

# Śītalā, and Śiva as “Śītaleśvara”, on the Chandrabhaga’s *Tīrtha* at Jhalrapatan

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*This paper is for  
Pramod Chandra:  
writing it has been a  
liberating experience.*

On the eighth day of the bright half of the Hindu month of Phālguna, which falls in March/April, a man carrying water in a leather skin (“*bhisti*”) walks the streets of Hadoti in southern Rajasthan. Young mothers offer him a few coins for sprinkling cold water on the figurines of Śītalā, the Smallpox goddess, collected under the trees.<sup>1</sup>

## Śiva as Śītaleśvara, “Lord of Śītalā”, on the River Chandrabhaga

Orientalists have known the temple of Śiva as “Śītaleśvara” Mahādeva, or “Śiva as the lord or patron of Śītalā”, on the *tīrtha* on the River Chandrabhaga at Jhalrapatan in southern Rajasthan, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. James TOD, the British diplomat and explorer, brought the temple and an associated inscription of 689 AD to light (TOD 1832/1957: 586-587). Alexander CUNNINGHAM (1872: 265-269) gave an account of the temple. Śītaleśvara featured in the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1908: 122-124) and the *Rajasthan District Gazetteer: Jhalawar* (1964: 282-283). It was discussed in papers, and rejoinders to papers, by Carol G. LIN-BODIEN (1980, 1985) and Michael W. MEISTER (1981, 1985); and the date of its construction as 689 AD can be considered as settled.

The present paper is not about the temple, or Śiva, but about the goddess Śītalā, whose “lord”, Śītaleśvara, he is. TOD first wrote about it and about the

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1 Information from Prof. Jagat Narayan of Kota, a lifelong seeker of the past culture of Hadoti and Rajasthan as a whole.

inscription of 689 AD. Yet that inscription does not *name* the temple as such, but only as one for “the god who wears the crescent moon on his forehead”, that is Śiva (among other epithets). Those who wrote on the Śītalesvara were concerned with its architectural history, its date, etc.; therefore, they did not even pose the following question: “Since generations of people have worshipped Śiva on this *tīrtha* as patron of Śītalā, should we not expect a shrine or an image of that goddess here? And, if the answer is in the affirmative, then *where* can we find that shrine or image or images?”

### The Temple’s Present-day Appellation

The suffix *-śvara* to a name of Śiva is of frequent occurrence. It is applied to Śiva as presiding over a sacred place; or as favoured by the founder/builder/donor; or the material out of which his Liṅga is made, etc. Thus, Rāmeśvara, as worshipped by Rāma on the seashore before he embarked on crossing the sea to rescue Sītā at Rameswaram; Mahākāleśvara, the great lord of Kāla or Death at Ujjain; Kedāreśvara in the Himalayas. As Rājarājeśvara, he is revered by the great Cola Emperor Rājarāja. He is Someśvara as patron of the Later Cālukya king of the Deccan (but also lord of the sacred juice Soma, or the Moon god Soma). Śiva as Vālukeśvara or made of the sand of a river presides over the *tīrtha* on the seashore (“Walkeshwar” in Mumbai); Hāṭakeśvara is the Liṅga “shining like gold” or made of gold, at Vadnagar in Gujarat, and elsewhere.

Closer to Chandrabhaga/Jhalrapatan, Śiva as Mahānāleśvara looks out over that valley and the Menali rivulet’s waterfall at Menal or Mahānāla, “the great gorge”. The Cāhamāna Queen Suhavadevī worshipped him as Suhaveśvara in Menal (1168 AD Menal inscription); cf. RAY 1973: 1079. When installed in an underground shrine at Bijolia, he was Uṇḍeśvara (*uṇḍā* = “deep” in the dialect of Malwa). And at the Pratīhāra site of Baroli, Śiva is called Ghaṭeśvara from the globular shape of his Liṅga there.

Śītalesvara, “patron or lord of the goddess of *Smallpox*, Śītalā”, is a rather improbable name, even for a god who has an avowedly outlandish character. Śiva as Viśveśvara, “lord of the universe”, or Candramaulīśvara, “who has the crescent moon on his forehead”, can be the name of him as the presiding god of any shrine; but “Lord of the *Smallpox Goddess*” without the presence of that goddess *also* at the place, is rather unlikely.

A case therefore exists to look for Śītalā in the immediate vicinity of her Lord on the Chandrabhaga’s *tīrtha*.

### The Śītalesvara/Candramaulīśvara Temple and the 689 AD Inscription

We owe our knowledge of the monuments of Mewad to James TOD, the East India Company’s political agent in Rajasthan and an explorer in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. TOD discovered such important sites as Dara, Baroli, Menal, and Jhalrapatan-Chandrabhaga. This is the area ruled many centuries ago by the Aulikaras of Daśapura-Mandasor, whose earliest record is the Mandasor inscription of Naravarman, of 404 AD. Other inscriptions about the construction of shrines, commemorative columns, monasteries, and excavation of wells continued right down to 532 AD. The monuments themselves that the inscriptions record did not survive, or have not yet been discovered. The Śītalesvara, which provides the setting for this paper, bore a dedicatory record by its donor, Voppaka, and the date of Durgagaṇa, a local Maurya king, of 689 AD.

A description of the temple is to be found in MEISTER 1981: 57-58, and in EITA 1988: 145-148. It consists of a square sanctum fronted by a vestibule and a pillared *mukhamaṇḍapa* added in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The three *bhadra* niches are now vacant, two of their occupants, Ardhanārīśvara and Mahiṣāsura-mardini, now displayed in the Jhalawad Museum. The 689 AD inscribed tablet was found lying against the vestibule wall.

The inscription describes the shrine as being one for Candramaulīśvara, “Śīva who wears the crescent of the moon on the forehead”. In the sanctum, of course, his Liṅga would have been worshipped. It would make little sense for Śīva “who wears the crescent moon on his forehead” to be called Śīva “the lord of Śītalā” on account of Śītalā’s sculptures that might have existed at some *other* location. Śīva could only have been named after Śītalā from a shrine or image of that goddess nearby. CUNNINGHAM found this name already current one hundred and fifty years before our time; we would not be wrong to think that it would have gained currency a reasonable length of time before.

As a matter of fact, we shall see that the goddess of smallpox Śītalā is indeed present at this very spot – literally a stone’s throw away from the house of her patron – and in not just one, but as many as six sculptures, making up almost the complete sisterhood of the traditional “Saat Sahelis” (below; Fig. 1).

MEISTER 1985: 122 L (=Left column of the page), citing the *Rajasthan District Gazetteer: Jhalawar* (1964: 282), calls the largest and earliest temple on the Chandrabhaga as the temple of Candramaulin. By this of course the



Fig. 1 General view of the site from the south-east, with Śītaleśvara Mahādeva temple on the left and the flat-roofed Śītālā shrine or structure at stone throwing distance on the right. Photo: Ritu Joshi

Śītaleśvara is meant: however, though the 689 record refers itself as one of the god who wears the moon on his forehead (*candramaulin*), that is Śiva, the temple is not specifically described there as Candramaulīśvara’s temple.<sup>2</sup>

The find spot of the inscription may be considered as settled, for all practical purposes. The nomenclature of the site itself also has given rise to some discussion, as there are three locales involved. The first is the sacred spot on the river Chandrabhaga itself with its masonry Ghats with half a dozen structures, a *tīrtha*, “a path or stairs for descending into a river”. Then there is the Rajput-period township of Jhalrapatan with its fort, its Sun god’s and Jaina temples; and the town of Jhalawar, now the district headquarters.<sup>3</sup> Zalim Singh

2 All the new road signs leading to the riverbank indicate the direction to the “Candramaulīśvara” temple, so the name has official sanction.

3 In early archaeological writings, Chandravati/Candrāvātī, Jhalawar/Jhalawad/Jhalrapatan are used for the site and the sacred centre. In this article, Jhalrapatan/Jhalawad for the town and Chandrabhaga and its *tīrtha* for the river will be preferred. — Chandrabhaga/Candrabhāgā, “curved like the digit of the moon”, “crescent of the moon”, is the name of more than one Indian river: Dr. A.P. Jamkhedkar’s innate sense for the Sanskrit language made me aware of the beauty of the name.

Jhala, prime minister, then regent, of the Rajput kingdom of Kota, founded Jhalrapatan, but his long and colourful career does not concern us here.

Voppaka’s court poet Bhaṭṭa Śarvagupta uses all the standard similes found in other such records, yet he is not a mere versifier. He says he composed the *praśasti* without arrogance about his poetical skill (*anabhimānāt*). He pays obeisance to Śīva (first line), mentions **Bhava**, the four-faced **Maheśvara** (both in stanza 2), the god with the crescent moon (**Candramaulīśvara**, stanza 8), Śambhu’s mansion (stanza 10), **Lokeśvara**’s temple (stanza 11), etc. – but Śītalā does not figure anywhere.

Nothing at all in the Śītalesvara’s iconography or in the 689 AD inscription suggests the Smallpox goddess Śītalā. The sanctum has the customary Liṅga; against the rear wall, there was a 10<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture of Śīva and his consort (probably installed when the colonnaded *maṇḍapa* was added to the old structure).<sup>4</sup> The niches in the outer walls are now vacant, their images of Ardhanārīśvara and Maḥiṣāsuraṃardinī shifted since long to the State Museum at Jhalawad founded in or about 1915. Smaller figures of the regents of the guardians of Space (Dikpālas) survive at their appointed spots. As to the inscription, there is no specific indication, only conventional epithets/attributes of the god, of which there are three. Voppaka constructed a mansion of Candramaulin, “the god who wears the moon on his forehead” (*akāri candramaulerbhavanam*, stanza 8). This, and the mention in stanza 2 of the god “with the four faces” loudly laughing (the Maheśamūrti aspect, favourite in Mewad and Rajasthan), are common epithets of the god. The god is specifically mentioned only once, in stanza 10, as Śambhu, that is Śīva.

The temple, therefore, is a regular one for Śīva, the name Śītalesvara surely being attached to it later, the interval between its construction and the date at which it came to be known by its present name being unknown. A point which might interest architectural historians occurs in stanza 10, which describes the structure as *alpapakṣma*, “provided with small wings” (= *bhadras*), that BÜHLER emended (for the sake of the metre) to read *alpakapakṣma*.<sup>5</sup>

4 This was stolen in 2012. See Post Script to this paper, and [www.plunderedpast.in](http://www.plunderedpast.in) for the First Information Report of the theft.

5 BÜHLER 1876: 182, R column, fn. \*. *Pakṣman* (n.) is literally “eyelash”, and MONIER-WILLIAMS’ dictionary gives a meaning as a “wing”, met with (only) in lexicons: the *bhadras* or projections on the two sides of the structure can be thought of as the wings of a structure (as eyelashes are “wings” in a sense, as a poet might see them).



*Fig. 2 The flat-roofed structure housing Śītalā's sculptures as photographed in 1968, with Śītalā No. 6 standing outside. Photo: AAB 87.91/Acc. No. AIIS/vmis 7047*

### **The Flat-roofed Structure to the North of the Temple**

As the visitor enters the premises through the gate in the north side, he comes across an east-facing square structure (inside measurements 13'7" = 4.14 m East-West; 13'3" = 4.04 m North-South) with an antechamber, the three other walls being plain. The interior walls of the antechamber on the left and right have a large Cāmuṇḍā and a dancing Śiva Naṭeśa facing each other; in addition, there is a Gaṇeśa and a damaged Mahiṣāsura-mardīnī. The structure is known locally as a Navadurgā shrine; CUNNINGHAM (1872: 268) described it as a temple of "Kālikā-Devī". Such alternative nomenclature, Navadurgā/Kālikā-Devī, suggests that the true nature of the figures housed within had already been forgotten when the earliest archaeologists learned about the place.

The flat-roofed structure (our **Fig. 2**) that houses our goddesses obviously was not planned as a normal shrine. Its very plan suggests that its builder intended it to shelter sculptures such as the very ones we are going to consider, ranged on either side of another central image set up in the back wall. This is also evident from CUNNINGHAM’s first description of the shrine, after his visit there (1872: 268-269).

### The Six Nude Goddesses

This paper discusses six sculptures of nude females, whose photographs were taken at the time Dr. Pramod Chandra of the American Academy of Benares, now The Center for Art and Archaeology of The American Institute of Indian Studies in Gurugram / Gurgaon, and his photographer Mr. Dayasaran, visited the site in 1968. The photographs of 1968 are being supplemented by others taken in November and December 2017 by Ms. Ritu Joshi, a Ph.D. candidate, who accompanied me to the site. Two out of the original six sculptures had been stolen at some time in the past, but one of them has been recovered, and is now kept in the police station at Jhalrapatan. (See Post Script to this paper.)

The interior of this chamber in the daylight coming in from its single entrance presents a somewhat eerie scene. In the centre of the back wall, directly facing the entrance, is a towering 12-armed Cāmuṇḍā; most of her arms are broken, but the natural right hand presents a macabre sight, a dead child hanging head down. Flanking Cāmuṇḍā, set up on a platform running against the left and right walls, were at one time five *nude female figures*, and there was one more outside, propped up against the column of the façade/porch, each of these figures having eight arms. The individual figures’ heights vary, between 1.33 m and 1.5 m, as recorded by Pramod Chandra. These nude females are goddesses, not earthly women, but they are not goddesses in the normal manner either, not cast in the youthful forms with full round breasts and triple folds on the waist, and jewellery, customary marks of beauty. Their figures, with lifeless breasts, round blobs attached to the chest, not the shapely bosom of living breathing young women, are *unattractive, dull* – they give off *negative* vibes, and this was *intentional*, as will become clear in the sequel.

The ASI uses this structure as a store for antiquities collected from the surroundings, which jostle for space on the floor; a glance will show that these loose carvings, apart from the nude goddesses, are alien to the chamber (see **Fig. 3**, interior of the chamber). The sculptures that surely *belong* here are all placed on the wide ledges or platforms that run along the two inner walls,



*Fig. 3 Interior of the flat-roofed Śītalā enclosure. Photo: Ritu Joshi*

north and south, on either side of the door, and another platform along the back wall. It does not need much persuasion that this chamber was indeed designed to house this Cāmuṇḍā and her companions, who in 1968 numbered six, including the one resting outside at that time and, now, four. The overall Śaiva character of the figures in this chamber, both inside and in the antechamber, is evident.

Alexander CUNNINGHAM must have found the figures occupying the same positions in which they were installed originally. Written as it was as early as 1864, over one hundred and fifty years before our time, CUNNINGHAM's account of the sculptures ("Kâlikâ-Devi", "stark naked" female figures, and "skeleton figures": CUNNINGHAM did not suspect they were Śītalā's figures, of course) is pristine. On my visits, in 1992, 2002, and 2017, etc., I found them to be in the same positions as Pramod Chandra and Dayasaran would have seen them, as can be judged from the 1968 photographs in this paper.<sup>6</sup> After all, who would bother to move stones weighing a hundred kilograms and more, loaded on high platforms, unless there was some pressing need?

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Pramod Chandra, then Director of the American Academy of Benares, and Mr. Dayasaran, chief photographer: both have passed on.



Fig. 4 Śītalā 1. Photo: AAB 87.74/Acc. No. AIIS/dsal 7040



Fig. 4a Detail of the winnower in the hand of Śītalā 1. Photo: Ritu Joshi

The figures have their own pedestals; while generally they must not be vastly different in date amongst themselves, very likely they are not members of one group, as the following discussion will show.

Cynthia Packert ATHERTON is the only scholar known to me who has discussed these sculptures (1997: 103-104). ATHERTON published the same negatives that are being illustrated here. Indeed, no

other photographs are known. My understanding of these six nude goddesses, however, is at total variance with hers.

In the following description of the sculptures, Negative Nos. of the American Academy of Benares (AAB) and Accession Nos. of the Digital South Asia Library (AIIS/*dsal*) are given. In one instance, the Accession No. of the Virtual Museum of Images & Sounds (AIIS/*vmis*) is cited.<sup>7</sup>

### Individual Sculptures Described

#### “Nude Goddess” 1, Figs. 4, 4a (AAB Neg. No. 87.74/Acc. No. 7040)

In stark nudity, the eight-armed goddess stands frontally against a plain slab, hips swaying slightly. High hair is set in ringlets, some of which at least seem to be human skulls, and a slight smile is on her face; she wears a snake for the sacred thread, a long thick garland, and indeterminate earrings. Two women

<sup>7</sup> Note, however, that only the last mentioned photograph seems to have been uploaded on any platform: that is the reason why all the sculptures are being illustrated in this paper.

flank her. At her feet is an animal with pointed ears, which I understand to be an ass, in consideration with the over-all attributes of this and the other figures. The attributes in her hands are:

Right		Left
short-handled winnowing fan		a snake?
broom (without the straws delineated)		skull cup
a long object		shafted object
		severed human head

**“Nude Goddess” 2, Fig. 5 (AAB Neg. No. 87.75/Acc. No. 7039)**

This sculpture was stolen from the ASI’s store as we learned on 15 November 2017. On 12 December 2017, we inspected it and photographed it in the Jhalrapatan police station. (See Post Script.)



Fig. 5 Śītālā 2. Photo: AAB 87.75/Acc. No. AIIS/dsal 7039

Also quite nude, her coiffure typical of outlandish figures, she wears a flattish sacred thread and a long garland of human skulls or heads. There were eight arms, but the middle pairs of hands are not clear in the photograph or are broken. Her four discernible hands:

Right		Left
skull cup		broom
dagger		indistinct attribute

Two female figures, normal young women with normal attributes of attendant figures (flywhisks etc.) flank her at her feet, the one on her right standing on a large lotus. Two more seated women are perched above on the sides (normal young women also, shafted object and skull cup in the hands of the woman on her right; shafted object and *abhaya* (?) in the hands of the one on her left. Her ass mount looks out from behind.



Fig. 6 Śītalā 3. Photo: AAB 87.76/  
Acc. No. AIIS/dsal 7045



Fig. 6a Detail of the winnower in the hand of  
Śītalā 3. Photo: Ritu Joshi

**“Nude Goddess” 3, Figs. 6, 6 a (AAB  
Neg. No. 87.76/Acc. No. 7045)**

Three right hands of this figure’s eight hands are broken. A snake (?) as sacred thread, a long garland and distended earlobes with large holes are the only adornments of this standing figure with feet set slightly apart. The face has become darkened, due to oil anointment.

**Right | Left**

< \_\_\_\_\_ snake stretched overhead, hood to viewer’s right \_\_\_\_\_ >  
winnowing fan | broom  
broken | skull cup  
broken | long shafted object

A single female figure joins her hands in worship. The animal mount’s head is broken at the shoulder.

**“Nude Goddess” 4, Fig. 7 (AAB Neg. No. 87.78/Acc. No. 7043)**

Unlike the other panels, this figure is standing against a hollowed out frame. Hair is arranged in a high and tight tier, sacred thread and garland as per the other sculptures. Her darkened face and the dark streaks down her trunk indicate oil anointment in times past. The four pairs of hands have the following attributes as far as can be made out from the indifferent preservation of the figure:



Fig. 7 Śitalā 4. Photo: AAB 87.78/ Acc. No. AIIS/dsal 7043

**“Nude Goddess” 5, Fig. 8** (AAB Neg. No. 87.80/Acc. No. 7041)

Many of her hands are broken or indistinct. A sacred thread, a long garland and earrings are the only adornments. A boy on her left folds his hands; a toddler offers a bunch of grass (?) to the ass mount.

**Right | Left**

< \_\_\_\_\_ snake stretched overhead \_\_\_\_\_ >  
 boken | broken  
 broken | broken  
 lizard/reptile? | indistinct

**Right | Left**

< \_\_\_\_\_ snake stretched overhead \_\_\_\_\_ >  
 broom | broken  
 dagger | broken  
 stalk | broken

Note the curved vicious-looking dagger. The head of the animal standing sideways behind her is concealed by another sculpture, but we shall not be wrong to conclude that it is an ass. A female with a flywhisk is by her side.

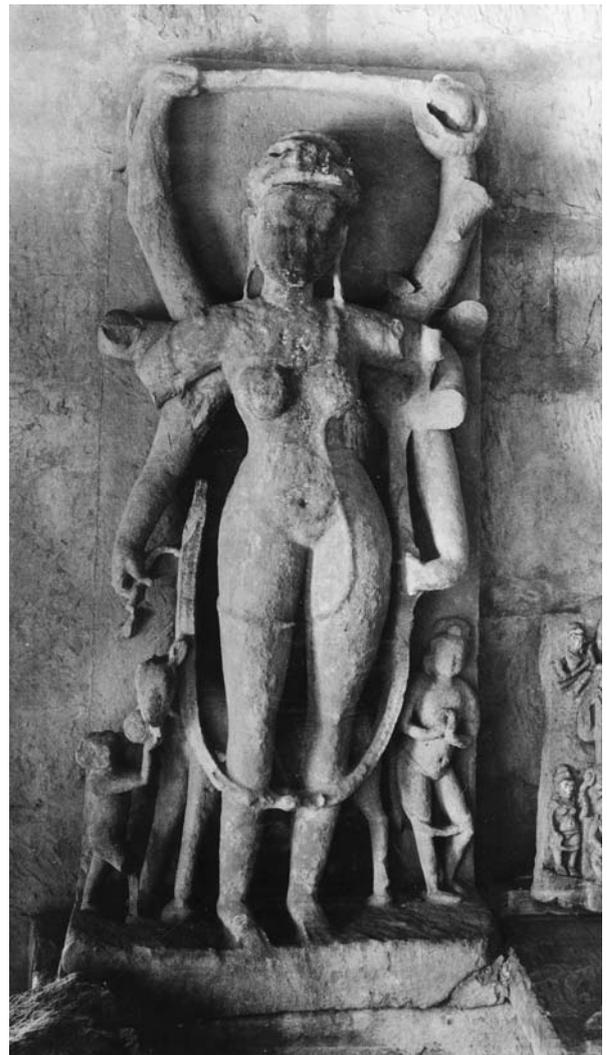


Fig. 8 Śitalā 5. Photo: AAB 87.80/ Acc. No. AIIS/dsal 7041

“Nude Goddess” 6, Fig. 9 (AAB Neg. Nos. 87.90, 87.91/Acc. Nos. 7046, 7047)

AAB Neg. No. 87.91 shows this sculpture kept outside the Cāmuṇḍā shrine (our Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> It was evidently stolen a long time ago, even before the year 2002, when I visited the site and photographed the remaining goddesses. I have the photographs of the other five on record, *but not this one*, though I must admit I was not particularly looking out for missing sculptures during that visit; its description is based only on the available photograph (AAB Neg. No. 87.90). (See Post Script.)

**Right | Left**

<writhing cobra, hood to viewer’s left>  
 broken | skull cup  
 broken | *khaṭvāṅga*  
 a baby’s corpse | severed human head



Fig. 9 Śītalā 6. Photo: AAB 87.90/ Acc. No. AIIS/dsal 7046

A sacred thread and a long garland are her adornments; her hair is piled up over her head. The face is relatively better preserved, hence we may see her stretched tongue, and detect a circular ear ornament and a long one in the ears. Her baby victim is held by one leg, head hanging down (compare the central figure of Cāmuṇḍā in Fig. 3). A female with a flywhisk is attending on her. An indistinct animal in profile stands behind her, which must be an ass. As can be seen from the pedestal that projects in the middle, where she is standing, the two side wings are stepped back.

### The Nude Goddesses as Śītalā

Sequestered in their enclosure a stone’s throw apart (see Fig. 1) from the temple of Śiva as Śītalesvara, “lord of Śītalā”, these nude companions of Cāmuṇḍā, herself an intense deity, are *divinities* for sure, but they are not

<sup>8</sup> The photograph has not been uploaded on AIIS/dsal, but can be seen on AIIS/vmis, under accession No. 7047; the site is named there as Chandravati.

*benign* divinities. Primal malevolence must have inspired a feeling of *awe*, a definite *dread* in the viewer.

Even in their mutilated state, with many of the attributes destroyed, enough remains in their forms, and in their shelter's very ambience, to identify all six figures as Śītalā, both malady and goddess, of Smallpox, Hinduism's figure of lower mythology. They thus unexpectedly validate the "Śītaleśvara" temple's current name: the temple of Śiva Candramaulīśvara must have come to be known as "Śītaleśvara" at some later date from just these images.

Taken together, these pointers to their identity are:

- (a) the *ass* as their *mount*;
- (b) the *brooms in their hands*;
- (c) the *winnowing fan*; and the *fan-shaped* – shall we say *winnowing fan-shaped* – hair (see below for this);
- (d) the presence of *children's corpses*; and
- (e) their stark *nudity*.

Most of these features exactly correspond to the well-known iconographic injunction about the goddess:

*Vande 'ham śītalāṃ devīm rāsabhasṭhām digambarām /  
mārjanīkalaśopetām śūrpālaṃkṛtamastakām ||*<sup>9</sup>

"I bow to the goddess (*devī*) Śītalā, *naked*, riding on an *ass*, who bears a *broom* and a vase, whose head is adorned with a *winnowing fan*." (Emphasis added.)

All these attributes are exclusive to the Smallpox goddess Śītalā. The disease – and its dreaded deification – under different names occur in the greater part of the country (see below, "Saat Sahelis"). Originally a figure of the "lower" pantheon, worshipped especially by women, because she "honours" young children in particular with her visits, Śītalā bonded with Śiva and joined his entourage. The Sanskrit adjective *śītalā* (feminine) translates as "the Cold (Lady)", "the Cooling (Lady)". She is called thus because the disease causes blisters or eruptions (*visphoṭa*) all over the patient's body. When a person was thus affected, it was believed that the goddess had "chosen" him, was "honouring" him by visiting him. The often-fatal illness in the form of such virulent boils can spare his life when its hypostasis Śītalā is pacified.

9 The verse is first quoted in the *Bhāvaprakāśa* and the *Nidānadīpikā* (of Bhāva Mīśra, mid-16<sup>th</sup> century AD) and is repeated in the *Śītalāṣṭaka* which constitutes a portion of the *Yogarātnākara* (17<sup>th</sup> century AD). See AUBOYER/DE MALLMANN 1950: 210.

Hence, one of the attributes in the personified Smallpox/Śītalā’s hands is a pitcher of water to “cool” the resulting fever. The pitchers cannot be confirmed in our sculptures since most of the arms are broken.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, much of the other stuff our sculptures carry spells Death with a capital D: daggers-skulls-*khaṭvāṅga*-serpents-human heads strung in garlands – even a toddler’s corpse – that nowhere figure in Śītalā’s actual carvings and in her standard prescription cited above. Chandrabhaga’s sculptors were playing by a different rule book.

**(a) their ass mounts**

The ass is an inauspicious animal in India with a base nature,<sup>11</sup> and has negative qualities: sinners, women of low virtue were to be punished by making them ride on an ass through the village. To cite just one instance: according to the *Āpastamba Dharma* [and *Gṛhya*] *Sūtras*,<sup>12</sup> “He who has unjustly abandoned his wife shall put on an ass’ skin with the hair turned outside (1.10.28.19). In the *Mahābhārata*, when the Kaurava prince Duryodhana was born, asses brayed as bad omen, etc. Indian inscriptions of the medieval period contain curses about asses violating the women of rulers who dishonoured the terms of the gifts.<sup>13</sup>

**(b) the broom**

This attribute is suggestive of the removal of dirt and impurities, physical, medical and metaphorical, as also the “sweeping away” of all kind of ill luck, poverty, want, etc. Rigorous sweeping of the chamber was prescribed immediately after the patient was cured of smallpox.<sup>14</sup>

10 We remember, however, that their shrine here is on the bank of a river! Śītalā being together with Śiva, and *both* being close to water, is reminiscent of the ancient Rudra’s powers of healing: “His healing powers are mentioned with especial frequency. He grants remedies, he commands every remedy and has a thousand remedies. He carries in his hand choice remedies, and his hand is restorative and healing. [...] He is besought to remove sickness from his worshippers’ offspring. In this connexion Rudra has two epithets which are peculiar to him, *jalāṣa*, (perhaps) ‘healing’ and *jalāṣa-bheṣaja*, ‘possessing healing remedies’” (MACDONELL 1897: 76; textual references to the hymns are omitted from the quotation).

11 On the ass as personification of illness, see FERRARI 2013.

12 Ed. by Sri Ram RAMANUJA ACARI (*Srimatham.com*), pp. 108-109.

13 See, e.g., KUMARI MYNEMI 2004; MOKASHI 2014 and 2016.

14 See AUBOYER/DE MALLMANN 1950: 215-216; and CROOKE 1896, II: 187-190, whom they cite.

**(c) the *winnowing fan*; and the *fan-shaped* – shall we say *winnowing fan-shaped* – hair**

In an agrarian culture, the winnowing fan, coming into use at the end of the food production process, where grain is separated from chaff, is a valued implement, as it makes one think of growth – plentiful grain – fecundity. AUBOYER and DE MALLMANN (1950: 214) have noted the practice of placing a newborn baby in a winnowing fan, in the hope for the baby to grow up and to be free of diseases, just as grain grows plentifully.<sup>15</sup>

**(d) the children**

Śītalā can “visit” anyone she chooses, but children are particularly vulnerable, hence the presence of toddlers in Śītalā’s sculptures here. And the female companions of the goddess in our figures doubtless are mothers beseeching her to spare their babies.

**(e) the nudity of all**

The statuette of Śītalā in the Musée Guimet, Paris, published by AUBOYER/DE MALLMANN (1950: figs. 1-2) is also nude, though the authors did not discuss nudity as such of Śītalā.<sup>16</sup>

In this manner, every single trait of the Smallpox goddess Śītalā – her *nudity*, her *ass mount*, her *broom*, her *winnowing fan*, the *children* – calls out to us the true identity of these six sculptures!

**Comparable Sculptures**

AUBOYER/DE MALLMANN (1950: 212) speaking about North India cited some figures from Bengal of the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, besides the one on which their article was based, though they listed many more from South India, known there as Jyeṣṭhā, Māriammai, etc. But we do know of other figures of Śītalā from northern and western India, for example one from Jhalawad itself in the local museum (AIIS/*dsal* 12430), and another as yet unpublished one on a

15 Śītalā is *śūrpālaṃkṛtamastakām*, “head adorned with a winnowing fan”. Stith THOMPSON [1955], A 137.8, cited the motif from folkloric tradition: “Small-pox deity rides nude on an ass, with the half of a winnowing-fan for an umbrella and with a swing in one hand and a broom in the other, India.” Some actual representations do have such a fan/half fan placed over her head. Some of our figures’ hair spreads out fanwise: a figurative fan?

16 On nudity in Indian custom and ritual, see CROOKE 1919.

10<sup>th</sup>-century doorframe at Baroli near Kota. In addition, there is one at Modhera in Gujarat as well. This twelve-armed nude figure is riding on an ass.<sup>17</sup> The few surviving hands have *varadākṣamudrā*, *triśūla*, *ḍamaru*, pitcher, and a winnowing fan in the uppermost pair of hands. Śītalā’s intimate association with cooling waters might have determined the choice of this figure’s location on the sacred *kuṇḍa* or reservoir, just as the Chandrabhaga river might have played a part in establishing Śītalā’s shrine there.

Even more figures can be cited, such as Śītalā on an ass from Gandhisagar in the Bhanpura Chhatri (AIIS/*dsal* 33685), and one of the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the Allahabad Museum (AIIS/*dsal* 95643). Then there are those listed and reproduced by Maruti Nandan Prasad TIWARI in his various articles on Śītalā; by Gudrun BÜHNEMANN 2000: 125-126, figs. 35a-c; and by N.P. JOSHI & A.L. SRIVASTAVA 2016: 441, 470-473.

In all these, Śītalā is nude. The state of the lady being “nude”, or uncovered, exposed, might have appeared to be quite natural, given the condition of the patient’s body “covered” all over with blisters (*visphoṭas*).

### Identification with Yoginīs to be Revised

Earlier writers on the Śītalesvara temple did not consider the sculptures in the Kālī/Navadurgā shrine, and quite naturally took the name Śītalesvara as a given fact. Only Cynthia Packert ATHERTON (1997: 103-104, pls. 142-149) has both illustrated and discussed these sculptures. She identifies them with the Yoginīs, members of that well-known group of occult goddesses who form the entourage of Śiva/Bhairava:

“That the... majority of these figures represent *yoginīs* – a fleet of frequently terrifying goddesses who serve the hideous goddess Cāmuṇḍā in her necromantic activities – is clear from their nudity and from their grisly attributes. The *yoginīs* [here at Jhalawar] are provided with either six or eight arms and display a fearsome collection of choppers, daggers, skull cups, and severed heads. They are also adorned with skull necklaces serpentine ornaments, with accompanying jackals and small, mostly female, figures at their feet.” (1997: 104)

The broad-spectrum arsenal that ATHERTON enumerates can suit many death-dealing deities, not the Yoginīs alone; but she altogether passes over the

17 LOBO 1982: 130, pl. 315; also published in TIWARI/GIRI 1984: 59-60, 67 [fig. 1, not printed]; TIWARI 1996: 457-458, 460 fig. 1; TIWARI 2000-01: 75, fig. 17; TIWARI 2011-12: 100, 103 fig. 1; JOSHI/SRVASTAVA 2016: 441, 471, fig. DspLD.16 (line drawing).

attributes that are Śītālā's alone in the entire Hindu pantheon – their total *nudity*, their *brooms*, *winnowing fans*, and *asses*. Their frank, in-your-eyes-nudity, their explicit vulvas, the nonchalance of one of the sisters as she carries off her child victim, not to speak of their location right next to the “lord of Śītālā”, “Śītaleśvara” – to me all this places their identification beyond question.

The Yoginīs originally were chthonic powers, as Marie-Thérèse DE MALLMANN (1963: 7, 169-182) so clearly demonstrated; but by the time we encounter them in art, they have achieved a high degree of definition. In the abstract, they number sixty-four, a magical number in India, though their actual number in a shrine may differ (such as Bhedaghat,<sup>18</sup> where there are 81). Forming a circle (*maṇḍala*), they fly up in the air (whence their known temples, with the sole exception of Khajuraho, are circular and roofless, open to the sky); they have strange animal heads/faces and mounts, but otherwise they are youthful figures.<sup>19</sup> Chandrabhaga's figures by contrast are an odd assortment, and were probably not carved at the same time, to make up a single group, though they are close enough to each other in date.

DE MALLMANN's account, and her quotations from the *Agni-purāṇa*, refer to sorcery and magic; she also points out that these supernatural beings' names can be rather freely interchanged, Yoginīs, Yakṣīs, Ḍākinīs, Māṭṛs, Devīs, etc.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, a mid-11<sup>th</sup>-century compendium by SOMADEVA of Kashmir, in passages that are in close proximity to each other, calls them variously Māṭṛs, Khecarīs (“moving in the sky”, a Siddhi: *Kathāsaritsāgara* XX.105), and Yoginīs (CXXIII.199, 207-208, 212, to give just one set of examples). Nudity is *not* amongst their traits, yet nudity is the first trait that strikes us in all six Chandrabhaga figures. Besides, the covenant of the sixty-four, their *sine qua non* Maṇḍala formation and their aerial sojourns, all this cannot apply here: there are just *six* of them, in a *square* shrine, that is *not roofless* besides.

### Nudity in Magic

N.M. PENZER, in his note on “Nudity in Magic Ritual” in the ten-volume English translation of the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (1924-28, II: 117-120), gives

18 See DEHEJIA 1986: 125-140.

19 DE MALLMANN 1963: 4-7, and 169-182 (practically the entire chapter VIII, “Les Soixante-Quatre Yoginī”); DEHEJIA 1986: ix, etc.

20 See for example, DE MALLMANN 1963: 171.

several possible reasons why sorcerers practice their trade in the nude. Among these are that “clothes used in a sacred or magical rite become taboo and cannot be used again”; or that “in order to do abnormal things successfully, the state of the operator should also be abnormal”. Or again, that “complete nudity represents total submission to the spirit power whose aid is needed in the particular rite to be carried out”. Amongst them, only the last, the idea of total surrender to a superior power has some force: the practitioner must be fully uncovered, “visible”, that is naked, in the natural state, before the forces of Nature to which he is making resort. I am not an anthropologist, yet I think that even this does not go far enough: Sorcery, Magic, Necromancy, these are Man’s responses to *primal urges*, to control Nature, harm the enemies, for success in the hunt, and other such vital, or fatal, situations. These urges are as old as Man is – and far older than his *clothes* are. In other words, it is not as though the earliest necromancer said, “Now, I am going to start this necromantic séance, I will take off my clothes and surrender to the Spirit Force”. Rather, when the first prehistoric necromancer started his *first ever* séance, he simply *might not have had any clothes to take off*. It may be significant that humans in prehistoric paintings appear to be naked. If shamans-sorcerers-necromancers in tribal societies continue to practice their craft in the nude today, it could be due to the conservative nature of their profession. To give a modern parallel: Hindu priests may wear the western dress in daily life, but change into the traditional *dhoti* for religious rituals.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, we should not think of Chandrabhaga’s nude goddesses as Yoginīs, members of an occult or Tantric pantheon, with a certain degree of remoteness about them, whose temples, necessarily of grand size because of their 64 images, kings and monarchs alone could have built. The smallpox goddess on the other hand inhabits roughly shaped figures, assorted fragments of all dates, even shapeless flint or quartzite rocks that beget sparks when rubbed against each other, collected under the trees outside the village. Capricious by nature, she may strike a solitary child or an entire village without warning; she is pestilence that can happen in an instant *here-and-now*. Unlike the Yoginīs, there is no hint of remoteness to her.

### **The “Sat Sahelis” or Seven Sisters of Folk Tradition**

While the Yoginīs number 64, there were other goddesses of a truly folk pantheon, who formed groups of seven. James BURGESS and Henry COUSENS

21 See “Human First Wore Clothes 170,000 Years Ago”, retrieved 30 June 2018.

(1903: 80, fn. 3) list Śītalā, Masānī, Vasantī, Mahāmāi, Polāmde, Lamkāriyā, and Agvānī. AUBOYER/DE MALLMANN (1950) did not cite BURGESS/COUSENS' list, but they did mention other cognate lists of the "Saat Sahelis", "Seven Sisters or Friends", that included Śītalā (1950: 226, fn. 144), from the Punjab (and elsewhere), on the authority of W. CROOKE (1896, I: 125ff.). They were Śītalā, Masānī, Basanti, Mahā Māl,<sup>22</sup> Polamde, Lamkanijā, and Agwanī. Elsewhere, they are Śītalā, Phūlmatī, Camariyā, Durgā Kālī, Mahā Kālī, Bhadrā Kālī and Kālikā Bhavānī. The tradition of the group of seven, with minor variations in names, was thus widespread. The heterogeneous character of the vernacular or subaltern group, with the intention to arrive at the sacred number of seven somehow, and to affiliate it to Śiva, is clear. AUBOYER/DE MALLMANN noted (1950: 210-212) that an old South Indian poet regarded the smallpox goddess as being "base cult".

### The Date of the Six Śītalās of Jhalrapatan

For the purposes of this paper, the date of these Śītalā sculptures does not matter, really: it is enough to show *what* they are, which, hopefully, has been done. They do not appear to be quite contemporary with the Śītalesvara temple and its carvings; yet they cannot be much later. That they are a heterogeneous group assembled at different times is evident from their divergent height, some with companions, some without, etc. For all these, and for Gaṇeśa, dancing Śiva and Cāmuṇḍā at the entrance, and for the enclosure itself, a date sometime in the 8<sup>th</sup> century can be suggested.

Consider their erratic, uneven workmanship. On the one hand, with centuries of experience behind them, the sculptors delighted in the classical shape of the dagger, with its efficient double curvature for greater lethal effect, and gutters to drain off blood. But on the other hand, the winnowing fans and brooms, never the stock-in-trade of art, have rustic forms. The oil stains and streaks on the face of one, and the deeply darkened thigh zones of another, indicate popular or folk nature of the cult.<sup>23</sup> In a strange way, CUNNINGHAM's words (1872: 269) ring true: "Altogether in this one temple there are assembled no less than fourteen statues of the terrific goddess Kālikā-Devi [as he

22 As printed; *should read* Mahāmāi.

23 The goddess Tārā in Cave 7 at Aurangabad also has her thighs smoothed by centuries of rubbing; she surely played a part in a folk fertility/Mother cult before the caves were taken over by Archaeology.

believed Śītalā to be], which must have been collected from all parts of the ruins at some late period”.

### Śītalā as a Benevolent Goddess

Fabrizio FERRARI (2015) presents his research over ten years in wide parts of India:

“I first met Śītalā in a small temple in Kaulagarh road, Dehradun (Uttarakhand), in 1997. Having heard and read a variety of stories on the Indian ‘smallpox goddess’, her temperamental nature and her power to inflict disease, I did not know what to expect. To my surprise, I witnessed an offering (*pūjā*) of water, sweets, fruits and flowers, and listened to women singing songs of praise to the Mother (Mā). Śītalā was not worshipped out of fear. In fact, she is invoked because she is gentle, compassionate and loving. As any mother, she protects her children from all imbalances, illness, poverty, injustice, misfortune, etc. I was intrigued, everything I read about her pointed in a different direction” (2015: xix).

“This book questions renditions of Śītalā as an ambiguous and capricious ‘goddess of smallpox’ invariably associated with folk/village Hinduism. In so doing, it is primarily a critique of the construction of myth” (2015: xix).

“... from the eighteenth century, Śītalā begins to be represented consistently as a capricious, dangerous and disease-inflicting deity. It is the beginning of the myth of the ‘goddess of smallpox’” (2015: 2).

The nude goddess, inauspicious, uncouth, rides awkwardly on her squat beast, or stands with it as here in Jhalrapatan: as encountered by FERRARI, she is decorously dressed: even her ass mount has the auspicious forehead mark. Śītalā has been proselytized, has become another benevolent protective Mother.

Hadoti’s women through the centuries – and not just since the 18<sup>th</sup> century – have seen the malady and its personification as in Jhalrapatan’s images. What changed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is not clear. *Their* vision of Śītalā, with her grisly attributes, not only those enumerated by ATHERTON, but also babies’ corpses placed in the hands of *two* goddesses in the shrine, is not a benedictory “*darśana*”. It is a cruel epiphany, one that must have inspired dread and powerlessness, a “creature feeling”, as was described by Rudolf OTTO in *The Idea of the Holy* (1959). Can such radically different visions of the goddess ever be reconciled, except in terms of the analysis in OTTO’s work?<sup>24</sup>

24 This paper with its limited scope is not the place to consider the Rational and the Non-Rational in the contrasting visions of Śītalā. See especially the first four chapters of

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The officiant walking the streets of Hadoti with the animal skin on Śītalā's day is a man from a lower class; he may even be a Muslim, which confirms the subaltern nature of the cult. Nonetheless, so long as their gesture serves to ward off a fatal visitation,<sup>25</sup> Hadoti's women would gladly make their peace with the mercurial goddess with their conciliatory offering.<sup>26</sup>

### POST SCRIPT THEFTS FROM THE ŚĪTALEŚVARA SITE

This article is based on the six sculptures of nude goddesses, here identified as Śītalā, as Dr. Pramod Chandra and Mr. Dayasaran of the American Academy of Benares (now known as the American Institute of Indian Studies) photographed them in the Śītaleśvara Mahādeva temple premises, under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India, at Jhalrapatan, in January 1968.

When this article was being finished, Ms. Ritu Joshi, a doctorate candidate, and I visited Jhalrapatan on 15 November and 12 December 2017. At that time, only four out of the original six sculptures photographed in 1968 were at the site; two of them, our **Figs. 5** and **9**, were missing. Curiously, however, there seems to be only *one* theft on record, the sculpture illustrated in our **Fig. 5**.

**Fig. 5.** The sculpture, local staff at the Śītaleśvara site informed us, had been stolen, but was recovered, and was still in the Police station at Jhalrapatan. We visited the police station on 12 December 2017, to find the goddess, painted in vermilion, in worship in the shrine in the station compound. The priest not being aware of the true nature of the nude goddess, the figure is decked in a deep blue *Chunri*. Courtesy of the Jhalawar Police officers and

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OTTO's book, "The Rational and the Non-Rational"; "Numen and the Numinous"; "The Elements in the Numinous"; and "Mysterium Tremendum".

25 "The cult of Śītalā is celebrated above all by women, it is above all a women's cult, because Śītalā 'honours' the infants much more often than adults, and the mothers of the families are attentive to conciliate her to protect their hearth. [...] It is in fact an honour, a special distinction, that the malady appears, because the goddess manifests herself in person in the patient; the smallpox and the blisters bear the same name as the goddess, and are proof of the incarnation of the goddess. That is why the patient is considered like one chosen by Śītalā, inspired by her, and is the object of a great deference" (AUBOYER/DE MALLMANN 1950: 218-219; author's translation).

26 The World Health Organization in 1980 declared Smallpox as having been globally eradicated: WHO Resolution WHA33.3 (*Wikipedia*, retrieved 3 December 2017).

the shrine’s priest is acknowledged for allowing us to inspect and photograph the sculpture.

**Fig. 9.** Even in 1968, when Pramod Chandra and Dayasaran visited Jhalrapatan, this sculpture was not inside the Śītalā (“Navadurgā”) shrine along with the others, but was resting against the front of the structure;<sup>27</sup> see our **Fig. 2**, AAB 87.91/AIIS/vmis 7047. I have visited the Śītalesvara site on other occasions in the past, once around 1992 (when no photographs were taken), in July 2002, etc. During the July 2002 visit, I photographed five of the sculptures, including that in **Fig. 5**; only those five sculptures were present, the one in **Fig. 9** was missing even then. We can therefore conclude that this Śītalā was stolen before the year 2002. Curiously, there seems to be no record of this fact with the ASI, and hence, no FIR or report of the theft with the police either.

This case is being uploaded on the author’s website, [www.plunderedpast.in](http://www.plunderedpast.in), which is concerned with the repatriation of illegally exported (“smuggled”) Indian art.

Śītalā of **Fig. 9** was not the only theft that occurred from the Śītalesvara temple premise. The Gaurī-Śaṅkara image of the 10<sup>th</sup> century that was in the Śītalesvara shrine (probably installed when the colonnaded *maṇḍapa* was added to the main temple) was also stolen in 2012, and remains untraced. Its information is also being uploaded on [www.plunderedpast.in](http://www.plunderedpast.in).<sup>28</sup>

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27 CUNNINGHAM 1872: 269, “At the ghât I found another ten-armed figure of this goddess, 4½ feet in height, and stark naked. The great number of these statues shows that her worship must have been highly popular...” It cannot be said with certainty whether this sculpture (Accession Nos. 7046 and 7047) was what is referred to, which was found by CUNNINGHAM and had remained outside the Śītalā shrine, where Pramod Chandra and Dayasaran photographed it in 1968. (As to the number of arms, CUNNINGHAM’s and my counts are in conflict, he mentions ten arms, but I can count only eight.)

28 See also my two articles published in 2016 and 2017.

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# **Berliner Indologische Studien**

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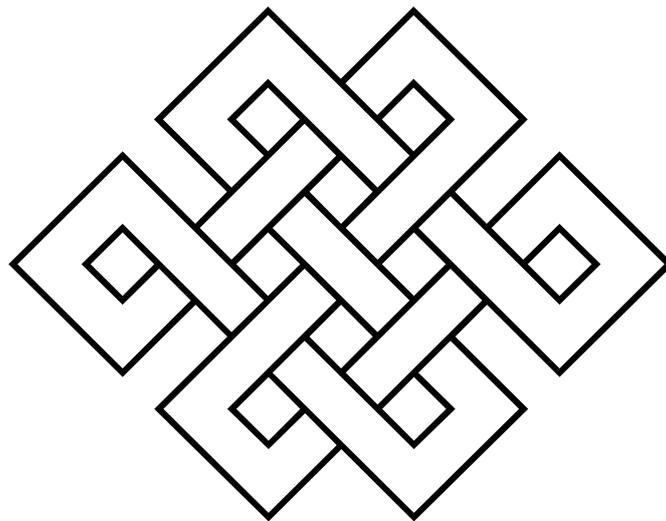
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