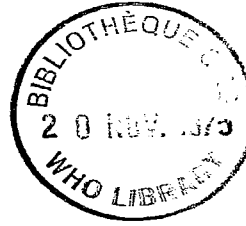




WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTÉ



WHO/SE/75.77
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

FAREWELL TO SITALA MAYYA

INDEXED

by

Dr S. H. Hassan
Principal, Regional Health & Family Planning Training Centre
Hyderabad, A.P.

Customs and traditions die hard. The author, who was on deputation to Bihar last year to contain smallpox there writes about the customs and beliefs of the rural people there.

Nothing but a vast spectre of angry water, flowing powerfully, could be seen all around us. The Kosi river was in ferocious spate as we were crossing it in boat. Besides the noise of flowing water, the only other sound we heard was that which emanated from the strong vocal chords of the four boatmen from Mahaisi "Kosi Maharani ki Jai, Kosi Mayya ki jai", they were shouting, appeasing the river as we were crossing the main stream. Our agitated hearts were beating fast as we realized how insecure and helpless we were.

After an hour of strenuous rowing, we neared the river bank. The cool breeze played softly on our perspiration and gave us a pleasant feeling under the hot sun. People of the nearby villages, standing on the river bank, jettisoned into the river a dead body. Like foam on the sea, it surfaced for a while before a strong, restless current of water dragged it away. It vanished as if it had never been. A co-passenger in the boat sighed "this is how our lives are sunk - all because of Bhagwathi (smallpox) since the last one year".

From the beginning of January to the end of August 1974 there were more than 6000 cases of smallpox in Saharsa district. About 1500 of them resulted in death. All the 23 blocks and three municipalities in the district were badly stricken with smallpox. Of the 1400 villages, 744 reported attacks of smallpox. Disruption of communications because of floods in the Kosi and the extreme climate then prevalent aggravated the situation.

Kosi, arising in the Himalayas, is the most important river in Bihar. It is aptly known as the river of Sorrow as it causes a lot of suffering to the people. The river shapes the economy of the district, playing an important part in the life of the people. It is notorious for changing its course. A change in its course means destruction of houses and uprooting of trees. Orchards are completely destroyed when the Kosi is in floods. The impact of the Kosi, when in floods, on the social, economic and cultural life of the villagers is considerable. Those in the flood affected areas are born and brought up in an atmosphere of insecurity and fear. Facing a constant threat, the terrorized people rarely enjoy their lives. Even babies are threatened by them with the words "KOSI MAYYA IS COMING" to make them give up their crying. Naturally, people brought up under such mental and physical stress and tension develop a peculiar outlook on life and their behaviour is peculiar too. In 1974 out of 23 blocks, a major portion of land in 12 blocks was under floods for sometime or other.

Saharsa was created as a separate district in 1954. It has a rich cultural heritage and its contribution to Maithili and Hindi is of considerable literary importance. Mahaisi in this district is the place where the famous discussion between Sri Adi Sankaracharya the great saint, and Mandana Misra took place. It is said that even parrots and maid servants could converse in excellent poetic Sanskrit in those days.

The issue of this document does not constitute formal publication. It should not be reviewed, abstracted or quoted without the agreement of the World Health Organization. Authors alone are responsible for views expressed in signed articles.

Ce document ne constitue pas une publication. Il ne doit faire l'objet d'aucun compte rendu ou résumé ni d'aucune citation sans l'autorisation de l'Organisation Mondiale de la Santé. Les opinions exprimées dans les articles signés n'engagent que leurs auteurs.

The people of the district had different manners and customs. Indigenous systems of medicine were patronized more than allopathy. In the rural areas, a disease was supposed to be an attack of evil spirits or a punishment sent by the Gods for the evil doings of the people. The village magician Bhagata (male) or Bhagatani (female) were first approached to recite mantras and drive away the evil spirit.

Smallpox is known as "Sitala" in the rural areas. Sitala Mayya, the Goddess, is believed to be responsible for this disease and hence she is widely worshipped. She is believed to have six sisters; Damesh, Kodha, Jataki, Sankail, Hohait and Dudh Kodha. Sitala is also said to have a daughter-in-law, Malait, and two daughters - Dhanser and Fulser. Smallpox is referred to in the villages as "Bhagwathi" or "Goti".

Whenever Bhagwathi or Sitala Mayya visited a house, the homes were kept clean. A bunch of neem leaves was hung at the entrance to the house to indicate the visit of the Goddess. In some places a pot with fire was kept. Members of the household resorted to strict vegetarianism and abstained from taking oil for nine days.

As a God or Goddess could manifest through a Bhagata or a Bhagtani, the services of these magicians were sought when there was a case of smallpox. They performed pooja and moved their hands over the body of the person having smallpox. It helped in the recovery of the patient and the Bhagata or Bhagtani was rewarded with either money or a goat.

The Bhagatas and Bhagtanis advised the people not to submit to vaccination lest the Goddess became angry. It was difficult to get hold of a Bhagata or Bhagtani, for with the news of the arrival of the health staff, they vanished into thin air. In many places, even today, the people insist on obtaining the approval of the Bhagata before agreeing to get vaccinated.

A smallpox patient was made to lie on banana leaves and stems. Neem leaves were used to fan him. Scented sticks, agarbathi, and candles were lighted. Deer's horn was scrubbed in water and offered to the patient. The patient was given a bath only after the scabs started falling off. The occasion was celebrated with the distribution of sweets. Sandalwood and Rudraksha paste were applied to the ulcers left over.

The people believed that smallpox could be prevented for a year if a person ate mango flower on Basanth Panchami day occurring in the month of Magh, according to the Hindu calendar. The eating of Karini sag, a kind of shrub, kept smallpox away for 12 days. The wearer of Srikant Chandan (a type of sandalwood paste) would never contract smallpox.

The ceremony of vaccination used to be observed with great pomp like "Mundan" or thread ceremony among Hindus or circumcision among Muslims during British regime. Its celebration was considered as a status symbol about 20 years back. A few rich families spent up to Rs 500 to celebrate the vaccination of a child. Irrespective of the previous status of vaccination the boy used to undergo the ceremony of vaccination within three years and girls within four years of birth. After independence, with the introduction of smallpox eradication programme there was sufficient awareness and change. Still there were many places where vaccination was celebrated. It was not discouraged officially, as it was of some financial benefit to the vaccinator.

Vaccination was known as pach in Saharsa. People identify three types of pach:

1. Sarkari pach: given by the health staff.
2. Khairathi pach: free vaccination given by the health staff appointed by Government. Some people do not appreciate free vaccination. They consider it just like a relief measure. They wait for their area vaccinator who charges them usually. They are district board vaccinators.
3. Sithal pach: weak and emaciated children were vaccinated with water only. Naturally there is neither any reaction nor protection after such vaccination.

The vaccinator was called by different pet names in the villages like Pachania, Chapania, Godhpara, Tikacar, Mali. They belonged to no specific caste or religion.

From 1901 six insertions were being given, three on each arm. From 1910 to 1930 they used to give four insertions, two on each arm. In the villages there were several people in their sixties and seventies having four scars. Between 1930 and 1960 they started giving three insertions on one arm. After 1960 there were two insertions. At present in many places there is only one insertion.

In the early days there used to be registered and certified vaccinators who were officially permitted to give vaccination on their own and charged four annas for services.

When the business became more profitable and the vaccinator alone could not cope with it, he started appointing apprentices who were employed on a commission basis. Later on, district board vaccinators were appointed. However, the old practice continued. With the introduction of smallpox eradication programme and supervision the business gradually declined. Nevertheless, old vaccinators will have their areas of influence.

Between October and February on an auspicious day "Pachaniah" the vaccinator visited the house. Neighbours, friends and relatives of the child were sent invitations. A place was selected in the courtyard. It was cleaned and plastered. Chauka (a plank of wood) was placed there. The mother was asked to sit on "Chauka" with the child in her arms; water with Tulsi leaves and some coins were kept in a metallic jug near the "Chauka". The vaccinator with lymph, lancet and Jhal (a musical instrument) sat near the child, surrounded by family members and friends. They requested the vaccinator to sing "Bhajans" and please Sitlamayya. The vaccinator put perfume (odd) in the fire and sang a bhajan, in the form of question and answer. He also played his Jhal (musical instrument).

PRAAYER SONG

The following is the translation of the Maithili Song.

- Q. Sitla-mayya¹ and Jagtrani-mayya,² from where have they come? From where have Bhagvan and Mahadev come?
- A. Sitla mayya and Jagtranimayya have come from Kamroop.³ Bhagvan from Ayodhya and Mahadev from Kailash.
- Q. On which carriage Sitlamayya and Jagtranimayya came riding and on which carriage Bhagvan and Mahadev have come riding?
- A. Sitlamayya and Jagtranimayya came riding in a chariot. Bhagvan came riding a Garuda⁴ and Mahadev came on the bull.
- Q. On what should Sitlamayya and Jagtranimayya be seated and on what Bhagvan and Mahadev?

¹ Sitlamayya: Goddess of Smallpox.

² Jagtranimayya: Goddess that saves the world from disaster (Man saviour)

³ Kamroop: It is a place in Assam. There is a temple of Goddess Kamakhya. People go there to learn magic mantras.

⁴ Garuda: Eagle.

- A. Sitlamayya and Jagtranimayya will be offered Kailash,¹ Throne will be offered to Bhagvan and Mirchala² to Mahadev.
- Q. What should be offered to please Sitlamayya and Jagtranimayya and what should be offered to please Bhagvan and Mahadev?
- A. We will please Sitlamayya and Jagtranimayya by offering betel (leaves) and flowers and please Bhagvan by offering Laddoo (sweets) and Bhang³ to Mahadev.

Before vaccinating the child pachaniah was expected to sing at least two songs. On an average he had to sing five to seven songs. The number of songs used to depend on the socioeconomic status of the household. The vaccinators were keen to finish the ceremony as soon as possible, get gifts and money and go to another house. Family members were keen to retain them as long as they could and prolong the ceremony. Many of these rural songs have health education values which was never realized by the health staff.

Following is the translation of another Maithili song on cleanliness when there is a case of smallpox.

Sitlamayya plays and dances in a circle in a clean courtyard and on clean paths. While dancing and playing in a circle, Sitlamayya gets perspiration.

Bhairav,⁴ please bring flower fan and bough of Neems for Sitlamayya.

- Q. Bhairav says: O Mother, from where shall I bring flower fan, from where shall I bring bough of Neem?
- A. (Sitlamayya answers): Bring flower fan from the gardener's shop and Neem bough from the forest.
- Q. Mother, who will fan you with flower fan, who will fan you with bough of Neem?
- A. Mother of child (having smallpox) will fan me with flower fan and Bhagta (servant of Goddess) will fan me with bough of Neem.

Now the arm of the child was washed with pooja water from the metallic mug and dried up. The child was vaccinated. He was blessed by all the family members, neighbours and friends. The vaccinator took the child in his arms and went around and collected money and gifts from the relatives of the child. The vaccinator also got rice, vegetables, condiments, etc.

On the fifth day the vaccinator visited the home "to give fever" to the child. He applied oil on the child's head. From then onwards the child was not given a bath and all family members stopped taking oil and meat for nine days.

On the 14th day, the vaccinator visited the home again to perform "Nimaiah Puja". The house was cleaned and plastered with cow-dung. It was the farewell function for Sitlamayya. In a small mug, turmeric powder, neem leaves and mustered oil were kept. Bhajan started and lasted for two hours. Members of the household got ready to give farewell to Sitlamayya just like a newly wed bride, albeit on a miniature scale. New clothes and cash were given to the vaccinators.

¹ Kailash: A water with pot topped by mango leaves and coconut.

² Mirchala: Deer's skin.

³ Bhang: A kind of intoxicant (Cannabis indica).

⁴ Bhairav: Servant of Shiva, God of Service. He rides on dog.

Following is the translation of the farewell song to Sitalamayya:

FAREWELL SONG FOR GODDESS SITALA

- Q. Oh Mother, in which forest are green parrots singing, in which forest are peacocks singing, and in which forest is Jagdamba¹ singing?
- A. Green parrots are singing in the forest of Biju. Peacocks are singing in Bhairav forest and Jagdamba is singing in children's forest.
- Q. Oh Mother, who will cut bamboo trees, who will make palanquin and who will be the carrier to take away Jagdamba on the palanquin to the land of Kamrup?
- A. Bhagta will cut the bamboo, make palanquin. He will be the carrier of palanquin to go to the land of Kamrup.

There are many written stories, songs and beliefs that influence the behaviour pattern of individuals. Many people believe in spirits that can change the natural order of events. It is proved by the fact that all resort to prayer. Thousands, at this very moment, are probably imploring some supposed power to interfere on their behalf. Thousands ask to be protected from evil. With innovation and scientific advancement these concepts grow less intense. Even then they still exist in the memory of the people in the vast rural area. Health workers must remember these facts. A sound health education programme is an essential component for any adventure in the sphere of health services.

¹ Here she is referred to as Goddess Sitala or smallpox.