors a marital connection but often holds greater significance than blood or marital ties. This tradition highlights how women have embraced Krishna worship to address their own interpersonal needs and values.

The stories shared by these women reflect the deep emotional significance of their pilgrimage. Purnima Devi, a widow from Odisha's Ganjam district, described her journey to Vrindavan as a 'lifelong dream'. Since childhood, she had envisioned visiting the sacred land, and experiencing it firsthand for a month was profoundly emotional. She emphasized how the rituals held deep personal meaning for her and how, despite coming from different castes and villages, the votaries became each other's closest confidants. Traveling in groups fosters a sense of empowerment, allowing women to temporarily step away from their household roles and immerse themselves in devotion. Their spiritual connection is rooted in both their love for Krishna and the experience of the sacred land itself. Through their participation in *vratas*, they carve out a space for self-expression and empowerment (Pearson 1996). Many return home with a sense of fulfillment, sharing stories of

their pilgrimage.

After over a month in Vrindavan, the women had become so familiar with the area that they knew places even I, despite two years of research, had yet to explore. Living together in a close-knit community, they relished their time away from daily household responsibilities. While most were homemakers, some were educated, including a retired school teacher. They made the most of their stay, ensuring they experienced the region fully. Their engagement with the pilgrimage extended beyond rituals to forming new relationships, such as with a boat rower who ferried them across the Yamuna at sunrise and their collective efforts in preparing offerings.

A key theme that emerged from interactions with the women was the centrality of *Gopi Bhav* in their devotional practices. Radha's elevated status, influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnavism, was evident in the *purna kumbha* depicted in their *alpana*, symbolizing that Radha's worship should precede all others, as she is inseparable from Krishna. In Bengal Vaishnavism, Radha embodies *Madhura Bhakti* or *Priti*, representing the highest form of devotion. The *gopis* of Vrindavan played a crucial role in facilitating Radha and Krishna's union, seeking joy in witnessing their divine love rather than pursuing Krishna for themselves. During Kartik, divine love for Krishna is believed to be more accessible, and adopting the role of a *gopi* brings devotees closer to the ultimate goal of *Vaikuntha*. The *gopis'* surrender to Krishna's love symbolizes the soul's yearning for God. Throughout the month, these women saw themselves solely as *gopis*, leaving behind their domestic lives and responsibilities. In Vrindavan, they perceived Krishna as a child to care for, mirroring their roles as nurturers. This profound connection reflects Gaudiya Vaishnavism's core belief in Krishna as the *Para-Brahma*, the ultimate source of divine energy, beauty, and *Rasa*.

The Kartik Puja incorporates depictions of Krishna's playful and transgressive nature but also introduces imagery that reconfigures Krishna traditions in ways that may not align with Sanskritic theology yet resonate with women's values (Pintchman 44). Judith Butler argues that rituals, as performative acts, shape gender identity through repeated stylized actions. Such perform activity allows women's *vratas* to subtly challenge patriarchal structures, demonstrating how devotion remains dynamic and evolving (Pechilis).

Victor and Edith Turner describe pilgrims as stepping out of their usual social roles to form a temporary,

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862

Vol.-4, Issue-I, 2025

classless society based on shared experiences, termed *communitas* (Turner & Turner). Though often critiqued for its limited applicability to Hindu rituals, elements of *communitas* persist, particularly among marginalized groups (Badone & Roseman 3-5). During the Kartik Vrata, *gopibhav* fostered deep female companionship, blurring hierarchies of caste and marital status. Women identified as Krishna's beloved *gopis* in Vrindavan, emphasizing equality in devotion, though they acknowledged that social distinctions would resume upon returning to their villages.

The Kartik Vrata is believed to erase sins and remove misfortunes, making it especially significant for widows. Widowhood, often stigmatized and bound by strict social constraints, finds a space for spiritual elevation during this sacred month dedicated to Vishnu. While traditionally excluded from many rituals, widows engage deeply in the *brata*, seeking liberation and empowerment. Women serve as ritual creators, participants, and observers, actively shaping religious traditions. Rituals reinforce, challenge, or transform social norms, particularly gender roles (Pintchman 5). Lesley Northup argues that rituals “constitute persons,” shaping identity through repeated sacred performances (Northup 87).

Rituals shape gender identity by influencing how individuals engage with social norms—either conforming, resisting, or negotiating them. Hindu women's religiosity reflects their roles, experiences, and values (Pintchman 5). Marjorie Proctor-Smith identifies religion's dual function: as emancipatory, allowing women to transcend constraints, and as sacralising, reinforcing traditional roles (Proctor-Smith 25-28). Susan Sered notes that women personalize religion, finding spiritual significance in daily practices (Sered).

Hindu traditions blend folk and Brahmanical elements, as seen in the *Kartik Vrata*, where women from Odisha integrate regional customs into Vrindavan's sacred landscape. This pilgrimage provides a space for devotional engagement on their terms, allowing them to sing, dance, create ritual art, and listen to sacred narratives without judgment. While ritual discipline instils order, the journey fosters creativity, emotional expression, and camaraderie. For many, this pilgrimage fulfils a lifelong aspiration, offering both spiritual liberation and a deep sense of gratitude.

References

- Crooke, W. *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*. North Western Provinces and Oudh, Government Press, 1894.
- Daniel, J. M. *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion*. State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Eck, D. L. *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Eschmann, A., H. Kulke, and G. C. Tripathi. *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*.

INDIC HERITAGE AND CULTURE

An International Open Access, Peer Reviewed Refereed, Yearly Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN (0): 2584-2862

Vol.-4, Issue-I, 2025

Manohar, 1986.

Ganguly, Joydev. *Dharmasastras in Mithila*. Calcutta Sanskrit College Research Series, no. 78, 1972.

Lahiri, A. *Chaitanya Movement in Eastern India*. Panti Pustak, 1993.

Northup, L. *Ritualizing Women*. Pilgrim, 1997.

Pearson, A. M. "Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind: Ritual Fast in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women." *State University of New York Press*, 1996.

Pechilis, K. "Illuminating Women's Religious Authority through Ethnography." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 29, no. 1, Spring 2013, pp. 93-101.

Pintchman, T. "Domesticating Krishna: Friendship, Marriage and Women's Experience in a Hindu Women's Ritual Tradition." *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*, edited by G. L. Beck, State University of New York Press, 2005, pp. 43-64.

Proctor-Smith, M. "In the Line of the Female': Shakerism and Feminism." *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*, edited by C. Wessinger, University of Illinois Press, 1993, pp. 23-40.

Risley, H. H. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. Vol. 1, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891.

Sered, S. S. *Women as Ritual Experts*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Sered, S. S. *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

Wadley, S. S. *Essays on North Indian Folk Traditions*. Chronicle Books, 2005.

Turner, V., and E. Turner. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. Columbia University Press, 1978.

Werbner, P. "The Place of Transgressive Sexuality in South Asia: From Ritual to Popular Culture." *Histories of Intimacy and Situated Ethnography*, edited by K. I. Leonard, G. Reddy, and A. G. Gold, Manohar, 2010, pp. 185-208.