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The Cultural And Historical Significance Of The Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja In Rangamatia Village: A 60-Year Legacy Of Faith And Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Folk deities serve as the custodians of indigenous faith, embodying the spiritual consciousness of rural communities and weaving together the intricate tapestry of cultural heritage. Among such revered deities, Sri Sri Maa Shitala occupies a place of profound significance in Bengal's religious landscape, venerated as the divine protectress against epidemics and a harbinger of health and well-being. This paper delves into the rich cultural and historical dimensions of the Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja in Rangamatia village, nestled in the Bamangola block of Malda district, West Bengal. Established in 1965 by the esteemed Biswas family, this sacred tradition has transcended its humble origins, evolving into a grand spectacle of collective devotion, drawing thousands of fervent worshippers each year.

Rooted in oral tradition and mythological reverence, the puja is an embodiment of the interplay between faith and traditional medical beliefs. Maa Shitala, often depicted seated on a donkey and carrying a broom, neem leaves, and a pot of cooling water, symbolizes both disease and its cure, reinforcing the age-old understanding of balance and purification. The rituals associated with her worship, including the practice of Arandhan (a day of complete abstinence from cooking), the offering of Sinni prasad, and the communal observances, reflect the deep-seated folk wisdom that intertwines spirituality with public health practices.

Beyond its religious essence, this annual observance has undergone a profound sociological transformation, shifting from a localized village ritual to an expansive congregation of faith that parallels major Hindu festivals. The research explores how this enduring tradition continues to thrive, fostering intergenerational participation, reinforcing social unity, and preserving Bengal's rich folk heritage amidst the tides of modernization. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this study seeks to illuminate the enduring legacy, ritualistic nuances, and societal impact of this 65-year-old sacred tradition, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping communal identity and spiritual resilience.

KEY WORDS: Shitala Puja, Folk Deity, Traditional Medical Beliefs, Arandhan Ritual, Sinni Prasad, Socio-Religious Transformation, Mass Participation.

INTRODUCTION

Folk culture stands as the soul of a nation's heritage, breathing life into its customs, traditions, and belief systems. Deeply embedded within the socio-religious fabric of Bengal, folklore and oral traditions act as the custodians of collective identity, shaping the moral, spiritual, and communal ethos of the region. In this vibrant cultural milieu, faith transcends mere religious practice, transforming into a lived experience that permeates daily existence. One such

enduring tradition is the worship of Sri Sri Maa Shitala, a deity of healing and protection, whose veneration has withstood the test of time, unshaken by the advances of modern science. This research delves into the origins, significance, and resilience of the Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja in Rangamatia village, which has flourished for over six decades, epitomizing the unwavering faith of its devotees and the cultural continuity of Bengal's folk traditions.

Rooted in agrarian society and deeply influenced by the cyclic rhythms of nature, the worship of Maa Shitala is an amalgamation of faith, folklore, and environmental consciousness. Unlike the grand temples dedicated to deities of classical Hinduism, Maa Shitala finds her sanctum in humble village shrines, shaded by the benevolent neem tree—an emblem of purification and healing. Her devotees, particularly women, revere her as the divine protector against epidemics, a belief that gained prominence in eras when diseases like smallpox ravaged communities unchecked. The rituals associated with her puja reflect a profound understanding of hygiene, community well-being, and the interdependence of humans and nature, thus offering a fascinating intersection of tradition and indigenous wisdom.

The Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja of Rangamatia village stands as a living testament to the enduring power of faith and the resilience of cultural heritage. For 60 years, this sacred observance has united generations in a shared spiritual experience, reinforcing social cohesion and fostering a sense of belonging. More than a religious ritual, it is an annual reaffirmation of the village's collective identity, where songs, recitations, and folk performances breathe life into the ancient lore surrounding the goddess. Through oral narratives and intergenerational participation, the tradition sustains itself, echoing the timeless rhythms of Bengal's folk culture.

In an era where globalization and rapid modernization threaten to erode indigenous traditions, the survival of the Maa Shitala Puja in Rangamatia is a remarkable instance of cultural resilience. This research seeks to explore the historical roots, ritualistic practices, and societal impact of this enduring tradition, unraveling its significance in the broader context of Bengal's folk religious landscape. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this study will examine how faith, folklore, and communal participation continue to sustain a ritual that, despite lacking scientific validation, remains an indelible part of the region's spiritual consciousness.

In Bengal, Maa Shitala is venerated through folk rituals, songs, and community gatherings. Unlike classical Hindu deities worshiped in grand temples, she is primarily honored in small shrines or open spaces, often under neem trees, symbolizing her association with purification and healing. Devotees believe she has the power to cure and prevent diseases, a faith that was particularly strong in times when medical knowledge was limited.

Folk Culture and Faith: The Enduring

Legacy of Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja in Rangamatia

Folk culture stands as the soul of a civilization, an unbroken thread that weaves together the spiritual, social, and historical consciousness of a community. It is an intrinsic element of a nation's intangible heritage, deeply embedded in its belief systems, oral traditions, and indigenous customs. In the culturally vibrant landscape of Bengal, where myth and reality intertwine seamlessly, folklore serves as both a repository of wisdom and a medium of identity formation. These age-old traditions, often untouched by the rigor of scientific validation, persist across generations, shaping the moral, spiritual, and social fabric of the people.

Among the myriad folk deities worshiped in Bengal, Sri Sri Maa Shitala holds a place of profound reverence. Traditionally venerated as the benevolent goddess of disease control, purification, and environmental harmony, Maa Shitala's worship transcends mere religious observance, emerging as a living testimony to the interplay of faith, healing, and collective consciousness. One of the most significant and enduring

manifestations of this devotion is the Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja of Rangamatia village, a tradition that has flourished for over six decades, standing as an unwavering symbol of cultural resilience and divine faith.

This paper delves into the mythological origins, ritualistic intricacies, and sociocultural impact of the Rangamatia Shitala Puja, tracing its evolution from a localized act of devotion to a grand socio-religious event that unites thousands in collective worship. By exploring the seamless fusion of faith, folklore, and traditional healing practices, this study aims to highlight how such indigenous rituals continue to shape social structures, reinforce cultural identities, and provide a sense of spiritual continuity in an ever-changing world.

The Mythological and Cultural Significance of Maa Shitala

Maa Shitala, a prominent folk deity in Hindu tradition, is venerated as an incarnation of Mahamaya, the great cosmic mother. According to popular belief, the presence of the goddess in the mortal realm results in outbreaks of smallpox, measles, chickenpox, cholera, and other epidemic diseases. In rural Bengal, the manifestation of these ailments is often interpreted as 'Maa's grace,' necessitating her worship for healing and divine intervention. As a result, village communities engage in collective prayers, believing that sincere devotion to Maa Shitala alleviates suffering and restores harmony.

Beyond her role as a disease deity, Maa Shitala is also regarded as a protector of agrarian livelihoods. In times of drought, excessive rainfall, or natural calamities, villagers turn to her for solace, seeking her divine protection over their crops. The worship of Maa Shitala is widespread, extending beyond Bengal to regions of North India and Nepal, reflecting a shared cultural belief in her healing powers.

The Inception of Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja in Rangamatia: A Historical Perspective

The origins of the Shitala Puja in Rangamatia trace back to the summer of 1965, when the village was gripped by an intense heatwave. The extreme weather conditions exacerbated the spread of bacterial and viral infections, threatening the health and livelihoods of the villagers. Simultaneously, prolonged drought led to the scorching of essential crops such as jute, flax, bitter gourd, and wheat, raising fears of famine. The villagers, faced with a dual crisis—disease and agricultural collapse—sought divine intervention to mitigate their suffering.

During this period, a young boy named Bura Biswas, son of Jogendranath Biswas, contracted chickenpox. Concerned for the village's wellbeing, the local headman, Shri Keshablal Biswas, took immediate action. A practitioner of indigenous medicine, he attempted to treat Bura while also consulting the renowned folk singer and healer, Avanihushan Biswas, popularly known as Chuban Gayen. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Gayen recommended the organization of a grand Shitala Puja to pacify the goddess and seek her blessings.

Under Keshablal Biswas's leadership, villagers collectively agreed to conduct the puja on the first Saturday of the Bengali month of Boishakh. The venue was designated under a large Ashwattha (sacred fig) tree beside the main village road. According to tradition, since Maa Shitala's worship is never conducted within a temple or under a roof, the open-air setting was deemed ideal. However, before the puja could be performed, tragedy struck—Bura Biswas succumbed to the disease, intensifying the villagers' fears of an impending epidemic.

Undeterred, Keshablal Biswas reaffirmed his faith and proceeded with the preparations. The villagers engaged in rigorous planning, ensuring the adherence to prescribed rituals. The puja was envisioned as a holistic communal act, reinforcing the ethos of collective faith, resilience, and devotion.

The Rituals and Traditions of Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja

1. Nagar Kirtan: The Prelude to the Puja

A week before the main puja, the village reverberates with the sound of devotional Nagar Kirtan (processional chanting). Every evening, villagers move from house to house, accompanied by the rhythmic beats of dhols, kanshis, and kartals. Women greet the procession with shankha (conch shell blowing) and uludhwani (auspicious vocal sounds). Each household offers a small quantity of water and sweets, symbolizing their participation in the collective prayer.

This daily practice is believed to have a purifying effect, with the loud vibrations of musical instruments disrupting the frequency of airborne pathogens. The culmination of the week-long Nagar Kirtan generates an atmosphere of heightened spiritual energy, preparing the village for the main ritual.

2. The Grand Puja and the Ritual of Arandhan

On the designated Saturday, the Nagar Kirtan intensifies, with devotees dancing in sacred mud, raising their voices in unison—"Hari Bol, Hari Bol." & "Vandeham Shitalam Devim, Rasabhashtam Digambaram; Marjani Kalashopetam, Shurpalankrita Mastakam." ("I bow to Goddess Shitala, who rides a donkey, is scantily clad, Holds a broom and a water pot, and has a winnowing fan adorning her head.")

A crucial aspect of the puja is the observance of Arandhan (the cessation of cooking). From dawn until the completion of the rituals, no household in the village lights a fire. This practice symbolizes reverence, discipline, and the community's absolute surrender to divine will.

Unlike conventional Hindu rituals that rely on monetary offerings, this puja is unique in its approach—no fixed donations are collected, and all offerings, including the murti (idol), are voluntarily provided by villagers. Following tradition, Maa Shitala's idol is sculpted from clay by local artisan Biren Pal, without any commercial transaction.

3. The Sacred Sinni Prasad

A highlight of the puja is the distribution of Sinni prasad—a mixture of milk, yogurt, flour, sugar, jaggery, dried fruits, and other ingredients. Notably, devotees believe that Sinni should not be taken home; consuming it within the temple premises ensures divine blessings, while carrying it away may invite misfortune. The prasad is widely revered, attracting devotees from nearly twenty neighboring villages, including Khutadaha, Bothtoli, Sonaghat, and Haripal.

The Climactic Divine Intervention: A Meteorological Miracle or Sacred Blessing?

One of the most awe-inspiring and enigmatic occurrences associated with the Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja of Rangamatia is the recurring meteorological phenomenon that has captivated devotees for over six decades. Year after year, as the sacred rituals conclude, the heavens seemingly respond with a dramatic celestial spectacle—a sudden and torrential downpour that engulfs the village. This profound synchronicity between the divine observance and nature's response has been etched into the collective consciousness of the villagers, who perceive it as an unquestionable manifestation of Maa Shitala's divine grace.

Beyond its symbolic significance, this annual climatic marvel serves a deeply practical purpose, replenishing parched water bodies, rejuvenating the soil, and breathing new life into the drought-stricken fields. The devotees interpret this as an act of divine benevolence, reinforcing their conviction in the ritual's sacred potency. Moreover, historical accounts suggest that following the inaugural puja in 1960, there was a marked decline in the prevalence of epidemic diseases that had previously plagued the village. This perceived divine intervention has since solidified the community's unwavering faith in Maa Shitala's protective embrace, transforming the puja from a regional tradition into a revered institution of faith, healing, and celestial harmony.

This convergence of meteorology and mythology, where scientific curiosity meets spiritual certainty, raises compelling questions about the interplay between faith, tradition, and natural phenomena. Is this a mere coincidence, or does it signify an ethereal connection between devotion and the elements? Regardless of interpretation, the phenomenon remains a cornerstone of the village's spiritual identity, perpetuating the belief in the goddess's unwavering guardianship over her devotees.

The Value of Maa Shitala in Today's Life:

While the scientific understanding of diseases has evolved, Maa Shitala's role in Bengal's cultural consciousness remains relevant. Her worship, though rooted in ancient traditions, teaches values that are still significant today:

1. Public Health Awareness:

The rituals associated with Shitala Puja emphasize hygiene and disease prevention. Though smallpox has been eradicated, the concept of cleanliness, proper food storage, and communal health consciousness remains crucial, especially in rural areas where health education is still needed.

2. Environmental Significance:

The use of neem leaves in Shitala worship aligns with modern scientific knowledge, as neem has antibacterial and antiviral properties. This reflects how traditional practices often had a basis in practical health wisdom.

3. Mental and Emotional Healing:

In today's fast-paced, stressful world, Maa Shitala represents a force of calmness and healing. The rituals associated with her puja—such as fasting, meditation, and communal participation—offer psychological comfort and reinforce the importance of mental well-being.

4. Women's Empowerment and Community Bonding:

Since Shitala Puja is primarily led by women, it provides them with a space for religious leadership and community organization. Such gatherings help strengthen social bonds and create networks of mutual support, which are vital for social harmony.

5. Resurgence in Cultural Identity:

With increasing globalization, many traditional beliefs and practices are being revived as symbols of cultural identity. Festivals like Shitala Puja serve as reminders of Bengal's rich folk traditions and their unique way of blending spirituality with practical life lessons.

Sri Sri Maa Shitala's importance extends beyond religious devotion. She embodies the wisdom of folk traditions, guiding people toward health, harmony, and resilience. While medical advancements have reduced the need for divine intervention in disease control, her cultural and spiritual influence continues to offer solace, moral values, and a sense of community in Bengal and beyond.

Conclusion

The Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja of Rangamatia stands as a resplendent testament to the enduring power of faith, tradition, and communal unity. What began as a humble crisis-averting ritual has, over the span of six and a half decades, blossomed into a magnificent cultural spectacle, resonating with the grandeur and devotion of the most celebrated Hindu festivals. Rooted in the indigenous belief systems that have withstood the test of time, this annual observance is more than just a religious event—it is a living embodiment of resilience, spiritual fervor, and the unyielding strength of collective worship. As faith continues to weave the fabric of societal structures, the Shitala Puja remains a beacon of cultural heritage, illuminating the profound connection between divinity and the human spirit.

The worship of Maa Shitala is deeply symbolic and multifaceted—it intertwines mythological reverence, ecological awareness, public health consciousness, and social cohesion. The rituals, particularly Arandhan (prohibition of cooking), the distribution of Sinni prasad, and the sacred use of neem leaves, reflect an age-old understanding of disease prevention and hygiene, echoing traditional medical beliefs that modern science has, in many ways, validated. The association of Maa Shitala with smallpox and other contagious diseases highlights how religious observances often served practical functions, fostering a collective approach to community health long before the advent of formal medical institutions.

Beyond the spiritual and medicinal dimensions, the puja also serves as an annual reaffirmation of cultural identity and social unity. It provides a space where intergenerational knowledge transfer occurs, ensuring that the customs, folklore, and oral traditions associated with Maa Shitala are preserved despite the pressures of modernization. The profound meteorological phenomenon observed during the puja—where a sudden

downpour coincides with the culmination of rituals—adds an aura of divine mysticism, reinforcing the villagers' unwavering belief in Maa Shitala's protective presence.

In an era where rapid globalization and technological advancements often overshadow indigenous traditions, the continued observance of the Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja in Rangamatia reflects an act of cultural preservation and spiritual resilience. While scientific progress has mitigated the need for divine intervention in controlling epidemics, the values embedded in Shitala worship—community participation, environmental consciousness, mental well-being, and collective healing—remain highly relevant in contemporary society.

This research underscores that folk traditions, rather than being mere relics of the past, continue to offer meaningful insights into human psychology, public health, and social organization. The worship of Maa Shitala, though deeply rooted in mythology, ultimately serves a practical and moral purpose, fostering an ethos of collective care, discipline, and faith. As long as these principles resonate with the people, the tradition will endure, continuing to be a beacon of hope, protection, and spiritual fulfilment for generations to come.

This research, while deeply rooted in mythology, history, and ritual studies, also invites interdisciplinary engagement from fields such as public health, environmental science, sociology, and anthropology. The Sri Sri Maa Shitala Puja, despite its folk origins, offers valuable insights into collective belief systems, healing traditions, and the enduring power of faith-based communal harmony.

Further research areas:

1. The Meteorological Anomaly and Sacred Rainfall:

Further studies could be conducted on the recurring rain phenomenon observed during the puja to explore possible scientific correlations with climatic patterns, atmospheric pressure changes, or seasonal shifts.

2. Women's Role in Ritual Leadership:

A detailed gender study could analyze the prominence of women in Shitala Puja traditions, highlighting how folk religious practices offer a platform for female agency and leadership in rural Bengal.

3. The Socio-Economic Impact of the Puja:

Given its increasing scale, a socio-economic study could investigate how the puja contributes to the local economy, including aspects of religious tourism, local craftsmanship (idol making), and community-run food distributions.

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"Vandeham Shitalam Devim, Rasabhashtam Digambaram;

Marjani Kalashopetam, Shurpalankrita Mastakam."

(Translation: I bow to Goddess Shitala, who rides a donkey, is scantily clad, holds a broom and a water pot, and has a winnowing fan adorning her head.)

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