

BOOK REVIEW-1

Fabrizio M. Ferrari, *Religion, Devotion and Medicine in North India: The Healing Power of Sitala*, (London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. i-xxiii, 222, Rs 2375.76, paperback, ISBN:978-1-4411-6380-6

Devotion and Religion in any culture is entwined with each other for good health, longevity, fertility and healthy progeny. Praying for all these are part and parcel of devotional aspect. Although writings on the history of devotion, religion and culture has been burgeoning over the period of last century and similarly writings on social history of health and medicine too proliferated yet various aspects of health and healing practices were left untouched. Fabrizio Ferrari adds new dimension focusing on the interrelationship between health, healing and religion. Ferrari draws from varied range of sources including archival and beyond archival ones, such as oral narratives and interviews, media, devotional tracts and imageries to examine the notion of health and illness in the devotional culture and life style of North India with particular study of the Goddess ‘*Sitala*’- the Cold Lady or *Sitala mata* – the one to be appeased with worshipping and certain rituals. *Sitala* Goddess was commonly portrayed as Smallpox goddess in colonial and post colonial literature. This valuable contribution on *Sitala* goddess of Ferrari is divided into five lucid chapters apart from introduction, and conclusion along with illustrations, appendices and an exhaustive bibliography. Ferrari tries to show that among variety of gods and goddesses in Hindu culture, *Sitala* holds a unique position. “Although *Sitala* is not pan-Hindu Goddess, not even adored in authoritative text, but ardently worshipped by Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians alike and even in tribal communities in villages, towns and metro cities of Pakistan, northern India, Nepal and Bangladesh”.

Ferrari’s study is based on anthropological and ethnographic survey which shows that the description of *Sitala* as the deification of Smallpox in colonial reports and records is not in consonance with widely held belief and faith in *Sitala mata*. According to Ferraris informants’ information “*sitala* is a benevolent mother goddess and a goddess of hygiene, worshipped by women for fertility, healthy male progeny and [a] decent husband”. [sic]

In Introduction author puts forth the association of smallpox with various healing practices and establishes a linkage between *bhakti* (devotion), medical culture and Goddess *Sitala*. In continuation with this, the Chapter 1- *Sitala*, the Cold Mother, discusses the description and representation of *Sitala* in Indian literature from twelfth century onwards. Describing vividly *Sitala* according to various texts, the author narrates that only Bengali *Mangalkavya* tradition highlights the ferocious feature of *Sitala* and tells stories about her dangerous and infecting character. Comparing to *Puranas*, ayurvedic compendia, law digests (*Dharmanibandhas*), tantric literature, stories on fasting (*vratakathas*), folk songs in Hindi and Bhojpuri, only *Mangalkavya/Sitalamangalkavya* shows that *sitala* is an ambiguous goddess, one who spreads contagious disease particularly various forms of smallpox and plagues, in retaliation to any form

of disrespect. The author is not clear in explaining that why only Bengali narrative *Sitalamangalkavya* highlights the threatening and capricious nature of Goddess *Sitala*.

Ferrari cursorily shows that this fiction/myth was constructed by Bengali Brahman poets on the basis of their understanding of the culture of Bengali peasantry, and the same was conveyed to British. But this is not as simple as a linear relation or logic. Bengal is known for rich culture of Goddess (*Devi*) worship. In order to understand this one should see the socio-political transformation taking place in Bengal. With the battle of Plassey in 1757 and the battle of Buxar in 1764 East India Company established its political domination over Bengal and then introduced various kind of land revenue mechanism in order to generate income. This affected the patron/clientele relationship between landed gentry and Brahmans as well. Brahmans started presenting Goddess in its ferocious form and *Sitala* as “Goddess of Smallpox” in order to retain and extend their clientele for survival.

Visualization of Goddess *Sitala* is meticulously taken forward in chapter 2, Visions of the goddess: the iconography of *Sitala*. In this chapter Ferrari focuses to examine the *Sitala*'s iconography as worshipped widely across north India. Investigating aniconic *murtis*, zoomorphic, phytomorphic, cephalomorphic and anthropomorphic images author shows the benevolent aspect of mother goddess characterized by cold, auspicious, benign and protective nature. Iconography confirms the lack of disease-inflicting side of the *Sitala* Goddess. Breaking the linearity of the visuals and bringing in more nuances would have given more textured analysis. For instance this anthropomorphic image was widely circulated and popularized with the coming of calendar art and new printing technology. This further extended the clientele for Brahmans who also started losing their government jobs with the introduction of English education and language.

In the midst of the debate from the representation and visualization the author teases out another strand of economic-political agenda in worshipping *Sitala*. In chapter 3, Hosting Ma, Feeding Ma: controversies around *sitala puja*, Ferrari lucidly discusses about class conflict association with devotion in form of animal sacrifice, devotional possession and austerities. Impact of political agendas, entertainment industry, and pathologization of devotional behaviour led to the transformation in cultural tradition of *sitalapuja*. The moralization of tradition and inculcation of rationalism proved crucial in the containment of *sitala* culture. One finds continuity with change among devotees and devotion in order to acknowledge the power of the goodness to free devotee from crises.

In Chapter 4, The Smallpox Myth and the creation of the Goddess of the Smallpox, author tries to show how smallpox myth was the construction of cultural colonialism, beginning in the 17th century and encompassing globally with the emergence of new media, mainly internet. In this process of cultural colonization British tried to prove that the indigenous knowledge of inoculation and other form of worship is a sign of the superstition and backwardness. In order to explain cultural colonialism and myth of smallpox goddess, author left the point of cultural nationalism

and its impact in the construction of goddess mother cult. Assimilation of *Sitala* with *Durga* and presenting *Durga* in varied forms was an initiative taken to provoke national sentiments amongst Indians. This also reflects the way contemporary nationalism had its footprints on the representation of *Sitala*, where she was supposed to free India from all sorts of diseases, poxes and lead to independence. Nonetheless Bengal being a ground for extremist nationalism too shows its imprint in the construction/representation of *Sitala* Goddess as threatening and ferocious. Cow protection movement and schism between Hindus and Muslims further led to the transformation in terms of offerings to the Goddess. Bali offerings (animal sacrifices) changed into offerings of fruits, vegetables and/or flowers.

In chapter 5 The Legacy of *Sitala*, the author tried to show the popularity of *sitala* with global media and how folk/ancestral ritual practices have been marginalized and discredited. Homogenization or assimilation of *Sitala* with *Durga* or *Vaishno Devi* shows the development and expansion of *Bhakti* culture beyond India as well; transforming from healing goddess to global Goddess Devi, i.e., converging in a hyper model of benevolent mother, limiting the image of ‘disease goddess’ as fictional aspect only.

In the end the book concludes with a hymn sung in the praise of *Sitala* Goddess, followed by four appendixes consisting of different stories about fasting (*sitala vratkathas*). Although the author categorically puts this as the history of Hinduism, but it equally suffices to be the history of culture, environment and people’s history.

Fabrizio M. Ferrari opens a new vista in the writings on the history of medicine. It would have been more intriguing to see the role played by the Indian inoculators, doctors, *vaidyas* and *hakims* in their struggle to break down the boundaries marked by western medicine with reference to research on vaccination and vaccinators.

This is a stimulating and engrossing work for scholars, teachers and students pursuing sciences and social sciences and anyone who yearns to know the politics about the establishment and cultural transformation in religion and religious practices, or in other words ‘the intellectual, social and cultural history of Smallpox Goddess *Sitala*’ in British India and post- independence.

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