

MA SITALA: GODDESS OF SMALL POX

Jawhar Sircar

Ananda Bazar Patrika, 23th March 2016
(English Version)

Those who think that Sitala is just one more local deity who is worshipped only by superstitious rural folk may not be aware that she is actually regarded as a deity all over India. Some pockets in the South do not pray to her because there the multi-purpose Dravidian goddess Mariamma rules. Sitala finds mention in several ancient Puranas such as the Skanda and Brahmavaivarta that define her as the goddess of small pox. She is said to have risen from a sacrificial fire and Lord Brahma had commanded humans to worship not only Sitala, but also her companion, Jwarasura, the demon of fever.

There are also stories on how Durga appeared as the little daughter of Sage Katyayana to guard her childhood friends against diseases like cholera, dysentery, measles, smallpox and thus Sitala is actually another form of Katyayani. Sitala is also worshipped as the daughter of Brahma and the wife of Kartikeya. Other than the Puranas, there are also simpler folk tales like Sitala Kathas, Mangal Kavyas and Palas in her honour. We find poets like Manikram Ganguly, Dwija Harideva, Kavi Jagannath in the late 18th century Bengal, and even Kavi Vallabha and Krishnaram Das a century earlier, singing her praises.

Smallpox has been a dreaded disease for over ten millennia, against which mankind has not yet found a cure, though it was hopefully eradicated in 1979, through vaccination. It is sad that before going away in the twentieth century, some 40 to 50 crore humans lost their lives to it. Four out of every five infected child died and even adults who survived the disease were disfigured or blinded for life. As smallpox was airborne, it could attack even those who were extra careful. But religion had to come up with some response and the way Sitala was brought into the official pantheon displays the immense flexible capacity of Brahmanism to absorb even the most bizarre of folk traditions. The Puranas accepted the

dreaded Jwarasura as fit enough to worship, when all other asuras were killed: simply by stating that he was created from Siva's hot sweat! Even Buddhism took in both, but as companions of Parna-sabari, the prime goddess of disease. We also come across images of both deities flying away to escape the wrath of Vajrayogini, the destroyer of disease. Those who were getting worried about why patriarchal religion always blamed women, can now relax as we have a goddess as a saviour also.

British commentators had observed how Indians coped with the terror of smallpox through Sitala puja and even three centuries ago, JZ Holwell of the Black Hole story of Calcutta wrote about her worship. Two centuries ago, John Moore mentioned of Sitala in his History of Smallpox and a hundred years ago, CH Buck reported that "Sitala or Mata was actually the chief of a group of seven sisters, who caused pustulous diseases and has to be propitiated regularly by women and children." With the advent of modern medicine, Sitala and her sisters seem to have receded into the background, but we cannot overlook the fact that Sitala was originally a malevolent deity. American anthropologist Ralph Nicholas who spent long periods in Midnapore in the 1970s, to study popular religion at close quarters, has given us valuable first-hand accounts. He has traversed several texts to supplement his contextual research.

Sitala appears to have been created for taking the blame for this dreaded disease and also for leading people to believe that she could cure it, if she was propitiated well. Unlike organised religions, Hindu pujas do not distinguish too sharply between 'devotion' to a high divinity and 'propitiating' a dangerous deity, like Shani or Sitala. Tales abound of Sitala's powers and it is said that when King Virat, a staunch devotee of Siva, refused to accord her the same level of devotion as he did to his Mahadeva, Sitala unleashed so many kinds of pox to plague his people that the Raja had to relent. It was only when he prayed to Sitala that she became soft and healed the sick. It reminds us of the story of Manasa but we need

to find out why all these powerful folk goddesses always picked on the manly Siva, and not Vishnu.

Sitala still carries on under one name all over the Indian subcontinent other than deep South. This may indicate that there was one common or similar substrata of popular belief that lies beneath the differences in regional languages that emerged later. Some say that the Savara tribe introduced this deity but we cannot be certain. Different communities, however, worship her in different months and seasons, depending on their perception of the dread of disease. In Bengal, she is worshipped in Spring, in the month of Phalgun, i.e, February-March when the air brings not only love and cheer but also alarm as it is rife with contagious airborne diseases. Her companions are Ola Devi, the goddess of cholera, Ghentu, the goddesses of skin diseases, Raktabati, the devi of blood infections and so many others that it appears almost like a multi-speciality hospital. In many parts of India, Sitala Shasti is observed in the late fortnight of Magha, a month before Bengal. As Sitala means cool, during her worship no fires are lit and food is eaten cold. Scottish missionary, John Murdoch wrote a century and half ago that "Sitala's ceremony is of a strictly private character and is limited to married women who have children". Old reports say that some regions like Punjab had fixed the seventh day of Jaishtha for Sitala's puja, while in Gujarat it is in Shravana.

How she is visualised is another issue. Non-Aryans were perfectly comfortable with worshipping a piece of stone or any other shapeless symbol or even a pitcher. For centuries, she was worshipped as a stone, sometimes black or one covered with a yellow cloth that was placed on a platform at the bottom of a banyan tree. But Brahmanism preferred a more definite anthropo-morphic image and the Brahmavaivarta Purana states that she is to be meditated upon as a female dressed in red garments riding on a peacock and holding a cock. Her imagery also differs according to regions and sometimes just a small doll is worshipped. In Bengal and many other places, Sitala comes riding on ass, the humblest of

vahanas, as earlier deities had grabbed all the better creatures to ride on. She is seen holding a short broom to dust off germs, a pitcher full of cold water to heal and another jug to capture diseases, as well as a winnowing fan to sift viruses from others.

Fabrizio Ferrari, who recently published his research on the Sitala cult of North India, found her temples spread from Gurgaon to Patna; from Benares to Salkia; from Adalpura in UP to Nagaon in Assam; Jodhpur-Barmer to Virat Nagar in Nepal and from Uttarakhand to Nagpur in Maharashtra, Jalandhar in Punjab to Kolkata. The fact that Sitala has survived repeated attempts by formal Hinduism to sanitise her and that she is worshipped all over through one single name speaks volumes about her strength and her deep roots. Even though smallpox has disappeared, Sitala Mata still continues to wave her broom and ride her donkey!