

The Epidemic Goddesses of Hindu Mythology: Faith to Tackle the Pandemic

Devika B

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Christ University, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

Religion and its mythology have been ruling mankind for centuries now. Fear of the unknown and uncertain have always forced human communities to invoke the powers of the universe and create deities for their protection. Hinduism has thirty three million deities in its pantheon dedicated to different causes like war, wisdom, wealth, destruction, disease, protection, fertility, creation, and much more. This paper discusses the existence and significance of the cult of epidemic goddesses or contagion deities in many parts of the country, perpetuated through Hinduism. The study intends to trace the history and evolution of these epidemic goddesses starting from the ancient 'Hariti-the Goddess of Plague' and 'Mariamman-the Goddess of Smallpox' to the most recent Corona Devi and Corona Mata. The emergence of new goddesses attributed with powers to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic could also be seen as the re-emergence of the Mother-Goddess iconography and thereby has much importance in the cultural and religious framework of our contemporary society. This paper provides a cultural analysis of the pestilence goddesses who are revered and mediated through different public and religious platforms, and also studies how this mediated memory affects the collective consciousness of a community.

Keywords: Pandemic, contagion goddesses, matriarchy, Goddess cult

INTRODUCTION

The cult of the Mother Goddess, or the Great Mother, or Earth Goddess is one of the most ancient pantheons of Gods that existed in every civilization. Mythographers have often identified that the pre-Aryan races which existed in India had the tradition of Goddess Worship, and it was then passed over to the later Aryan settlers of the land. This tradition could closely be associated with the Mother Earth cults that prevailed in many parts of Europe, including the hellenic goddesses. The worship of the Goddess dates back to Palaeolithic times. The earliest symbols engraved on rocks, bone and horns reflect a profound belief in the life-giving Goddess who is represented in different forms. A study of the symbols in palaeolithic art demonstrates that the female, rather than male, was the deity of creation. Marija Gimbutas observes in *The Civilization of the Goddess*, "In fact, there are no traces in palaeolithic art of a father figure"(222). It has been conceded that such societies were probably matrilineal and matrilocal, reckoning descent through female lines and organising tribal groups and settlements according to those lines.

According to J.J. Bachofen and Friedrich Engels' theory of matriarchy women were held at a superior position in the hunter-gatherer community. Bachofen has identified a three-phase scheme in human cultural development which can briefly be recognized as hetaeristic, matriarchal and patriarchal. In the hetaeristic period, neither men nor women had control over the other, which lead to a state of sexual indeterminacy, and that didn't last long. In the next stage, women took control over the whole human community, creating Goddesses and nymphs, and worked on the principle of 'regulated naturalism.' In the patriarchal stage that followed, men gained control and created powerful masculine Gods who were later positioned as the superior authority in spiritual realms. In the matriarchal society, a tribe's inherent instinct was to adapt to the protection of the Great goddess. They worshipped the spirits of nature like forest nymphs, animal gods, and river spirits, and attributed supernatural powers to them. Every tribal group had an adapted instinct to identify with their maternity or motherhood and they rallied around a 'witch-priestess-queen-earth mother'. As Juliette Wood says,

Deities undoubtedly formed a background to everyday life, and both archaeology and the literary record indicate that ritual practice in Celtic societies lacked a clear distinction between natural and supernatural realms. This implies a precarious balance between sacred and profane, in which rituals, offerings and correct behaviour, maintained equilibrium between gods and men and harnessed supernatural forces for the benefit of the group. (Wood, 4)

Aims And Objectives

This paper tends to understand and analyze the different conceptions regarding the powers of healing attributed to Gods and Goddesses in Hindu religious mythology. Any attempt at understanding the intricate religious beliefs and systems in Hinduism would require one to delve deep into the origin of Hinduism itself. Therefore, in this paper, I intend to explore the history of epidemic goddesses in Hinduism, and their significance in the contemporary scenario.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Contagion Goddesses in Hinduism

In the orthodox Brahmin Vedic rituals and beliefs, male deities are considered of predominance compared to the goddesses. Goddesses are deemed to be of secondary importance, with hardly any particular role in ruling, except for a few like Kali, Durga, and Goddesses are expected to be protective deities. But if we go back to studying the primitive pantheons of the Dravidians, which survived in South India, they worship the feminine motherly forces of nature. The goddesses of this primitive religion are primarily worshipped by women, or people from the lower class, rather than brahmin priests. Worshipping rituals include animal slaughter, blood sacrifices and land worships which are now seen as primitive and barbaric. With the advent of anthropomorphism into spirituality and religion in the modern ages, the representation of the Goddess rapidly changed. Goddesses began to be attributed with powers of protection, fertility, and healing. In many parts of Bengal and South India, the monsoon season is considered to be the season in which the Goddess is supposed to menstruate, and ritualistic celebrations are done to please the Goddess to bless the land with fertility. As Veen puts it, the Great Goddess is a manifestation of the matriarchal symbolism. They embody the power in the forces of nature.

The Mother Goddess is the goddess of life and death at the same time - the Feminine contains opposites, and the world actually lives because it combines earth and heaven, night and day, death and life. Human beings lived for thousands of years within this psychophysical space in which outside and inside, world and man, powers and things, are bound together in an indissoluble unity (Veen, 45)

Hindu culture has the tradition of attributing healing powers and therapeutic faculties to their deities. William Harman rightly calls these goddesses as celestial epidemiologists. The ancient Indian scripture, Atharvaveda is considered as the chronicle of medicine, healing and health of which Ayurveda is a part. It is believed that the vedic chants and mantras of Ayurveda are composed by Brahma- the creator, who then passed on the knowledge to his son Daksha Prajapati, and later to the twin Gods, Ashwin Devas. Therefore, these Gods, along with Surya Deva, Dhanvantari, Vaidyanath, and Yogeshwar are considered as the mainstream healing Gods of the Brahminical pantheon. However, even before the Buddhist and Brahmin traditions of worship came into being, the indigenous and tribal communities of India worshipped local deities for protection from diseases and pandemics. When the bubonic plague, cholera, and smallpox hit the country, many primordial goddesses were worshipped extensively as contagion goddesses, and there are still shrines dedicated to these goddesses in many rural parts of India. Till the 7th century, Ayurveda had not considered smallpox as a disease, rather, it was seen as the wrath of the goddess. Therefore, instead of treating smallpox with medicine, the communities used to conduct ritualistic ceremonies and rites to please the goddess. In several parts of the country, many goddesses are still being worshipped for protection from diseases and pestilence. This paper aims to provide a cultural analysis of a few contagion deities ranging from the ancient goddess Hariti, Shitala, Mariamman, to the very recent Corona Mata and Corona Devi.

Hariti is a demon-turned goddess who is considered as a contagion Goddess, who was called upon for protection from many diseases. According to the legends, she was a demon child eater who was converted by Buddha. This early representation of conversion of the Goddess is also evidence of the Buddhist and Brahminical attempts to subordinate indigenous Gods under their pantheons. She was extensively worshipped during the plague outbreak in the Justinian period that came to India from Europe through trade routes, and later during the bubonic plague outbreak in the nineteenth century. There is also anthropological evidence that Hariti is still revered in South India as the Goddess of smallpox, and there are hundreds of small shrines dedicated to her throughout the land. As Geoffrey Samuel says in "The Daughters of Hariti Today",

like other smallpox goddesses of India, Hariti was probably the object of an ambivalent attitude on the part of her worshippers. On the one hand, she was feared as the bringer of disease and harrier of children. On the other hand, she was worshipped as the one who could spare and, in this sense, give life to those same children. (Samuel, 36)

The most popular and revered contagion goddess of South India is Mariamman. The earliest references to Mariamman worship could be found in 18th century documents, positing that she is “said to cause, prevent and alleviate illnesses characterised by fevers or diseases pertaining to the eyes.” There are thousands of temples dedicated to Mariamman throughout the rural parts of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and even Sri Lanka. Her most important and celebrated association is with the smallpox epidemic. She is revered as the Smallpox Goddess of South India. The term ‘maari’ in Tamil means pestilence, and ‘amman’ means mother. Certain iconographic representations of Mariamman depict the goddess with pustules all over her body. It is believed that smallpox is caused as a result of the wrath of the Goddess, and eccentric ritualistic penances are performed to alleviate this wrath. People perform self-flagellation practices and ritualistic piercings as penance. They don't treat smallpox with medicine, but rather use the sacred neem leaves and pray to the goddess for her blessings. The goddess is believed to manifest herself in the bodies of her devotees during festivals and rituals, and the devotee enters a trance state. William Harman elaborates on the beliefs associated with the healing powers of Mariamman as,

When serious illness attributed to Mariamman occurs in the home, the afflicted person can be treated as the physical embodiment of the goddess. The home becomes a quasi-temple and it is decorated with neem leaves. Nothing foreign is admitted to the presence of the afflicted person lest the goddess (who is averse to the strange) be incited to feverish and potentially deadly anger. (Harman, 3)

Even though smallpox has been eradicated through modern medicine, the post-pox period established Mariamman as the power that erased the disease. During the post-pox period, she went through a process of re-invention, and was attributed several other afflictions. Currently, Mariamman is worshipped as the goddess of all epidemics and pestilence, and the protector of communities.

Goddess Shitala is another important smallpox goddess who is extensively worshipped particularly throughout North India. According to the myths, Goddess Shitala emerged from a sacrificial fire offered to Goddess Parvati. She emerged as the divine antagonist of the demon Jwarasura, who spreads diseases. The iconographic representations of her depicts the Goddess with a silver broom in one hand and a sacred pot in the other, seated on a donkey. The broom is a symbolism of the act of sweeping off germs, signifying her as the protector of people. The pot in one hand is either a representation of a cold water pot, to provide respite, suggestions to the meaning of her name, or it is symbolic of a pot of viruses, signifying her also as the fatal one. In the paper “Old Rituals For New Threats: Possession And Healing In The Cult Of Sitala”, scholar Fabrizio M. Ferrari has done extensive fieldwork in parts of West Bengal on the goddess Shitala. She is identified by the localities as ‘*asanta roger adhicsthatri*’ which means ‘she who cures the fever in the month of Basanta.’ Gitala is another goddess who is revered as a smallpox goddess in the Northern parts of the country. Olai Chandi is a goddess worshipped as the goddess of Cholera in Bengal. Similarly, Goddess Manasa is considered as the goddess who protects children from snake bites. But with the advancement of modern medicine and vaccinations, these contagion goddesses lost their significance, but they are still worshipped for protection in many communities.

DISCUSSION

Faith to Tackle COVID-19 Pandemic

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, contagion goddesses re-emerged and re-conscripted with their lost glory. As Tulasi Srinivas puts it, “the hindu goddesses who protect believers against sickness have been co-opted to combat the coronavirus” (Srinivas). Recently, an artwork of the Corona goddess painted by Sandhya Charlie titled ‘Coronavirus Mardini’ went viral in social media. The goddess is represented with ten hands, with each hand symbolically equipped with tools to combat the pandemic. A trident that pierces the virus, a stethoscope, medicine box, sanitizer, mask, vaccination needles, and a chain are the things in the hands of a hygienically masked goddess. This representation is symbolic of the Shakti image of goddess slaughtering the evil demons. In contemporary society, the representation of the corona goddess is updated for the contemporary devotees. The modern use of unconventional symbols in iconography to appeal to the modern senses is a new way of bridging the gap between religion and rationalism. As Tulasi Srinivas says, “COVID-19 has undoubtedly increased the goddesses’ workload. And with no known cure and no viable vaccine, the contagion goddesses may well have their hands full for some time.” (Srinivas)

Corona Devi is now a popular contagion goddess worshipped in many parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, with even temples dedicated to her. In a study conducted by the newspaper The Hindu, their staff reporter identified a local shrine

in the Kollam district of Kerala where Corona Devi is worshipped in its SARS-CoV-2 virus form with red tentacles and spherical shape. The priest Anilan says, “I will conduct pujas in front of the goddess for the safety and well-being of all engaged in the battle against the pandemic. There will be no darshan as it is also a protest against the political propaganda behind the reopening of temples. People are now using gods for political gains, but now is no time for temple visits. Survival is all that matters now,” (The Hindu)

The role of fear in Indian religious ideology is very significant in the discourses related to contagion goddesses. Faith and fear are the two primary tools used by religion to keep their devotees intact. The fear of the unknown and the unpredictable, and the fear of natural forces that are not under the control of human beings intimidates them into creating deities that they can manipulate through religious rituals and ceremonies. The basic paradigms of worship in the temples of contagion deities involve blood sacrifices and self-flagellation as penances for the sins that they have committed. The very belief that deadly pandemics are unleashed upon humanity by these goddesses to express their wrath is an indication of the impact of fear that religion casts upon human beings.

The making of religion requires nothing found in fear that is present also in the other emotions. The place of fear in primitive religion is due not to its intrinsic qualities, but simply to the circumstances which made it appear first as a well organised emotion, vitally connected with the maintenance of life. (Leuba, 48)

The emergence of contagion goddesses like Corona Mata and Corona Devi in our contemporary times, could be seen as a re-emergence of the primitive cult of the Goddess, breaking away from the shackles of the mainstream Hindu religious conventions. The concept of the Great Mother Goddess is a reflection of the feminine spirit in all aspects of life. The emergence of the Goddess Movement and ecofeminism in the West also has significant cultural impacts on the Orient as well. As Carl Jung has explained, the ‘mother archetype’ symbolises fertility, productivity, protection, and nourishment, to which all human beings go back to. The modern movement to embrace the goddess cults is built on the concept of sacrality of the female body. As Mircea Eliade states,

Woman, then, is mystically held to be one with the earth, childbearing is seen as a variant, on the human scale, of the telluric fertility. All religions experiences connected with fecundity and birth have a cosmic structure. The sacrality of woman depends on the holiness of the earth. Feminine fecundity has a cosmic model – that of Terra Mater, the universal Genetrix (Eliade, 144).

CONCLUSION

The iconography of the contagion goddesses emphasises their healing and therapeutic powers. The distinction between ‘goddesses of control’ and ‘goddesses of release’ made by Ramanujam and Blackburn in the book ‘Another Harmony’ emphasise the differences between the indigenous cult of the Goddess and the goddesses from conventional Brahminical pantheon. The traditional Hindu Goddesses like Lakshmi, Parvathi, and Saraswathi personify the passionate, gentle, dependable, and refined side of femininity, and therefore, are called the ‘goddesses of control.’ On the other hand, the primitive, animalistic, unpredictable, and fierce aspect of femininity is exemplified through the indigenous goddesses like the contagion goddesses, and tribal goddesses who are referred to as ‘goddesses of release.’ They are usually worshipped by tribals or outcastes, and are usually associated with tantric practices and dark magic. People perform blood sacrifices and practices of self mortification to prove their devotion to the goddess. But these practices were not accepted by the High caste brahmin priests and the elite devotees. As Tulasi Sreenivas says, “High caste Hindus and those who mirror high-caste practices often ignored and shunned the contagion goddesses, fearful of the blood rites, possession and the tantric rituals, which they associated with low caste worship”(Srinivas). Therefore throughout time, there have been many attempts to subordinate and domesticate the rustic and primitive goddesses of release under the Hindu pantheon, within the three million deities. In the process, thousands of local goddesses are merged into the image of Mother Shakti - the feminine force of creation, to make them more appealing to Hindu devotees. Joanne Waghorne calls this process the ‘bourgeoisification’ of the Goddess. She specifically points out that the Mariamman temples in Chennai city have been transforming over the years from a tribal and primitive state to a more refined state to accommodate the middle class devotees.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Eliade, Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*, translated from the French by William R. Trask, (first published in German as *Das Heilige und das Profane*). 1957.



- [2]. Ferrari, Fabrizio M. "Old Rituals for New Threats: Possession and Healing in the Cult of S'ī-Tala'." *Ritual Matters Dynamic Dimensions in Practice*, by Hüsken Ute and Christiane Brosius, Routledge, 2010. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203151723-12/old-rituals-new-threats-possession-healing-cult-s%C2%B4%C4%B1%C2%AFtala%C2%AF-fabrizio-ferrari>
- [3]. Gimbutas, Marija. *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.
- [4]. Harman, Williams. "Taming the Fever Goddess Transforming a Tradition in Southern India", *Manushi*. http://www.manushi-india.org/pdfs_issues/PDF%20140/01fever%20goddess%20pg2-13%20version2.pdf
- [5]. Lagana, Louis. "The Re-emergence of the Great Mother Goddess." *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 2009. Academia.edu, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330831705_The_Re-emergence_of_the_Great_Mother_Goddess
- [6]. Leuba, James-Henry. *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future*. Kessinger Publishing, 2007.
- [7]. Myers, WM. "Use of Fear in Religious Education," *Religious Education*, 23:9, 1928, p.908-913, DOI: 10.1080/0034408280230918.