

# Maa Sitala: Transformation from Smallpox Deity to Goddess of Good Fortune.

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## Abstract

Since ancient times, Maa Sitala has been well-known as a mythological goddess. Although she is mentioned in the Vedas as a symbol of misfortune, she is also mentioned in the Ayurvedic scriptures, the Skanda Purana, and the Brahmavaivarta Purana, as well as in poison treatment texts. Common people turned to various worldly gods and goddesses to find relief from social ills. The people of rural Bengal started worshipping Maa Manasa, Maa Chandi, Maa Sasthi, Ghetu Thakur, Dharma Thakur, Panchu Thakur, Bhim Thakur, Kshetragnpal, Kaluraya, Satyapir, Banbibi, Dakshin Roy, Tusu, and Bhadu, along with Maa Sitala. Every god and goddess has established itself in the public mind with their own greatness. In this regard, Mother Sitala is different from all others because she has been the main deity of the Shabar tribal community since ancient times. When smallpox outbreaks occurred in various parts of Bengal, common people, including tribal communities, started eating stale food or cold food (Panta Bhaat) as the main offering to Goddess Sitala. Everyone was saved from the deadly disease of smallpox within a short time. Maa Sitala easily came to be worshipped as the protector of smallpox or the goddess of smallpox due to her greatness. Gradually, Maa Sitala was no longer limited to being the goddess of spring. People began to worship Maa Sitala as a symbol of good fortune. They believed that just as Maa Sitala saved them from deadly diseases like the epidemic, she would also restore happiness and prosperity to everyone's homes by curing them of diseases. In this article, I have tried to show the identity of Maa Sitala, how she became known to the public from a mythological goddess as the goddess of smallpox, and also how Maa Sitala began to gain more recognition as the goddess of fortune due to her greatness.

**Key word: Maa Sitala, Smallpox, Folktales, Gods and Goddesses, Epidemic.**

## Introduction

Humans are social creatures, and the behaviour of socialised humans is determined by nature. Since ancient times, various natural disasters, uncertainty in food procurement, and disruptions in crop production have all created a fear of uncertainty within them. Imagine and worship various gods and goddesses. With the change of time, these gods and goddesses were divided into two groups and handed down to us: first as mythological gods and goddesses, and second as secular gods and goddesses. However, the secular gods and goddesses began to exert more influence on society. One such ancient folk goddess is Maa Sitala, who was mainly known as a goddess among the non-Aryan community.<sup>1</sup>

## Origin and identity of Maa Sitala

Kali is mentioned as Sitala in the Vedas as a symbol of misfortune. In the Buddhist statue of the goddess Parnasharbari, several people suffering from smallpox are depicted lying at the goddess's feet. There is also a statue of a donkey there, Parnasharbari has just changed its name and become Sitala in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, in the context of the Sitala Stotram of Skanda Purana. There is a mention of the Pranam Mantra of Maa Sitala in the Stavakavachadhyan-Ratnamala.<sup>3</sup>

“Om Namami Shitalang Deving Rasavasthang Digambarim.  
Majjanikalasopetang Surpalankritamastakam.”

That is, I bow to the Digambari Goddess Sitala who sits on a donkey. She who adorns the broom and pitcher. Whose head ornament is the Winnowing basket, is our seasonal goddess. The Hindu's 'Sitala', the Muslim's 'Burabubu', the Buddhist's 'Hariti' coexist with the foliage, 'Basanta Buri' of the indigenous people, 'Parvati' of North India, 'Shitalamma' of the South, and 'Usha' of the Chinese. Although this goddess is worshipped in many places in the Indian subcontinent, including North India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. In Bengali literature, Maa Sitala is a much-studied folk goddess.<sup>4</sup> In the Ayurvedic literature, the Ayurvedic text 'Bhav-Prakash' and some ancient Puranas mention Sitala as a spring reliever. Although no clear trace of her can be found between the 10th and 12th centuries, by the 18th century she had established herself as an important folk goddess of South-West Bengal in every sphere of public life, even in the realms of literature and culture. In the hymn of Sitala, Shiva says-

“Yastamudak modhee tu krita sangpujjayannar.  
Bishfotakang bhayong ghorong grihe tashya na jayeta”.<sup>5</sup>

That is, she relieves the inflammation of the late spring, hence her name Sitala.

## Smallpox and the Tradition of Worshipping the Folk Goddess Sitala

The first outbreak of smallpox occurred in Assam in 1574 AD. The account of Stavernius, the Dutch naval commander of Chinsura, indicates that the first smallpox outbreak in Bengal occurred in 1770 AD.<sup>6</sup> Smallpox killed countless people in rural Bengal. The disease was so contagious that its first symptom was a slight fever. The whole body feels terrible pain. After two or three days, eruptions appear all over the body. More eruptions appear on the hands and feet than on other parts of the body. Usually, the eruptions fill with water. Within a few days, the eruptions ripen and the body feels a high fever. After a few more days, the lump dries up and the scabs start to come off.<sup>7</sup> 1767 AD: J.W. Holwell said that smallpox epidemics broke out in Bengal every seven years in March, April and May without any apparent cause and continued until mid-June.<sup>8</sup> Smallpox was so dangerous that it quickly became an epidemic. In an effort to escape the disease, ordinary people began to seek refuge in various gods and goddesses. The literary material Charyapada reveals that in the 10th century, a tribal community called Shabar lived in the border region of Bengal and Bihar. The main deity of this tribal community was the mythical goddess Maa Sitala.<sup>9</sup> Since Smallpox is a disease of warm tropical regions.<sup>10</sup> So, especially the people of the Shabar tribal community started praying to their main deity, Goddess Maa Sitala. Because the word Sitala means "the cool one".<sup>11</sup> That is, the main offering to Maa Sitala is 'Sital' or Basi food. Through the consumption of this food, the people of the Shabar community continued to get rid of spring disease and through them, the worship of Maa Sitala as the goddess of spring continued to spread throughout South Bengal.

## Popular Legends Surrounding Mother Sitala

In South India, the goddess of spring, Maa Sitala, is known by another name. There, she is known as 'Sitalamano' and 'Mariam'. The fear of the spring pandemic has transformed people from all walks of life from religious fear to religious fervour. Through the propagation of Mahatma, Maa Sitala also went from being a worldly, non-Aryan goddess to being worshipped as the goddess of Smallpox. Three stories can be observed in the poem "Sitlamangal" by poet Krishnaram Das, portraying herself as the goddess of Smallpox.

First, The Story of Madan Das Jagati.

Second, The Story of the Kaji.

Third, The Story of Hrishikesh Sadhu.

Madan Das, disguised as Basant Roy, a follower of Sitala, appeared at the Muraghat of Jagati with various diseases and spread them among everyone. On the other hand, smallpox and fever were also seen in the inner courtyard of the Kaji Sahib -

“Kājira haila gōda du'i cakṣē chāni.  
Ki haila ki hai bali śirē kara hāni.  
Bibi phātimāra tarē hājuta mānila.  
Śītalā dēbī khēlā tabu nā bujhila.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Family members and traditional mantras of Maa Sitala**

According to the legend of the Ramayana, Maa Sita worshipped old woman Sitala and the demon Jbarasura to protect Labh and Kush from fever and plague.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the members of Sitala's family are - Jbarasur, Ghantakarna, Raktavarti, Panchanan, and Basantaraya. There are also sixty-four Basanthas and seven sisters. Jbarasura is the god who cures all types of fever.

"The shape of the Jbarasur is diverse. The body colour is blue, in some places, it is like dark black kajaal, three heads, nine eyes, six arms, three legs, hair and moustache are brown in colour. Three crowns on the three heads, various ornaments on the neck and hands. It wears a yellow colored veil, a dhoti and short clothes like a banyan. It does not have any vehicle or guard.”<sup>14</sup>

There is also a popular mantra to cure fever with the Jbarasura -

“Jbarāsura mahābīrā mān'ya du'i bhā'i.  
Rātridina khēṭē marē mahādēbēra ṭhāñi.  
Phurachudē chatrīśa rūpa muhurtakē dharē.  
Nārāja mānuṣē bara phirē gharē gharē.  
Jbālājbara pālājbara kālājbara biśākhi.  
Dāhajbara umājbara jbara kumati.  
Chāra jbara bhūtājbara chāra bhāluki.  
Bhāja ghuṭitē ḍākē tādēra bhāṅgēra pinābika.  
Ō jbara jbarāsura kōna dikē cā'ō.  
Śīghra śīghra umakāra aṅga chāri tumi yā'ō.”<sup>15</sup>

## The greatness of Maa Sitala is celebrated in the poem "Sitlamangal".

Through the worship of Mother Sitala, the people of rural Bengal continued to be freed from the poisonous effects of smallpox. Maa Sitala continued to be worshipped as the goddess of spring, not limited to a folk goddess. It is believed that this goddess is the daughter of Brahma and the wife of Kartik. Apart from the Puranas, this goddess is also found in the poem Sitamangal. In the late 18th century, poets Manikram Ganguly, Dwija Haridev, poet Jagannath, and poets Ballabh and Krishnaram Das were worshipping Sitala in Bengal. Like Manasa Mangal, Sitala Mangal is written in Bengali literature. Like Manasa Mangal, Sitala Mangal also establishes the greatness of a marginal folk goddess by challenging the patriMarrieden though gods have rights, women have had to fight for organised by to become goddesses, for centuries. marginalised from the book Sitlamangal -

“Kēba kāra putra badhū kēbā kāra pitā,  
Marilē sambandha nā'i śuna ei kathā.  
Janmē'ō chāribē nā mahēśaṭhākura.  
Śuna rē ajñāna buṛi ēthāJournal dūra”.<sup>16</sup>

Educated people in modern cities consider Maa Sitala to be a blind person, a superstitious, worldly goddess from the village. Despite this, he is highly revered throughout India and institutional Hinduism has repeatedly sought to purify him. But has always failed to honour. Maa Sitala is known throughout the country for her own greatness. This is her great success and she repeatedly reveals the deep roots of marginalised people's lives. Therefore, even though urban people still forget Maa Sitala, known as the goddess of Smallpox, throughout the year. When children have 'Hum', 'Guti Basanta', or 'Mayer Doya', they worship her at the temple after twenty-one days.

## Transition from the goddess of Smallpox to the goddess of Fortune

Smallpox outbreaks occurred throughout rural Bengal from the 1770s. In the 19th century alone, smallpox killed millions of people, most of whom were children.<sup>17</sup> 1796 AD: Edward Jenner discovered the smallpox vaccine and the British government arranged for smallpox vaccination by hiring vaccinators. 1979 AD: The World Health Organisation declared the world smallpox-free.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, the greMaa Sitala as the goddess of spring does not diminish, but rather continues to grow. Now, Maa Sitala is no longer limited to being the goddess of Smallpox. She is known as the protector of children and especially the goddess of good fortune. Common people worship Goddess Sitala to protect children and bring financial prosperity to the family. Gradually, Maa Sitala is becoming a well-known and popular goddess in rural Bengal. All auspicious ceremonies are completed through the worship of Maa Sitala, especially in the Midnapore district. Due to this, the earlier Sitala Mata temples have now gained a lot of new features in terms of diversity. With the touch of modernity, the uniqueness of the temples has increased manifold. In Gujarat, in the Medinipur district, Maa Sitala is worshipped as the bringerrrrrr of good fortune.

There are various folk tales surrounding Maa Sitala as the protector of children and the goddess of good fortune. This puja is usually performed on the seventh and eighth days of the dark fortnight of the month of Chaitra. However, in different places, worship is also done in the months of Baishakh and Ashadh. Married women used to take vows to Maa Sitala with this belief. If they take vows to Maa Sitala, they will never have to observe widowhood. There will be no poverty, they will be able to live happily and peacefully with their husband, son, and children. In the Avantya Khanda of Skanda Purana, it is said about Maa Sitala, the protector of poverty and misfortune:

“Uttara tu prabakhami markateshawarmuttam  
Tatra tirthancha bikhatang sarbbakamapradayakam  
Tashmingstirthe naro snatba goshatasha falang labhet  
Bishfotanang prasantathang balanang chaina karone  
Mapen mapitan kritwa masurangstatra kuttwayet  
Sheetalayang pravabeno bala santu niramaya  
Je pashyanti nora vakta Sheetalang duritapaham  
Na teshang dushkritang krinchinna daridrang diwjottam  
Na cha rogwayong teshang grahapirra tathaiba ca”.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, Sitalapala songs are sung during the annual worship of Maa Sitala in various parts of Midnapore district. In the past, men would dress up as women and perform songs on the Sitala Mangal. Nowadays, both men and women perform songs together. Palagan was originally organised by Brahmins. Palagan began with a prayer to the Lord at a nearby temple. Finally, he would offer garlands and flowers to Maa Sitala and seek her blessings. Then the Brahmin would sprinkle Ganga water (peace water) from the kalas (pot) all around. After that, sweets and fruits would be served as prasad.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus, although various texts mention Maa Sitala as a mythological goddess, she was primarily known to the public as a secular, non-Aryan goddess. The path from a folk goddess to becoming known as the goddess of smallpox the goddess of fortune was not that easy. Due to her greatness, she is worshipped by different names in every village of rural Bengal. Somewhere he is called 'Gramer Maa', 'Jungli Maa', 'Kanthali Maa', 'Talindi Maa', 'Basanta Buri' etc. All these names come from the immense devotion of the devotees and children towards the mother. Also, people in rural Bengal still believe that even though smallpox has been eradicated, Maa Sitala regularly returns every year riding a donkey. The four-armed Sitala is now imagined as two-armed. He holds a broom in one hand and a poison pot in the other. That is, he spreads disease with one hand and cures it with the broom and the wind of the cistern in the other. In this way, Maa Sitala cured diseases in every house in the village of Bengal and restored peace and prosperity. Gradually, Maa Sitala began to be known more as the goddess of fortune than the goddess of smallpox.

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