

## Even with changing times, faith remains a great healer

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The belief in something larger that can heal is an assuring thought for the ailing |

**Man has always turned to the Supreme Being for strength to fight his strongest rivals – illness and death being amongst the most feared. Despite changing times and great strides in medicine, says Mallika Iyer, gods and goddesses continue to play a definitive role in the process of healing**

The purpose of religion and the function of mythology are closely connected with fulfilling human need. Safety and health being paramount amongst human concerns, it is not surprising that the human mind has created a plethora of deities to propitiate, in order to safeguard good health. The role of divinity and the belief in something larger that can heal is an assuring thought for the ailing. And as times have changed, gods and goddesses have changed too. While modern medicine may have replaced superstitious beliefs and practices in many parts of the world, faith continues to remain steady in the process of healing.


### **Devis that cure**

Nestled in the midst of a busy urban neighbourhood in Mahim is a little bubble that transports the visitor to another world. Here, Sitala Devi (the cooling goddess) presides over a complex of shrines and devotees pour in to worship the healing goddess. "People come here to worship Sitala Devi. They pour water over her stone figure and then bathe with that water," explains Mheda Mhatre, caretaker at the temple. "They believe bathing in the water that has been offered to the devi will heal them."

Under the shade of an old peepul tree is the smallest shrine in the complex dedicated to Khokla Devi, the goddess of cough. She is propitiated by many to rid them from persistent coughs and colds. "Khokla Devi is offered suran, atta and salt," explains Mhatre. The traditional prasad of the deity comprises dry ginger with sugar.

While these practices may seem bemusing to modern sensibilities, the myth of Sitala Devi is widely popular in many parts of North India. The story goes that travelling with Jvarasura (triple headed fever demon), Sitala, the beautiful maiden born from the cool ashes of a sacrificial fire, is insulted at the abode of Indra. Humiliated and enraged, she asks Jvarasura to possess the bodies of the gods. When Shiva reveals to the gods that their fever and small pox are caused by the

wrath of Sitala, they worship her with devotion and their afflictions disappear. The cult of Sitala-Jvarasura is very popular in West Bengal, where the duo is believed to travel on a donkey, their mount.

 Asklepios, the god of healing

Many such stories abound, including about popular gods and goddesses who are cast in healing forms. Shiva is known as Vaidyanatha or the Lord of Healing in the Vaitheeswaran temple in Tamil Nadu. Vishnu is sometimes regarded as a divine physician and the pond of water near his Tiruvallur temple in Tamil Nadu is believed to have curing properties.

The southern counterpart of Sitala is Mariamman who is worshipped with a cult following. It is believed that the goddess is a carrier of heat and devotees carry jars of water/milk to bathe her so she may cool the heat of disease. She was worshipped as the inflector and the healer of small pox in earlier days. Water, another common motif, is conceived in several cultures as having purifying and healing power.

Across India, a range of deities are worshipped for healing. While Garba Rakshambika protects the womb, Adi Parashakthi, the supreme primordial power is associated with cure. Dhanvantri, the physician of the gods, is worshipped as the god of Ayurveda while the Ashwins are regarded as twin doctors of the gods. In Bengal, Cholera Olabibi presides over cholera, Dhitpodani helps with digestive disorders and Ghantarana, a folk god is worshiped for the cure of skin diseases. The list is endless.

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### **Making the most of it!**

While the modern mind may scoff at these beliefs and practices, a few have sought inspiration in them to solve contemporary problems. An AIDS Amma (goddess of AIDS) has been devised, on the lines of Mariamma, in the hope that perhaps the goddess might inspire people towards health and hygiene. In a strange meeting of modern science with religion, Aidsamma temples in the South, inform devotees to guard against the killer disease.

In Bangalore, one finds a temple dedicated to Plagueamma, which was built when the plague struck the city over a century ago. "Faith allows for acceptance of the problem," notes Hemalatha S, clinical psychologist practising in Navi Mumbai who has studied healing deities. "With that acceptance may come a state of calm and inner strength, which help in the process of healing. According to modern science, when the body and mind are in a state of serenity, the body programmes itself to produce healing chemicals. Faith is a wonderful medium. It provides focus and direction to access that serenity," she explains.

### **A worldwide phenomenon**

Healing Gods and their cults are not unique to India. The cult of Asklepios (or Asclepius) was very popular in ancient Greece. Asclepion temples with sacred baths and non-venomous snakes for healing were common. Serpents were a symbol of Asklepios, whose iconographic representation holding a serpent-entwined rod is even today a symbol associated with health and is found on the logo of health-related organisations including the WHO.

In the Persian pantheon, Airyaman and Thrita are the gods of healing. Faridun is a hero who gives powers to spells and amulets and can keep back death, disease, burning fever and flying arrows. Anahita is a water goddess associated with healing.

Apollo is the god of medicine and plague from the Roman pantheon. Nintinugathe is his Babylonian counterpart; Eir, the life-giver of the Norse people, and Ixchel of the Mayans. Healing gods and goddesses emerge out of every culture.

The role of divinity and belief in something larger that can cure is an assuring thought for those sick and ailing. While modern medicine may have replaced superstitious beliefs and practices in many parts of the world, faith continues to remain steady in the process of healing.

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