



Research Paper

Disease Gender and Caste Revisiting the cult of the Goddess of Disease in the Pandemic Period

Sujatha Devarapalli

Advanced Centre for Women's Studies
TISS Mumbai

Abstract: *The present paper on 'Disease Gender and Caste: Revisiting the Cult of the Goddess of Disease in the Pandemic period' will discuss how the current global Pandemic reminded some of the indigenous cultural practices which played an important role in eradicating deadly epidemics like Cholera, Chickenpox and small pox in the past. The study is based on the author's field work done in the villages of Andhra Pradesh in South India. The study will also look at the intersections of caste gender and disease through the worshipping process of the local deities from a dalit feminist perspective.*

Received 29 Mar, 2021; Revised: 10 Apr, 2021; Accepted 12 Apr, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.
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I. INTRODUCTION

While referring to the spread of cholera in 19th c. Asa Briggs, says "Like a man it (Cholera) travels from town to town and attacks most populous town ports and commercial spots and gradually reaches the larger cities. It is a disease of society. It hits the poor ruthlessly, it exposes defects of our public health system, it highlighted the limitations of local public administration. It also brought out the social political and moral shortcomings in society. It also resulted in rumors suspicion and social conflicts" (Asa Briggs-1961). The sudden outbreak of Covid 19 in 2019-20 which created similar situation across the globe once again reminded the dreaded epidemic periods of the past. Due to the current global pandemic millions of people irrespective of caste, class and religious beliefs suffered with loss of several things, people, economy, jobs. These uncertain times added more emotional stress to our everyday lives.

Disease and ill health are of most fundamental concern to any human society. As a result every society developed its own methods for coping up with disease and created a native medical system which is mainly dependent on natural resources and connected to supernatural forces. Early humans believed that animals and birds possess wisdom and power to predict future climatic or atmospheric changes as well as the ability to foretell events, good or bad, for an individual or nature. This kind of relationship between nature and humans helped in maintaining ecological balance.

Whenever there is an imbalance in the ecosystem natural disasters and epidemics occur. Its bad influences create fear among the natives. They seek protection from the 'Devine Mother' whom they believe as the goddess of nature. The devine mothers also called as Grama Devatas or village goddess in the belief system embodies the very life and health of the natives. She can cause, prevent and alleviate disease. She is associated with deadly pestilences. As a small -pox goddess (the goddess who causes the out break of small pox; *Masuchi*) she has to be cooled. According to Obeyesekhara, an increase in the element of heat is due to the anger of the goddess. The anger of the goddess in turn is due to sins committed by the humans. The failure to propitiate the goddess causes danger and this anger results in excess of heat. The goddess is loved venerated worshipped and propitiated annually or cyclically to ensure the well being of the village community (Obeyesekhara, 1984).

In several parts of the world, the mother goddess worship have often been associated with diseases. Disease is seen as a favor of the goddess. It is believed that since the goddess loves humans, she wants to be a part of them. However, disease is also her way of punishment. If she can give life, she can also take it away. Through disease, she interacts with the universe and humanity. Worshipping disease is a way of appeasing the goddess. Traditionally, the goddess of disease is most active in the peak of the hot season, when contagious diseases and epidemics pose great dangers. When rains are needed, the worshippers approach her, requesting coolness and rains (Obeyesekhara, 1984).

The festival of the goddess confronts and overcomes the demons, the representatives of disaster, and in this struggle the village community entirely depends on the goddess to mitigate their sufferings. It is a contradiction to say that goddess causes disaster and epidemics. Rather she receives the brunt of the onslaught but she needs appeasement and devotion to protect the village.

The reason for worshipping of the goddesses more than the gods for healing is that the goddesses have nurturing qualities (eg. the mother: mother goddess). They are the primary and original sources of life (Kinsley, 1985). Goddesses are also linked to the darker experiences in the human condition. The healing and the quest for wholeness are universally associated with goddess worship not with the worship of male deities (Elaide, 1987).

The goddess of disease is a form of 'Divine Mother' adored under different names throughout India. In north India, especially in Bengal the goddess of disease is called Sithala Devi. The name of the goddess indicates the function of cooling. She is worshipped everywhere in Bengal. In Bihar, she is worshipped as Kalakuri Mata. The most dreaded are Phul Mata and Pansahi Mata, who attack children between seven and fifteen (Bhattacharya, 1977).

In Madhya Pradesh she is known as Mata Masani. In Assam she is known as Āi and is conceived as one of the seven sisters who cause diseases. In Orissa she is Thakur Rani. In Tamil region the goddess of disease is Maridamma or Mari. In all these places she is referred as the small pox goddess.

In Andhra Pradesh the goddess of disease is known by different names like Maremma, Maridamma, Usuramma and Nookamma. In north coastal Andhra region the goddesses of disease are by different names. The goddess of cholera is called Maridamma; the goddess of smallpox is called Nookamma; the goddess of chickenpox is called Muthyalamma. Among all these, the small pox goddess is much dreaded because she may either avert this disease or cause it. She is Nookamma, the most frightening goddess worshipped mostly in the coastal Andhra Pradesh.

Nookamma as noted by Bishop Whitehead (1921), she is very ill tempered and gives much trouble. She is a very harsh mother. The goddess of Small pox is also called as *Atamma*, (*Ata*: Play; *Amma*: Mother) because, by causing this dreadful disease she plays with the lives of the people. Though Smallpox is now eradicated, the belief and the methods of cure that were practiced earlier are relevant in this context.

In the Godavari region of Andhra Pradesh there is a belief that if the food offered to the goddess in the temple is not sufficient, she will enter the households of the village in the form of epidemics. That is why the desires of the smallpox affected persons need to be satisfied immediately. If the affected persons' desires are fulfilled the goddess also gets satisfied. Through ritual process the disturbed elements are controlled slowly; and the diseased person is treated very carefully, until he/she gets cured.

Whenever epidemics break out the village as a whole performs different rituals until the disease subsides. Such as, Challahtam *ōregimpu* (Procession of the decorated Pots full of Buttermilk. *Āsadis*, lower caste priests of the village carry two new earthen pots (*mattikundalu*) decorated with turmeric and lime. One pot is filled with buttermilk, the other pot is kept empty in which during the procession each householder brings buttermilk and pours it in. In return, the *Asadis* give some buttermilk as *theertham* (sacred liquid) to the devotees from their pot. Taking processions for the goddess continues until the epidemic is prevented. If any person dies due to epidemics, that is not considered as death but that person's permanent visit to the temple of Nookamma (Nookamma *Gudiki Poyinadu*). If a child dies, his family members offer cane sticks (*Karra Bettalu*) to the temple of Nookamma. So that, the spirit of the dead child will not affect other children.

In the tribal agency areas of northern Andhra, during epidemic season (*Anturogala kaalam*) every night villagers get together at one place and make loud noise beating drums to frighten the spirits. In the fishermen community the belief of *bestas* is that if they keep wooden dolls in the center of the house on the name of dead persons of their family Nookamma won't enter their house. In some villages once, the epidemic subsides *Jatara* will be celebrated. During the days of *Jatara*, coconuts, fowls, goats are offered to the goddess. A special cooling food made of *ragi* (millet, *Elusine corocana*) powder mixed in buttermilk brought from Golla's (pastoral community) house and onions will be offered to the goddess. Later this cooling food will be distributed among the devotees. On the last night of the *Jatara* a fire pit (*agnigundam*) will be arranged. Devotees, whoever were cured from the epidemic *Atamma*, walk on the fire, showing their gratitude to the goddess. These devotees observe fasting for the whole day. Turmeric mixed water will be sprinkled on the devotees in their fire walking. Sometimes, the devotees while walk on the fire pit go in to a trance; in order to keep them in conscious the observers sprinkle turmeric water on them.

The Reversal of Roles: The lower castes in Coastal Andhra enjoy some kind of power and prestige in association with the worship of local goddesses particularly during epidemic season. The role played by *Asadis*, lower caste male priests and the *Ganacharis*, female priests is remarkable during the epidemic period. *Asadis* and *Ganacharis* not only act as priests in the temples of the village goddesses but they are also the medical practitioners of the village. They are the healers of the village. Their main duty is *Digadudupu*, draining out the

evil spirit from the diseased body. Throughout the epidemic season, Asadis distribute buttermilk and Pulihora (cooked rice mixed with tamarind syrup and jaggery) which are useful in boosting immunity with its highly rich Vitamin C element. The traditional medical practitioner who cures small pox is called *Ganachari*. The priestess or Ganachari offers coconuts, rice, curd and fowls to the goddess on behalf of the patients. The patients of the smallpox or chickenpox will be under the constant observation of Ganachari. By sprinkling turmeric water on the eruptions on the body of the patient and by giving globules of neem and turmeric paste to the patient to eat. Ganachari treats the contained patient with utmost care. When the eruptions on the body start disappearing a head bath will be given by Ganachari. Before giving bath the paste of neem leaves and turmeric will be applied to the patient and the patient is bathed with hot water boiled with neem leaves. Then *Chaldiannam* (cooked rice mixed in curd and onion which is attributed with cooling property) will be offered to a washerman (indicates getting rid of the pollution) with this the pollution of the family members will be over. After two or three days again the patient takes head bath, visits the temple of Nookalamma and offers coconuts, Chalimidi and other cooling ritual foods with the help of Ganachari. Then all the family members take the food offered by Ganachari as Prasadam. The patient's visit to the temple indicates that the heat is controlled and the disease is prevented from spreading the infection.

II. CONCLUSION

Nandini Bhattacharya in her *Tropical Medicine in Colonial Enclave* explains how native medicine is systematically undermined by the British administration and missionaries (Nandini-2012). The colonial rulers banned the ritual practices in village goddess temples with the support of social reformers in the name of barbaric activities of illiterate and unenlightened lower castes. After independence, the same social reformers influenced the socio political activities to modernize the state. In the process of modernity and development several changes came in the indigenous culture of India. With the introduction of new western medicines, vaccination campaigns and sanitary reforms the native or indigenous therapeutics were considered as primitive and unscientific methods. The sudden out break of current Pandemic once again reminds us the importance of our indigenous practices and belief systems which played significant role in eradicating deadly epidemics in past.

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