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*Religion, Devotion and Medicine in North India: The Healing Power of Śītalā.*

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The North Indian goddess Śītalā is most often understood as the “goddess of smallpox,” a fierce goddess who is both the cause and cure of disease. Scholarship on her worship, literature, iconography, and evolution has, for the most part, agreed with this assertion, with few acknowledging her simultaneous existence as a benevolent and protective mother. In *Religion, Devotion, and Medicine in North India: The Healing Power of Śītalā*, Fabrizio Ferrari aims to correct this imbalance, as he argues that the majority of scholarship on Śītalā has been complicit in the construction of the “myth” of the fierce smallpox goddess, when, in fact, she has always and only been a goddess of protection. Through a combination of ethnographic, textual, iconographic, and archival research, Ferrari traces Śītalā’s history in North India, with the crux of his argument centering on the eighteenth-century Bengali Śītalāmaṅgalkāvyas, wherein she is portrayed as dangerous and disease-inflicting.

The volume consists of five chapters organized thematically on the topics of Śītalā’s literature, iconography, contemporary worship, association with smallpox, and legacy, as well as four appendices with English translations of Hindi and Sanskrit texts. As much of Ferrari’s argument is based on dismantling previous scholarship, each chapter (with the exception of chapter 5) attempts to take on a current understanding of Śītalā and dismantle it. Overall, while Ferrari’s work is valuable for its analysis of historical texts and contemporary rituals, his main argument that the smallpox-bringing Śītalā is an inauthentic result of foreign influence is unconvincing.

Ferrari begins with textual sources, including *purāṇas* and *dharmanibandhas* from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, tantric and āgamic texts from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries, and the Bengali Śītalāmaṅgalkāvyas from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Interspersed with ethnographic details of modern ritual practice, the texts are used to question the previously accepted notion that there are two distinct Śītalās; the fierce, disease-bringing Bengali version and the benevolent protective mother of Northwest India. He argues that the absence of an association with smallpox or other diseases within early texts proves that the fierce Śītalā of later texts is the result of “the interpolation of textual material associated with other, *ugra*, goddesses” (19). He continues this argument in his fourth chapter when he returns to the Śītalāmaṅgalkāvyas, within which Śītalā is portrayed as a fierce, disease-bringing goddess. Ferrari argues that these texts represent the beginnings of the smallpox myth and “shaped a new profile of the goddess that eventually impacted on renditions and understandings of Śītalā in colonial and post-colonial Bengal, in the rest of India and, eventually, abroad” (120). Ferrari clearly considers

these texts to be inauthentic with respect to Śītalā's true nature, arguing that they are the work of an elite group who were prejudiced against the lower classes. His literary analysis offers insight into textual conceptions of Śītalā and identifies a new text, the *Prabhāsakhaṇḍa* of the *Skandapurāṇa*, as containing the earliest mention of the goddess. However, textual and lived traditions are often mentioned without distinction, with variations from the textual tradition attributed to colonial notions of Śītalā and their perceived unquestioned acceptance by devotees.

In other chapters, Ferrari utilizes what he terms “ethnographic vignettes” from his fieldwork at various North Indian temples in order to analyze Śītalā's iconography and contemporary ritual practices, including animal sacrifice, possession, and mortification of the flesh. The ethnographic components of these chapters are thorough and offer valuable information concerning patrons, practices, and iconography in specific temples. He denies any connection to illness, stating that associating ritual and possession with illness is a form of “disturbing cultural colonialism that [does] not correspond to beliefs and practices” (94), yet includes a Bengali informant's assertion that in response to feigned possession “Śītalā is likely to show her rage by heating up (*tāpāno*) and causing illness” (95).

Ferrari's final chapter appears almost as an afterthought, consisting of sections on Śītalā as an AIDS goddess, a comparison of Amitav Ghosh's 1995 novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* to Bengali *maṅgalkāvya*, and the modern “Durgāfication” of Śītalā in contemporary pop-culture. Each of the sections in this chapter would have perhaps been more suited to articles; there is no real cohesion between them or with the remainder of the work.

Overall, Ferrari's textual analysis and ethnographic research offer a valuable contribution to the field. However, he often seems unaware of his own biases; his dismissal of devotees for whom Śītalā is a fierce goddess as having been subject to “foreign influence” is similar to his criticisms of prior scholarship, in which “the voices of Śītalā's devotees, their texts and their material culture have been suffocated by the truth-claims of powerful, external door-keepers” (xxii). Although he convincingly shows a Śītalā that is a benevolent mother, his argument that this is the “real” Śītalā remains unproven and distracts from an otherwise well-researched volume.