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Mothering the Pandemic through the Interface of Ritual and Performance

Abstract

The representation of Sitala, “the one who cools,” the goddess of smallpox, is believed to relieve a community from fear, pain, and deadly epidemics through significant ritual practices. Marginalized populations, especially women, and those socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged in India’s caste-based society primarily worship Sitala. Household ritual practice, such as *dondi* is an essential part of the worship of Sitala and an act of altruism or self-sacrifice. Through *dondi*’s ritualized gesture, Sitala devotees display their obedience to the mother goddess. Through a sociological lens and adopting an autoethnographic approach, I reflect on my personal experiences of the interplay between *dondi*, ritual worship of Sitala, and the reclamation of women’s agency. By carefully examining household rituals and worship, I argue that *dondi* contributes to the identity formation of under-resourced and marginalized women.

Introduction

The world we live in is no stranger to epidemics. Yet, as the global community collectively wrestles with a pandemic, it authors a new story of resilience. Despite history's deep familiarity with epidemics, the COVID-19 pandemic invites contemporary reckoning with the global history of fatal diseases and how communities perform solidarity when the disease occurs. The divine mother figure Sitala's association with epidemics makes her especially important in this time. Through the worship of Sitala, Bengali people without access to proper healthcare can endure and exercise their beliefs in hopes of warding off fatal diseases: smallpox in the past, COVID-19 in the present. The name Sitala can be loosely translated as "the one who cools." Sitala is a mystic mother figure, traditionally depicted holding a small whisk, carrying medicinal herbs, and riding a donkey. The Bengali community conceives her mythical form as the mother goddess through performance narratives that capture her healing abilities that guard against fatal diseases afflicted upon humanity.



Fig 1. A vendor selling all the necessary items for the worship. March 2020. Image courtesy of the author.

I became interested in the iconography of Sitala in 2001 when my family moved to Balia, a suburb of Garia in South Kolkata (previously Calcutta). In Balia, I have seen daily worship at our neighborhood Sitala temple. The temple bells indicate the moments in the temple's daily schedule at which Sitala is available to worshippers. The annual Sitala worship occurs during summer and spring, particularly in April and May. This time is considered particularly auspicious for Sitala worship, and the devotees from the neighborhood and from afar come to Sitala's shrines by early light. Scholars have speculated that there is a correlation between the annual

worship, ritual observances, and the spread of epidemics in India. For example, epidemiologist Leonard Rogers report published in 1930, that heat and lack of humidity had contributed to the rise of epidemics such as smallpox in India. Roger asserts, "[t]he great decline in the seasonal prevalence of smallpox during the south-west monsoon

rains from June to October was closely related to the high absolute humidity at that season...In the more humid areas of north-east India and Madras relatively low absolute humidities in autumn and early winter are followed by increased smallpox in the following season" (Rogers 1930: 793). This early study of smallpox indicates the seasonal influence on the epidemic. Therefore, besides daily worships, the annual worship of Sitala is a collective celebration to establish a relationship between the goddess and the community, who frequently do not have any access to advanced medicine. Furthermore, this festival, imbued with ritual observances, allows the community to celebrate the occasion with food, performance, and games, fostering a spiritual and communal milieu. The people inhabiting villages around Sitala's dwelling worship the village goddess as a large-scale community.

For the purpose of this paper, I examine marginalized women in terms of social inequalities, including the lack of access to public health services and economic freedom. As they have been historically excluded from advanced healthcare in West Bengal, it is primarily marginalized populations, especially women—who are socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged in India's caste-based society—who worship Sitala. The marginalization of Bengali women is a sociological and cultural phenomenon. Women can be marginalized irrespective of their educational, economic, and social status. It might be helpful to look into Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay on postcolonial studies *Can the Subaltern Speak?* in which she meticulously and radically interrogates the position of the marginalized identified as subalterns in the postcolonial society. Especially, Spivak's focus on subaltern agency can unlock aspects about the shifts in the social-political structures in postcolonial society and the ways in which the changes affect gender identities. It is equally important to consider the evolving status of women along with their counterparts in Bengal. The nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengal witnessed a new social category of an English-educated, elite colonial middle class who influenced Bengali society's social, cultural, political, and intellectual behavior. This group was known as *bhadralok*, or gentleman, and their counterpart was known as *bhadramahila* or a lady, a noblewoman.¹

Alongside the concept of *bhadramahila* and *bhadralok*, in colonial Bengal, the rural, indigenous, deprived, illiterate, and mostly domestic helpers were recognized as *chotolok* or subordinate people. The term *chotolok* is somewhat gender neutral. The disposition of *bhadramahila* has not evolved completely in postcolonial Bengal, although the term *bhadramahila* is extended through language and occupation. For example, a domesticated, devotional, well-articulated woman is a *bhadramahila*, and an educated, independent, and socialized woman is also considered a *bhadramahila*. With this in mind, this essay focuses on the under-resourced and marginalized women of Balia, some of them domestic helpers, who are also considered *bhadramahila*. They might come from a rural or peri-urban region, yet through their everyday interaction and socialization, they maintain their identity as *bhadramahila*. It is important to note that the sacred and ritual performance of *dondi* establishes a reciprocal space in which women thrive beyond their immediate social identity.

Household ritual worship of Sitala, often termed *dondi*, contributes to the identity formation of marginalized women, as they find protection and healing from maladies through performing *dondi*. Additionally, women are marginalized by the patriarchal society. Therefore, my classification of marginalized women centers on women who experience structural discrimination and are forced to follow traditional and institutional norms, which cause them to stay in the domestic spaces primarily as

nurturers, caregivers, and homemakers due to the systemic oppression within society. In addition, I focus on the performative worship of Sitala in Balia, West Bengal, for two reasons: firstly, because of my own association and familiarity with Sitala worship in this area, and secondly, because the fabric of Balia is peri-urban, an area surrounding the city between the suburbs and the countryside, inhabited by the low-income and rural population of a total population of 74.39 (District Statistical Handbook 2010-2011: 2.3).

This low income and rural population is comprised of people who are at the bottom of India's caste system. According to the District Statistical Handbook, the economically disadvantaged population or people below the poverty line reside in and around this area, including more than half of the Scheduled Caste (SC) and another substantial number of Scheduled Tribe (ST) categories (District Statistical Handbook 2010-2011). The SC belong to the "lower-caste" category and were historically excluded from the caste system consisting of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra classifications, marked by the Brahmin at the top and Shudra at the bottom. (See Sengupta 2013). The Hindu *varna* or caste system and its sub-categories or *jati* or ethnic compositions are classified according to occupation, determining an individual's social and economic privileges.² In addition to SC, Balia is inhabited by the population categorized as ST, or Scheduled Tribe, which consists of *Adivasi* or tribal groups, and entails 5.5% of the total population of the State of West Bengal; however, it is not culturally homogeneous ("Data Highlights: The Scheduled Tribes" 2001, 1). The term ST is "[u]sed for administrative purposes to confer certain constitutional privileges and protection to a group of people who are considered to be backward and disadvantaged" (Mitra 2008: 1202). The census on ST of Bengal recognized tribal and ethnic communities under the ST categorization as "Santal (51.8%), Oraon (14 percent), Munda (7.8 percent), Bhumij (7.6 percent) and Kora (3.2 percent) ... [T]he STs in the state are predominantly residing in the rural areas (93.9 percent)" ("Data Highlights" 2001, 1). Even though the Constitution of India (1950) adopted anti-discriminatory policies, the SC and ST identities continue to stay at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Due to the area's significant minority population and lack of access to social privileges, including healthcare, the population is more prone to believing in mysticism to establish a closer union with the deities. Religious beliefs reinforce social identity, and to the disenfranchised community without access to social privilege, faith can be a source of sustenance. The intimate relationship with the divine is a mode of survival in the face of social inequality. One way of establishing the relationship is through ritual worship, a part of their social activity: women, especially disadvantaged women, worship *gramdevata* or village deities such as Sitala. Taking a sociological perspective as my primary methodological tool and employing an autoethnographic approach, I reflect on my personal experiences with the interplay between ritual worship of Sitala, and the reclamation of women's agency in a public sphere through the ritual observances, as supplemented by an interview with a local priest. This close reading of the representation of Sitala in a cultural landscape analyzes ritual practices in order to understand how these marginalized women gain power through ritual performance.

Background and Context

Sitala's chronicle appears in Bengali oral tradition. This Bengali literature is known as the *mangalkavya* or the "auspicious verses," which intersperses the narrative with lyrical passages similar to poetry (Nicholas 2003, 194). One of the primary comprehensive Bengali texts used to analyze *mangalkavya* is *Mangal Kabbyer Itihas* or *The History of Mangal Kavya* by Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1975), who traces the origin of *mangalkavya* in medieval Bengal between the thirteenth century and the eighteenth century. The *mangalkavya* is written in lyrical verses and is divided into separate *pala* or dramatic segments. *Mangalkavya*, other *brata katha*, or orally-transmitted instructional narratives for ritual worship teach Bengali women socialization skills and how to be a model caregiver. Within *mangalkavya* traditions, *Sitalamangalkavya* (hence *Sitalamanga*) is authored in honor of the goddess Sitala. The multifaceted religio-cultural experience of the performative worship of Sitala

manifests in the community through various theatrical renditions, especially the performance of *Sitalamanga Jatra*, based on the poetic composition of *Sitalamanga*, and the *Jatra* usually takes place after the worship of Sitala. *Sitalamanga Jatra* is an operatic performance, detailing Sitala's advent on earth. *Sitalamanga* is written in Bengali and is rendered in a traditional poetic format, known as *panchali*, in which Bengali cultural discourses and traditions upholding Bengali-ness intersect

Traditionally, women who worship Sitala for good health relate directly with *Sitalamanga* for its lucid *panchali*-style reading, which is often orally transmitted and easy to memorize by women who lack access to literacy. Observing the personality formation of the girl child in domestic spaces, gender scholar Jasodhara Bagchi argues that "Proverbs and the

'bratakathas' [the instructional narratives accompanying the ritual penance known as the *brata*] are the major sources of the personality-formation of the girl child" (Bagchi 1993, 2216). The themes in the oral verses primarily revolve around the sanctity of



Fig. 2. Sitala worship in progress at the local temple. March 2020. Image courtesy of the author.

women as ideal caregivers, achieved through self-control, self-awareness, and penance. Bagchi argues that the literary texts and oral-performative traditions largely contributed to the formation of an “ideal” woman, which in turn was labeled as a representative of the cultural heritage and influenced the national identity formation of the Hindu women (Bagchi 1993: 2217). Hence, *Sitalamangal* is a culture-specific, sanctified, and codified text tied to the cultural identity at a local level that communicates directly with the Bengali community, especially with Bengali women partaking in the ritual worship of Sitala.

Specific modes of Sitala worship appeal to marginalized communities, particularly those who have been subjugated by the caste-based hierarchy in India. Brahmins are the highest of the four traditional class divisions of Hindu society. In part, this position of privilege has had a significant impact on India’s social and religio-cultural structure. Despite the Brahminical privilege over the other castes, Sitala’s existence has embodied solidarity amongst the people living on the margins of the hegemonic social structure.

On these margins lies Balia, a neighborhood suburb of Garia, a lively city-like district of Southern Kolkata with a long history. Surrounded by high-rises and luxurious townships, the fabric of Balia is a fusion of the urban and the rural and inhabited by working-class people drawn to its affordability. Retirees who moved here seeking a relaxed lifestyle mix with the residents who have lived in the area for generations. Most of the residents own small businesses, such as tea stalls, roadside snack bars, community grocery stores, and local barbershops. Alongside owning their small-scale businesses, some community members maintain their occupations in fishing and farming, passed down through generations. Local families are also the owners of neighborhood *mandir*, or temples, the Sitala Mandir and the Manasa Mandir. Ultimately, the heart of Balia is the local Sitala temple, and the residents’ cultural and religious functions are constructed around Sitala and the local temple.

Emphasis on the Performative Ritual Worship: *Dondi*

Although there are multiple narratives of Sitala’s origin, her story does not require a single, homogeneous version to justify her position in disadvantaged women’s public and private lives. The prevalent version of Sitala’s origin by poet Nityananda Chakrabarti (the author of *Sitalamangal*) imagines Sitala emerging from the cold ashes of the sacrificial fire that have contributed to her name, “the one who cools” from heat and fever. In this narrative, Sitala is considered a “lesser” deity among the supreme gods, who are primarily male. Chakrabarti’s composition also includes a feminist representation of Sitala, for, ultimately, she becomes a champion despite ridicule others cast at her because of her gender identity. The story of Birat *pala*, one of the three popular segments of *Sitalamangal*, highlights Sitala’s struggle for recognition. The arrogant and chauvinistic king Birat only recognizes Brahma as the supreme god. He refuses to accept the presence of a mere female as a *debi* or goddess. To teach king Birat a lesson and establish her authority (and perhaps to act against the patriarchy itself), Sitala destroys the king’s entire kingdom and family, including his sons, by unleashing diseases. Nonetheless, Sitala spares the king’s wife and daughters-in-law, who convince Birat to recognize Sitala. With the king’s acknowledgment of Sitala’s power, it is sung, “Raja puje hey puje hey Sitala charan,

Sankha ghanta hulahuli bajey ghoney ghan,” which translates as, “the king is worshipping the feet of Sitala, while the glorious sounds of the conch, bells, and drums are chiming” (Mukhopadhyay 1994, 78). Paralleling this narrative, in 17th and 18th-century literary traditions of paeans (*mangalkavya*) in Bengal, Sitala emerged as the goddess of smallpox. Her relationship with *jwar* or fever is more familial in this account, as her son *jwarasur* is the fever demon, signifying a synthesis between *jwar* or fever and *asur* or demon (Katyal 2001, 97). When she is denied recognition as the goddess, she sends her son, the fever demon, to spread diseases, including sixty-four types of pox (Misra 1969; Katyal 2001). Once she receives her due recognition through ritual worship, she restores humanity to live.

Sitala is popular because although the underprivileged community is susceptible to many deadly diseases, smallpox has vastly affected India’s mortality rate. The historical reference of smallpox or *masurika* is found in medical compilations dating back before the Common Era by the ancient Indian physicians Caraka and Susruta. (Nicholas 1981, 25). Even so, the effect of the disease was not widespread in Bengal until the eighteenth century, when internal conflicts and colonialism disrupted the natural order and caused disasters such as famine and dislocation of the rural population, which contributed to the spreading of smallpox (Nicholas 1981, 33-34). Around the time the smallpox epidemic stunned Bengal, Sitala transformed from a minor deity to the goddess of smallpox who could relieve the population from the tragedy. It is notable that, unlike the western secular view of diseases, smallpox carries a religious significance in India, which resembles the idea in Hinduism that diseases are inflicted upon humanity by the gods. Therefore, as the goddess of smallpox, Sitala is responsible for the disease and can cure the disease (Arnold 1995, 228). Examining the medicine and diseases in colonial India, scholar David Arnold emphasizes that although detailed smallpox mortality statistics are absent before 1880, nonetheless,



Fig. 3. The performance of dondi in progress. March 2020. Image courtesy of the author.

some data existed for Kolkata (colonial Calcutta), stating “[s]mallpox deaths averaged 734 a year between 1837 and 1865; but many fatal cases probably passed unrecorded in these early years” (Arnold 1995, 227).

The outbreak of smallpox continued to be an epidemic in Asia and Africa as recently as the 1960s (Banthia, Dyson 1999). Socio-economically vulnerable and disadvantaged communities suffered greatly from this deadly virus along with other types of epidemics, such as cholera, plague, and malaria. In this context, both in the past and the present, the development of a mother figure, a goddess who can care for and protect the members of the community with supreme authority over the epidemics, has been a natural response from people who want to restore faith over uncertainty. As such a mother figure who can cure epidemics like smallpox, aggravated by environmental adversities, such as drought and famine, Sitala is remarkably close to the people and the earth. Thus, Sitala earned the status of a *gramdevata* or village goddess. During the annual worship of Sitala, people from the surrounding areas partake in altruistic rituals, such as *dondi*.

Dondi is a part of ancient Hindu religious practices primarily related to the region of Bengal. The aesthetic features of *dondi*, from practicing cleanliness to performing the rituals correctly and with precision, are a necessary part of the practice while exhibiting symbolic offerings of the self through the purification of the soul to receive Sitala’s blessings. *Dondi* is an essential part of the worship of Sitala and an act of altruism or self-sacrifice. Through *dondi*’s ritualized gesture, Sitala devotees display their obedience to the mother goddess.

First, the participants, mostly women, start from the side of the nearest body of water, moving towards a local Sitala temple. The performers begin from a standing position; then they prostrate or lie on the ground face down and touch their foreheads to the ground. Afterward, they stand up again and bring their palms together to show respect for the goddess. Standing up and lying down is a continuous process, wherein the participants know instinctively when to stand up again to complete a whole movement. This way, they move forward. This process may continue for miles and hours; as long as it takes to get from the body of water to the temple. Considering the rigorous journey of this act and the participants’ ability, they may or may not begin and conclude *dondi* together. On the one hand, the participants surrender themselves entirely to the goddess, and on the other hand, after finishing the act of *dondi*, they stand victorious, radiating strength and extraordinary power through submission. Watching women performing *dondi* during the annual Sitala worship fascinated me as a child. I always wanted to participate in the performance instead of observing as a part of the crowd. Nevertheless, my self-identification with the middle-class people who did not perform *dondi* inhibited me from participating in the event.

The devotional display of *dondi* intertwines social, religio-cultural, and aesthetic performances in an effort to gratify the goddess and achieve emancipation through altruism: a self-sacrificing act for the well-being of an individual, family members, or the community. The audience participation is instrumental to *dondi*. The audience comprises the family, and community members accompany the women performing *dondi* to alleviate any distress by offering water and emotional support. The religio-cultural aspect of *dondi* is directly associated with the act itself. *Dondi* is performed when people have a *manot* or an incentive, symbolizing a private contract between the goddess and her devotees. The performance of *dondi* is an act of altruism; it

demonstrates public religiosity as neighbors, family members, and other devotees who are not performing dondi walk alongside participants throughout the process.



Fig. 4. Dondi in progress. Image courtesy of Anjan Ghosh. 'Dondi,' June 27, 2017. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/54221875/Dondi>

Furthermore, *dondi* is a healing ritual. By going through the symbolic, ritualistic, and altruistic process, women experience self-manifestation and spiritual transformation, a “fundamental change in the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred in the life of the individual” (Pargament 2006: 18). This altruistic practice is a catalyst for change from illness to cure, engaging both mind and body. From a psychological standpoint, the transformation of the women and the community of spectators is more internal than external. For example, *dondi* creates a social space intersecting the religious domain; as argued by psychologists Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, “Religion in reality is joy in fellowship, warmth and belonging. We are touched when we experience the community of believers, conjoined in faith, security and camaraderie” (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 1998, 1). After completing *dondi*, the participants wash, get dressed in clean clothes, and join in the worship of Sitala. For example, after worship, the participants break their fast, and the community shares the *prasad* or food offerings such as fruits and sweets for gods. How the *dondi* participants socialize with the community exhibits their transformation both in their individual and social behavior, illuminating a sense of collectivism, confidence, and wellness. Within this culturally specific context, women’s spiritual transformation delineates a universal concern: saving loved ones from illnesses so that the community can be whole.

Equally important, through *dondi*, the quest for the sacred often manifests through the participants’ bodies, known as *bhor* or possession. In many cases, the women participants achieve a trance-like powerful state epitomizing the divine presence through space and time. Religious studies scholar June McDaniel identifies

possession trance or *bhor* as biological, psychological, and religious (McDaniel 1989, 237). This ecstatic spiritual state is a part of Bengali religious traditions. According to McDaniel, “The Bengali devotional tradition is a history of people who are considered saints, incarnations of deities, and liberated souls. Their words change the course of the tradition, for their inspirations and revelations are believed to come directly from their deities” (McDaniel 1989, 2). In the case of *dondi*, the ecstatic state of mind manifests through the women devotees’ bodies, and at that time, they may possess visions and extraordinary power to heal the diseased.

The women’s ability to channel the divine feminine in their bodies to ensure protection and renewal of life challenges the very basis of the Hindu patriarchy. Kathleen M. Erndl explains that the ability to channel the divine is a radical and feminist act through which women become more and more “goddess-like” (Erndl 2007, 152). Erndl writes, “Possession is an embodied phenomenon in which women experience the divine either within their own bodies, [...] or as part of the collective, participatory process [...] In either case, women gain access to power, many kinds of power, including the power to improve their lives, mitigate suffering, help others, and achieve spiritual insight” (Erndl 2007, 157). Domestic and ordinary women become extraordinary by merging with the sacred and reclaiming power through healing. The community of devotees highly respects the woman who attains the trance-like spiritual manifestation and identifies her as holy. In my observation, when a woman achieves such a state, the community brings their sick loved ones for the women’s blessing. The woman experiencing devotional ecstasy gently touches the unwell person’s head. The devotees believe that this gesture can help the diseased person to recover from the illness. Furthermore, as indicated by Erndl, the otherwise marginalized women are empowered through the altruistic and spiritual performance of *dondi*. This transformative phase that the women collectively experience can be identified as the embodiment of the inner *shakti* or power.

Intersecting Ritual, Performance, and Identity

The act of channeling the divine is a part of *dondi*, with or without achieving the trance-like state. *Dondi* is also a compassionate act, as the economically deprived women conduct for the health and happiness of their families and community. Ultimately, *dondi* fosters a space of communion through ritual and performance, which strengthens the identities and agencies of marginalized women as the protectors of the community, a role often associated with males in the patriarchal society. The marginalized population in West Bengal, without access to modern healthcare, values the end result of the *dondi* practice: a union with Sitala and renewed faith in her power to ward off diseases. The decision to participate in the *dondi* process is largely dictated out of concern for a woman’s family or community. Through altruistic performances, the community stands against external threats such as deadly diseases. For example, many of the participants I observed were performing *dondi* for their immediate family members, extended family and neighbors in a display of radical empathy. As an anthropologist and psychotherapist observing ritual healing in Puerto Rico, Joan Koss-Chioino defines radical empathy as something that “[p]rovides a feeling of direct and deep connection with another person who may be a stranger” (Koss-Chioino 2006, 663). Koss-Chioino continues, “radical empathy” in ritual healing erases individual boundaries and goes

beyond acknowledging the sufferer's distress based on shared adverse circumstances (Koss-Chioino 2006, 661). Through this framework, such an act of kindness displays *dondi* participants' concerns not only for their family but for their community as well. Therefore, a woman's deliberate decision to observe *dondi* is for the welfare of others, guided by empathy and love. A relationship based on compassion creates an "inter-subjective" space where individuals (the *dondi* performers) and acquaintances and strangers (the community members or observers from the vicinity) come together both emotionally and physically.

In addition, the emancipatory possibilities of women who perform *dondi* are not without paradox. While through the performance of *dondi*, women foster an inter-subjective space, getting outside the domestic sphere and occupying a social and collective space, it should also be acknowledged that women learn to "give" according to a specific social and patriarchal system. If we look at this paradox as inseparable from the process of *dondi* we might develop an intersectional understanding of the altruistic and autonomous practice of *dondi* within the ethnic-cultural landscape. Women who perform *dondi* become caregivers, without advanced healthcare resources, and are responsible for their community's well-being. Notably, combined with local and Bengali purificatory practices, the ritual performances in Sitala worship, the *brata* or the initiation through narrative verses to welcome the gods and goddesses are ingrained in Bengali culture and the performances are celebratory. Of course, the socio-cultural rituals of *dondi* are not an exception to this patriarchal hegemony. As Bagchi notes with respect to Hindu religious practice, "[r]ituals operate within the overarching governance of brahmanism with its need to maintain the purity of patrilineal descent" (Bagchi 1993: 2216). Within this framework, rituals function as indigenous responses to claiming cultural identity against hegemonic power, as observed by Bagchi (1993, 2216). In colonial Bengal, *brata*, or instructional narratives for rituals, were a part of indigenous values and responses to colonial belief systems. By performing *brata* along with altruistic practices, such as fasting, the women practice faith towards their religion, domestic ideals, and physical and emotional discipline (Bagchi 1993, 2216). Ultimately, in postcolonial Bengal, *dondi* continues to foster a space for women to exercise agency and maintain a crucial role in the class-based patriarchal society.

Dondi cultivates a sense of cultural collectivism that resides in the experience of women, centering on a divine feminine point of view, and invoking the powerful woman's presence—in this case, Sitala—through the female body. The marginalized women reclaim their collective identity and take stride over the domestic boundaries into a communal space, while sharing feminine perspectives and familial experiences while collectively providing protection and kindness for their community.

Conclusion

The women participating in the rituals surrounding the worship of Sitala are often robbed by the structural inequalities of the society, and therefore, lack access to essential resources. Varieties of traditions for healing purposes were also born from tragedies, in this case, deadly diseases such as smallpox epidemics in the community. In addition, these ritual and devotional performances are historically concerned with the socio-economically disadvantaged without any access to advanced healthcare. The

performers of *dondi* are not an exception to that principle. By acknowledging societal imbalances that can cause sufferings due to illnesses, this essay also highlights how the Bengali community has devised ritual healing for these maladies. In doing so, we can expand our scope of examining performances recognizing their diverse and contradictory framework—their cultural, religious, and communal centers—without reifying universalization and homogenization.

Additionally, *dondi* reveals the performer's agency and belief in self. Though they believe that the disease is perpetuated by the supernatural, nevertheless, through the practice of faith, altruism, determination, and negotiation, the illness can be cured, and the performer establishes order in the face of suffering. Remarkably, *dondi* is an inherently collective act of resistance against systemic hegemony.

By looking at the patriarchal nature of Bengali society, this essay has explored the relational nuances between the performance of *dondi* and the identity expression of marginalized women. It is not to be overlooked that Hindu oral literature enforces patriarchal norms and values, and ritual practices are part of this systemic control; nonetheless, *dondi*, as indigenous ritual performance, fosters a social space for women, subverting patriarchal authority, and reaching beyond the domestic sphere. The iconography of Sitala is of an empowered woman who claimed her place in the patriarchal framework of the Hindu pantheon. Since her inception in the mortal world, she became affiliated with the indigenous, the tribal people, and the non-Brahmins. Although *dondi* cannot escape the Brahminization of ritual practices, Sitala worship engenders a collective milieu for the marginalized, for the non-Brahmins, especially women. In the worship of Sitala, women are not merely the audience; they are the protagonists of the process. They secure the right to channel the goddess in their body through *dondi*. In essence, the performance of *dondi* imbues marginalized women with power, as they believe that through this practice, they can cure the diseased. Thus, *dondi* opens up a space for the goddess's connection with marginalized women, allowing them gain agency through their commitment to Sitala.

Notes

1. For reference, see: Sarkar, Sumit. 1997. *Writing Social History*. Oxford University Press.
2. According to sociologist Andre Beteille, caste was characterized as *varna* in classical Indian literature; however, in contemporary India, typically caste is identified as *jati* or otherwise categorized as sub-castes (Beteille 1996, 15). He identifies *varna* and *jati* as polysemic terms and the overlap between them is not unusual. Based on his analysis of the works of the preceding sociologists, Beteille examines the thin line between *varna* and *jati* (1996, 20). He argues, "When Bengalis speak or write about caste, they no longer use *barna* [sic] as commonly as before, but *jat* in the spoken language, and also *jati* in the written form. Their experience and perception of caste has changed, and this change is expressed in the shift of vocabulary" (1996, 19). While *varna* incorporates only four social categories, Brahmin, Kashtriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, all of humankind must be a part of the four categories: "The term *jati* refers more to the units that constituted the system—the castes and communities— than to the system viewed as a whole. It did not provide the kind of basis for a universal social classification that *varna* did" (1996, 21).

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About the Author

Jashodhara Sen is a Theatre and Performance Studies historian with a specialization in South Asian theatre and performance. Dr. Sen's research focuses on the evolution of Bengali performance, *Jatra*, as a cultural enterprise and a provocative form of theatre both socially and politically charged to support grassroots engagement. Her performance practice, scholarship, and teaching are informed by theatre history and performance, postcolonial and subaltern studies, and oral history and autoethnography. Her research and reviews have appeared in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Ecumenica*, *Asian Theatre Journal*, *New England Theatre Journal*, and *Texas Theatre Journal*. Dr. Sen's Ph.D. is in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Colorado Boulder, and currently, she is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Florida.