



The Deity of the 'Minors': *Sitala* Puja in India- the Continuity of the Folk Traditions in Indian Culture

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Abstract: *Sitala* has been worshipped as a deity of a significant disease in India that occurs periodically in the Indian sub-continent due to its climactic conditions. A very significant part of the belief system in Hinduism revolves around this deity. Nevertheless, it has yet to acquire any significant place in the representation of Hinduism on a global cultural platform. This paper discusses the ethnohistorical details of this deity in the Hindu culture, along with a detailed description of the depiction. In the last part of this paper, there has been an explanation of the representation of this Goddess as a 'minor deity' from a sociological point of view, which has kept the following tradition still enclosed within a small, under-represented community in the society. I have referred to different religious scriptures and books for collecting historical data. To authenticate the validity of the folklore read, I also accessed and enquired about the people still associated with this tradition in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

Keywords: *Sitala*, a minor deity, Hindu culture, smallpox

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Introduction

India is a country of brooding religiosity. Religion is in the blood of every aspect of India. Before the religious implications, India is a vast country where an intriguing compatibility is found in varieties of cultures that makes this country a unique example of 'Unity and Diversity'. (Clarke, 1970) With numerous communities of people and their sub-divided inter-communities, an indigenous culture grows within India. Most of the time, significant religions widely influence these cultures. The members of the community inherit the major religions intricately. Though India is a 'Secular' country by the Constitution, the most dominant religion in India prevails is Hinduism. The so-called 'Sanatan' (the Primeval) dharma has been the most populated

religion, thriving in the Indian subcontinent. Hindu religion is a polytheistic religion, with more than 33 crore deities to worship. However, with invent of time and space, the true essence of religion has gradually been replaced by the globalized effects of the culture of consumerism. Like every religion, the Hindu religion is also becoming an 'invested' list of vested propaganda than merely being a way of life. There is a major contribution to this 'commercialization' of religions in India by selectively choosing certain religious ceremonies or rituals as a part of global culture. On a global note, the most convenient way to identify Indian Culture and the Hindu religion is the 'Durga Puja' (Goddess Durga). Besides, deities like Ganesha, Shiva, and Kali have been observed and celebrated by most states in India.

These populated depictions of the 'almighty' might have contributed to creating a unique identity of Hinduism on a global scale. However, with the commercialization of these Hindu Gods and goddesses, many other equally popular, dedicated, influential, ancient, and traditional deities, who were equally a part of the formal worship process and identification of the religion, are now at stake. In different religious transcripts and sacred books, there had been deliberate divisions between the personalized deities, with the categorization of 'Major Deities' and 'Minor Deities'. The practice of these minor deities might not be recognizable in the global description of Hinduism. However, the belief in these deities had been so strongly attached to the communities that even today, they are worshipped by people. These people predominantly belong to the 'others' among the Hindus, the Minorities.

Moreover, even doctrines and works of literature of this religion have compartmentalized their worshipping idols as the 'Minor deities'. (Wilkins, 178: 1882) Suppose one thoroughly studies India's medical history. In that case, one can find the significance of these 'minor gods' as the sources of traditional medicines, long before the introduction of 'Western medicines', healing people for centuries only through their deep dedication and unwavering beliefs. Even after playing such a crucial role in the very existence of the religion, today, identifying these deities has almost been obsolete. With this gigantic agenda of globalization, silently, these worships continue like an undercurrent, even in today's 21st century. Their existence even being dwindling still people hold their generational beliefs and continue performing these deity worships, keeping a significant part of their religious identity intact and alive.

In this paper, I would like to highlight and discuss one of these famous 'minor deities' in the Hindu religion, the '*Sitala* devi'. My research paper includes everything about this popular 'local' deity- its history, ethnic background,

implications in the religion as well as society, and the communities solely performing its responsibilities to carry on with the age-old traditions, even in the 21st century. I have also tried to draw a socio-anthropological connection between the social positions of the deity. Even after being equally powerful, how the Goddess has remained identified as the deities of the minor, lacking their positions in the 'mainstream Hindu religion', would also be included in my research paper.

Methodology

In my research paper, I have used the **secondary data analysis** methodology, where I have relied on factual research data previously collected on the same topic. I have analyzed the previous articles, journals, published papers, and books on my chosen topics to identify the supremacy of these ancient practices in certain rural and suburban parts of India. Also, I have taken help from these data to find out the analytical answer to my research question about the position of this deity in the society. To validate the efficacy of the data found and recorded, I have also visited some of the old households, carrying the traditions of these 'lost deities' every year. I have used them in my research as primary data sources.

Secondary data research methodology can be identified as a research method involving the compilation and collection of data from different authentic and channelized resources. Such data set is used to find the answer to a question, significantly different from the original work and conclusive statements published on the basis of the same data set previously.

Objective of Study

Through my research, I would like to draw attention to three crucial points.

- To elaborate on the practice of the 'other deities' by specific community people, contributing actively to the creation of the identity of major religions, even in the 21st century.
- To provide accessibility to the rich anthropological background of the Hindu culture that already has been overshadowed by the commercialization of certain cultural practices.
- To provide a proper analysis of such significant deity's social position in the society. This is to emphasize the sociological implication of these deities being addressed as 'minor deities' in the semantic resources, globally used for the introduction of Hindu Religion on a universal platform.

A Brief History of Hindu Religion's Depictions of Gods and Goddesses

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion that includes different worship cultures in its religious doctrines. As mentioned in their religious manuscripts, Hindus worship almost 33 crore gods and goddesses. Some of them are incarnated into personified beings. Some of them are incarnated into other natural elements. They all have specific influences and are imperative in people's daily lives.

Worshipping these deities is also associated with specific rites and rituals in religious texts and literature. Starting from the beginning, *Veda* and *Purana* are two inscriptional texts that mention the varieties identity of Gods and Goddesses and their implications on human lives. *Veda* again had been divided into four sub-divisions, each of them again was sub-divided into further two subdivisions: *Sanhita* (a collection of hymns mantras during worship) and *Brahmana* (regarding the perceptions of the ritual performances for worshipping the deities.) (Wilkins, 7: 1882)

Most of the deities in the Hindu religion symbolize various natural elements. There have been popular gods like *Surya* (God of the Sun), *Agni* (God of Fire), *Indra* and *Indrani* (God and Goddess of Storm), *Pawan* (God of Wind), and more. There have been deities resembling particular virtues as well, as mentioned in *Purana*; they were *Saraswati* (Goddess of wisdom), *Lakshmi* (Goddess of Wealth), *Durga* (Goddess of Power), and more. (Keith, 15:1986) However, these religious scriptures categorised all these deities as the 'Superior' deities. Hence these were the Gods and Goddesses, who single-handedly carried the sole responsibility to represent 'Hindu Religion' on the global platform. The idol '*Durga*' itself is enough to create a global identity of the Hindu Religion on the universal platform.

On the other side, these scriptures also mentioned some other Gods and Goddesses that were categorized and represented as the 'Inferior/ Minor' deities. Implications to these worshipped Gods and Goddesses were highly associated with the cultural representation. Since Hindu society had always been a dividend society with four significant divisions- three of 'purity' (*Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*) and one of 'pollution' (*Shudra*), so one of the most convincing ways to dominate the inferiors was to ostracize them from every realm of the society. There has been deliberate division in the worship of the almighty as well. And from there originated these divisions between the deities.

A list of 'Minor deities' is even mentioned in the pious manuscripts of the Hindu religion. There were mentions of *Sasti*, *Dhenki*, *Sitala*, and *Manasa*.

(Wilkins, 1882) In this paper, I would like to focus on how even in the stage of the Hindu religion is a major global religion, it continues with its little folk traditions that solely persist with the existence and as the identity of many traditional communities in India. Also, I have tried to draw a causal imperative of why these deities have been addressed in such social positions from ancient time in society.

Sitala- the Cool (*Shital*) Goddess

India had vastly been affected by various seasonal and chronic diseases, which at the primitive age, had no medicinal cure. Since then or even before, people used to worship God as they were depicted as the 'cure' of such diseases. One such seasonal disease was 'smallpox'. When asked about this disease, a native follower of this ritual stuck her tongue out and ceased me from uttering the name. '*Mayer Doya*' is the native term they use for one suffering from it. Their belief in this God is so profoundly enrooted that their native term mentions nothing regarding this as a disease. Rather, they consider it a 'boon from mother', a blessing. The worship of *Sitala* begins then.

The Name and the Different Identities

Shitala is identified as the '*Devi*' (Goddess) in charge of the seasonal disease of 'Small Pox'. (Wilkins, 178, 1882) She is also addressed as *Roga Raja* (Queen of Diseases), *Vyadhi Pati* (Lord of Pestilence) or *Besanta Raya* (Mother of Poxes). (Ghatak, 120: 2013) The native Bengali name for this disease is '*Sitala*'. The elementary meaning for this word is the 'one who makes cold'. The name is believed to be derived from the mythological birth story of her being born from the cooled ashes of the sacrificial fire. (Stewart, 1995) She is a goddess who abhors heat in seeking coolness. It has been believed she rewards the one who cools her while she is vigilant to the ones who burn her. (Wadley, 1980) One of the native preachers of this deity also added, on the day of *Sitala* puja, none of them burns the *chulha* (hearth) as they believe the *devi* rests on the *chulha*. Burning it makes her uncomfortable and she becomes angry.

Sitala is demonstrated as a *Gramadevata* (Village God). Also, she is worshipped by one of the most marginalized groups of society- the *Sabara* (the hunter tribe; in Bengali, known as *Vyadh*). Her resemblance reflects on her attribution to the tribal or indigenous traditional practice, and her 'non-Indo-Aryan' description makes her the prime deity of the forestry tribe. As per the *Charyapada*, the Savaras were the residents of the hilly terrains of West Bengal and Bihar since the 10th century. (Ghatak, 119: 2013) *Sitala* carries the

wild leaves (*neem leaves*) around her waist, which symbolize the deity's intense connection with Mother Nature.

India also categorizes the nation into variant 'disease-demons'. *Sitala* is believed to be the Goddess to cure the 'smallpox' disease, but there is also an unpopular belief that she carries the disease. (Keith, 1986) Within the Hindu religion, *Sitala* also has different incarnations in different places in India. Kankhol, a place near Hardwar, *Sitala*, is personified as a 'Muslim' woman. The story that revolves around this incarnation is that during the bidding of Badarinath, she revealed her adobe to prove her identity as a Hindu Goddess. Then she was rewarded for her piety and gained her identity of *Sitala*, the 'Goddess of Children'. *Sitala* again is depicted as a Sati woman named *Gandhari* in a shrine situated at Dehradun. *Gandhari* is the same woman mentioned in *Mahabharata* as the wife of *Dhritarashtra*, the mother of *Kauravas*. Again, *Sitala* is identified as a kind of *Matangi Sakti*, a resemblance of power to the feminine side of lord *Shiva*. This depiction of the Goddess closely resembles the 'demonic' depiction, as the physical features of this idol are horrible. She has ears as winnowing fans and a frightful face with projecting teeth coming out of her open mouth. In Punjab, the disease has a direct attribution to *Devi Mata*. (Keith, 1986)

The image of *Sitala* is a very popular one throughout the whole of North India. And its connection with the disease 'smallpox' is evident everywhere. (Nicholas, 1981) The belief is that when some children suffer from the disease, the *devi* enters the children's bodies. And also the ones who die from this disease, keeping piety in mind, the dead had never been cremated; instead, they are buried like godly persons.

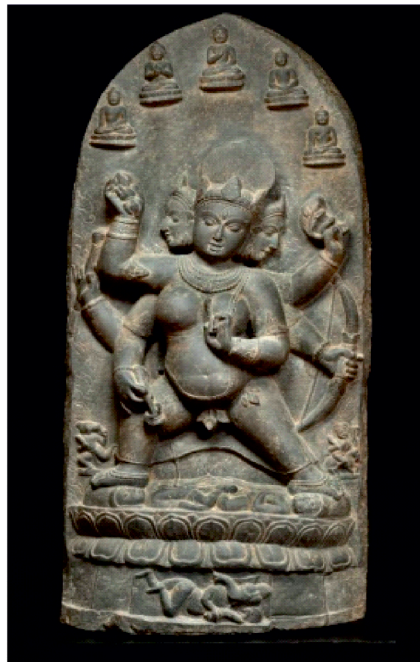
The Resemblance with Almighty of Other Religions

Sitala is a Hindu Goddess. In Buddhism, one can find a goddess who shares a similar depiction and implication to that of *Sitala* in Hinduism. Through the practices, this deity can draw an intense root connection between Hinduism and Buddhism.

The Goddess *Parnasavari/Parnasabari* is a Buddhist incarnation, intensively followed by the 'Mahayana' and 'Vajrayana' traditions. In Buddhist textures, she has been mentioned with different other names like *Sarvasavaranam Bhagavati* (Goddess of all Savaras), *Sarvamariprasamani* (healer of all epidemics) (Shaw, 2006), and *Ritro Lo-ma-gyon-ma* (Mountain dweller dressed in leaves). (Bhattacharya, 1928) Her name is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Parna*', which means the 'leaves', and '*Savari/Sabari*', which means the tribal woman of the

Savara indigenous group, residents of Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh. It means a leaf-clad Sabara woman from central India and later accepted as a Goddess in Buddhist traditions. (Raju,-) As has been discovered, both deities were worshipped to save people from epidemics, mainly smallpox, which remained incurable through medicines at that time. *Sitala* is a woman of a golden complexion who resided on a lotus. (Wilkins, 1882) Something ubiquitous in *Parnasabari* as well is that. *Parnasabari* resides on a lotus as well. The greater possibility for the connection between these two depictions is the exhibited idol of *Parnasabari*, restored from the 11th century in Kapoor Galleries. (Raju, -) The idol stood above the lotus steles, with specific human figures at her feet. These human figures have circular (pustule infection) marks on their body, resulting from smallpox.

From a historical point of view, there has been a different depiction of the *Parnasabari* idol as well, which is relatable to the rise and fall of Buddhism and Hinduism in the Indian sub-continent, as explained by various scholars.



Parnasavari sculpture

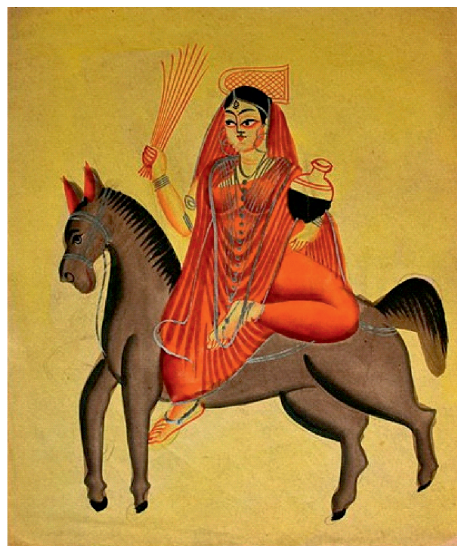
The sculpture of *Parnasabari* from the Pala dynasty consisted of three lotus-steles – in the middle, there was *Parnasabari*, and *Sitala* and *Jvarasura* on the two sides, in comparatively smaller shapes. The inferior depiction of the

Sitala deity reflects the rise of Buddhism over tyrannical Hinduism during the reign of the Pala dynasty. (Bhattacharya, 1962) Hence, *Parnasabari* is reflected as monumental in the middle, and the other two Hindu mythical deities were placed as inferior near her feet. Nevertheless, it could have been the other way as well- instead of delineating the status of Hinduism, it could be an acknowledgement of the local Hindu gods along with the famous Buddhist deities. (Shaw, 2006)

Depiction of *Sitala* in Hindu Culture

Though the name *Sitala* is associated with the idea of coolness, she has nothing but the characteristics of coolness. She is satiated with blood; hence, in many places, a goat sacrifice is still made as a devoted offering to the *devi*. Also, she is dressed in red, a symbol of blood. (Mukherjee, 1918) *Sitala* is a married woman who carries all the signs of her married state in her appearance. She wears a red border white saree, with a red big vermillion (*sindoor*) mark at the middle of her forehead. She has knee-length, long, thick black hair. She is white and appears as a Brahmin woman. She also carries the *neem pata* (margosa leaves) in tribal attire. Such a leaf carries various medicinal and social significances as well. Neem is an anti-bacterial leaf that cures various infections. Similarly, it is not very pleasant and hence is mostly avoided by the people.

As the local worshippers explained, a *Kulo* (a winnowing tray-like thing made of cane) is another symbol of this deity. There is a tradition of taking this



A portrayal of *Sitala* deity in Hindu Mythology

sacred kilo to different households and carrying them on the head of a married woman. So, *Sitala* has both an incarnated as well as metaphysical depiction as well. Since *Sitala* is identified as a *grama devata* (Village Goddess), she is also worshipped in non-incarnated forms. In Madhya Pradesh, an indented stone beneath a sacred Neem tree is identified as the *Sitala mata*. Also, in Punjab, she is believed to reside inside a *kikar* (Cape Gum) tree. (Rahman, 1965)

The idol is identified with many more significant features and symbols. Those are explained below-

Ass- the vahan (the Vehicle): In the Hindu religion, every deity has a vehicle or carrier on which they are worshipped. This reflects the Nature of strength and power this deity carries. Most of the time, these animals are either valuable for daily life purposes or are powerful. It is pretty unusual to have a deity in Hindu mythology mounted on an Ass. *Sitala* has an ass as her *Vahan*. An ass, in native terms, is a *gadha* devoid of all usefulness; hence is referred to as a symbol of idiocy. It is also a representation of disruption and destruction. This *Vahan* is chosen to reflect on the power that this deity holds when she gets angry or unsatisfied. Such hostile animosity is a unique symbol of her representation. (Ghatak, 2013)

Jhata- the astra (the Broom): The deity carries a huge broom in her hand. This also has a significant symbolization. Every other deity in Hindu culture has sharp, dangerous weapons and shining like armour. In contrast to that, a *jhata/jharu* is very inferior as such of its power. However, it is a very prominent representation of the class of people. *Sitala* is depicted as a Goddess of *Savara*. The *Savara* is included within the cleaning group of people in the society; *Savara* women are always carrying the broom for cleaning throughout the daytime. (Ghatak, 2013) However, at night, using a broom is prohibited. Such a depiction reflects the intimate connection of Nature to the culture. Broom is used to clean dirt and eliminate anything that is dirt. The broom has a tightened gripped end and one open end. The tightened, gripped end represents the unity of the people. The way we put the broom, it always has its open end downwards as the opposite is believed to bring disorder, pollution, and disunity. Hence, the broom as the armor in the hand of deity depicts how she is symbolized to remove all that is dirt from the society.

Kalash- the Pitcher and jug- the Ewer: A *Kalash/ghoti* is a container to keep water stored inside. It is usually made of clay to keep the water cool. *Sitala* having a *kalash* with her is related to her name and Nature of being. Water always keeps everything cool. *Sitala* meaning in the native language is also 'cool'. But pitcher has some other significant meaning as well. A pitcher

is hollow inside and is filled with water or air. This reflects the human abode-which is also empty from the inside and filled with air. (Ghatak, 2013) When the water is poured into the pitcher and human drinking water, it reflects on having life and atma in it since water is synonymous with 'life'. This pitcher is a very pious symbol for the *Sitala cult* as a symbol of fertility and protection of the people.

On the other hand, a *jug* or an *ewer* is a pot used to carry water or other liquids, or sometimes, the specific shape of the urn is used to contain ashes. *Sitala* carries a pitcher and an ewer in her two hands together and also has a powerful depiction. Carrying the water-filled pitcher represents she is a 'life giver'. Moreover, at the same time, carrying an ashes-filled ewer, on the other hand, represents the equal ability to take away life as well.

As the native preachers said, they consider the pitcher as a '*mangal kalash*' and keep the pitcher's water in their household for welfare and protection.

Pakha- the Winnowing Fan: The concept of winnowing is very significant in Hindu culture. It is a process of separating purity from the impurity. The winnowing tray in the native language is known as the *kulo*, as mentioned previously. The crown of the idol is a winnowing fan. This profoundly connects with the representation of the tribe she is a goddess of. *Savara* is the scheduled tribe of people belonging to the lowest caste and class strata in society, associated with cleaning every unclean thing. This *kulo* symbolises the cleaning process's necessity and the people associated with this work. It also separates and rejuvenates the good, leaving the bad behind. The disease that the deity is named as a goddess of, 'smallpox', is also identified as part of the impurity this deity carries. Hence, these representations are very much reflective of the curative power of the deity as well as the luminal position of the cult in the Hindu culture.

Rakta netra- the Red Big eyes: This depiction of the deity is associated with the devastation it is capable of causing. With such huge eyes, *Sitala* is depicted more as a 'demi-god' than a reflecting figure of beauty and goodness. Her intriguing look reflects the ugly side of famine; her eyes look dreadful and starved. Out of the fear and dread she invokes from her eyes, people devote and respect this Goddess from the heart.

Sitala being the Goddess of *Coolness*, the months of scorching summer are identified as the worshipping time for the deity. Some people from Bengal worship her just a week after the *Holi* festival, the seventh day of the waning moon in *Chaitra's* (the last month of the Bengali calendar) dark fortnight. Some worship her in *Sravan* (the fourth month of the Bengali calendar) light

fortnight. The devoted women also keep a fast on every moonless *Saptami* from the dark fortnight of *Chaitra* to the light fortnight of *Sravan* in the name of the *Sitala* Goddess. Hence with a stretch of 5 months, this deity has been worshipped throughout India. (Mukherji, 1918) Again, in Sambalpur, Odisha, the natives celebrate *Sitala Sasthi* in *Jyestha* month (the second month of the Bengali calendar). (Mahanty, 1935)

The Ethno-Historical Background of the *Sitala* Saga

In the *Sitala* saga from the *Mangalkabyas* written by the Paeans back in the 17th and 18th centuries, the *Sitala* is identified as a 'pre-Aryan' Goddess, primarily worshipped by the aboriginal natives from four North Indian states- Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Orissa. Her identity was even present in the popular Sanskrit Ayurvedic medical scriptures- *Bhavaprakash* and *Skanda Purana*. The context comes with the dreadful disease of smallpox and its curative measures. (Curley, 2008) *Sitala* has also been mentioned as a daunting Goddess of smallpox in popular historical writings like *Dharmashastra* and *Nirnayasindhu*. The origin of the *Sitala* cult can prominently be traced to the *Vajrayana Buddhism* traditions. *Sitala* being a Goddess is a reflection of *Saktism*, the worshipping of Nature, reproduction, and life.

There have been several folklores revolving around the nexus of the deity *Sitala* in the native regions. *Sitala* is believed to be connected with her six other sisters. All seven of these sisters are associated with the seven most common forms of fever from which the people of the regions suffered the most. They are- *Sitala*, *Maha Mati*, *Lamkaria*, *Basanti*, *Agwani*, *Masani* and *Polamde*. (Wadley, 1980)

Three varieties of implications are found in the three regions where *Sitala* is being worshipped even today. In Bengal, *Sitala* is associated with the seasonal illness of 'smallpox'; and is also referred to with two more demi-gods *Jvarasur* (the Fever demon) and *Raktabati* (the Goddess of blood infections). Also, *Sitala* is worshipped with *Oladevi* (the Goddess of Cholera) and *Ghetu devata* (the God of skin disease). (Bose Dey, 2019) Hence, in Bengal, we mostly see the relevance of this deity is deeply enrooted in diseases.

In the other states of North India, the implication of this deity is even greater than just the Goddess of ailment. According to the native traditions in Bengal, there are some resemblances with the North Indian traditional practice as well. In North India and Bengal, the deity is worshipped with *basi* (stale) food. On the day of the puja, none of the houses where the *kulo* is taken is allowed to burn their *chulha* (hearth). They are supposed to cook and have the

food they cooked the previous night. A tradition of eating *panta* (water-rice) is also prevalent in this puja. It is believed that since the deity herself is born from the ashes of the dying fire, she is always hot and burning. All she requires is coolness; hence is worshipped with cold food. In North India, Basora (the Left-Over Food Festival) is a unique name for this festival. (Wadley, 1980)

However, in Gujarat, the symbolization of *Sitala* is completely separate from that of the other states. In contrast to the more strict and rigid regions of *Sitala* worship, in Hindi-speaking states like Gujarat, the worship process is less formalized and more distant from the beliefs. In Gujarat, *Sitala* is a deity of 'Good Fortune' in wealth, family, and business. The worship process is much more materialized than that of the other states.

Despite having variations in the symbolization of beliefs and the preaching process, there have been some basic similarities in all forms of *Sitala* worship available in the Indian subcontinent. In all places, she is the Goddess of Coolness. Her physical attributes are always that of feminine tranquility (of a naked woman, of a married woman wearing a red border white saree, and /or of an old Brahmin woman).

Sitala Katha- the Popular Folklores

Sitala is both dangerous and benevolent. As a deity of 'coolness', three different folklores about her characteristics have been present, where she is calm and seeks coolness. Nevertheless, whenever there is heat, she becomes ruthless and punishes people with the dreadful disease of smallpox.

Sitala – the 'Goddess of Small Pox': (Popular Folklore in West Bengal)

This is a story of a King and *Sitala*. During the *Chaitra* month of the Bengali calendar, the prince and a farmer's son suffered from *Chechak* (smallpox) disease. The farmer kept his house clean, worshipped the shrine, and fed his son cold and stale food. Eventually, his son was cured. While the King sacrificed goats daily, recited a hundred and eight names of *Chandi*, another popular 'minor deity' of India, and fed his son with hot cooked food. As a result, his son's condition worsened, and hearing about the recovery of the farmer's son from the same disease, he got angry about the Goddess's unequal favor. On the seventh day of the dark half of *Chaitra*, the deity appeared in his dreams and asked to feed her uncooked/previously cooked, cool, and stale food. Furthermore, following her instructions, her son's condition improved from the following day toward recovery. (Wadley, 1980)

Sitala- the 'Guardian of the Children': (Popular Folklore in North India)

Sitala, resembling the *Sasti* goddess, is worshipped on the sixth day of childbirth and the sixth day of many lunar fortnights during the summer seasons. This folklore revolves around a Brahmin with seven sons, all married and without children. Instruction of an older woman, the deity in disguise, to follow the fasting for the *Sitala Sasti* resulted in all of them having sons the following year. As she continued with the *vrata*, one day during the *vrata*, she and her daughters-in-law accidentally bathed with hot water and ate hot cooked food. As a result, she woke up from her nightmare the night, screaming her husband's name only to find him dead. Also, her sons and daughters-in-law died. Bewildered in grief, she ran to the forest and saw an older woman burning with fever. She learned that the older woman was *Bhagavati Sitala*, and her suffering happened because of her accidental mistake. As a remedy, the deity asked her to bring cold curd in a clay pot and put it on her and her dead family. Furthermore, the deity recovered from suffering, and her whole family was rejuvenated to live.

Sitala- the 'Patron of Good Fortune': (Popular Folklore in Gujarat)

This folklore is about Princess Subhakari, the daughter of King Indradumn and Queen Dharmasila of Hastinapur. Subhakari was married to Prince Gunavana, and he came to take Subhakari on the day of *Sitala Sasti*. He was convinced to stay there while Subhakari, the priest, and his wife went to take a holy dip in a pond in the forest. Unable to find a pond, both the Brahmin couple sat under a tree, exhausted. However, Subhakari continued the search and met *Ma Sitala* in disguise as an older woman to take her to the pond and made her follow the *vrata* by bestowing her with a long life for her husband, devoid of misfortune and famine. On her way back, she found the priest dead and the wife weeping, for she would become 'sati'. On calling *Ma Sitala*, she advised her to perform the puja rituals to make her husband alive, and it worked. On her way back home, she surprisingly found her husband dead on the road. She called *Ma Sitala*, and the deity said to take him home. Her husband awakened, fulfilling the blessing of the *Sitala* deity. (Wadley, 1980)

These are the ways how the *Sitala* worship becomes a prominent part of the culture in India throughout the ages.

The Representation of Sitala as a 'Minor Deity': a Sociological Implication of 'Then' and 'Now'

A culture is a practice that continues with the time and place, holding and carrying the exact identity of a community and religion. The advent of time,

technology, and modernity, affects the frequent changes in culture when certain traditional practices hold back the root of the changing originality of the culture. In the Hindu religion, worshipping *Sitala* reflects that even in the 21st century.

We know that goddesses are supreme powers; they all are equal. However, rooting back to the textual references of *Sitala*, it has broadly been identified as the 'minor deity'. Such a depiction reflects how even in the pious worship system of the Almighty, the discriminating division system of society had smoothly invaded and ruled. *Sitala* is a goddess of the *Savara*, a class of people who belonged to the lowest strata of the society, with 'impure' occupations of cleaning and stepping on whose reflection made the upper caste people take a bath to regain their 'purity'. Every 'superior deity' in Religious scriptures had powerful armor as their weapon and bewildering animals as their *vans*. Where to isolate the superior deities from the minor ones, this minor deity was armed with a blunt weapon of *jharu* and was mounted on a dumb animal, *gadha*. This was a predictable way of separating the 'extraordinary' from the 'ordinary'. A donkey/ass (*Gadha*) is not of great use in a great cause but is of enormous benefit for daily work like carrying loads.

Similarly, a broom (*Jhata*) is the least option to use as a weapon but is one of the essential things used in a household or any place for cleaning. None of the superior goddesses had been associated with diseases, while these minor goddesses all represented the disease and the healers of these diseases themselves. When the superior deities were instructed to be worshipped with fresh, piping hot, cooked food, this deity had been explained to be satisfied with only cold, uncooked, and stale food, which had been the typical food for their worshipper caste of people. Her divine connection with her six other sisters are also associated with seven of the most dreadful fevers people suffered back then. This disease was common for all classes and caste people back then; why *was Sitala* not introduced to be worshipped by every caste and class?

The upper caste people had educative doctors (*vaidya*) who could treat the diseases with medicines and Ayurvedic cures. Nevertheless, how was it possible for the 'upper caste' doctors to enter a 'lower caste' household to treat a patient suffering from any of the dreadful fevers, including 'smallpox'? For such invasion, the upper caste person would immediately put his 'pure' identity at stake. Hence, it was necessary to introduce a *deity*, specifically for them, as a symbol of the disease and its healing. Hence, the explanation of the deity and her characteristics are all reflective of ordinary things, just as same as that of

her worshipping community, the *Savaras*. Also, *Sitala* is a goddess in a veil of a 'mother', a true worship of *Saktism*. However, in today's global culture, the sole identification of Hinduism when it comes to a culture worshipping 'feminine power' is reflected in the commercialized worshipping of the Goddess *Durga*. Being highly influenced by globalization and consumer culture, UNESCO has identified *Durga Puja* as a world heritage culture of the Hindu religion when the 'little traditions' of these minor deities continue to carry the originality of the *Sanatan Dharma* in minimal spaces.

With the frequent essence of the post-modern advents, every religion is on the verge of losing its roots and authentic identities, where their primitivism started back from worshipping Nature. The engulfing consumerism is high on profit for the technicality that it is constantly hampering Nature and the natural equilibrium. To keep pace with the material culture and avoid the 'cultural lag' and religious practices, cultures are also on the verge of modifying themselves to carry on with the race of existence. Hence the 'non-material' cultural practices are almost obsolete in the modern world. Moreover, the case of the Hindu religion is the same. However, in this 21st century, it is the predominant and prominent practice of this *Sitala puja* by a specific class of people that contributes actively to holding on to the roots of the Hindu religion. Also, these traditions contribute to maintaining the identity of the people who practice them. Even these are some of the few traditions that continue with enriched folk traditions of Hindu culture. The folklore associated with this deity is also very intriguing; but only a few people are aware of this. However, whatever little communities continue practicing them is carrying on the legacy of the ancient belief structure of Hinduism.

Conclusion

Every culture consists of 'Great traditions' and 'Little Traditions'. At the same time, with time, it is the 'great traditions' that become established within the culture as a global identity and the representation of its identity. However, the 'little traditions' somehow lost their way in the rapid transformation and became obsolete, taking away a significant part of the culture with it permanently. Many such little traditions in Hinduism are on the verge of extinction. Moreover, the *Sitala Saga* is one of them. Such a community-based yet significantly traditional practice still contributes to the completion of the Indian culture, reflecting the essence of Hinduism. Even if this is not part of a dominant Hindu identity on a global platform, losing such culture would cause a significant loss for the religion to continue with its ancient culture.

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