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# Sociological Implication of the 'Minor Deities' in Hindu Doctrines-A Reflection on the Social Conditions

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### Abstract

India is a country that is popular in history for its confluence of different varieties into unity. There have been religious scriptures and doctrines of different religions that have shaped the history of India in a very colourful manner. There had been dominant religions peacefully existing within the Indian Territory. However, of all the religions, there was a thriving religion ruling the majority of the Indian subcontinent from ages. And that is Hinduism. One of the prominent and exclusive features of this Hinduism practiced in Indian society is the *Varna* system. The difference between people from their birth had been an elementary practice in Indian culture. However, not just the daily life practices were reflections of discrimination; even the religiosity and ritualistic behavioral restriction and depiction were also not spared at all. How the religious depiction of *Gods* and *Goddesses* was even a victim and reflective tool of practicing this discrimination, I would like to reflect that through my paper. In this research article, I have referred to the doctrinal discrimination written, promoted and practiced even for the Hindu worship system. My aim is to focus on the explanation of how the deliberate discrimination between the *major* deities and the *minor* deities had been the mere reflection of the societal conditions of the original society.

**Keywords:** Minor deities, Manasa, Sitala, smallpox

### Introduction

India has vastly been known in the world for its divergent forms of 'belief systems' and the intriguing unity amongst them. In a constitutionally addressed 'Secular' country, there are varieties of religions and their preachers living with each other in harmony for ages. Every religion shares a respectful relationship with each other. Even when the country is a beautiful confluence of varieties of religions, there is one religion that thrives within the maximum of popularity, claiming to be the 'only religion' in the country to follow, being influenced by some corrupted political agendas.

Of all the religion that prevails in India, Hinduism is the dominant religion in India. As we know, any religion is nothing but a 'belief system' that is being carried on generation after generation without questioning the validity of these beliefs as they provide a concrete social identity to its following communities. And there is nothing different in the case of Hinduism as well. Hinduism is a polytheistic religion that has a description of 33 crore gods and goddesses to worship. And, about all these deities, one can get to know them from the religious doctrines.

The oldest till date religious doctrine for the Hindu religion is the '*Rig Veda*'. Dated 5000 years and more years back, this doctrine is considered the first and ancient doctrine, with each of the *Veda* having four sub-divisions, and each sub-division had sub-sub divisions furthermore. In the later ages, another

important and reliable source of information about Hinduism is provided by the '*Purana*'. Tracing all these religious manuscripts and doctrines, one can find the root of the long history of deity worship.

In both *Vedas* and *Puranas*, one can easily find there are ample numbers of deities being prescribed to be believed, respected and worshipped. Sometimes, there had been incarnated versions of natural elements. In Hinduism, the dominant Gods are *Surya* (God of the Sun), *Bramha* (God of the trinity), *Agni* (God of Fire), *Barun* (God of water), *Vishnu* (God of wealth), *Shiva* (God of Fertility, Cattles). There has been Goddess as well embodying certain *virtues* like *Saraswati* (Goddess of Wisdom), *Lakshmi* (Goddess of wealth), *Durga* (Goddess of Power) and more <sup>[1]</sup>. However, of all beliefs that the Gods and Goddesses in Hinduism are powerful, there has been a stringent division between these deities. *Veda* and *Purana* deliberately categorized these 'almighty' depictions into unequal categories. There had been deities included in the 'major' categories. All of the above deities mentioned before had been included within the category of 'Superior' deities. On the other hand, there had been deities who were deliberately considered as 'minors' and had been depicted in such a way.

The depiction of such 'inferior deities' had been characterised by things that had been significantly different as well. We know that all gods and goddesses must be equal. But even in

the worship of the great 'almighty', how deliberately the age-old, unquestionable inhumane practice of inequality had slipped in, invaded and ruled is what these doctrines have carved the path for.

Of these inferior deities, there had been so many. There has been *Sitala*, *Manasa*, and *Sashti*, the most prominent ones [2]. All these deities had been represented in the semantic doctrines as significantly different from that of the other 'Superior' deities. In this paper, I would like to draw attention to how the portrayals of these deities in the religious doctrines as minors had a strong reflection of the social stratification systems of that ancient India, which thrived by Hinduism. Also, I would like to draw on how the worship of deities keeps the relevance of the existence of a certain class of people within the society.

### Methodology and Materials

Since I have chosen to reflect on the historical and mythological contents, I have chosen secondary data analysis to be my methodology for this paper. Secondary data analysis can be defined as a research methodology where information and data are gathered from a primary data set but have been used for reflecting on answering a significantly different research question and justifying the findings.

For the authenticity of the data collected and the popularity of the folktales regarding these deities, I have also accessed and interacted with communities who are indulged in the practice of these deities, specifically in a very small area of research in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Apart from that, I have also interacted with other community people to know about their knowledge of these deities and their ethno-historical backgrounds.

### A Brief Description of the 'Minor' Deities

***Sitala*:** *Sitala* is the Goddess of 'Small Pox'. She is depicted as a worshipping idol of *Savara*. *Savara* is one of the most indigenous scheduled tribe people present in the Indian subculture [3]. The practice of *Sitala* deity worship is found in the profound interiors of four North Indian states-West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and, to a certain extent, Punjab and Gujarat [4]. *Sitala* is believed to be born from the cooled ashes of the sacrificial fire [5]. *Sitala* means 'cool'. This deity is also believed to be satisfied with coolness. Hence, she isn't offered any fresh food; rather, cold, previously cooked, stale food is what she desires. Worshipping this deity with *basi* (stale) food is a significant festival in North India known as *basoda* (Worshipping with stale food). Because of the representation and the healer of the disease of *smallpox*, *Sitala* is worshipped throughout the mentioned places from *Chaitra* (the last month of the Bengali calendar) to *Shravan* (the fourth month of the Bengali calendar), five long months of the scorching heat of summer, till the monsoon arrives [6]. However, in Sambalpur, Odisha, specifically, *Sitala Sashti* is celebrated *Jyestha* (the second month of the Bengali calendar) [7].

*Sitala* is mounted on a *Gadha* (ass/donkey) and has a *Kalash* (a pitcher) in one hand, an *ewer* (urn-shaped bowl) and a *jhata* (broom) as her armour [8]. She is also depicted to have long black wavy hair, a golden complexion, big red eyes, wearing a big red vermillion *bindi* and in the form of a married woman wearing a red border white saree [9]. Sometimes, she is also worshipped as embedded within the natural elements as well, like in *neem* trees or in *kikar* trees [10].

**Folklores Regarding the Deity:** *Sitala* is a Goddess of Small Pox-this belief comes from a folk story where during the above period, both a prince and a farmer's son were suffering

from smallpox. While the farmer fed his son with cold, stale food, he recovered gradually. However, the king, in the name of worshipping the deity, continued to feed his son with piping hot, cooked food. And the prince's condition continued to worsen. Hearing about the farmer's son's recovery, the king became angry. And on the seventh night of the waning moon in *Chaitra*, the deity showed herself up in the king's dream and ordered him to feed his son with cold food. And eventually, the prince recovered. It is a very popular folklore of *Sitala* in West Bengal [11].

In different regions of North India, *Sitala* is more than just the Goddess of Small Pox. She is also a 'protector of the children'. Regarding this, the popular folklore is about a Brahmin woman who had 7 married sons but no children of them. On the instruction of an older lady, they did the fasting of *Sitala sashti* and, eventually, had grandchildren. As she continued to keep the fast on the pious day, one year, accidentally, during the fast, she and her daughters-in-law bathed in hot water and ate hot food. As a result, the Brahmin woman found her family dead by the night. Saddened by the grief, she ran to the forest, where she found the same older woman suffering from a burning fever. She got to know that she was *Sitala Devi* in disguise, whose suffering was because of her mistake. So, on ordering her to bring cold curd and to put it on the deity's forehead as well as on her dead family members, she got her family back to life [12].

However, in Gujarat specifically, *Sitala* has a different identification than that of these places. *Sitala*, there, is a 'Goddess of Good Fortune'. And the story behind this belief is of a princess named Subhakari who was married to Gunavana. On the day of *Sitala Sashti*, when Subhakari convinced her husband to stay at her house, and she went inside the forest to take a bath in a pond with the Brahmin Priest and his wife. Being exhausted, the couple rested under the tree, and Subhakari went searching for the pond. There she met *Ma Sitala* in disguise and followed her instructions to complete the puja. And she gained the blessing of getting Good fortune, a life without famine and a long life with her husband. On her return, she found the priest was dead of a snake's bite, and the wife was crying. She again made her worship *Ma Sitala* and gave life to the priest. On her way home, finding her husband dead, Subhakari again prayed to the deity, and her husband recovered [13].

***Manasa*:** Another popular inferior deity that one can significantly find around India is considering *saap* (snakes) the deity. The festival celebrated by circulating *saap* is widely known as *Nag Panchami* in India. However, exclusively in Bengal, there is a different name and festival regarding this. In Bengal, the deity of *nags/saaps* (snakes) worshipped is *Manasa* [14]. *Manasa* is believed to be *Nageswari* (Goddess of snakes). The name *Manasa* comes from the Sanskrit word *Manas* which means mind. *Manasa* also has an unpopular name of *Padmavati* (since she resides on Lotus) [15].

One of the most popular folk cults of Bengal is *the Manasa* cult. Within West Bengal, she is the popular deity in the rural *Rahr* (places with red soil) areas, in the districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, and Bardhaman [16]. She is often worshipped on the last day of the lunar month, *Bhadra* (fifth month of Bengali calendar), popularly known as *Bhadra Sankranti*. In some areas, it is a month-long festival, starting from the tenth day of the lunar month *Asar* (the third month in the Bengali calendar). *Manasa* is basically a lower-caste Goddess [17]. The main worshippers of this goddess belong to the lowest caste strata in the society-the *bagdi*, the *bauri* and the *muci*. She is worshipped during the rainy season by the

villagers as she is popular as the deity of snakes. So, worshipping her means she will protect the people from snake bites and the venom of the snake. The worshipping priest is also popular as *Ojha*, who is an expert in handling snakes.

Usually, *Manasa* does not have an incarnation idol in the human body. She is mostly worshipped with an idol of 5 colourful snakes together or seven colourful snakes together, all with their fangs up <sup>[18]</sup>. But she is also worshipped as an idol of a married woman as well, wearing a red saree draped with snakes, having a snake, one white and one pink flower in two hands. The five-fang-headed or the seven-fang-headed snakes are identified as the idol's crown.

**Folklores Regarding *Manasa*:** The most popular belief about the birth of *Manasa* is a vivid one. It has been said that one of the great Hindu trinity, lord *Shiva*, had a quarrel with his wife *Devi Parvati* and left the home. He was worshipping at the banks of the *Kalidaha* pool, where he was aroused to see a fruit resembling the breast of *Parvati*. He threw his semen into the pond, and it was stuck at the stem of a lotus plant underwater and thus, *Devi Manasa* was born. Since she was born out of *Shiva*'s mind, she was named *Manasa* <sup>[19]</sup>. *Vasuki* was the *Nagaraj* (the King of all Serpents) then, and *Manasa* is identified as his sister. However, *Shiva* was not ready to accept *Manasa* as his rightful daughter. He reluctantly brought her to *Kailash* (the home of the Gods), hiding her inside a floral basket. But before *Parvati* could see her, one of the temptresses had beaten her and blinded her in the right eye. From then, she is identified as the 'one-eyed deity' whose left eye is believed to be her *bish-dristi* (evil eye).

In the popular *Manasa Mangal* kabya, there has been a more popular folktale about this deity. There was a famous merchant named *Chand Saudagar*, who was a worshipper of lord *Shiva*. His son, *Lakhindar*, had a life-threatening curse that he would lose his life from the bite of a venomous snake on his wedding night with *Behula*. And eventually, he died, and *Behula*, with her innate dedication towards *Manasa*, brought her dead husband back to life. Somehow, *Chand* was not at all a worshipper of the deity *Manasa* who was *Shiva*'s daughter. But when His dead son becomes alive because of the fortune that *Behula* had brought by worshipping her deity *Manasa*, in the end, *Chand* was convinced and compelled to worship *Manasa* for saving his son's life. He was so reluctant to put an offering to her that he threw the flowers with his left hand. And from then, the ritual of worshipping *Manasa* with the left hand started <sup>[20]</sup>.

## Results and Discussion

**Representation of the 'Minor Deities' as the Reflection of the Social Condition:** A culture is considered as a 'way of life' that endures over time and place, preserving and carrying the precise identity of a group of people and a religion. The onset of time, technology, and modernity has an impact on how frequently cultures change when some conventional habits stifle the source of the culture's shifting originality. Even in the twenty-first century, worshipping *Sitala* is a reflection of that in the Hindu religion.

We are aware that all goddesses possess the same supreme power. However, it has generally been referred to as the "minor deity" when looking back at the textual references of *Sitala*. This portrayal shows how the discriminatory division system of society had easily entered and governed even the religious worship system of the Almighty.

*Sitala* is the goddess of the *Savara*, a caste that belonged to the lowest social strata and whose members engaged in 'impure' work such as cleaning and walking on their shadows,

caused members of higher castes to take a bath to reclaim their 'purity'. Every 'superior deity' described in religious texts used intimidating creatures as their vehicles and mighty armour as their weapon. This minor deity was mounted on a *gadha*, a dumb animal, and was armed with a *Jharu*, a blunt weapon, to distinguish the superior deities from the minor ones. This method of differentiating the "extraordinary" from the "ordinary" was predictable. A donkey or ass (*Gadha*) is very useful for everyday tasks like carrying things but is not very useful for noble causes.

Similar to a broom, which is the least effective weapon option but is a necessary cleaning tool in any home or establishment is the use of a broom (*Jhata*). These minor goddesses all symbolized the disease and the healers of these ailments themselves although none of the superior goddesses had ever been connected to illnesses. This deity was claimed to be content with merely cold, uncooked, and stale food, which had been the traditional diet of their worshipper caste of people, while the superior deities were instructed to be worshipped with fresh, boiling hot, prepared food. Seven of the worst fevers humans had back then are linked to her divine connection with her six other sisters. Why wasn't *Sitala* brought to be worshipped by every caste and class at that time, when this disease was widespread throughout all classes and castes?

The upper caste had educated physicians (*vaidya*) who could treat illnesses with pharmaceuticals and Ayurvedic remedies. But how was it feasible for the 'higher caste' doctors to visit a 'lower caste' home to treat a patient who had any of the terrible fevers, including 'smallpox'? The upper caste person would quickly jeopardize his "pure" identity for such an invasion. As a result, it was necessary to establish a deity who was created especially for them to serve as a symbol of the illness and its cure. Hence, the deity's explanation and all of her attributes are reflective of everything 'neglected' by the society, just like the *Savaras* who serve as her worshippers.

*Sitala* is a goddess who is worshipped in pure 'Sakti' fashion while wearing a mother's veil. However, in today's global culture, the marketed veneration of the Goddess *Durga* is the only way to identify Hinduism as a civilization that worships "feminine power." Despite being heavily influenced by globalization and consumerism, UNESCO has designated *Durga Puja* as a world heritage Hindu religious practice because these minor deities' "little traditions" nonetheless uphold the Sanatan Dharma's originality in constricted areas.

If we reflect on the position of *Manasa* as a deity as well, we will see that there is a socially malign condition that reflects from its depiction of its position within society. *Manasa* had also been identified as a deity of the significant 'lower' castes of *bagdi* (aborigins), *muci* (cobbler) and the *Bauri* (backward Hindu castes). Deities described as the 'superior' caste had always been reflected in either power or virtues. Superior deities were also worshipped by the superior group of people in the society. On the contrary, the 'minor deities' more resembled the concept of fear. *Manasa* was a goddess of snakes; there is a possibility that the snakes can bite any person, yet it continued to be a deity only to the remote rural areas of the Indian subcontinents. One of the reasons behind that can be identified as the access to medicine. The upper castes, being financially well-off and socially designated, had the opportunity to take the help of medicines and doctors who were also from the upper caste. Now, if a lower caste enters the same medical premise, it will break the age-old notion of 'Purity-pollution'. A situation where humanity would have been sacrificed in the name of the shackled and tyrannical



hierarchy of elite position in society would always throw a question of dignity to the conscience of the one who practices it. Hence, better cut off the possibility even before it arises by establishing a 'deity' in the name of the protection of the *impure* caste. Since they had been devoid of education, it had been very easy to convince them if a person bitten by a snake survives, then it is the *deity's* blessing. And if they die, then it is the *deity's* anger.

A *Snake* as a *vahan* (vehicle) to *Manasa* only has a depiction of destruction within the society. *Vahans* of deities were supposed to be something powerful, significant and useful to society. Reflecting on the fact, a *snake* can only cause harm to people, leaving them with a possibility of even death as well. Such a depiction also contributes to the status of this deity as an inferior one within the status hierarchy of society.

Every religion is at the risk of losing its origins and real identities due to the frequent occurrence of post-modern advents, where their primitivism began back when they began to worship Nature. In spite of the fact that consumerism is destroying Nature and the delicate balance of the natural world, it is highly profitable. Cultures are also on the point of altering themselves to keep up with the race of existence and avoid the "cultural lag" and religious practices. Therefore, in today's society, "non-material" cultural traditions are all but defunct. Additionally, the situation with the Hindu religion is the same. However, in the 21st century, it is a particular class of people's widespread and prominent practice of this *Sitala* puja and the *Manasa* puja that actively contributes to keeping on to the Hindu religion's origins. These customs also help to preserve the identity of the people who follow them. These are among the few Hindu cultural practices that are still practised today with rich folk traditions. Few people are aware of these deities' fascinating folklore, which is another fascinating aspect of them. However, whatsoever little communities continue to practice them is preserving the legacy of the traditional Hindu religious system.

### Conclusion

Culture is always complete with its changing and unchanged patterns of practice. With the increasing rate of change in time and space, every culture is undergoing rapid, selective changes where they can cope with the changing time and identity. Concepts like globalization, consumerism and capitalism are flowing under the skin of the world, articulating changes to every eternal thing that carried the very origin of the society itself. Even from the primitive age till modernity, there has always been a division between the people in all society; between the upper and the lower, between the haves and the have-nots, and between the rich and the poor. And the religious doctrines reflected on these divisions throughout, contributing positively to concrete such divisions within the society by even creating divisions between divinities as well. And the same picture followed with the Hindu religion as well. To specify the differential positions of the people within the society, they have deliberately produced and promoted ritual and religious practices, tagging them as *major* and *minor* deities for the *Superior* and the *Inferior* people, respectively. Such depiction was not just the reflection of such established inequality but also was a concrete contribution to seal the discrimination even more evidently that still prevails within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These *minor* deity worships are exclusive parts of the 'little traditions' present in the Hindu culture today, which still carry the origin and authenticity of Hindu religion and culture through their very limited practice. It is very disheartening to

sense that with the disappearance of these groups of people from society with the advent of time, these practices would also go extinct, which play a considerable part in the construction of the Hindu religion and culture.

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