

# Shakti Versus Sati

—A Reading of The  
Santoshi Ma Cult

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WITH the unprecedented success of *Jai Santoshi Ma*, a Bombay film released in the seventies, a little known goddess became the centre of a new cult in many urban centres, particularly in north India. This paper seeks to explore the cultural idiom within which the story of Santoshi Ma was created, and speculates about the nature of the social groups in which this goddess has elicited such an enthusiastic response.

## The Film

For those readers who have not seen

the film *Jai Santoshi Ma* the main events of the story are briefly related here. The lord Ganesh creates a daughter called Santoshi at the request of his sons. When the girl grows up, she finds many devotees on earth. One devotee is Satyawati, the daughter of a Brahman priest. Satyawati prays to Santoshi Ma to unite her with the man she loves who is called Birju, and promises to visit all the shrines of the goddess if she gets Birju as a husband.

Birju is a poet and singer but belongs to a peasant family. His six elder brothers

work on the land. A marriage is arranged between Birju and Satyawati. Satyawati fulfils her vow to the goddess.

As Santoshi Ma's fame spreads, the three great gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, come in the garb of ascetics to receive the *prasad* of jaggery and roasted chickpeas offered to Santoshi Ma, at Satyawati's doorstep. This act of the gods enrages their wives, Brahmani, Lakshmi and Parvati. They appear in a dream to Satyawati and threaten to punish her if she continues to worship Santoshi Ma.

Satyawati remains steadfast in her devotion. This leads to a great conflict between the principle of *shakti* represented by the three goddesses, and that of *sail*, represented by Satyawati.

Disregarding their husbands' attempts to intervene, the goddesses arrange for Birju and Satyawati to be separated. Satyawati discovers that her sisters-in-law are feeding Birju his brothers' leftovers (*jutha*) because they resent his not working on the land. Enraged, Birju, leaves home and vows to return only after he has become rich. He goes on a sea voyage; the three goddesses cause a storm but he is saved by Santoshi Ma and finds employment with a rich merchant.

Meanwhile, the goddesses appear as village girls and tell Satyawati that her husband is dead. She refuses to believe this, but Birju's brothers and their wives believe it, and begin to mistreat her by overworking and underfeeding her. Although Birju has become rich by now, the goddesses have caused him to forget Satyawati. He falls in love with Geeta, the merchant's daughter.

One day, while working in the forest, Satyawati is pursued by the local ruffian and is saved by Santoshi Ma. But Satyawati is so demoralised that she decides to kill herself. The sage Narada appears and advises her to worship Santoshi Ma by fasting on 12 consecutive Fridays and offering jaggery and chickpeas at Santoshi Ma's temple. She does this for 11 Fridays but is unable to procure the offering on the last Friday. She prays to Santoshi Ma who appears as an old woman and gives her the jaggery and chickpeas.

Now, the three goddesses cause the forest to burst into flame but because of her devotion to Santoshi Ma, she is unscathed by the fire. She completes her vow and prays to Santoshi Ma to restore her husband to her. At that moment, Birju hears a voice urging him to return to Satyawati. He rushes back, laden with riches, is shocked to see how his wife has been treated, and decides to set up house separately.

Satyawati now decides to instal an image of Santoshi Ma in her new home. She invites Birju's brothers and sisters-in-law. The goddesses become the hidden instruments through which the sisters-in-law of Satyawati add lemon juice to the milk offered to Santoshi Ma. Sour tastes are taboo in the worship of

Santoshi Ma and she is so enraged that she causes all the children present at the *puja* to die. Satyawati is accused of poisoning the children. She prays to Santoshi Ma saying that the entire relationship of devotee and deity will be tarnished by the accusation. The goddess appears in person, declares herself pleased

creation of a new deity, or on the rejuvenation of the world through the sacrifices of another *sati*. Every significant chain of events relating to Satyawati is accompanied by a movement in the evolution of Santoshi Ma, so that the goddess moves away from the possibility of being defined as a malevolent, punishing goddess and slowly emerges as an intimate benevolent goddess. The story requires that we understand not only who Santoshi Ma is, but also who she is not.

It is significant that both at the local and at the all India level, the mother goddess in her *shakti* form usually stands



A scene from the film

by Satyawati's devotion, and restores the children 10 life.

In heaven, the three goddesses reveal that they were only testing Satyawati. They bless Santoshi Ma and pray that her worship maybe established throughout the world.

### Renunciation Versus Power

One may justifiably ask whether the true subject of this story is Satyawati or Santoshi Ma. Is the emphasis on the

alone, and is not encompassed in a higher male principle. In her powerful aspect as the goddess Durga, she stands alone, and as the fearsome goddess Kali, she is ascendant over her husband Shiva. However, as the gentle Parvati, she appears with Shiva in a position that shows her femininity as encompassed within the male principle and subordinated to it. The *shakti* form of the goddesses stands in contrast to the *sati* principle

wherein the woman is represented as subordinated to her husband.

The principle of power finds expression in the goddesses who represent *shakti*. They come to the aid of human beings and of gods in periods of cosmic darkness, by killing the demons who threaten the cosmic order. The principle of renunciation finds expression in the ideals of *sati*. At the mythological level, this principle finds explicit recognition in the asceticism performed by Parvati in order to obtain Shiva as a husband.

The mother goddesses who represent *shakti* in an explicit form require periodic propitiation through suffering of a single devotee who can suffer on behalf of all future devotees.

Satyawati's sufferings begin when she is separated from her husband. Her sufferings in her marital home constitute the test of her devotion both to her husband and to Santoshi Ma. At this point, the narrative seems to pose the question: is she capable of the devotion that can defy not only men but also the gods?

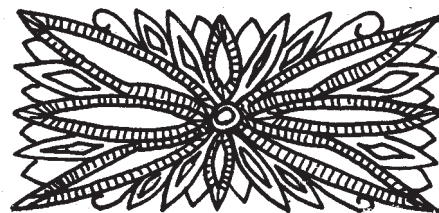
Once Satyawati successfully passes the test and is restored to happiness, the next test is of the goddess: is she capable

only of punishing or she is capable of forgiving? This test is framed when Satyawati's sisters-in-law add lemon to the milk and the enraged goddess for the first time turns her anger against her devotee, causing the children present to die. Thus, a possibility which had remained dormant in the benevolent presence of the goddess now comes to the fore.

Up to this point in the story, it was Satyawati whose devotion was being tested. Now, in a sense, it is the goddess who is being put to the test. If her anger now turns against her devotee, she will fall back into the category of a ferocious powerful goddess who is to be feared and propitiated primarily through the observance of negative injunctions, but with whom the devotee cannot enter into an intimate relationship. Intimacy with a deity requires that he or she should not only know how to punish the guilty but should also know how to forgive. In overcoming her anger and forgiving those who broke the food taboo, Santoshi Ma is finally established as a gentle, benevolent goddess who is intimately involved with her devotees.

At this stage, it may be useful to restate

the significance of a *sati*. Hindu myths often represent the conflict between Indra, the king of gods, and human ascetics. Asceticism is seen as forcing the gods to come into a relationship with the ascetic and to grant him or her whatever boon he or she desires. If the acts of gods can be seen as acts emanating from forces over which human beings have no control (since they emanate from an authority that is higher than human), then one may be



justified in going along with Durkheim and saying that the gods here are the personification of society. It is precisely against the vagaries of temperamental gods like Indra that Hindu myths bestow on humans the powerful weapon of asceticism.

As pointed out earlier, the asceticism of a woman is seen as consisting of selfless devotion to her husband. The asceticism of woman as *sati* comes into conflict with another aspect of femininity — that of *shakti*, the powerful, ferocious, feminine cosmic principle that reverses the normal relations between men and women, but is seen as necessary in the oscillation between the states of wellbeing and illbeing that societies undergo. This conflict is presented in stories such as that of Sati Anusuya and that of the goddess Manasa.\*

•According to the myth, the goddesses, jealous of the power of the *sati* Anusuya, sent their husbands, the gods, to test her. The gods came to her in the form of ascetics and said they would accept food at her hands only if she gave it to them naked. She resolved the situation by using her power to transform the gods into infants. The story would seem to suggest (hat a woman who is a *sati* has the power to disarm men by transforming them into babies. The legend of the goddess Manasa concerns the trials and tribulations of a young bride who remains faithful to her worship of Manasa despite the hostility to her devotion which she encounters in her in-laws' home and at the hands of the other goddesses.

### Worshippers at a Santoshi Ma shire, New Delhi



In the film, this conflict between *shakti* and *sati* becomes the means of defining the cult of Santoshi Ma.

### A Deity For Our Times

Although the story of Santoshi Ma draws on older myths and traditions, the idiom of continuity hides important discontinuities and new elements. I can show this best by contrasting the new goddess with an 'older goddess like Shitala.

Thanks to the excellent work of anthropologists like Ralph Nicholas and literary scholars like Edward Dimock and Aditi Nath Sarkar, we know that the worship of Shitala was closely connected with the spread of smallpox as an epidemic in Bengal. These scholars have shown that Shitala rose from the sacrifice of a victim. In many myths, the gods evoke the goddess in her *shakti* form to ward off demons. It is important that the goddess in her pure, gentle form, such as that of Lakshmi or Parvati, is unable to meet the threat of demons. It is when she takes on a dark, ferocious form such as that of Kali, that she can annihilate demons such as Raktabija or Mahishasura.

At the local level, a village woman may turn into a ferocious goddess, as is seen in various village myths of South India. In one such story a Brahman woman tricked into marrying a Shudra, is so enraged when she discovers the fraud, that she kills herself and takes on the form of a goddess who can only be appeased by the sacrifice of her husband. In the annual sacrifice offered to her, and other goddesses of her kind, an animal is seen as a substitute for the husband. Even if the animal is substituted by a vegetable, the killing is still symbolically represented by cutting the vegetable in half.

The power of renunciation in Hindu myth is different. The ascetic who renounces the world is often, pitted not against the demons but against the gods. *He* forces the gods to concede the demands of men. However, the asceticism of a woman is always for a husband, while the asceticism of a man takes him towards

his own personal goals of salvation or power. Thus, if Parvati's asceticism is to get her-self a good husband, Savitri's devotion to her husband acts to defeat Yama and bring her husband back from death.

Since Sati (an earlier incarnation of Parvati) and Savitri are often held up as

on the role of victim herself and suffers on behalf of all humanity, particularly her devotees. The *shakti* goddess absorbs the evils of society as embodied in the victim; by contrast, the *sati* goddess suffers on behalf of all humankind. Thus, the *sati* goddess is not propitiated through the shedding of any sacrificial blood.



Poster advertising the film

ideals of Indian womanhood, it is important to remember that the cults built around these women emphasise the once and for all nature of their sacrifice. Because Parvati in her Gouri form performed severe asceticism to obtain Shiva as a husband, other young women need not perform such ascetic feats. They need only commemorate the asceticism of Gouri through a symbolic fast in order to reap the benefits of her feat, and obtain husbands like Shiva. The sacrifice represented by the destruction of a victim at the altar of *shakti* is thus distinct from the sacrifice of a *sati*, for the latter takes

The nature of the relationship between devotee and deity has been strongly influenced by *bhakti* cults. When the deity is seen as an intimate friend, taboos may be violated. Thus, Ram accepted contaminated berries offered by Shabri; Radha stood with her foot on Krishna's chest. Such an intimate relationship is not possible with fierce goddesses like Shitala, although due to the influence of Tantric cults, it is sometimes possible with Durga or Kali in certain parts of India.

### Evolution Of Santoshi Ma

Let us now look at the evolution of Santoshi Ma in the story of Satyawati, and

examine how certain characteristics of different kinds of mother goddesses are combined in her until, at the end, one type emerges as dominant.

It is important to note that the first part of the story where Satyawati makes a vow and fulfils it is similar to many myths related to women's fasts which deal with how the failure to fulfil a vow led to the goddess' anger and the devotee's expiation. By fulfilling the vow, Satyawati obviates the possibility of Santoshi emerging as a wrathful punishing goddess at this stage of the story.

In the next stage, Satyawati demonstrates her steadfast devotion to her husband, while the three goddesses defy their husbands' request to admit Santoshi Ma into the cosmic pantheon: The events that follow, as one of the goddesses says, represent a struggle between the principles of *shakti* and *sati*. In this formulation it becomes clear that Santoshi Ma does not desire to be worshipped in a *shakti form*. She is not shown fighting any demons nor does she require the destruction of a victim. Rather, she requires the a minor deity to occupy an important place in the Bengali pantheon. The myths and rites connected with Shitala clearly helped to transform the experience of smallpox from an individual calamity to a collective one, and brought it within a frame-work of meaning for the individual.

What is interesting in the myths of Shitala in Bengal is that the illbeing of the community, in the specific experience of epidemics, is attributed to Shitala and her instrument Jvarasur, the demon of fever, who are clearly identified entities. Both the affliction and the healing testify to the power of Shitala who emerges as a powerful goddess who is to be propitiated by sacrifice. The victims of smallpox are represented as offerings to the goddess, but it is hoped that the disease can be warded off by offering the destruction of an animal, as a symbolic substitute for the human victim.

In contrast to the specificity with which the source of illbeing is defined in the cult of Shitala, Santoshi Ma does not establish herself through the annihilation of any particular demon. In fact, the sufferings of Satyawati emanate from a variety of diffused happenings — the jealousy of a sister-in-law, the unfair division of labour and food in her husband's house, the designs of a local ruffian on her honour, the forgetfulness of her husband. There is no specific villain in the film to whom one may attribute all of Satyawati's sufferings. This fact seems to me significant, for it may suggest that the everyday tensions of existence have become shapeless demons against whom the existing gods and goddesses are helpless. The goddess Shitala (cool) derives her name in opposition to the heat generated by the fever of smallpox. By analogy, one may argue that Santoshi Ma (contentment) derives her name in opposition to the diffused feeling of *asantosh* (discontent, the absence of peace).

The story of Satyawati, as myth, seems to say that since the demons of our time do not have a form, they cannot be annihilated in one grand battle or even in periodic battles fought by the goddesses in their *shakti* form. Instead, the diffused evils of our society can only be purged by the equally diffused suffering of a *sati* who must suffer on behalf of society. Correspondingly, at the cosmic level, we see the defeat of powerful femininity and the emergence of a goddess who is gentle and benevolent.

One last point of comparison between Shitala and Santoshi Ma. Shitala is rarely represented in a clearly recognisable human form. She is most often suggested by crude, unhewn figures and even her rare human form is not beautiful to behold. Since direct contact with such a deity is deemed dangerous, human relations with her are veiled through the nonelaboration of her form. Santoshi Ma, however, appears directly before her devotees,

though only after the possibility of her malevolence to the devotees has been clearly rejected.

Traditionally, only the *shakti* form of the goddess was not encompassed within a male principle. All other forms of goddesses were encompassed within higher male principles. Now, it seems that direct, unveiled relations with benevolent goddesses, unaccompanied by male gods, have become possible through the emergence, of Santoshi Ma.

### Message And Medium

We have concentrated so far on the message of the myth. What about the medium? In the case of the Shitala myth, Nicholas and Sarkar have shown how the development of printing technology led not only to the spread of the myth but also to its standardisation. It seems to me that the medium of film is likely to lead to an even greater standardisation — *Jai Santoshi Ma* is directly accessible to the vast majority of illiterate people and is regularly given a rerun around the time of major Hindu festivals. Unlike the printed versions of a myth which might still need to be interpreted by a priest, film as a medium does away with the necessity of any mediation.

It would be of interest to try to locate the story in its original form in the local traditions and to trace the transformations that it has undergone in being recast as a film. Do these changes relate to the new social conditions in which the story is being told or do they relate to the nature of the medium?

Similarly, extensive research needs to be done on the kinds of social groups within which the cult of Santoshi Ma has been accepted. I cannot suggest answers to these questions at this stage. The world of the Hindi film has presented us with the opportunity of studying how Hindu cults are evolving in relation to traditions, to the demands of contemporary society, and to the new media through which the messages are spread. This opportunity for studying the mythologies of our time should not go to waste. □