

A Study of Significance of Sheetla Mata in Jaipur's Folk Culture

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Jaipur is a hub of modernity and western ideas, yet the city never fails to accommodate faith and tradition within its avenues. Folk goddesses like Shila Mata, Cheenk Mata, and Nakchi Mata, among others, are an important part of the cultural heritage of Jaipur. Sheetla Mata is another folk goddess revered deeply not just by common people but even by royalty. The research paper aims to identify the historical, ritualistic, and medical dimensions of Sheetla Mata, highlighting her importance in the folk culture of the state. Worshipped as the goddess of healing and the protector against diseases such as smallpox and chickenpox, Sheetla Mata's veneration reflects indigenous understandings of epidemic control and public health in pre-modern societies. The legends of Sheetla Mata have been passed down through folklore, oral traditions, and archival material, emphasizing the role of divine intervention in disease prevention. The research examines the historical evolution of the temple, its patronage by the rulers of Jaipur, and the significance of the goddess to Jaipur State. Revisiting the legend of Sheetla Mata through mythology, rituals, folklores, and its medical associations, the paper aims to give an interdisciplinary dimension to the scholarship of history and health practices. The study employs significant use of primary sources like *Dastoor Komvar* and *Dastoor Bakaya*. Sheetla Mata holds a prominent place as a folk goddess across various communities and is not confined to Rajasthani culture. The paper also introduces this theme and highlights regional variations in rituals and legends. This research is thus significant as it provides critical insights into the living traditions of Jaipur's folk culture while shedding light on the intersection of faith and indigenous healthcare practices.

Keywords: Sheetla Mata, Folklore, Jaipur, Oral history, Folk Traditions, Medicine

Introduction

Rajasthan is home to a wide variety of folk traditions that have had a significant impact on the development of the local way of life. The folk traditions of Rajasthan bear witness to the long-standing traditions of its people and demonstrate a harmonious blending of various cultures and civilisations. Over the ages, the state's mythology, history, and ideals have been transmitted, and each form serves as a storehouse for culture. The development of contemporary scholarship led to the inclusion of oral traditions and folk literature in mainstream historiography, which created new opportunities for social science research. Folk deities are an important aspect of this tradition. Stories about folk gods and goddesses make up a sizable portion of Rajasthan's rich traditions of folklore, folktales, and songs. Folk goddesses like Karni Mata, Shila Mata, Cheenk Mata and Nakchi Mata among others are an important part of the cultural heritage of Rajasthan. These goddesses are not just revered as protectors and healers but also consolidate the identity of community.

The rural people of India maintain the widely held idea that a divine power directly governs every stage of human existence. It goes without saying that illnesses of any kind, regardless of their characteristics or signs, are also ascribed to some kind of strange or even supernatural occurrence. Smallpox is an epidemic that is typically thought to be brought on by one of the folk deity as a result of the villagers' disregard for their proper devotion. Among the folk goddesses of Rajasthan, Sheetla Mata holds special significance to the culture of Jaipur. It is said that she is the "Mother" who "prevents smallpox, and may prevent smallpox, cause small pox herself." On a specific day each year, in accordance with the Hindu calendar, she is revered throughout India. Women perform this ceremony primarily for the benefit of the children. Aside from this yearly ritual, she is also revered in villages whenever smallpox strikes.

Sheetla Mata depicts an amalgamation of faith, medicine and folklore. Interestingly, the legends of Sheetla Mata are not confined to Rajasthan and the goddess is deeply revered all over India except south.ⁱ

The purpose of the research study is to highlight the significance of Sheetla Mata in the Jaipur's folk culture by identifying its historical and ritualistic aspects. The stories of Sheetla Mata, who is revered as a goddess of healing and illness, have been preserved through oral traditions, folklore, and even historical records. The study looks at the temple's patronage by Jaipur's kings, its historical development, and the goddess' importance to Jaipur State. Using mythology, rituals, and folklore to revisit the narrative of Sheetla Mata, the study seeks to add

an interdisciplinary element to historical inquiry by associating folk culture with medical advancements. The paper employs significant use of primary sources like Dastoor Komvar and Dastoor Bakaya supplemented by oral history. Sheetla Mata finds the place as a prominent folk goddess in various communities and is not confined to Rajasthani culture. The paper also aims to introduce this theme and highlight the regional variations in rituals and legends. The research is thus significant as it provides significant insights to the living traditions of Jaipur's folk culture.

Historical and Mythological Background of Sheetla Mata

Located in the suburbs of Chaksu, the temple of Sheetla Mata is situated on Sheel ki Dungri. The name "Sheetla" means "coolness," and the goddess is depicted riding a donkey (gadha), holding a broom (jhadu), and carrying a pot of water (kalash) or healing herbs (soop).ⁱⁱ The idol of Sheetla Devi is typically represented in a calm and benevolent form, symbolizing her role as a healer and protector. It is believed that Sheetla Mata symbolizes gentle energy (Saumya-Shakti), as the cooling elements (Somgat Tatva). There are various stories associated with the origin of Sheetla which are popular all around the country. According to one legend, she is Sati Gandhari, Dhritrashtra's wife and Duryodhana's mother. When Dhritrashtra was consumed by fire at Sapta-srota, close to Hardwar Gandhari also dove into the fire and became Sati alongside her husband. As a reward for her devotion, the gods bestowed upon her the advantage of becoming the goddess of smallpox and the guardian deity of infants during the Iron Age.ⁱⁱⁱ According to another legend, Sheetla, is eldest of seven sisters, by whom the pustular group of diseases is supposed to be caused. An episode from Matasyamahatmya mentions the origin of Sheel ki Dungri, the hill in Chaksu, near Jaipur, where Sheetla resides.

The legend goes as follows "In ancient times, this place was famous as Champavati. According to the Matsya Desha Mahatmya, during the reign of King Kampil, Sage Shandilya arrived. He foretold the king about destruction in war and the absence of a male heir. The king then worshipped and meditated upon Lord Vishnu, who granted him a boon—a valiant daughter who would bring prosperity to the kingdom. The king named his daughter Champavati. After the death of all her relatives and family members, Champavati undertook severe penance. She filled a dried-up pond with the sacred waters of the Ganga, Godavari, and Saraswati rivers. Due to Lord Vishnu's boon, this pond came to be known as Champakund. The place where she performed tarpan (offering to ancestors) for her kin was called Tilodaki Vapi. Lord Vishnu blessed the site, declaring that whoever bathes here and donates on the Panchami (fifth day) of

the Shukla Paksha in the month of Magha will have all their wishes fulfilled. According to the Matsya Mahatmya, demons named Durjaya and Vijaya tried to disrupt Champavati's penance but were transformed into a mountain due to her spiritual power.”

The Sheetla Mata temple is located on this very mountain, and the goddess is believed to protect devotees from all misfortunes and calamities.

Royal Patronage to Sheetla Mata

Although the establishment of the Sheetla temple remains obscure, its close association with the royalty of Jaipur is clearly evident. According to various sources, the Sheetla temple was established by Maharaja Madho Singh. Apart from Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh who was extremely devoted to the Sheetla Mata as depicted from Siaha Hazur documents, Maharaja Ram Singh II and Maharaja Madho Singh II visited the temple, reinforcing the long-standing reverence for Sheetla Mata.

The devotion of Jaipur rulers to Sheetla Mata is well evident in sources like Dastoor Komwar and Dastoor Bakaya.

One such instance is when little Maharaja Ram Singh II contracted chickenpox in 1837, he was brought to Mitti Maha Sudi 7 Brahsaptiwar for the Shitala Mata's darshan.^{iv} This was followed by large gifts and donations in the Zenani Deorhi. This episode is interesting in two aspects. Firstly, it depicts the devotion and faith of Jaipur royal family in Sheetla Mata. Secondly, it gives clear indication of prevalence folk beliefs and culture in field of healthcare, even among the royalty. As, this patronage was not merely religious; it functioned as an endorsement of folk medicine and healing traditions. The belief in Sheetla Mata's power to cure diseases, particularly smallpox, played a crucial role in the way healthcare was approached in pre-modern Rajasthan. Even among the elite, folk remedies and religious rituals coexisted with more formal medical knowledge, reinforcing the role of faith-based healing.

Maharaja Madho Singh II was a significant devotee of Sheetla Mata. According to one such legend, when Maharaja Madho Singh II's son Lalji Gopalji recovered from smallpox, he and paswan Rooprai visited Sheetla Dungri to offer prayers. Considering Sheetla Devi's significance for all 36 communities of Rajasthan, Madho Singh II built a Baradari (36-pillared pavilion) at the site.^v During his reign, Sheetla Ashtami was celebrated with great pomp and

show. A large number of offerings were given to the temple on account of the festival. These include puja ki satar by khasa rasora, haathi pachrang from feelkhana and rath among others.^{vi}

However, by the reign of Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II, the importance of Sheetla Ashtami was extended to such an extent, that there was a holiday on Sheetla Ashtami^{vii}, and businesses, including brick kilns, remained closed.

Folk Traditions Associated With Sheetla And Their Medical Significance

In Jaipur, Sheetla Mata is worshiped as *Saidhala Mausam Mai* (goddess of seasons and immunity against diseases). A traditional *Gali-Baqji* competition (insult battle) was held at Ram Niwas Bagh, and horse-cart races took place. Meat sales were strictly prohibited, and official announcements ensured adherence to these customs.

The *Sheetla Dungri* (Sheetla hill) in Chaksu, near Jaipur, was an important pilgrimage site, where an offering for the goddess was sent from the City Palace.

The festival is closely associated with the ritual of 'basoda'. The literal meaning of "Basoda," sometimes known as "Baasi," is "stale." This points to the primary custom of this event, which is to offer stale food to Sheetla mata and prepare full feasts the day before. No food is prepared using a stove on the day of the celebration. On Saptami, households prepared dishes like *Gulgule* (sweet fritters), This celebration is made distinctive and alluring by the preparation of certain delectable traditional foods for "Basoda," such as Auliya, Panchkuta, Kadhi, Charki-Meethi Papdi, Papad-phali, *Pakodis* (savory fritters), *Khichda*, *Rabri*, and *Besan ki Chakki*.^{viii} These were consumed as sacred offerings the next day. Potters (Kumhars) served as priests in Sheetla temples, ensuring cold food offerings to the goddess.

Stale food is offered to the goddess and subsequently eaten in this festival, which is different from others when the best and freshest food is always utilised for worship. The food dishes prepared for this occasion are likewise unique because they have the unique quality of staying fresh for a day. To savour the many traditional meals, the entire family looks forward to this celebration. Only vegetarian food is prepared for this festival. This celebration takes place seven days after Holi, as the summer season is just getting started and the temperature of the atmosphere is rising. This celebration is also meant to raise awareness that, following the Basoda celebration, one should refrain from consuming stale food because the temperature increase may cause the food to putrefy, which could be detrimental to one's health.

The festival is closely linked with local folklore and traditions, where young women sing traditional Dhundhari songs while enacting male and female roles. This festival remains a deeply ingrained tradition, symbolizing devotion, health, and well-being in Rajasthan and beyond. The folklores speaks highly for Sheetala Mata. Her legends are deeply rooted in Hindu mythology and folklore, reflecting her significance in Indian culture. The legends mostly show her horrific form and the benefits that her worship brought to her followers. They constantly perceive Sitala as "the cool one," a deity who despises heat and seeks out coolness. The thing that unites Sitala's diverse personalities is coolness. Sitala was thought to have been born on cooled ashes.

Thus, Sheetla Ashtami possess not just spiritual but scientific significance. Both Chaitra Krishna Saptami and Ashtami are considered auspicious days for the worship of Sheetala Mata. In some places, the period from the first to the eighth day after Holi is observed as Sheetala Saptah (Sheetala Week). As winter ends, people no longer prefer hot food, and nature also flourishes in the pleasant spring climate. In this context, there is a tradition of eating cold food for two days on Saptami and Ashtami, with yogurt and buttermilk being consumed extensively due to their cooling properties.

The worship of Sheetala Mata is believed to prevent and cure diseases like smallpox and fever. The food offerings—fermented dishes like rabri, buttermilk, yogurt, rice, sprouted grains, and ghughri—are nutritious and beneficial for health. On this day, cooking is avoided, and only foods that can be eaten the next day are prepared.

During smallpox outbreaks, avoiding salt reduces itching in blisters. Refraining from frying or adding tempering (tadka) prevents smoke from irritating the patient's eyes, nose, and lungs, making breathing easier. Moreover, the absence of strong food aromas prevents the patient from craving heavy, potentially harmful meals.

The Neem tree is connected to the goddess of smallpox, Sheetala Mata (Cool one). This tree is thought to be the home of the Sheetla Mata. Individuals who have smallpox are treated using the leaves of this tree. The leafy twigs of this tree are used to fan the patient. Additionally, there are a number of ways to reduce and alleviate this illness using the leaves.^{ix}

Folklores serve as a powerful medium to expand the ideas of traditional healing, disease prevention, and public health awareness associated with Shitala Mata among the people of Rajasthan. These oral traditions, songs, and stories have been passed down for generations, reinforcing cultural beliefs and guiding communities in times of epidemics.

In villages across Rajasthan, there are numerous temples dedicated to Sheetala Mata. In some places, women drape a donkey with a yellow cloth, apply turmeric and yogurt as a sacred mark (tilak), and feed it grains as an act of devotion towards Sheetla Mata. A day before the festival, potters deliver clay pots, earthen lamps, and other ritualistic items to the households of their patrons. Women, dressed in traditional veils, carry offerings on their heads while singing devotional songs in praise of Sheetala Mata, worshipping her with deep faith and devotion. It is believed that Sheetala Mata blesses children. The name Sheetala itself means "one who provides coolness or relief from heat." A well-known folk song in her honor is widely sung:

"Paan chhayo mandavo, phool chhayi baadi,
Phoolan chhawal Sheetala Mata baithi ratan kanwoda,
Doodh piyanta maara nana bhai ye,
Dekhya tyar maari Sita bai hai limloon keeda."

In March, during Shitla Ashtami, the Chaksu fair near Jaipur takes place. At the temple of Shitla Mata, who was thought to have miraculous abilities to keep people from getting the feared small-pox, devotees congregate on the grounds and hike to the top of the hill at Seel ki Doongari to worship and offer stale food prepared the previous evening.^x According to legend, this fair began when a Jaipur king had a vision of an old woman in a dream after his horses fell sick with smallpox. The old woman appeared with a fan in one hand, a small stove (sigdi) on her forehead, a lamp in one ear, and a lock in the other. Disturbed by this vision, the king prayed for the recovery of his horses. The old woman advised him to offer a silver sigdi and umbrella in worship and to organize an annual fair at that place. Since then, the tradition of holding this fair continues. The folk song sung at the festival is:

"Mataji ko melo aayo, jagat dekhba aayo che
Ee mela ki shobha, mhare man mein gehri bhaye che."

This fair also includes shrines dedicated to Bodari (smallpox deity), Bhomiya, Bhairav, and Hanuman. Tourists from far and wide come to witness the unique cultural displays of Dhundhari traditions.

Fruits, betel leaves, donations, and traditional offerings are then made. The story (Katha) of the fast is narrated, and on this day, only previously cooked, cold food is eaten. This practice is believed to prevent infectious diseases.

Sitala searches for coolness because she is naturally cool. She attacks people with the dreadful pox or destroys their children when she is heated. She is identified in three different forms; as the goddess of smallpox, the protector of children and the source of fortune.^{xi}

According to one such folklore, an elderly couple had seven sons, all prosperous but childless. One day, an old woman advised their mother-in-law, "Tell your daughters-in-law to observe the Sheetala Mata Vrat (fast) with full devotion; they will be blessed with children." The daughters-in-law followed her instructions, and soon, they were blessed with children. However, over time, they forgot to worship Sheetala Mata.

One Ashtami, due to extreme cold, they bathed in warm water and ate hot food, ignoring the traditional observance. That night, their mother-in-law had a dreadful dream in which she saw all the family members and livestock lying dead. In despair, she went mad with grief. Neighbors suggested that such a calamity could only be caused by divine wrath. Realizing her mistake, the woman wandered into the forest, where she encountered an old woman covered in painful, burning blisters.

When the mother-in-law asked about her condition, the old woman accused her, saying, "This suffering is due to your family's negligence. On my sacred day, you consumed hot food and bathed in warm water, causing me this pain." She then instructed the woman to bring a pot of yogurt and apply it to her wounds. The woman obeyed, and as soon as she applied the yogurt, the old woman felt relief. In gratitude, the old woman said, "Use the remaining yogurt to mark your family members' foreheads. They will come back to life."^{xii}

Following her instructions, the woman revived her family. From then on, people vowed to observe Sheetala Ashtami by eating cold food and worshipping the goddess properly. Even today, this tradition is followed in many households.

The legends of Sheetla Mata are not just mythological tales but also a reflection of cultural values, traditional knowledge, and societal needs. They highlight the goddess's role in addressing health-related anxieties, promoting hygiene, and fostering community resilience.

Conclusion

Folk narratives are a potent tool for assimilating and disseminating a society's knowledge and power. Narratives determine gender roles, create and rebuild social order, and, when needed, reverse it, just like any other oral discourse. However, in some areas or communities, the worship of Sitala is still cited as the cause of the smallpox epidemic, which is believed to have

been eradicated. She has assumed various personas that portray her as the goddess of illness, the guardian of children, and the source of good fortune (Wadley). According to historical understanding, Shitala gives non-believers a chance to ponder by giving them smallpox. People in the area initially opposed the World Health Organization's attempts to disseminate smallpox vaccines because they believed that vaccination was an attempt by Western science to get around Hindu religious law, despite her religious duty to heal those who provide gifts to those who are ill. The international Smallpox Eradication Program (SEP) created posters showing Shitala holding a vaccination needle in an effort to change the way people thought about immunisation by redefining it as a result of Shitala's strength.

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