A handful of South Asianists in recent times have turned their attentions to the social histories of epidemics, floods, famines and other natural or health disasters. Contemporary historiography has repeatedly made the point that subaltern political consciousness in pre- British India accorded a special place to epidemics, famine and natural disasters. Ralph Nicholas has draws attention to this element in his writings on the worship of Sitala (the small pox goddess) in West Bengal. Kautilya’s Arthasastramentions five divine scourges that can destroy a king and a kingdom. These are fire, flood , disease , famine and epidemics.[[1]](#footnote-2)Similarly the enormous corpus of folk literature in the form of religious epic, the *Mangalkavyas,* *Manasamangal, Chandimangal* ,  *Sitalamangal,* and others ( 13th – 18th centuries) were woven round certain healing deities, like Manasa (snake goddess) Chandi (the patron deity of forests and animals) Sitala (goddess of small pox).These narratives for the first time echoed the voices of the downtrodden, their ritual patterns, customs and their daily struggle against adversities like natural calamities and protection against deadly diseases.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Resorting to faith in times of distress has been an inherent human reaction since the beginning of civilisation. In India , worship of Hariti , Sitala, Ola Bibi has been prevalent to ward off diseases. Hariti is one of the earliest iconographic tradition, who had been worshipped for the overall well being of the children, fertility etc. By the nineteenth century British physician in India , ranked small pox among the most prevalent and destructive of all epidemic diseases. David Arnold in his monograph “ Colonising the body : State Medicine and Epidemic diseases in nineteenth century’ notes that the small pox accounted several millions deaths in the late nineteenth century, alone , a mounting on average to more than one hundred thousand fatal cases a year. Believed to be an incarnation of Hindu goddess Durga , Sitala or simply ‘ mata’ ( mother ) was widely worshipped in the nineteenth century in Bengal and North India as one who can cure small pox. [[3]](#footnote-4)

Another deadly epidemic of the nineteenth century was cholera. Even though references to cholera occurs in ancient medical works of Hindus , Arabs , Chinese , Greeks and Romans from the fourth century B.C. the disease acquired a whole new status in the nineteenth century, when a total of five cholera pandemics claimed the lives of millions across the world. Thus the fear of diseases and the resultant suffering had also given rise to several religious manifestations. The first plague in human history also known as the Justinian Plague in the sixth century , was seen as an act of angry gods. The British polymath Bertrand Russell had in his famous lecture titled “ Why I am not a Christian ,” delivered in 1927 at London , expressed that fear is the foundation of religion. One of the most common religious manifestations of fear is that of snake god.

Based on this understanding of epidemic and ritualisation of the deity , this paper would tries to reflect on how the concepts such as ‘ritual’ , ‘illness’ and ‘health’ are intertwined with the present day epidemic caused by COVID 19. By objecting to past and present logics that ascribe to folk healing , an innate subalternity because of certain contexts ( example : the village) mode of transmission ( example orality ) gender and social background of votaries ( example low caste )[[4]](#footnote-5), my analysis is how the spread of coronavirus has created a deity named Corona Mai or mother Corona.

In India , villages of Kerela , Assam , Jharkhand used to worship Corona Devi . These images however resulted in angry social media responses , resorting to faith in times of distress , which has been an inherent human reaction since the beginning of civilisation[[5]](#footnote-6) In rural and urban areas alike superstitions had been rampant regarding angry deity . Woman flout social distancing norms while trying to placate goddess. In several parts of Jharkhand , including Bokaro, Giridhi , superstition had given birth to this new deity. At a time when temples are closed in the wake of pandemic , a group of women have dubbed the Covid -19 virus a goddess who must be placated and decided to pay obeisance through special puja. [[6]](#footnote-7)

With Covid 19 tightening , its grip across India , amid rising infections and fatalities , several groups of people in eastern parts of the country , mostly in the state of Bihar are worshipping the virus as a deity , desperately asking it to leave. It has been heard that Corona Mai appeared in a dream of villages in another part of Bihar and asked to be worshipped this way and she would leave. Anuradha Chaubey , a community leader in her 60’s from Bhagalpore said that there is nothing strange to worship a disease as divine rather than approaching the divine for protection against the diseases. [[7]](#footnote-8)

In Bengal often Corona devi had been trying to get the position of goddess Sitala from Asansol , Ondal to Kolkata. This had often noticed in folk culture of Bengal. [[8]](#footnote-9) The Corona virus deity has been worshipped for the safety and well being of the health care of professionals , police personnel , scientists , who are toiling to discover a vaccine.

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2. W.L. Smith, *The Myth of Manasa – A study in the popular Hinduism of Medieval Bengal*, Stockholm’s University 1976,  pp. 1-4. Also see , Sudarshana Bhaumik, “ The Healing Power of Goddess : Oral History Narratives of Bengal,” in Naseem Akhtar and Parvin Jolly ed.  *Women’s Voice a search for feminist consciousness,* Sangbed , Dhaka June 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For details see, David Arnold *, Colonising the body : State Medicine and Epidemic diseases in nineteenth century,*  University of California Press, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Fabrizio M. Ferrari, “ Illness is nothing but Justice,” The Revolutionary element in Bengali Folk Healing ,”  *The Journal of American Folklore,*  Winter 2015, Vol. 128, No. 507, pp. 46-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/when-fear-leads-to-faith-the-disease-gods-of-india-6470376/> accessed on 12th December 2020 at 00.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Fears fuel trend of Corona Mai worship ,  *The Telegraph* ( India) Calcutta 07 June 2020. ProQuest document link [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “ In India , rituals performed to calm down angry coronavirus goddess,”  *EFE News Service,*  Madrid 30th July 2020. ProQuest document link [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. “ Corona kale debater janma , surakha shikhoy,” ( in Bengali) *Anandabazar Patrika,*  the Bengali daily newspaper, 7th June 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)