



# Myth and Legends of Goddess Sitala In Bengal: Symbolizing the Invisible

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## Abstract

*Sitala*, the goddess of smallpox found throughout Indian Subcontinent under the same name; village titularies under various names, for contagious and epidemic diseases. The association of diseases with myths, legends and memories conceptualized in the early medieval narrative of ‘*Sitalamangal*’. The Sacred journey of Goddess *Sitala* in Bengal and circumambulation are as equally important cultural symbol. The shift from orally transmitted tales to popular printed literature of *Sitala* Cult is a crucial for standardization. The paper will analyse how the growing concern for household and community protection from epidemic diseases, welfare of children and community has resulted the development of *Sitala* Cult in West Bengal.

**Keywords: Sitala, Epidemic, Goddess, Religion, Culture, Bengal, Myth, Folklore**

## Introduction

The mother Goddesses of India are well known for their dual qualities of benevolence and malevolence. One of the goddesses is, the *Sitala*, popularly known as smallpox deity. She is worshipped throughout northern, western part, southern and eastern part of India, known by various names whose actual association with smallpox and epidemic diseases. Yet she is occasionally given other roles and powers, including those as the protector of children and the giver of good fortune. The wide geographical and historical appearance of *Sitala* allows for examination of her personalities and attributes in a variety of cultural traditions. *Sitala* was not part of the original Vedic pantheon and may have been a local deity who rose to prominence as smallpox grew more widespread and established from the 7th century onward. Ralph Nicholas has recorded the rise of a Bengali literature about the goddess starting in the 16th and 17th centuries, but also notes earlier representations of the goddess in Hindu shrines and temples from Gujarat in the west to Bengal in the east. *Sitala* could be counted among the many “godlings of disease” worshipped in villages across India. Some took the form of mother goddesses, protectors of the village community from calamity as well as reminders of the ever-present danger of disease. *Sitala* occupied a place of exceptional reverence among disease deities, especially in 17th- and 18th-

century Bengal, a superior deity, a mother goddess to be worshipped not only in village ceremonies during the early spring season when smallpox first became prevalent, but also celebrated in religious hymns and verses. She was also worshipped by the Muslims of eastern Bengal (today's Bangladesh), who shared much of their culture with Hindus until the Faraizi reform movement in the 19th century. In other words, the goddess retained her authority even over a prophylactic practice instituted by humans and intended to minimize the impact of the disease over which she presided. Sitala helped her devotees make sense of why epidemics occurred and gave them a means by which to address the near inevitability of the disease's visitation. The invocation of Sitala that accompanied the cool and calming atmosphere with which householders tried to cope with the disease and aid recovery gave religious sanction to local practices that helped reduce the impact of one of the most devastating diseases known to humankind.

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. Moreover, the personalities attributed to Sitala in popular vernacular religious literature present even more anomalies related to two separate Sanskritic traditions. Without doubt, 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.

### Methodology

The present study is conducted in the selected in the Amdhop village of Bagda block, of South Bengal. The source materials are collected in the fieldwork of nine months and they comprise oral narratives, informal interviews, endowment records and village rituals and festivals. Initially, a pilot survey was carried out in the months of March and April-2018 in this area. During this period, festivals at various places are identified for the study. The study is basically empirical, descriptive, analytical, exploratory in nature and intensive field work has been made with Anthropological approach. Besides, conventional methods, namely genealogical, case histories and participant observations were adopted.

### Historical Background of Sitala Cult

The *Sitala* cult is mostly developed in Bengal. She was found in the form of puja in village to local to city, lengthy poems (mangal) written in her honor, and numerous *Sitala* temples across the region. The earliest of the mangal date from the 1600s while published materials on *Sitala* have existed since the 1870s. *Sitala*'s most prevalent personality is that of the goddess of smallpox. 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 woman 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 honour. 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. 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. She 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 *Nirnayasindhu* 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 were assigned an instrumental role to fulfil 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. Smallpox is generally known as *basanta rog* (the "spring disease") in Bengal because epidemics strike in the spring. The virus is serially transmitted and travels furthest and fastest when the air is dry. The association of Sitala with stale vs cold food is in stark contrast to Bengal. In Bengal, the absence of cooking is also associated with the goddesses *Sasthi*, when on *sitalasasthi* no cooking is undertaken as an austerity to honour the goddess directly. *Sitala* as the protector of children has no related Sanskritic tradition except that derived from her benefactor *Sasthi*. Dimock finds *Sasthi* mentioned in the sixteenth century text the *Tantrasdray* as well as in the *Skanda-purana* and the *Brahmavaivarta purana*. According to Dimock, it is *Sasthi's vahana* (vehicle), a cat, who is dangerous when offended. Whereas the cat steals children, *Sasthi* returns them. The goddess herself is completely benevolent. When they are heated, despite the cold weather that prevails in Magh, they become angry and take revenge upon their devotees. Here the seasonal time interacts with the ritual rules to create a situation of real austerity like cold baths and cold food on a cold day. If the austerities undergone in worshipping a given deity are indeed related to that deity's potential powers, then it is proper for *Sitala*, the Giver and Protector of Children, to demand greater austerities than *Sitala*, the Goddess of Smallpox. There are interesting discrepancies even within this Sitala, but the dominant theme is her association with poxes of various sorts, especially smallpox. Folklores of *Sitala* explains womanhood, austerities that causes disruption in community to family level. The three stages; menstruation, pregnancy 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.

## Representations: The Symbolic Significance of Goddess Sitala

The personalities of *Sitala* are constructed out of this idiom of hot and cold. *Sitala*, born of cooled ashes, is by nature cold. As a result, maintaining the necessary balance between hot and cold is for her a delicate matter. She, 'The Cool One, is more easily burned than are others; what is to others acceptable heat is to *Sitala* excessive. It is coolness which links *Sitala*'s various "personalities" the Goddess of Smallpox, the Protector of Children, and the driver of good Fortune. Born of cooled ashes, *Sitala* is by nature cool and she continually seeks coolness. When heated, she heats others—attacking them with the dreaded pox or destroying their children. Hence a hot bath in January is too hot for *Sitala*. As the excessive heat of summer builds up, *Sitala* must be cooled or she will burn—and in her rage will burn others (who are then cooled by concerned relatives' thereby cooling the goddess herself). *Sitala*'s physical attributes are common to all three regions as well as to the extant Sanskrit texts: she carries a broom and a water vessel, she rides an ass, she has a winnowing fan on her head, she is often naked (or is dressed as a married woman), and she regularly appears disguised as an old Brahman woman. Moreover, when *Sitala* is worshipped, she is able to expend her excess heat and maintain her necessary coolness by burning the sins of her devotees. *Sitala* when cool is united with her devotees in a bond of devotion and protection. *Sitala* when heated causes separation and death. Moreover, *Sitala* expects coolness at midnight (the unlit fire) and is often cooled, as the *puja* rules demonstrate, at midday. The presence of *Sitalasathi* demonstrates this diversification, despite its being also closely allied to standardization. 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 to as '*Gadha*'. It lacks all horse-like qualities thus becomes 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.

The broom is referred to in Bengali as "*jhata or jharu*". The function of broom is to remove dirt and dust. The broom is made of straws tied tightly from one side, leaving the other side loose and open. It represents the 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 instance, 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. Another important practice is the symbolic sweeping or dusting done by the local 'ojha' or 'shaman' to the subject with the broom made of feathers or twigs of some plants like neem. With this ritual, the patient's mind and spirit are supposed to be cleansed and a balance is restored. In this particular context it represents both aspects cleaning and elimination. Pitcher in Bengali is known as "*ghara*". 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* emphasizes the fertility and life-giving or protecting aspect of the cult. Winnowing is a process of

cleaning grain through the winnowing tray. It is called “*kulo*”. 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.

### Sacred Narratives to Ritual Performance

Sitala spreads her poxes, through the medium of lentils, among those who refuse to worship her. The modes by which she obtains devotees and also her attendants are unique in Bengal. The *Sitala Mangals* of Bengal, portrays the goddess, as whose connection with poxes, and disease in general, is fundamental. Here Sitala is associated with *Jvarasur*, the Fever Demon, and *Raktabati* (“She who possesses the Blood”) both her serving woman and herself a form of pox. The purpose of the Sitala Mangal is not primarily the avoidance of disease, whether smallpox, malaria, or any other. The mangal, the “well-being, ” the “auspiciousness” ,or the “beneficence” of the text lies in its capacity to enlighten and instruct. Stated in oversimplified terms, bhakti, an attitude of religious love, places the worshipper in a wholly dependent and child-like attitude toward the deity. The composition or publishing of a mangal text is an act of bhakti and also a means of enlightening and instructing others by explaining the divine to people so that they too can have proper bhakti. The custom of accompanying the puja of *Sitala* with a performance of her sacred text, or *Sitalamangal*, reflects the Brahminization of this goddess. Isolated and tribal intensive areas do not associate the performance of the lyric with worship, nor do they give it ritual status. 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 is similarly performing an act of devotion.

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*, 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.

Three *Sitalakatha* are quite popular and used as a reference to make aware the people towards goddess *Sitala*. The stories depict mainly her terrible form and how devotees benefited through her worship. One of the stories which is quite prevalent among the Bengali society is about the king and smallpox disease. So, 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 every day 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 lumps 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.

Another story is concerned about *Sitala* 's benevolent and malevolent aspect towards 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, her neighbours 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 an old woman 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.

One more popular story which is quite familiar among eastern part of the country as it links to king *Indradumn* and the grace of 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 '*Akhanda Saubhagya*' 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 favour. Feeling pleased *Subhakari* started going home on the way she saw the Brahman wife's crying. The Brahman wives 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 wakes up the way he would, after a restful sleep at home. *Subhakari* told the old women, "Ma gives me such a favour 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*.

## Conclu sion

Finally, attempting to discover patterns in Sitala's personality and worship forces us to address questions of religious modernization and standardization. In consideration of these questions, the immense complexity, variability and adaptability of Hindu beliefs and practices are highlighted. The presence of the goddesses *Sitala* in Sanskrit ritual treatise is sporadic and more exploration is necessary before this aspect of her history can be understood. The idiom of hot and cold and a goddess named *Sitala* have been interacting for centuries. Time and circumstances permit new variations on the theme of coolness so that an author of an eighteenth-century ritual text can choose among several 'Cool Ones' In modern times, the printing press and greater literacy have led to increased familiarity with local practices in other regions. One result is *Sitala*, the Protector of Children. The theme of coolness is well-known to Hindi authors, while the Bengali goddess Sasthi is not. Working with the familiar idiom, they create a new *Sitala*. She remains, as she no doubt will remain in the future regardless of her other attributes, 'The Cool One' Ultimately, *Sitala* is not saying something about smallpox, sons, or husbands; rather the meaning and the message of *Sitala* is a reminder and warning to humans of the necessity of maintaining the proper balance of heat and coolness.

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