

## **RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN SOUTH INDIA TO CURE DISEASES**

**M.M.ALAM\* & B.RAMA RAO\*\***

### **ABSTRACT**

There is belief in South Indian villages that epidemics are due to evil spirits surrounding the villages. The propitiating of Gods and Goddesses to get rid of diseases in these villages are discussed. The Christian and Muslim traditions to cure the diseases by practising religion are also detailed.

All religions in ancient civilization worshipped various gods and goddesses for relief from physical ailments and mental agonies. It was a common belief of villagers that the villages are surrounded by evil spirits who cause failure of crops, fire or inflict diseases, epidemics like cholera, small pox, fever, cattle diseases. They used to turn towards guardian deities and propitiate them to ward off such diseases and calamities.

Ancient Indian civilization had worship of deities for averting epidemic diseases and other such calamities supposed to have been caused by evil spirits. Traces of worship of mother goddesses are found in Indus Valley civilization thereby giving an impression that worship of goddesses was prevalent for cure of diseases. Chinese traveller I' tsing mentioned that image of Hariti was found near the door of all Buddhist monasteries. Hariti was

regarded as an incarnation of disease that destroy children. Lord Buddha turned her into a protector of children from her old character of destroyer of children. Sitala is an identical form of Hariti and goddess of smallpox worshipped in India.

In Vedic religion Ashvins are associated with the act of healing. Several miraculous cures like providing an artificial iron leg, rejuvenation, cure of blindness, leprosy are attributed to these twin gods. Many of the hymns of Atharvaveda are for cure of diseases supposed to have been caused by evil spirits.

In spite of the fact that rationalised medicine and medical concepts of Ayurveda and use of medicines in various forms and from various sources emerged long before the appearance of Ayurvedic classics, worship of gods and goddesses was continued and is continued even today. Some temples

---

\* Assistant Director

\*\* Director

Indian Institute of Panchakarma, Cheruthuruthy, Kerala (India).

which are known for relief of certain diseases and also various practices and sacrifices of animals for relief of diseases specially epidemics by villagers in South India are presented here.

Worship of gods, goddesses and spirits is in vogue in villages. People, both men and women, boys and girls who have died violent or untimely, are worshipped after death.

There are temples of goddesses Ankamma and Gangamma for cholera and small pox respectively in Andhra Pradesh. Temples have been built to plagueamma to prevent plague. A story is mentioned by Henry (1921) that there was a widow, Ramamma living between Vijayawada and Hyderabad. She had illegal relation with one of her servants named Buddha Sahib. The brother of Ramamma on knowing it killed both of them. After this murder there was out break of cattle plague which people attributed to the spirit of Ramamma. They instituted special rites to pacify her spirit. Now there is a practice of taking out wooden images of about 2 feet high to represent Ramamma and Buddha Sahib with two images of local goddesses as their attendants during cattle plague. The images are placed on a cart and are dragged in procession at night through all the main streets of the village accompanied by fire works, music and dance. Finally the cart is dragged to the boundary of the village and is thrown into the territory of the adjacent village in order to transfer the angry spirit of Ramamma.

The Kogillu village in Karnataka there is a slab of rough stone of about five feet high and three feet broad. It is placed on a stone platform and is worshipped whenever cattles get sorefeet. In another village the goddess of small pox, Maramma, is represented by erecting a square stone pillar of about five feet height and half a feet in thickness near the cattle stone. She is called Maramma - Hethana and is offered buffaloes and sheep whenever epidemics break out.

In Tamil Nadu Mariamma or Mari is worshipped for small pox while Kali is regarded as the goddess who protects from evil spirits and ghosts. In some parts she is the special goddess of the vivid character and in some villages she is also the guardian against cholera. The cholera goddess is believed to be the mother of washerman. He is therefore chosen to officiate as the *pujari* (priest) as the son alone can hope to succeed in propitiating such a fierce divinity. The washerman bathes early morning and places a decorated pot called *karagam* on his head. The villagers pour ragi gruel in iron buckets which are kept for boiling water. The poor are fed this ragi gruel and the washerman dances before them holding a sickle in one hand and margosa leaves in another hand. After dusk when the procession passes through the village, sheeps are sacrificed at the important centres in the village and the blood is collected in an earthen pot. The washerman goes on dancing accompanied by musicians and places the *karagam* and blood vessel

at the border of his village. He returns home after taking bath. The goddess is believed to be propitiated by this and is carried beyond village limits. The villagers of adjacent villages in their turn carry the *karagam* to the border of the next village and this way the *karagam* travels long distance resulting in the transfer of angry goddess to a safer place.

In some villages Kaliamma is represented by seven brass pots one above the other with margosa leaves attached to the mouth of top most pot along with an earthen pot filled with water and adorned with margosa leaves. It is possible that the seven pots represent seven sisters or seven virgins found in Tamil Nadu shrines.

It is reported that in Kerala many religious communities have faith in supernatural beings and believe that prayers, partaking *prasadam*s or *nerchas* is very useful for their welfare. Bhajanams are offered in certain temples to get children. Many miracles are attributed to the Lord of Sabaarimala i.e Ayyappan, like dumb devotees regaining speech and so on. Performance of certain *vazhipadus* in the Taliparamba Siva temple cures diseases like epilepsy. The goddess of Kurumba Bhagavati temple at Kodungallur (Kerala) is the *masuri devata* (goddess of small pox) and prayers are offered to ward off the disease. Guruvayur temple is known for definite cure of rheumatism and other maladies. Bhramarasandesa and Chakorasandesa (19th C) refer to the

rheumatic patients going to Guruvayur. In recent example late Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavataer is known to have regained his golden voice after Bhajanam at Guruvayur. There are certain *prasadam*s known as antidotes for certain diseases. The *talkari* of Maruttoruvattom temple, the *valiaenna* of Takazhi Sasta temple and black ointment resembling eyetex obtained from the big lamp at the entrance of Ettumanur Siva temple are known as such antidotes for diseases. There is a tank with perennial supply of water (Muchukunda Tirtham) adjoining Sri Parthasarathi Temple at Munjanakavu in Kasargod Dist. It is believed that a dip in this water, three *pradaksinas* and offering of handful of *Navadhanyas* is a sure remedy for all warty growths on human body.

Muslims and Christians are no exceptions in superstitions. St Thomas tradition believes in miracles. St. Sebastian possesses power to afford relief from contagious diseases and St. George from serpentine displeasure. Pilgrims at Arthungal Church to pay homage to St. Sebastian crawl on - their bellies from the beach to the church (urul nercha) and make offerings of gold and silver images of human limbs, bows and arrows.

At St. George's church at Edathua models of snakes, ears and other organs are offered apart from gold and silver. The water from the well in St. George's Church at Edappalli is having miraculous curative powers. The Orthodox Syrian Church, Manarcaud is visited by

mentally sick and those possessed by evil spirits. Putupalli Church is visited for cure form poisoning. The *tamuk* a special edible sweet in some churches like that of Infant Jesus, facilitates easy delivery and pregnant women partake it.

Kerala Muslims have faith in saints - dead and living. The *jarrams* are graves of some Muslim divines and they attract devotees in large numbers. The tomb of Beema Bivi and her son is in Beemapalli in Tiruvanathapuram. This tomb is visited by physically crippled and mentally deranged. The *tangals* are

believed to be direct desendents of the Prophet and their help is sought in difficulties. Musaliars are attributed with miraculous powers of curing diseases, exorcising evil spirits and doing general good to the welfare of the family.

### Conclusion

The main aim of worshipping village gods and goddesses is to avert their wrath. The purpose is to get rid of cholera, small pox, cattle disease or drought and other calamities. The worship in most of the villages takes place during epidemics while in some villages annually.

## REFERENCES

- |                           |      |   |
|---------------------------|------|---|
| 1. Leslie, Charles        | 1977 | Asian Medical System A comparative study, University of California Press, London. |
| 2. Ramana Rao, V.V.       | 1971 | Indian Goddesses of Epidemic diseases, Bulletin Ind.Inst.Hist.Med. 1 (1-2) 44-88. |
| 3. Sreedhara Menon, A.    | 1996 | Cultural Heritage of Kerala S.Viswanathan Pvt. Ltd., Madras.                      |
| 4. Whitehead, Henry, D.D. | 1921 | The village gods of South India, Oxford University Press, Calcutta.               |

सारांश

## दक्षिण भारत में रोगचिकित्सा हेतु धार्मिक प्रथायें

- एम.एम. आलम

बि. रामाराव

दक्षिणत भारत के गाँवों में ऐसी धारणा प्रचलित है कि बुरी प्रेतात्माओं द्वारा गाँवों को घेरे में लेलिये जाने के कारण ही महामारियों की उत्पत्ति होती है । उनसे छुटकारा पाने हेतु देवी देवताओं को संतुष्ट करने के विषय में प्रस्तुत लेख में चर्चा की गई है । विभिन्न रोगों की चिकित्सा के लिए ईसाई तथा मुस्लिम संबंधी धार्मिक परम्पराओं पर भी सविस्तार विचार किया गया है ।