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The Sitala Saga: a Case of Cultural Integration in the Folk Tradition of West Bengal

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Abstract

The paper discusses religious narratives about annual deity of Savara of South Bengal that can be conceptualized as myths, legends, and memories according to folklore of 'Sitalamangal'. This goddess is primarily associated with smallpox, yet she is occasionally given other roles and powers, including those as the protector of children and the giver of good fortune. Her role also incorporated other elements of the period, viz. incorporation of deities from Brahmanical religion, incorporation of motifs and symbols from it, incorporating tribal, Tantric-goddess tradition to its fold as well as developed an elaborate ritual structure. The Sitala worship has attached the social fabric of Savara society and maintaining social solidarity.

[Keywords: Sitala Saga; Savara, Worship, Ritual, Religion, Epidemic]

Introduction

The Savara is a marginalized scheduled tribe distributed both in North Bengal as well as in South West Bengal. In ancient medieval literature *Savara* was used as a generic term for the tribal population to mean non-Indo-Aryan population living in forest. From the literary evidence of Caryapada of 10-11th century, it seems that the Savara have been living in the hilly terrains of Bengal –Bihar borders since 10th century AD. Sitala is the goddess worshipped by the Savaras of South Bengal. Sitala is considered as the chief deity of the Savaras. She is controlling deity of epidemic diseases like cholera, small-pox and the like. Some tribal shrines were eventually changed to temples dedicated to her. She is also worshipped as the Village Goddess (*Gramadevata*). The Savaras worshipped Sitala to get rid of the disease, for wellbeing of Children and for fortune. The attribution of widely varying personalities to Sitala is a result of continuous processes of communication between localized little traditions and the more widespread, continuously Sanskritizing great traditions.

Ethno-History of Sitala Worship

Sitala is a pre Aryan goddess, worshipped by tribals of Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa. Texts written in the 17th and 18th centuries as paeans (*Mangalkavya*) elaborated Sitala Saga. She was the goddess of smallpox appeared in the *Skandapurana* and the *Bhavaprakash* , a Sanskrit ayurvedic medical text, allegedly quotes from this Purana in discussion concerning the cure of poxes. The

Bhavaprakash quotes a Sitalastakam from the Skandapurana and clarifies the nature of the Goddess herself. Sitala appears in nibandhas of the late medieval period. Kane in the history of Dharmashastra claims references to Sitala are found in the Nirayasinidhu of kamalakarabhatta (composed in banaras in 1610). The popular folklore depicts that Sitala has seven sisters and may also have one brother who is not as well known. Sitala's sisters are known as Masani, Basanti, Maha Mati, Polamde, Lamkaria, and Agwani and are all associated with one of the seven types of fevers that are prevalent in these regions.

The goddess also has its origin in Vajrayāna Buddhism. It catered to the need of the masses by inventing Buddhism, where one finds numerous Buddha, *bodhisattvas*, gods and goddesses, both in peaceful and wrathful moods. Each god and goddess was assigned an instrumental role to fulfill the everyday needs and aspirations of the masses. The worship of plants, trees and log by the remote tribal race gave birth to the concept of Saktism. Later she was included in the Hindu pantheon.

The Sitala cult is unquestionably the most highly developed in Bengal. She is worshipped throughout the Indian subcontinent and is especially adored in the region of Bengal (Stewart). Sitala is commonly known as the goddess of smallpox and disease but may also be referred to as the Queen of Disease (*Roga Raja*), Lord of Pestilence (*Vyadhi Pati*), or Mother of Poxes (*Basenta Raya*). Her name means the "Cool One" which is thought to be derived from her mythical birth from the cooled ashes of the sacrificial fire (Stewart). The three regions have different views about Sitala but all are linked by a few common ideas. Sitala is always the "Cool One" and she is frequently represented by a golden pot, except in wealthy temples where she is depicted as a naked women with her hair dishevelled, riding a donkey, and wielding a broom (Rodrigues). Sitala is most well known in West Bengal where there are many temples and *mangals*, which are lengthy poems written in her honor. Throughout West Bengal she is associated with Jvarasur, the Fever Demon, and Raktabati, the one that possess the blood of servant women (Wadley). Sitala is one of the many Hindu mother goddesses who are known for their benevolence and dreadfulness. Sitala is worshipped during Phalgun which are the months of February to March. . In North India Sitala is associated with stale or leftover food because she is thought to have been born of the cold ashes of the sacrificial fire. Festivals are held in her honor and are commonly termed *basora* which literally means "Leftover Food Worship" (Wadley). The people of this region prepare only cold foods on the day before the *pujas* and offer these to Sitala and eat only cold food themselves. The third region, which worships Sitala is the state of Gujarat, where she is no longer associated with disease; instead she is seen as the giver of good fortune, husbands and sons (Wadley). The origin of the Sitala shrine in Gujarat is thought to be identified with Bariha Bapji or Babribahan of the Mahabharata (Misra).

In this region she is not worshipped during the hot season but rather during the rainy season, Shraavan, the months of July and August. Although there are vast differences between these three regions and the ways in which they worship this goddess, there are a few similarities that link the regions together. Sitala's main association in Bengal is with the various forms of pox. The origin of worship of Sitala in this region was thought to come from a popular story about a kingdom that was infected with the smallpox disease. Sitala went in disguised as a beautiful woman to see the king and advised him to worship her. The people of the kingdom worshipped her and were relieved of the dreadful smallpox disease (Misra). In Northern India Sitala, is associated with pox but she is also seen as the protector of children (Wadley).

It is claimed that in a previous life Sitala was married to a Muslim emperor and was very faithful and devoted to the Hindu gods and goddesses, who was deified as Sitala in reward (Misra). She is worshipped during Caitra which is in the months of March and April or Baisakh the months of April and May because these months are in the hot season when the outbreak of the disease is the most prevalent. The Mangalkavaya tradition is an archetype of the synthesis between the Vedic and the popular folk culture of India. Indigenous myths and legends inherited from Indo-Aryan cultures began to blend and crystallize around popular deities and semi-mythological figures in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mangalkavaya were used to describe the greatness of particular Hindu deities known as "Nimnokoti" (roughly translating as lower) by historians, because they were absent or unimportant in classical Hindu literature such as the Vedas or Purans. These deities were based on indigenous to Bengal who had become assimilated in regional Hinduism. These deities are often depicted with unusually strong human qualities and they engage in direct interaction with humans. The Mangalkavyas were written to popularize the worship of a number of deities, mostly Shitala, Manasa and Chandi. The physical attributes of Sitala are as follows.

1. Appeared as Brahmin women, in Red border white sari

The Goddess Sitala is the cool one. She always appeared as Brahmin women who dressed up with red border white sari. Her hair is long and open. The length of hair is too long and they touched her knees. She is fair and put big round 'Sindur' on her forehead. She is a married woman. The attitude looks and dress of goddess reflects her divine personality.

2. Ass as Vehicle

Mother goddess Sitala rides on an Ass. In Hindu mythology it is common that deities have various animals as their vehicles. It is also believed that the vehicle also represents the nature and spiritual power of the deity. The selection of an ass, as a vehicle is unique and surprising because the ass is referred as Gadha. Ass as a mammal is bracketed with the horse. It lacks all horse like qualities thus become a

symbol of dullness and idiocy. In this context it neither represents sexuality nor disrespect. It represents destruction, devastation and complete infertility. If she is in her terrible form can completely devour vegetation and life. She rides on Ass which is a unique symbol of negative animosity.

3. The Broom

Goddess Sitala carries a huge broom in her hand. The broom is referred in Bengali “jhata or jharu”. This article is used to remove dirt and dust. The first job of Savara women is getting up early in the morning and sweeping the house with a broom. The use of broom after sunset is prohibited. The belief is that it can sweep out all prosperity if it used at night. Another belief is that if pregnant women cross a broom she runs the risk of miscarriage. The broom is made of straws tied tightly from one side, leaving the other side loose and open. It represents simplest transformation of nature into culture. Broom as an instrument of cleanliness helps in transformation of nature. Its form in itself has a variety of meanings. For instances, the tightly tied side of broom represents unity, order and cleanliness while the open and loose side with scattered positions of straws symbolizes disunity and disorder. It is never placed in the position in which loose and open side is upward because it is believed that it brings disunity, disorder and pollution. One important practice is the symbolic sweeping or dusting of the subject with the broom made of feathers or twigs of some plates. With this ritual, the patients mind and spirit are supposed to be cleansed and a balance is restored. In this particular context it represents both aspects cleaning and elimination.

4. The Pitcher

Pitcher in Bengali language is known as “gharo”. It is used to store water particularly in summers. It is used as a device to cool the water. The pitcher resembles the human body in many ways. Its hollowness is like human body which has air as breath or prana inside. Its association with water is very significant because water is a universal symbol of vegetation and life. Pitcher as its container symbolizes human body which contains life. The association of a pitcher with the cult of Sitala emphasis the fertility and life-giving or protecting aspect of the cult.

5. Winnowing Fan

Winnowing is a process of cleaning grain through the winnowing tray. It is called “kulo” in Bengali language. As an instrument it has acquired a unique cultural significance in Sitala worship. It is used in various rituals and ceremonies. It mediates between purity and impurity. The cult of Sitala is also associated with a particular type of impurity which causes smallpox. The disease in itself is processes which symbolize both the manifestation and outbreak of impurities and ultimately it ends in purification and rejuvenation. As a symbol, it represents the cleaning

and curative power of the cult on one side and the mediating and luminal position of the cult on the other.

6. Huge Eyes

The huge eyes symbolize the essential nature of the cult. She is not the personification of goodness and beauty. She represents the negative and ugly side of famine. She looks with starved eyes towards her victims. Her eyes invoke dreads and awe which is transformed into respect and devotion. Through humanity and devotion she is propitiated particularly in the season of an outbreak of the smallpox.

7. The ewer

The ewer which is locally known as “jug” . It is a pot which is used to carry water or other drinks. These containers are communally used to contain liquids but the specific form of urn is used to contain ashes of cremated persons. Sitala keeps a pitcher and an ewer in her hands. Symbolically she may be life giving and life taking depending on her will. In the symbol of a vessel the pitcher and ewer both have qualities of protecting as well as of containing.

Folklore of Sitala Worship

Folk narratives are powerful medium through which folk assimilates and disseminates knowledge and power of a given society. Like any other oral discourse narratives construct, reconstruct social order, define gender roles and reverse it when necessary. Folktales explain womanhood and basic principles of female biology which signifies social reality. The three stages; menstruation, defloration and childbirth are most important events of women’s life which rule and determine women’s behaviour in a society and culture. It seems, these phases of female life are expressed symbolically in a narrative. Three stories of goddess Sitalas are mostly popular among them. The stories depict mainly her terrible form and how devotees benefited through her worship. For them Sitala is always “the cool one”, a goddess who abhors heat and who seek coolness. It is coolness which links Sitala’s various personalities. They believed Sitala was born on cooled ashes. Sitala is by nature cool and she seeks coolness. When heated, she heats others and attacking them with dreaded pox or destroying their children.

1. The Goddess of Smallpox
2. The protector of Children
3. The Giver of Good fortune

Sitala Katha : The goddess of smallpox

Once upon a time, pox (chechak) appeared on the oldest son of a king. At the same time in the city pox appeared on the son of farmers. The farmer was very poor and a devotee of a Sitala. They used to keep houses very clean. Spread cow dung everyday on the floor. They serve only cold things to a pox victim. His son quickly got well. Elsewhere because of the appearance of the pox, the king sat in the shrine of Sitala and reading the hundred names of Chandi. Every day he performed sacrifices. They made various kinds of hot and spiced foods and also made meat with spices. Because of the adore of the cooking of spiced foods. The prince eats spice and hot foods. Sitala's anger with the prince grew on his whole body huge itchy louse's appeared and he began to burn up with fever. The king and queen schemed to obtain the peace of Sitala but everything was futile. Then someone brought the news that along with the prime pox had appeared on a farmer's son and he had been completely cured. The king became extremely jealous and he thought why Sitala been so unjust to my family? His anger was due to the fact that the farmer could not do any kind of puja and service but his son quickly got well. One day Sitala manifesting herself in a dream and said to king that she was satisfied with the shrine and for that reason his son is still alive. If he wants happiness for his family and for son, from today do not eat cooked food. Give only cold things to me for offerings and also to the prince. The king saw Sitala in his dream was the seventh of the dark half of Chaitra . The king gave a proclamation to his people that on the eight day everyone should do Sitala's puja with state grain and cold foods for offerings. From that day , the prince condition began to improve and after some days he was completely cured.

Sitala Katha : The protector of children

Sitala is associated with the Bengali goddess "Sasthi" whose domain is the bestowing and protecting of children. Sasthi is worshipped on the sixth day after the birth of a child and also on the sixth day of many lunar fortnights. A Brahman and his wife have seven sons. All were married but none had any children. One day old women gave the rules for having the sons and daughter-in- law do the fasts of Sitala Sasthi. The Brahman women had her daughters -in - law do the fasts of Sitala Sasthi. The Brahman women had her daughters -in-law do this fast with great faith and after a year all daughters-in- law had sons playing in their days. One day the Brahman women doing the fast negligently bathed with hot water and made fresh food. Along with her daughters in law she did this. Brahman women were started into awakening from a nightmare. She tried to wake her husband but he was dead. Looking toward her sons and daughters-in-laws she saw that they too had all died. She began to scream with grief. Hearing her screams hers neighbors awake and came to her. These people said that this is the result of the anger of Bhagavati Sitala. The Brahman women ran toward the forest on the road she met a old women who was burning up with fever. Upon inquiring, she came to know

that this was the reason for her sorrow. The old woman was none other than Sitala Devi herself. Bhagavati Sitala asked the Brahman women to bring a clay jar filled with curds to relieve her of the heat of the fever. She spread curds on the body of Sitala from this the fever was reduced and her body became healthy and cool. The Brahman women felt very sorry for her and she begged again and again for forgiveness for her bad actions and she prayed for the lives of her family. Then Sitala devi was pleased and told her to put curds on the heads of the dead. Then they being awakened from sleep and they all sat up.

Sitala katha : The Giver of Good fortune

There was a king in Hastinapur. His name was Indradumn. His queens' name was dharmasila. Her faith in religion cannot be overstressed. The almighty had given the couple a daughter. Her name was subhakari. She too was religious like her mother and in beauty. Her parents got her married to Gunavana. After the marriage, Subhakari went to her home of in -law and then back to home of the parents. After a few days, the prince Gunavana came to take Subhakari back. It was Sitala Sasthi day. Subhakari parents told her to stay here . Ma Sitala is going to bestow 'Akhandasaubhagya'so better to go after performing the vrat. Subhakari was sent to the pond for a bath with the priest and his wife. The three of them were moving from here and there in the forest but the pond could not be seen anywhere. She had never walked so much. But even then she went on walking by taking the name of Sitala. The tired priest was lying under the tree. The Brahman wife sat nearby but Subhakari went ahead in search of a pond. In the meantime she saw old women. She managed to go under the old women and asked about the pond. The old women felt pit for Subhakari and she told her "it is good you have come on, I shall show you the pond to take a deep in the pond, perform the puja of Ma Sitala and your husband will live a long life". They came across a pond. Their subhakari took her bath. She performed the puja of the Ma Sitala. The Goddess was pleased and she gave her a divine favor. Feeling pleased Subhakari started going home on the way she saw the Brahman wife's crying. The Brahman wife's said to her "sister I shall be sati after my husband. My husband died from the bite of a sinful serpent and what is the worth of my living"? Meanwhile the Brahman said "till I go on the pyre do remain here". She readied herself to become a Sati. The princess started to pray to Sitalama being, remembered. Sitalama appeared and said "Child, why did you remember me? While crying the princess said "ma, you are a remover of widowhood, please have mercy for me and give life to this priest. Sitalama told the princess, give the merit of the 'vrata' done today and her husband will come alive. After performing the vrata to the Brahman's wife and thereby the priest got life. Meanwhile the prince started to worry as the princess was gone for a long time. He left home to find the princess. After completing puja they all were going along the road. The princess saw her husband dead. She started cry. Seeing her crying, trees, animals and birds also started to weep. There upon

Sitalama appeared and said “Child , the one who performs Sitalama vrata never get widowhood. So go and wake up your husband. While praying to Sitalama the princess awakened her husband. The prince wake up the way he would, after a restful sleep at home. Subhakari told the old women, “Ma give me such a favor that I would never get widowhood, not see poverty and not be separated from my husband. There on the old women took the form of Sitalama and said “So be it, wherever does the puja with complete faith and hears this katha shall never be occasion to be a widow”. On saying this goddess disappeared afterwards the princess worshipped Sitalama.

Sitala Pala : Sacred Ritual into Professional Performance

Sitalapala is a layering of religious ritual and professional theatre, where, unique feature of this form of sacred performance. The custom of accompanying the puja of Sitala with a performance of her sacred text, or Sitalamangal, reflects the Brahminization of this goddess, and is common in the Midnapore, 24 parganas , Howrah and Hooghly districts of Bengal. Isolated and tribal intensive areas do not associate the performance of the lyric with worship, nor do they give it ritual status. However, where this custom is prevalent, the performance and the worship are part of the same ritual. Sitalamangal lyric troupes, or "parties," sing the devotional mangalsangeet (auspicious songs) between March and June, when the epidemics of infectious diseases are traditionally at their height and Ma Sitala is widely worshipped. The lead singer performs with six accompanists holding a chamar or whisk in his hand, and wearing ritually accepted clothing associated with the recitation of a sacred text-such as a dhoti, with the upper torso bare and a shawl draped over the shoulders, or a dhoti and kurta (the traditional upper garment worn by males as formal clothing). Musical instruments include the harmonium, khol (drum), and kartal (cymbals). The performance can last from one to seven days. During this time, the lead singer has to practice celibacy and vegetarianism. (Mukhopadhyay)

Of the several poetic texts of the Sitalamangal, the one that is most widely read and accepted as the definitive version is by Nityananda Chakravarty, which has been printed and distributed by the Battala presses of Calcutta. This text, composed in the panchali tradition (poetic renditions of a religious tale), details Sitala's struggle to gain due recognition as a "new" devi, first from the gods in heaven and then from man on earth. In every case there is a locking of horns between arrogant patriarchy and the will of the goddess; in every case the women plead for her and advise capitulation. The custom of holding a Sitalagan (song) , where the legend of the goddess is sung and performed, is part of a long tradition of auspicious gatherings where virtue is dispersed through the recitation of and accrued through the communal hearing of the holy life of a saint, or a god or goddess, or scriptures. It is quite common for such gatherings to be organized around the festivals of different deities. On such occasions, being present at the

chanting, recitation, reading, song session is in itself considered auspicious, an act of bhakti, devotion; those performing, reading are similarly performing an act of devotion. There are only certain areas of Bengal where the Sitalagan is performed at the time of the annual puja, and this is done in different ways. The Sitalamangal palas follow the puja, which is conducted by the priest before the idol. The performance starts with a vandana, or invocation to the goddess, by the actor playing the goddess, who asks for blessings and sings her praise. This is directed to the image of the goddess, either in the nearby temple, or within the performance space, or both. At the end, the entire company turns once again to the idol and offers pushpanjali, or offerings of flowers, uttering the prayer in praise of Sitala. Then the actor-goddess, who has been carrying a pitcher of holy or Ganga water (known as shantijal, literally, the water of peace), walks around sprinkling it on the gathered devotees while sweets are distributed as Prasad, or consecrated food offerings. So, at the beginning and the end of the performance, the sacred space and the performance space are explicitly melded together.

According to the Sitala performer Chapal Bhaduri, his empirical research into the customary Sitala performance shows that the Sitalagan of Medinipur (Midnapore) is traditionally performed by a male, seated and dressed in a dhoti and kurta, with the formal shawl over one shoulder and sporting shoulder length locks. In fact, he often repeats the incident where, when the women were anointing him with sindoor (vermilion) and he was in turn anointing or blessing them in the same way, which is a ritual only women share, he stopped and questioned a young woman. She replied that as long as he was playing the goddess, with the divine third eye on his forehead, she accepted him as Ma Sitala, even though she knew he was Chapalda (elder brother). This is just one example of what Richard Schechner, in his study of other Indian sacred performances, describes as "the two realities which are mutually porous" (Schechner), the simultaneity of which in such situations makes possible the mechanism of faith. The gradual changing of sacred performance of Sitalapala situates itself in an ongoing tradition that express its contemporaneity is a typical feature of folk culture.

Ritual Performances

The cult of *Sitala* is also associated with a particular type of impurity which causes smallpox. The disease in itself is processes which symbolize both the manifestation and outbreak of impurities and ultimately it ends in purification and rejuvenation. The huge eyes symbolize the essential nature of the cult. She is not the personification of goodness and beauty. She represents the negative and ugly side of famine. She looks with starved eyes towards her victims. Her eyes invoke dreads and awe which is transformed into respect and devotion. The Savara of North 24 Parganas, worshipped *Sitala* on the day of *Paus Sankranti* every year.

According to Sastri, Sankranti as the time in which the sun moves from one sign to another is considered most auspicious time of worship. Twelve Sankrantis make one year, when the sun goes to Makara or Karkata, the night is holy. *Paus Sankranti* occurred everywhere on the day of 14 or 15th January. The weather changes dramatically and human beings like all another organism respond in various ways. On the day of *Paus sankranti*, they do not cook any food nor light the hearth. It is believed that on this day *Sitala* 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. It is a custom that the expenditure to be incurred in celebrating the occasion should be collected from all the Savara families.

The community priest or *deheri* is selected from the community members. The *deheri* should have knowledge of the traditional rites. The *deheri* or community priest of the Savara community prepares a list of articles which is collected from the markets. Three deities with different size and physical attributes were prepared by the neighbouring pal community. The shrine or *bedi* is cleansed by women. They spread a paste of cow dung and mud all over the floor of shrine and later melt the paste by their hand. The young girl decorates —*alpana* at the side of the shrine. The —*alpana* is the decoration of white colour. The colour is the mixture of —*Kharimati* and *chalerguro* (rice flour). The *dehri* or community priest goes on a fast on the day before the worship. He took a bath in the morning and put a fresh cloth. The cloths are new *Dhuti*' and undergarments. He went with his wife to nearby pond at around 4 pm to fill water in earthen pot. He was followed by a procession of women and children. They are all playing bells, blowing *Shankha* (conch cells) and *Ulu* (sound comes from women tongue). He throws fruits, flower and unhusked rice and *batasa* (round shaped sweet of sugar) to pond before filling water. The earthen pot was carried by the priest on his shoulder and placed on the platform of the shrine. The priest put a mango twig on the mouth of the sacred pot and vermilion marks were pointed on its neck. A green coconut having a long stalk was also pointed with vermilion on the head. This coconut was placed on the mouth of the pot with its head forward. The idol was then garlanded with *chandmala*' and of flower. She also dresses up with ornaments which they brought from local market. *Kachha* (not cooked) foods are generally offered to *Sitala*. They offered raw, unripe, unbaked and uncooked food as likes fruits and vegetables, sun dried rice, milk and sweets. The priest began uttering incantations which are composed of distorted Bengali. Priest sprinkled a quantity of ghee on the fire and recited short incantation. The sacrificial rite is next stage of *Sitala* worship. *Dehri* or community priest brought a quantity of sun dried rice which is mixed with sweets, flowers and fruits. Mostly fowls and goats are offered at the time of sacrificial rites. He applied vermilion marks on his sword. The head of fowl and goats are marked with vermilion before sacrifice. Some sundried rice was then offered to fowl and goat. It is believed that if the animals eat the rice then sacrifice was acceptable to the goddess.

After cutting the heads of fowl and goats, he poured the blood in the long banana leaves. The detached head of fowl and goat were taken in front of the *Sitala* as an offering. He again recited the incantations and the villagers were directed to blow and the *Shankha* (couch shell), ring bell, drum and *_ulu'*. All the Savara men's and women's started dancing after the sacrificial ceremony. The youth group carrying musical instruments like, dhamsa, madam etc and then play their musical instruments and sing folk song. The ritual performance ends with playing music, singing and dancing. The collected money is to be spent in celebrating a communal feast where country liquor is also served for drinking and making merry some of the Savara old man developed a sign of possession of spirits. They started uttering the future of the Savara society. They immersed *Sitala* on the next day. Priest takes bath early in the morning and started the arrangement of immersion worship of *Sitala*. He offered the goddess with fruits, flowers and sun dried rice and started incanting.

It is believed by them that if flowers fell down at the time worship then the deity was pleased. The *dehri* or community priest also worshiped the *Tulsi* Tree at the time of final immersion. Priest and his son take idols in their hand. All the Savara fell down on the way of priest. He takes *Sitala* in his hand and crossed everybody who was lying on the way. He crossed one by one over the bodies. It is believed by the Savara that *Sitala* take all the disease of the village at the time of immersion. Ceremonial immersion completes with placing *Sitala* in the field. They immersed the goddess in *Galay-Darir-Maath*. The field is 5 km far from the present habitation. They also immersed old basket, Kula', Jhata' and Earthen Vessel. The Savara are not allowed to turn back to the place at the time of returning home. It is believed if anybody did wrong he will die at the time of returning home. If a gilt person confessed his crime in front of *Sitala* then nothing will happen wrong. *Sitala* always forgive her children. The belief behind such worship is that the deity will destroy evil elements or spirits.

Conclusion

Although the smallpox disease is thought to be eradicated by the worship of *Sitala* and it still continues as the reason in some regions or community . She has taken on different personalities that depict her as not only the goddess of disease but also the protector of children and giver of good fortune (Wadley). Another reason that *Sitala* is associated with so many different personalities is because of the changing modes of transmission of traditions and cultural practices among the Hindu religion (Wadley). The attribution of widely varying personalities to *Sitala* is a result of continuous processes of communication between localized little traditions and the more widespread, continuously Sanskritizing great traditions. Her multifarious manifestations also reflect the influences of changing modes in the transmission of cultural data. In this respect, the shift from orally transmitted

tales to popular printed literature is especially crucial, tied as it is to processes of Sanskritization and standardization. Sitala is considered one of the lesser goddesses not part of the Great Traditions. She is most feared and appeased wherever due to lack of medical facilities or the money to offered treatment. The need to please her is the most urgent in rural areas and among the poor. She is worshipped largely by tribal and lower caste populations.

Sitala priests are usually non-Brahmins belonging to tribal or lower caste communities. It is interesting to note that almost all village deities like Sitala, Baram and Garam are regarded as "Mother" and usually worshipped by the women folk of India. The beliefs of the people in the spirits and demons have been interpreted by the priestly class in such a manner that a Sitala cult has evolved during the passage of time. Sitala in her primitive form was also anionic 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. She is still regarded as the small-pox deity with additional responsibility as a protector of children. Naturally, therefore the worship of Sitala 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 and for wellbeing of Children. Their origin, method of worship and folk-beliefs about their uncertain temper pose a bewildering complexity in explaining their relationship to the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Today our country is witnessing a militant resurgence of religious ritual and demonstrative religiosity. An aggressive reclamation of "tradition" and "heritage" stifles with its rhetoric any analytical thinking about how these traditions evolve and change, or how they are inflected by socio-economic factors. It suits the agents of fundamentalism to see religious tradition as fixed, divinely ordained, unchanging and unchangeable. To accept that they have always evolved as society has evolved, that they have been inflected by other cultural influences, that they reflect accretions and adaptations, is to accept that there is no single, definitive, point can be judged and condemned.

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