

## Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata and Kathā—A New Perspective

*This article by Jai B. Jaglan is from a small book on Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata Kathā in Hindi based on the lectures of the late Ānanda Swāmi Saraswati, an Ārya Samāj scholar of great repute, together with some comments by K.S. Sripada Raju.*

Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata Kathā is found in the last five chapters of the Revā Khaṇḍa section of Skanda Purāṇa. These five chapters, narrated by sage Sūta in a hermitage in the forest of Naimiṣāraṇya, describe the stories (*kathās*) of five people whose pain and suffering were removed by observance of Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata. A poor Brāhmin became a happy man and a woodcutter became rich and was blessed with a son. A king and a trader got blessed with daughters by doing Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata. By forgetting to perform the Vrata, the trader gets into trouble; and after performing the Vrata, his suffering ended. A proud king had his pride humbled and thereafter became a devotee. These five stories are intended to motivate people to observe the Vrata, but they do not truly explain what the Vrata is and how to perform it properly.

In this article, we examine these questions: Who is Satyanārāyaṇa? What is Vrata? How does one perform it? What is the discipline required? What is the significance of the Naimiṣāraṇya forest, which has been described as a holy place (a *tīrtha*)? What is a Tīrtha? The answers to these questions become clear by reading the entire Skanda Purāṇa, for scattered throughout that book are passages that teach true devotion to God and provide clarifications.

**Who is Satyanārāyaṇa?** *Nārāyaṇa* is the Lord and *Satyam* means Truth, so Satyanārāyaṇa is the Lord who is Truth. Truth—one of the cardinal virtues of Sanātana Dharma—is the quality of the Lord that is worshipped during Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata. Depending on one's need to embrace a particular value at a particular time, one may choose to adore other attributes of the Lord. Thus we worship Kṣamānārāyaṇa when it is His forgiving nature we wish to focus on; Kīrtinārāyaṇa when it is His fame that appeals to us; Daridranārāyaṇa when it is His Poverty we seek to celebrate; and so on. We note that the Daridranārāyaṇa aspect of the Lord had a special appeal for Swāmi Vivekānanda, Mahātma Gāndhī, and Vinoba Bhāve because of their passionate commitment to serve the poor.

**What is Vrata?** Vrata is making a commitment or *sankalpa* or pledge to follow a certain procedure. Adopting any discipline and adhering to it is Vrata. Making a promise and keeping it is Vrata. When a government official makes a promise to faithfully discharge the duties and obligations of his office—that too is Vrata. To fast for a specific reason is also Vrata, but Vrata is much more than fasting. Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata is the discipline which a devotee adopts in order to get the protection and the blessings of Lord Satyanārāyaṇa. Adopting the Vrata commits one to live a certain lifestyle and follow certain rules: a life of purity (*sattva*) and austerity (*tapasya*), with truthfulness in one's thoughts and actions, control of

one's senses, and constant remembrance of the Lord. One has to observe these ethical practices all the time in order to gain the benefits of Satyanārāyaṇa Vrata.

**What is the significance of Naimiṣāraṇya?** The word *Naimiṣāraṇya* is derived from the root word *nimiṣa*, which means “an instant.” Thus Naimiṣāraṇya is a forest where just by the blinking of an eye, we have God Vision. Skanda Purāṇa identifies the forest's location as Nīmaṣār on the left bank of the river Gomati in Sītāpūr district of Uttar Pradesh. In a deeper sense, however, the forest of Naimiṣāraṇya is one's own *hṛdaya* (heart), for the Lord lives in one's heart. But, as explained below, God Vision is granted only to those who have purity of mind.

**What is a Tīrtha?** Literally, *tīrthas* mean holy places—places by visiting which a person is liberated from the ocean of miseries; places where sages and saints have meditated for long periods; places with a pure environment which is conducive to the practice of *sādhana* (spiritual disciplines). Insight into what really constitutes a *tīrtha* is given by sage Agastya in the Kāśī Khaṇḍa section of the Skanda Purāṇa in response to a question from his disciple and wife Lopāmudrā. Agastya starts his description by saying “Now I describe Mānasa Tīrthas; by bathing in these *tīrthas*, man reaches to supreme abode.” Then he elaborates on the Mānasa Tīrthas (“sacred places of the mind”):

*satyam tīrtham kṣamā tīrtham tīrtham-indriya-nigrahaḥ  
sarva-bhūta-dayā-tīrtham tīrtham-ārjavameva ca  
dānam tīrtham damas-tīrtham santoṣas-tīrtham-ucyate  
brahmacaryam param tīrtham tīrtham ca priyavādītā  
jñānam tīrtham dhṛtis-tīrtham tapas-tīrtham-udāhṛtam  
tīrthānāmapi tattīrtham viśuddhamanasaḥ parā  
na jalāplutadehasya snānam-ityabhīdhīyate  
sa snāto yo damasnātaḥ śuciḥ śuddhaḥ manomalaḥ*

Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa VI.30-33

“Truth is *tīrtha*, forgiveness is *tīrtha*, control of senses is *tīrtha*, mercy to all creatures is *tīrtha*, straightforwardness, charity, control of mind, contentment, celibacy, sweet speech, knowledge, fortitude, austerity are all *tīrthas*. Among these, celibacy is prime *tīrtha* and purity of mind is *tīrtha* of *tīrthas*. Dipping in water is not bath. It is the person who has controlled the senses and cleansed the impurities of the mind that has really taken bath.”

Sage Agastya then goes on to emphasize that removing the impurities of the body does not make a man pure; removal of the impurities of the mind alone makes a man pure. What are the impurities of the mind? They are lust, anger, greed, attachment, ego, jealousy, hate, etc. Yama and Niyama, restraint and observances, which are among the disciplines listed by Patañjali in his Aṣṭāṅga (eight-limbed) Yoga, are meant to get rid of these impurities and enable one to live a harmonious life. When the mind has become pure, we start to feel the presence of God within us.