

Sitala: The Small-Pox Goddess of India

By

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It is a common-place belief amongst the rural folk of India that every phase of human life is directly controlled by some divine power. Naturally enough, diseases whatever may be their nature or symptoms are also attributed to some sort of unnatural or rather supernatural phenomenon. If man suffers from any disease it is either due to an evil spirit or the working of a sorcerer or believed to be brought on by the wrath of an angry God. These supernatural phenomena have such impact on the mind of the Indian people that every disease has its own theory of origin. "If small-pox comes of its own accord in the ordinary form, it is harmless, but a more dangerous variety is attributed to the anger of local deities."¹ Usually the deities take the help of various demons. The concept of the small-pox deity and its origin varies from place to place in India. The various village deities or the tutelary deities of the villages of India are supposed to be the cause of small-pox. As Grâmadevatâ or village deities they are supposed to be "generally an-ionic, being supposed to dwell in a pile of rough stones or potsherds, collected under the sacred tree of the community."² It is surprising to note that almost all village deities are regarded as "Mother" and usually worshipped by the women folk of India. Their origin, method of worship and folk-beliefs about their uncertain temper pose a bewildering complexity in ex-

1. W. Crooke, 1896, *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Vol. I, p. 124.

2. W. Crooke, 1919, "The Cults of the Mother Goddesses in India," *Folklore*, Vol. XXXIX, p. 285.

plaining their relationship to the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon.

Small-pox, being an epidemic of uncertain nature is generally believed to be caused by one of these village deities either due to the neglect of the villagers in proper worship or the desire of the deity to have victims. *Sitalâ* is one of these innumerable village goddesses, popular all over India excepting the South. She is regarded as the "Mother" who "presides over small-pox, and may prevent small-pox, cause small-pox or be herself small-pox."³ In south India, small-pox is also believed to be caused by village goddesses namely, *Sukhajâmâ*, *Gangâmmâ*, *Kanniyama*, etc. It is surprising to note that though *Sitalâ* is popular all over India, She is somehow or other unknown in the south. This leads us to believe that the present image of *Sitalâ* in India has been worked and reworked by the Brahmans to establish her relationship with the different goddesses of the Hindus. *Sitalâ* in her primitive form was also aniconic and was only responsible for and in charge of small-pox. From the position of a disease-deity She has been transformed to a children's deity now. Of course, She is still regarded as the small-pox deity with additional responsibility as a protector of children. Every year on a particular day according to the Hindu almanac She is worshipped all over India. This ritual is mainly done by the women folk for the welfare of the children. Besides this annual rite She is worshipped also when small-pox appears in a village. Perhaps at a very late stage, a cultus of some kind has been created around *Sitalâ*, by which She is worshipped as a protectress of the children. To my mind, this status of *Sitalâ* is a later development and might have originated due to the high rate of infantile mortality in India.

Origin Stories:

The stories regarding the worship of *Sitalâ* are different from one another, representing the diversity of popular imagination. In Bengal, it is believed that since the people did

3. M. Williams, 1897, "Indian Mother Worship," reprinted from the *Athenaeum* of Dec. 6, 1879 by H. C. Coote in *Folklore Record*, Vol. III, Pt. I., p. 120.

not pay proper respect to *Sitalâ*, She summoned the fever demon and consulted with him. The fever demon called sixty-four kinds of pox. It was decided that the fever demon should first go to the earth and enter into a human body after which the pox deity should follow. According to the decision they reached the kingdom of Chandraketu. After their arrival the people of the kingdom suffered from small-pox. *Sitalâ* in the disguise of a woman went to the king and advised him to worship her. After the worship was made, the people of the kingdom recovered.⁴

In northern India, *Sitalâ* is considered to have been the wife of a Muslim emperor, in her previous birth. She was a Hindu woman and as such devoted to the Hindu gods. As a reward for her piety she was deified as a manifestation of *Sitalâ* after her death.⁵ In Râewâl in northern India, She is considered as a mythical woman, *Gândhâri*, the wife of *Dhritarâstra* of the famous epic *Mahâbhârata*, in her previous birth.⁶

In Gujerat, *Sitalâ*'s shrine is identified with the famous hero Bariha Bapji or Babribâhan of the *Mahâbhârata*.⁷ In Konkan She is identified with the Hindu goddess Laxmi.⁸ In Punjab during the small-pox period, the housewife makes a vow to propitiate *Sitalâ* by doing service at *Gurudwâr* (the temple of the Sikhs) and recite the holy book *Grantha Sahib* of the Sikhs.⁹

The foregoing accounts reveal that the worship of *Sitalâ*, the primitive disease deity, through the lapse of time has been identified with Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faith.

Preventive Measures:

The various precautions taken to ward off small-pox vary from place to place, since the precautionary measures largely depend on the beliefs of the people of a particular area. But the general trend in India is to propitiate the angered *Sitalâ*.

4. A. Bhattacharya, 1962, "Legends on Cure-Deities of Bengal," *Folklore*, (Calcutta), Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 123.

5. W. Crooke, 1896, *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Vol. I, p. 127.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Informant—Ambalal J. Patel, Baroda.

8. R. E. Enthoven, 1915, *Folklore Notes*, Vol. II, Konkan, p. 31.

9. Informant—B. R. Khusman, Punjab.

When small-pox appears in the village, the people of Orissa go to a person known as *Kalisi* who is supposed to be the possessed person, through whom the villagers know the wishes of the *Sitalâ mâtâ*. "The criterion of true possession is the belief that the voice of the possessed person is really that of the supernatural intruder."¹⁰ According to the direction of the *Kalisi*, the villagers perform the worship of *Sitalâ*. Usually the deity is satisfied with sacrifices. It is a primitive concept that all deities are satisfied with blood. In Bengal, a hog is sacrificed. In Konkan also sacrifices are made to her. But almost in all parts of India, it is a strict taboo not to prepare meat or fish in the house where there is a person suffering from small-pox. In the house of the sick man, an idol made of earth or cow dung is prepared by the women folk, representing *Sitalâ*. She is bathed by a holy man (in Orissa known as *Ojhâ*, in Bengal as *Mâli* or gardener) and the water is given to the patient to drink. The gardener in Bengal "ties a lock of hair, a cowry shell, a piece of turmeric and an article of gold on the right wrist of the patient."¹¹ The sick person in Bengal and Orissa is made to lie on a bed of *nim* leaves (*Azadirachta Indica*). Branches of *min* leaves are suspended on the front door of the house in almost all parts of India. Brahmin priests are invited to recite *Sitalâstaka* (a verse in Sanskrit in praise of *Sitalâ*) in the house. Perhaps this measure is due to the Brahmanical influence. In Assam and the Bhojpuri speaking area (Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) of India, the women folk sing songs in praise of *Sitalâ*.¹² These songs portray the vows made by the women to be performed after the patient recovers. Generally the vows are made to abstain from doing certain things (as not to take any sweet, etc.) till the patient recovers. The members of the household do not shave, women in their monthly course are not allowed to visit the patient, women do not comb their hair. Indulgence in sexual intercourse during this period is prohibited. Women do not wear

10. F. E. Clements, "Primitive Concepts of Disease," *American Archeology and Ethnology*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, p. 190.

11. W. Crooke, p. 131.

12. (a) For materials on Assam cf.: P. Goswami, 1965, *Folk-Literature of Assam*, p. 61.

(b) For materials on Bhojpuri cf.: K.D. Upadhyaya, *Bhojpuri Gram Geet*, pp. 259-276.

black clothes. In Gujerat "the patient is often entirely made over to the *mâta* and is again purchased at a nominal price of a rupee and a quarter."¹³

Transference of Disease:

Since the folk mind believes that the disease is due to the intrusion of *Sitalâ* or a demon or spirit sent by her, the obvious remedy is to expel her from the body. As such in certain parts of India the women try to transfer the deity from the body of the sick person to an animal or some other object. Such a case is reported from Northern India. According to the report:

In one case, in 1955, an Ahir woman circled some grain around the head of the sick family member, and then ground it, making *capatis* from the flour. After this she gave the *capatis* to a camar boy, thus transferring the sickness to him.¹⁴

In Orissa, I myself have observed that transference is usually made to a dog or a river. Some article used by the patient is thrown into the river or the food left over by the patient is given to a dog. The people believe that by doing so the disease will be transferred from the person to an animate or inanimate object.

The Care of the Patient:

The patient is regarded as *Sitalâ mâta* personified. People coming to see the patient usually salute him with utmost reverence. Sometimes they bring with them some food for the patient. As *Sitalâ mâta* always prefers cool food the patient is not allowed to take any other food than cool drinks, milk and uncooked food. Offering of cold food to the patient signifies the folk-belief that *Sitalâ* herself being "cool goddess" (etymological meaning of the word "*Sitalâ*") likes cold food. This can be considered as nothing more than an association of ideas, in Frazerian concept.

Sometimes due to high fever the patient utters some words in delirium. But the members of the house consider these words as the wishes of the "mother" and act accordingly. In

13. R. E. Enthoven, 1914, *Folklore Notes*, Vol. I, Gujerat, pp. 76.

14. J. M. Planalp, "Religious Life and Values in a North Indian Village" (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University).

some places, the patient is also worshipped with all the formalities of the Hindu customs by offerings of flower, burning incense, making *âratî* with a lighted lamp. Usually on the seventh or the ninth day pustules appear on the body of the patient. The pustules are considered to be the flowers decorating the body of the *mâtâ*.

When a *mâli* or gardener (in Uttar Pradesh and Bengal) or *Ojha* (as in Orissa and some parts of Uttar Pradesh) is invited to propitiate the goddess, he makes certain magical rites, and requests the mother to leave the house. These rites vary from place to place and from one individual *mâli* to the other. As soon as the pustules are healed, it is believed that the *mâtâ* is ready to depart. This is popularly known as the "Cooling Down" ceremony. Here is an account of such a ceremony in Northern India :

"This rite is an individual, highly variant family affair. In most families five clods of earth from a field are circled around the sick person's head five times. Then five balls of *gur*, and finally a *lota* of *dhar* are circled in the same way. These three substances are taken to the Kali Mai shrine and there offered to Kali Mai and Bhagavati Mai, with a prayer to the goddesses not to trouble the family any further."¹⁵

Remedies:

Besides these magical and ritual practices, the patient is also given certain herbal medicines. But the name of these medicines are only known to the holy men. They do not disclose the name. The only medicine applied to the pustules is the ashes of burnt cow dung. Sometimes dried *nim* leaves are powdered and applied on the postules. In certain places sandal wood oil is also applied. The patient is allowed to take a bath only on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, other days of the week being regarded as inauspicious. He takes a bath with the water boiled with *nim* leaves. The popular belief about the use of *nim* leaves is its bitterness. If *Sitalâ mâtâ* is given something bitter, she will leave the body soon.

After-recovery Rites:

According to the vow made by the women, different articles are presented to the village goddess, whose temple is supposed to

15. J. M. Planalp, *op. cit.*, p. 746.

be the dwelling place of *Sitalâ*. The women usually offer black saree, silver eyes, silver ornaments for the body and sacrifices of chicken or goat or any other animal. Brahmins are invited and sumptuously fed, and are paid copper coins.

Every year on the seventh day in the month of Sravan (July-August), the women folk in India worship *Sitalâ*. On the previous day they prepare all sorts of foods and sweets. On the day of *Sitalâ saptmi* they do not cook any food nor do they light the hearth. It is believed that on this day *Sitalâ* visits every house and lies inside the hearth. If anybody lights the hearth by mistake, she becomes angry and curses the family, as a result of which some member of the family suffers from small-pox. On this day the women go to some temple to worship the goddess. In some parts of India, the women prepare an idol of *Sitalâ* made of earth and cow dung with eyes made of cotton seeds or cowry shells. They place the image of the deity in the court-yard of the house and worship it. They very often sing songs in praise of the deity. Perhaps this ritual is a later development of the primitive disease-deity-complex after the myth about her had become quite popular in India. In recent times, though the people are taking the help of scientific medicines, the ritual still goes on, as a reminiscence of the primitive disease-concept, and as reverential attitude toward tradition.

Concluding Remarks:

The foregoing accounts of the beliefs, magical practices, the taboos, the remedies connected with the small-pox constitute such a pattern around *Sitalâ* that it is difficult to interpret the *Sitalâ-complex*. It seems that these were at first unconnected with each other. The beliefs of the people in the spirits and demons have been interpreted by the priestly class in such a manner that a *Sitalâ-cult* has evolved during the passage of time.

It is still a problem for the researchers in India to structure the functioning role of *Sitalâ*. Before making a final remark about the cult all over India, it needs further fieldwork, and to locate the distribution of this cult in India. The concept of *Sitalâ* might have originated from the concept of an earth-

goddess. One of the remarkable features of the *Sitalâ*-cult is its supposed efficacy on the mind of the rural folk of India. As such even "the bodies of those who die of small-pox are not burned but buried, lest in burning the corpse the crime of burning the very essence of the goddess herself should be perpetrated."¹⁶ Though *Sitalâ* is supposed to be a terror to the villagers, she is still regarded as divine Mother. This is a common feature of all mythologies. Even the South India small-pox deities are also regarded as mothers. Deities of terror being regarded as mothers are also not uncommon in Greek mythology. The modern Greeks also respect the small-pox deity as a woman and the enemy of children.¹⁷ This poses another problem in deciphering the primitive concepts about the diseases and the different deities related to the diseases. To quote Crooke:

. . . many of the Mother goddesses have been developed from the Grânde-vatâ, or village goddesses, many of them owe their origin to the cult of Mother Earth. The benignant and chthonic or malignant, manifestations of this Earth goddess account for the two distinct types which we find among the Mothers as a class. The localisation of function in the case of the village goddesses opens the way for the specialisation of the Mothers, many of whom ultimately come to be regarded as responsible for distinct spheres of activity; various classes of disease, for instance, being made over to distinct deities. But this is a later development, the Mothers, as well as the other deities of Hinduism, being in their most primitive types deities "of all work."¹⁸

Naturally, therefore the worship of *Sitalâ* is not done for any sense of gratitude or spiritual attainment, but due to a fear-complex, the only desire being to get rid of the disease. The primitive mind, being incapable of any reasoning or logical analysis, believed in invisible and malicious spirits. This may be considered as nothing else than the existential meaning of religion in the folk-mind.

Regarding the various modes of treatment, dependence on the herbal medicines, magical practices, adherence to certain taboos, transference of disease, etc., seem to be the folk-practices all over the world. These practices are a corollary to the

16. In Orissa this practice still continues. See M. Williams, *Op. Cit.*, p. 120.

17. W. Crooke, *Op. Cit.*, p. 125.

18. W. Crooke, 1919, "The Cults of Mother Goddess in India, p. 297.

beliefs about the cause of the disease. But one thing is of importance to note that these practices have proved to be a boon to the rural folk in the release of psychological tension, at the time of the epidemic. It may be concluded that the different methods of treatment were at first of independent origin, but blended together through passage of time. The belief in the supernatural phenomenon as the source and cause of small-pox, may be considered as the reason for this blending.

Before concluding this paper, I wish to refer to the astrological beliefs of the Indian people regarding the diseases. It is believed by the astrologers and as well the Indian people that "when a person is under the evil influence of the planet Mars, he becomes susceptible to infectious diseases of the skin; Mars and the goddess Kâli are closely associated, thus providing people with an astrological *raison d'être* for the worship of the latter for immunity from small-pox."¹⁹ It may be noted here that *Sitalâ* is often identified with Kâli or Durga.

Examining the different concepts about small-pox and *Sitalâ*, it may be said that the concept of the diseases in the folk and the so-called higher cultures of the world has always been regarded as something abnormal and attributed to some sort of supernatural phenomenon, be it *Sitalâ* or any other deity. Be it whatever may this complex continues to exist and can hardly be structured around a theoretical concept.

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19. A. Aiyappan, 1931, "Myth of the Origin of Small-pox," *Folklore*, Vol. XXXXII, p. 291.

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