

SASTHI PUJA: THE DARK FAIRY GODDESS

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(English Version)

Sasthi was always my mother's special day when she would make her restless children sit on sital-patis and would recite the folk tale of how Ma Sasthi had blessed all children and ensured a long life for them. She would chant a few mantras and bless us, by sprinkling water on our heads from a funny little brush of grass-durba and a hand fan, before heaping a lot of fruits on our small palms. After marriage, however, my bonedi Ghoti in-laws made it clear that this day was really for jamais, hinting that my mother's santan sasthi was a very Bangaal custom. I had no problems with jamai sasthi, as I would gorge on a very satisfying meal that my mother-in-law prepared with no less than half a dozen delicious fish and meat preparations and then stuffed me with a similar number of sweet items.

But the contradiction puzzled me, and over the next few decades, when I got deeper into my research in social history and religious customs, it became increasingly clear that a resilient folk stratum had doggedly survived for more than two millennia, beneath the bedrock of official Hinduism. What fascinated me more was that Ma Sasthi was not just some local village deity of Bengal as some believe, but like Sitala and Manasa, she is worshipped in many other distant parts of India. A century ago, William Crooke stated "that the more we explore popular superstitions and usages, the nearer are we to the discovery of the basis on which Hinduism has been founded".¹

Ashutosh Bhattacharya, who did a lot of work on age-old lokayata dharma, felt that Sasthi is really the protecting goddess of childbirth and offspring, while anthropologist and historian Sudhir Ranjan Das tried to trace

¹Crooke, W., The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India Vol.I, 1893, Delhi, 1968 (reprint).

the tribal roots of this guardian deity. American archaeologist, Ernest Mackay, discovered some terracotta female figurines of a goddess from the pre-historic Harappan sites and opined that Sasthi was possibly worshipped there as the guardian deity of new born babies. This takes us back by more than four thousand years, which means that gluttonous jamais like us should look at this homely grameen debi with some more respect. Mackay also traces Sasthi as a pan-Indian deity, but observed that her worship is exclusively confined to the womenfolk.

There is little doubt that Sasthi predominantly represents the primitive belief in ‘magic’ and this goddess of fertility powers belonged originally to pre-Aryan cultures. In 1904, John Murdoch² compiled his book on Hindu and Muhammadan Festivals where he mentioned it as Aranya Sasthi, a festival held on the sixth day of the new moon in Jaistha (May-June) that is celebrated only by women who go to forest. In 1917, C.H. Buck³ observed in his Faiths, Fairs and Festivals of India that ‘Aranya-Sasthi’ on the 6th Jeyt was an occasion when women in Rajputana who were “desirous of offspring would walk into the woods to gather and eat certain herbs”.

He said that even Sir William Jones had been astonished at the similarity between this and the ancient European Druidic ceremony of gathering mistletoes as a preservative against sterility: which was also on the 6th day of the new moon.

In his Hindu Religious Year, M.M. Underhill writes in 1924 that in western India the same tale that my mother told us was repeated by other mothers during this Jyeshtha Shukla Sasthi. Amazing! The legend speaks of greedy youngest daughter in law of a large joint family who regularly stole food in her father-in-law’s house and blamed the black cat. In revenge, this cat carried off all her children as soon as they were born to Ma Sasthi. When the

² John Murdoch’s “Hindu and Muhammadan Festivals” – The Christian Literature Society, London:1904

³ C.H. Buck, “The Hindu Festivals”, London:1917

distraught woman discovered this, she wept profusely and begged the goddess for mercy. Sasthi forgave her on certain conditions and directed her to pray to her on this day, and venerate the black cat as the vahana.⁴ Indians need not, therefore, bother about black cats being unlucky and even the commandos who guard the prime minister are called ‘black cats’!

The legend of Ma Sasthi is obviously one of the moral stories that held the old joint families together, so that no one member could snatch more than his or her due share. It remains totally unsophisticated and it is one of the wonders of India how such tales could survive, almost unscathed, over several centuries without any refinement of brahmanical purification or editing. It is not that brahmanism did not try to absorb her, as she was linked to the Hindu war-god Skanda as his consort Devasena in the Yaudheya period from the fifth century BC and in the Kushan era between the first and third centuries AD, a large number of coins, sculptures and inscriptions depict her as a six-headed devi. Even Gupta era terracotta figures of the fifth-sixth centuries from Ahichchhatra show the goddess with six heads.

But, she is not mentioned specifically either in the Vedas or in the Epics, though the 5th century text Vayu Purana includes Sasthi in a list of 49 goddesses, while another Puranic text calls her "the worthiest of worship among mother goddesses". The 4th to 5th century text Yajnavalkya Smriti describes Sasthi as the foster-mother and protector of Skanda, though later texts identified her as his consort Devasena. The Padma Purana also declares Sasthi to be the wife of Skanda. In the 7th century text Kadambari, the images of Skanda and Sasthi are also painted together on the wall of a palace.

Sasthi is often pictured as a motherly figure, riding a cat and nursing one or more infants. She is symbolically represented in a variety of forms, including an earthenware pitcher, a banyan tree or part of it or a red stone beneath such a tree. Several outdoor spaces are termed as Sashti-tala and consecrated for her

⁴ M.M. Underhill, "The Hindu Religious Year" – London:1921

worship. One must remember that till very recently there was a very high mortality rate of children both pre-natal, post-natal and in their initial years. Sasthi was invoked for protection of the new born, but a conflict is evident between formal Hinduism that desired to convert her into one more Puranic goddess and folk religion that insisted on worshipping her in their own form.

This hiatus between high Hinduism and folk religion is also seen when Sasthi was increasingly depicted as a malevolent deity associated with the sufferings of mothers and children. The fifth century text Kashyapa Samhita calls Sasthi as Jataharini, "one who steals the new borns" and says that Sasthi steals foetuses from the womb and devours children within the sixth day after birth. The text therefore recommends that she be 'propitiated' on the sixth post-natal date.

In Bengal, her legends appear in the Mangal-Kavya texts, especially in the Sasthi-Mangal which describes Sasthi as closely related to Manasa, the serpent goddess. In Bihar, the sixth day ceremony is called Chathi (sixth) and Sasthi is known as Chati Mata. Childless couples often perform a vrata (ritual) for Chati Mata, i.e, or Sasthi Vrata, and in Odisha, the goddess was also worshipped on the sixth and 21st days after childbirth. In some parts of North India, Sasthi is worshipped at childbirth and puberty, and during marriage rites as well.

It is around this driest part of the year just before the monsoon rains arrive that other such festivals⁵ were also held. Sabitri Chaturdasi, celebrated in the month of Jyaistha on Krishna paksha was an instance for the wives to propitiate Yama, the god of death, for the longevity of their husbands. This must have been this trigger point which babu culture in Kolkata picked up for converting this Sasthi in favour of jamais. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the proliferation of child marriages and polygamy among the well off classes in Bengal often led to the practice of Sati Daha, burning alive of wives on the pyre

⁵ Usha Sharma, Festivals in Indian Society: Page 248

of their husbands. It was now essential for mothers and their daughters to pray for the longest life possible for the jamaais and husbands. This was certainly more important in Kolkata and certain other regions of Bengal than praying only for their own children.

Every new challenge calls for a fresh response and throughout history society has suggested and modified its age-old festivals and rituals to suit the situation. The worried Bengali mothers-in-law, conveniently converted the Sasthi meant for sons to a lavish feast for their sons-in-law.