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SUPER MEDICINE: FOLK DEITIES WHO CURE

Bithusmita Mandal

Ex-Student, Dept. of History
Jadavpur University, Kolkata-700032

Many Indian cultures nurture the belief that each phase of human life is controlled by a particular holy power. Disease is regarded as divine rebuke to be appeased with the redoubling of faith. To this end, various health-giving and destroying deities have manifested all over India. These are fierce goddesses, praised in folk stories and legends, and worshipped primarily by lower caste, Dalit, Bahujan and tribal communities who have been excluded from Vedic Hindu temples and rituals. It has proved the claim of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep that rituals arise and become popular at the time of disorder, uncertainty, and anxiety. The practice of religious rituals of different deities to prevent illness and disease has also been very prominent still in the 21st century in the areas deprived of timely and advanced medical facilities as found in the different parts of West Bengal, India. In Bengal, many folk deities like Shitala, Olabibi, Ateshwar, Babathakur, Basalee, are worshipped to get rid of the diseases like smallpox, cholera, diarrhea, infertility. This dependency of the folk people on gods and goddesses to get relief from illness has shaped the cultural activities of the Bengalis as Ernesto de Martino defines culture as 'result of the victorious struggle of the health of the pitfalls of disease'.

The relationship between spirituality, religion and medicine has been recognized since antiquity in human communities living in different geographic areas of the world. Despite large differences in their history, society and economy, cultures from North and South America, The Far East and The Middle East, Africa and The Mediterranean area, shared a common belief that spirituality and religion played an important role in the healing of diseases. Afterwards, above all in Eastern cultures, spiritual and religious components have always been believed to be important factors in maintaining health.

Human beings always carry the faith of 'God heals everything'. From the very onset of human creation, they saw the difference, the change, the magic, and the unnatural in the power of 'beyond natural'. Being comprehensive of their limitation, they started practicing different religious rituals with many types of social rituals and aesthetic rituals. Human beings have been worshipping trees, the earth, hills, rivers, in culmination the Mother Nature and also many unknown deities to get escaped from deadly diseases and many health issues. Moreover, according to many scholars, some people who believe in a sacred power view the world through the lens of mythic vocabularies and regulate their lives according to the models and injunctions set forth in their

religious traditions.

Human psychology tends to deal hand in hand with God. If I talk about the disasters countered by humans, can possibly be fought with sheer belief in God. Evolutionary and psychoanalytic theories provide possible answers concerning the reason why, universally, humans are religious. The question then arises: how does a belief in God contribute to an individual's well-being? Do the expectations, linked to the acknowledgement of a higher presence and the consequent correctives on behaviour and our mind add or detract from people's well-being? Chicken pox, for example, is believed to be a sign that the sufferer has been possessed with the spirit of Shitala Mata, who shows herself in the delirium of a high fever. There is a psychological benefit to this idea. While it inspires a terrified reverence for the Goddess, it also provides a glimmer of hope during dark, uncertain times. If the Mata is pleased with your faith, you may be healed. Hope can be a potent medicine and Shitala Mata, along with a whole pantheon of healing goddesses, is the locus of its power.

In different regions, Bengal has also been practicing religious rituals with the belief of being cured of diseases and many health problems. These folk religious practices give us an understanding of the community's life and culture. Mr. W. Crooke observes that "I believe that the more we explore these popular superstitions and usages, the nearer are we likely to attain to the discovery of the basis on which Hinduism has been founded" (Maity, p 3).

In this paper, I will talk about few folk deities of Bengal, significantly 'rural Bengal', or 'gramadevata', who are prayed and practised by folk people to get cured from heinous diseases. Each deity has some powers to cure, based upon which the very human psychology and cult belief works.

Maa Sitala

Epidemics in India are attributed to sins committed by people in their present birth, and the gods or goddesses responsible for them are objects of special veneration among the common people. Fear of small-pox is indicated by the euphemistic title given to Sitala (cool), its presiding deity who is chiefly worshipped for the cure of the disease from Assam to Baluchistan, and from the Himalayas to the Vindhya. The name Sitala is non-Vedic, but became current as a popular designation (lokasraya saijna) of the small-pox goddess in the 12th century AD.

In the Hinduised localities, the goddess has been given an anthropomorphic form, but among the lower class people she is usually represented by a crude piece of stone daubed with vermilion. "The conception of Sitala", says Nanimadhab Chaudhury, "her cult as it is practised now-a-days and the absence of any mention of her in the older Puranas - all point to her rise from a folk goddess of demoniacal type."

The origin of Sitala as well as her name has been described in the following legend by Nityananda Chakravarty, the author of a Bengali Sitala Mangala poem. Sitala is obviously a Pauranic name invented to address or designate euphemistically the small-pox goddess so that; she might restrain the burning heat from which the patient suffers during an attack of the disease. It originated doubtless in connection with the cold

treatment for small-pox because of the high fever that accompanied it. Since the mild type of small-pox is cured of itself and the virulent type is a sure killer, many physicians prescribe no medicine and the only treatment suggested is application of cold water and putting the patient in a cool place. According to Skanda Purana, in her dhyana (meditative posture), she is mentioned as visphotakadugrapratapaprasamanakari, or 'one who alleviates the high heat caused by the eruptions'. The iconography rerjjeselits, whose dhyana represents her as seated, on an-ass, naked, with a winnowing fan over her head and holding a broom in her hand.

Therefore, the families observing Shitala Devi rituals don't light the stove on certain Ashtami and Saptami days, to essentially "cool off" the stove. Instead, they prepare celebratory foods the day before, to be eaten as thanda khaana (cold food) prasad, the next day. Instances have also been recorded of ritual smallpox inoculation via infected pus. Side-effects of this inoculation are treated with the eating of cold, stale food.

Ola Bibi/ Olai Chandi

Equally fatal and dangerous is cholera, whose presiding known as Olai Chandi/Ola Bibi in Bengal, and Ankamma in South India. The word Olabibi or Olauthabibi is formed with two words- 'ola' meaning faeces and 'utha' meaning vomiting. She is worshipped along with her seven sisters known as Olabibi, Asanbibi, Jholabibi, Ajgaibibi, Chandbibi, Baharbibi, Jhetunbibi, and her shrine is known as Sat Bibir Than.

Many local and folk deities, having association with diseases, the goddess presiding over this notorious disease, is sometimes represented as wearing a gown and riding a horse but usually she is worshipped in the form of an earthen pot placed under a nim tree. As in the case of Sitala the priests of the cholera goddess also belong to the lower castes, The Mother Goddess Durga, whose manifestations the various godlings are, is believed to develop during the excitement caused by epidemics into her terrible form, the blood-thirsty Kali. She is therefore worshipped, particularly in Bengal, as Rakhsa Kali, 'the preserver Kali', in times of an epidemic of a severe type.

Though cholera, as argued by Arabinda Samanta, "might not have been so prevalent in India in the commencement of the eighteenth, as it was in the seventeenth century, nevertheless for years past it had been a well-known disease in Bengal" (Samanta 2017: 68).

The epidemic caused by cholera became also a topic of literary discussion in Bengali literature as found in the stories by Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya and also in Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's Arago Niketan (1953), and a rumor in Bengal:

".....the cholera deity or Olai Chandi can actually be seen; she roams the village in the evening. It is a girl, dragging her lean and thin body with fiery eyes and disheveled hair; she wears a damp and ragged cloth; tucked under her arms a tattered mat, she trudges along the margin of a muddy village road. She prefers to remain incognito, but whoever notices her first becomes her victim. After taking its first toll, the disease travels fast from house to house, and from village to village. At midnight, street-dogs bark, wailing for long, indicating that they have noticed the unfamiliar girl roaming. The barking becomes louder."(Samata 201 7: 71)

Maa Manasa

Manasa Devi is worshipped as the goddess of snakes, predominantly in the Bengali provinces and the Hindu Assamese north-eastern belt. The presence of a serpent goddess is hardly surprising in India where there is a long history of serpent and naga worship.

Much like the other village deities, the cult of Manasa too stems from indigenous tribal stories as a goddess that protects people from snake bites, especially in the Gangetic delta where serpents teem during the rains. One version of the Manasa saga even reads, "When a sage dies, he goes to the sun but a victim of snakebite goes to the domain of Manasa." She is depicted often, seated in an elegant lotus posture with serpents emanating all around her and at her behest. Her primary characteristics are said to be destruction and regeneration. She destroys ruthlessly and wantonly, the innocent with the guilty, to demonstrate her might; she has the power to bring her victims back to life once they submit to her power. Her regenerative powers are not separable from her role as a snake goddess. The snake represents life and death, as it regenerates itself periodically in the shedding of its skin.

Her stories have been told in the form Patta Chitra, an ancient storytelling tradition through paintings and poetry in song by people from various faiths. These stories are told often picked from the medieval text Manasa Mangal Kavya. More recently, legends of Manasa Devi's shrine, wrath and protection has also been the central theme of Amitav Ghosh's novel, Gun Island.

Penchothakm/Panchuthakur

Practicing motherhood and taking care of children have been integral parts of the lives of women in India specifically. The social significance of women depends on their motherhood and fertility. The religious rituals being predominantly patriarchal represents women as weaker than men. Women are forced to practice different rituals only to fulfill their responsibility of motherhood. Rickets in rural Bengal is also called as 'Penchoy dhara' or 'Tunye Paoa'. It is also found that some parents follow the deity until the diseased child becomes eleven years old and till then its hair is not cut or saved and the child wears an iron ring locally called 'Dadko' at its feet as a safeguard and, if the child is cured, they make save the hair of the child and take the child to the shrine of the deity in a gorgeous and celebrating manner.

Panchuthakur, which is also known as Penchothakur, is the deity who saves the lives of children. The mothers who lose their children within a few days of its birth or the women who give birth to a dead child, or whose children suffer from rickets in their very early age worship the deity. They make different promises to the deity if their wishes are fulfilled and as symbols of their promises they hang lumps of soil and they believe that their fetus or the sick child will be saved once the symbols are seen by the deity.

Ghanta Kama

Ghanta Kama or Ghantu is the god of skin disease. The myth that revolves is that Ghanta Kama was born in a demon's family because of being cursed by Lord Bishnu. Ghantu is worshiped by the women in the districts of Burdwan, Bankura, 24 Parganas South and North not in a temple but beside a water body during the month of Chaitra. At the end of worshipping Ghantu, the children break a piece of a clay pot. A piece of cloth dyeing with turmeric is touched on the eyelids of the children and dust ink created on the broken part of the pottery is used by all the members of a family with the belief that these will cure their eye diseases. The Ghetu flowers and Ghetu leaves are used in rural areas for their medical qualities, its juice is used as a medicine for stomachache, headache and especially for skin infections and diseases, and, hence, they are given so much importance in this puja. In the sculptures, he has eighteen hands. He is offered prayers for cure of diseases.

In conclusion, Sri Asutosh Bhattacharya in his famous book *Bangla Mangalakabye Itihas* (1947) argued that there is no relation between these folk religious rituals and the established Hindu mythology. But, with a detailed discussion of the folk deities and their rituals one important part can be added to the social history of Bengal. The general functions of the Indian village deities, as we have already seen, include the infliction and removal of epidemics and disasters. The absence of evidence does not however enable us to determine how far back the worship of the various gods and goddesses of disease may go, though we can well imagine the circumstances under which they were conceived and venerated. We have also at the moment no proof whatsoever of the cult of any such deity in the religion of the Indus Valley in the (Shalcolithic period. Yet, as the Mother Goddess of that place has been pointed out both as a village and household deity, it may be suggested that, like the present-day gramadevata, her functions also included causing, preventing and curing diseases. Sickness and disease were attributed in ancient India to supernatural agencies.

This divine maternal shield is invoked even today against the contagion of poxes, pustules, sores, fevers, plagues and most recently, even Covid-19, which birthed Corona Maa and CoronaDevi. Interestingly, it is never health gods that are called upon for rescue. Even in the spiritual realm, caregiving, blessings and to cure, to protect is a woman's work.

- ❖ India maybe a land of many wonders, but being situated within the tropical belt, she is also excellent breeding grounds of diseases, which are propagated through air and water. The most fearful of the diseases belonging to, these categories are small-pox and cholera. Ignorance of the laws of hygiene and absence of adequate preventive measures are chiefly responsible for the frequent outbreaks of these two diseases in the form of epidemics which have not only laid desolate many a once prosperous and well-populated village, Put also take even now a heavy toll of human lives.
- ❖ Village goddesses were originally believed to concern themselves with the general welfare of the people living under their respective spheres of influence. But in course of time, and chiefly under the auspices of the educated Hindu priestly class, their functions became, more or less specialized.

- ❖ Sickness and disease were attributed in ancient India to supernatural agencies. It might be from the gods in punishment for sins, as in the case of dropsy caused by Varuna, or, it might be due to a mere caprice of a malevolent deity. A cure, it was believed, could be affected only by propitiating and appeasing the god or spirit responsible.
- ❖ Many, if not most, religions and biblical ideas regarding the natural and supernatural world date from a pre-modern world and do not necessarily coexist in harmony with modern or postmodern notions (Wilber 2007). Scientific advances have explained many phenomena, for example disease and weather patterns, which were previously thought to have had a supernatural cause. All humans (to a degree) intuitively understand natural laws of causality, but many religious people also believe in the counterintuitive notion that God can, and does, suspend natural laws (Dennet 2006; Montell 2001).
- ❖ The simultaneous holding of opposing, logically inconsistent notions causes cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), resulting in psychic tension and anxiety which motivate strategies to reduce dissonance and therefore also anxiety (Burris, Harmon-Jones & Trapley 1997; Western 1999). Such strategies include a change of belief (Western 1999), belief intensification by inter alia religious attributions (Ozorak 2005) and transcendence where conflicting notions are reconciled under a superordinate concept (Burris et al. 1997). Believers who are willing to intellectually confront the discrepancies are motivated to change beliefs. Few people intellectually confront the discrepancies, but rather use religious attributions to bolster their belief.

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