

# Śītalā: the Cool One<sup>1</sup>

By

SUSAN S. WADLEY  
*Department of Anthropology*  
*Syracuse University*

The mother goddesses of India are well known for their dual qualities of benevolence and dangerousness. One such goddess is Śītalā, 'The Cool One,' When properly worshipped she is kind and forgiving, but when ignored she is infamous as the harbinger of smallpox. In this latter guise she brings heat, fever, itchings, and the horrendous sores of the pox to her victims. But Śītalā is much more than the goddess of small pox: most critically, she is 'The Cool One', a constant reminder of the necessity of maintaining the proper balances of hot and cold in one's life and one's body.

In almost every part of India there is a goddess, known by a variety of local names, concerned with smallpox. Throughout most areas of northern India, from Gujarat in the west to Bengal in the east, there

---

1. This paper could not have been written without the aid of a great many persons. My deepest gratitude is extended to Ralph Nicholas who started me on my quest to understand Śītalā and along the way provided comments, criticism and invaluable aid in the form of translations. I owe much also to the many people who provided translations: to Veena Das of Delhi University for her translation of the *Śītalā cālisā* of Prabhudas, to Bharat Bhatt of the University of Texas for his translations of the Gujarati *kathās*, to Douglas Twells of the University of Chicago for his translation of the *Bhāvaprakāśaḥ* and to Ralph Nicholas for his translation of the Bengali *Ṣaṣṭhī kathās*. All other translations are mine. I had invaluable aid in doing these from Robert O. Swan and Suniti Dutt, both of Syracuse University. Bruce W. Derr, Barbara D. Miller, David Sopher, and Daniel Smith all provided critical readings and comments. Financial aid for this project is varied. My initial work on the manuals of the twelve months was begun while on a Faculty Research Grant from the American Institute of Indian Studies in 1974-75. Research into the *nī-bandhas* was carried out under the sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities (Summer Stipend for Younger Humanists 1977). My thanks are due to both of these organizations.

is found a smallpox goddess to whom is attached some variant of the name "Śītalā." This goddess's primary association is with smallpox, yet she is occasionally given other roles and powers, including those as the protector of children and the giver of good fortune. Śītalā's multifaceted character results in some of her attributes being commonly found throughout northern India while others appear erratically as her personality varies. Moreover, the personalities attributed to Śītalā in popular vernacular religious literature present even more anomalies related to two separate Sanskritic traditions. Without doubt, the attribution of widely varying personalities to Śītalā is a result of continuous processes of communication between localized little traditions and the more widespread, continuously Sanskritizing great traditions. Her multifarious manifestations also reflect the influences of changing modes in the transmission of cultural data. In this respect, the shift from orally transmitted tales to popular printed literature is especially crucial, tied as it is to processes of Sanskritization and standardization. The wide geographical and historical appearance of Śītalā allows for examination of her personalities and attributes in a variety of cultural traditions. In this paper, ethnographic and textual evidence from three regions in northern India (Gujarat, West Bengal and the Hindi-speaking area)<sup>2</sup> is examined to illuminate the true nature of 'The Cool One.'

The Śītalā cult is unquestionably the most highly developed in Bengal, for there are found major all-village *pūjās*, lengthy poems (*maṅgal*) written in her honor, and numerous Śītalā temples.<sup>3</sup> The earliest of the *maṅgal* date from the 1600s while published materials on Śītalā have existed since the 1870s.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the Śītalā cult of Gujarat and the Hindi-speaking area is considerably less formalized, and only recently has a literary tradition begun to develop around her.

2. I am here considering the Hindi-speaking area very broadly—from Rajasthan on the west to Bihar on the east; from Madhya Pradesh in the south to the Himalayan foothills on the north.

3. See Ralph W. Nicholas, "Śītalā and the Art of Printing," (Paper presented at the Duke University Symposium on Language Arts and Mass Culture in India, March 13–15, 1970); B. C. Bang, "Current Concepts of the Smallpox Goddess Śītalā in Parts of West Bengal." *Man in India* 53 (1973), pp. 79–104; and Asutosh Bhat-tacharyya, "The Cult of the Goddess of Smallpox in West Bengal," *The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* 43 (1952), pp. 55–69.

4. Ralph W. Nicholas and Aditi Nath Sarkar, "The Fever Demon and the Census Commissioner: Śītalā Mythology in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Bengal," in Marvin David (ed.) *Bengal: Studies in Literature, Society and History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, Asian Studies Center Occasional Papers, South Asia Series, No. 27, 1976), pp. 3–68.

Most critically, however, the Hindi and Gujarati Śītalās are not the 'same' as their Bengali sister. In West Bengal, Śītalā is associated primarily with the dreaded pox. In northern India she becomes also the protector of children, taking on some of the attributes of the Bengali goddess Śaṣṭhī. In yet another shift, texts from Gujarat ignore all of these connections with illness and smallpox, portraying Śītalā as the giver of good fortune, husbands and sons.

An examination of textual and ethnographic reports of Śītalā reveals important characteristics and patterns of her changing nature, even though printed texts contradict ethnographic reports and the historical record is uneven. Nevertheless, there are several factors which do unite the Śītalās of the plains and plateaus of northern India. First and foremost, she is always 'The Cool One,' a goddess who abhors heat and who seeks coolness. While rewarding those who make her cool, she 'burns' those who cause her to burn. In addition, Śītalā's physical attributes are common to all three regions as well as to the extant Sanskritic texts: she carries a broom and a water vessel, she rides an ass, she has a winnowing fan on her head, she is often naked (or is dressed as a married woman), and she regularly appears disguised as an old Brahman woman. A stone carving in a Gujarati temple dating from the twelfth century<sup>5</sup> as well as modern lithographs of Śītalā in this form add further evidence of the geographical and historical spread of Śītalā's iconography.

It is Śītalā's connection with coolness, however, that is her most compelling attribute, one that she in turn shares with Mariamman, the smallpox goddess of South India. It is coolness which links Śītalā's various "personalities"—the Goddess of Smallpox, the Protector of Children, and the Giver of Good Fortune. Born of cooled ashes, Śītalā is by nature cool and she continually seeks coolness. When heated, she heats others—attacking them with the dreaded pox or destroying their children. Consideration of Śītalā's cool nature further leads us to an examination of hot and cold in South Asian thought. Finally, attempting to discover patterns in Śītalā's personality and worship forces us to address questions of religious modernization and standardization. In consideration of these questions, the immense complexity, variability and adaptability of Hindu beliefs and practices are highlighted.

#### *The Goddess of Smallpox*

The Goddess called the poxes in terrible glee:

5. Bang (N. 3 above), p. 86.

“Come, we will go to Munipur for the sake of my worship.”<sup>6</sup>

Śītalā’s most prevalent personality is that of the goddess of smallpox. There are interesting discrepancies even within this Śītalā, but the dominant theme is her association with poxes of various sorts, especially smallpox.

One body of Sanskrit texts emphasizes this personality. A *stotra* to Śītalā as the goddess of smallpox is said to appear in the *Skanda-purāṇa* and the *Bhāvaprakāśaḥ*, a Sanskrit Ayurvedic medical text, allegedly quotes from this *purāṇa* in discussions concerning the cure of poxes. The *Bhāvaprakāśaḥ* quotes a *śītalāstakam* (eightfold hymn to Śītalā) from the *Skanda-purāṇa* and clarifies the nature of the goddess herself.<sup>7</sup> In this, Śītalā is portrayed as a controller of disease *par excellence*:

Bhagavān Śīva said, “I make obeisance to Śrī Śītalā Devī who is naked and graciously sitting upon an ass. Upon attaining her refuge the fear of the disease of poxes (also called the disease *śītalā*)<sup>8</sup> is removed. By repeating ‘O Śītalā, O Śītalā,’ the fever of *śītalā* and the possibility of a dreadful calamity arising from it are removed . . . Oh Bhagavatī Śītalā, for him whose body is burning with fever, from whose body a foul smell is coming and whose eyes even have been ruined, for his life you alone are the sole remedy . . .”<sup>9</sup>

This image of Śītalā is the dominant one throughout northern India. In each of the three regions considered here, Śītalā has some connection with smallpox. Let us look at each in turn, examining both literary and ethnographic evidence.

The Śītalā *maṅgals* of Bengal portray a goddess whose connection with poxes, and disease in general, is fundamental. Here Śītalā is

6. Nicholas and Sarkar (N. 4 above), p. 37.

7. Ralph Nicholas reports that he and Ronald Inden searched the Kāśīkhanda of the Bombay edition of the *Skanda-purāṇa* and it has no Śītalā. Other editions are unavailable and have not been searched.

8. The term *śītalā* refers to both the goddess and the disease. To distinguish these meanings, I have italicized references to the disease itself.

9. This excerpt was translated from a Sanskrit/Hindi version of the text, by Douglas Twells. See Sri Pandit Lalacandraji Vaidya (ed.), *Bhāvaprakāśaḥ* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1958), p. 381.

associated with Jvarāsur, the Fever Demon, and Raktābatī (“ She who possesses the Blood ”), both her serving woman and herself a form of pox. With these two aides, Śītalā spreads her poxes, through the medium of lentils, among those who refuse to worship her.<sup>10</sup> Śītalā’s story as found in the Bengali *maṅgal kāvyas* is not present elsewhere in northern India. The modes by which she obtains devotees and also her attendants are uniquely Bengali. Moreover, the Bengali *maṅgals* perform a religious function that is not manifested elsewhere in northern India. Perhaps the lack of a major literary tradition connected to Śītalā outside Bengal is related to this function of the *maṅgal*.

The purpose of the *Śītalā Maṅgal* is not primarily the avoidance of disease, whether smallpox, malaria, or any other. The *maṅgal*, the “ well-being,” the “ auspiciousness,” or the “ beneficence ” of the text lies in its capacity to enlighten and instruct. Stated in oversimplified terms, *bhakti*, an attitude of religious love, places the worshipper in a wholly dependent and child-like attitude toward the deity. The composition or publishing of a *maṅgal* text is an act of *bhakti* and also a means of enlightening and instructing others by explaining the divine to people so that they too can have proper *bhakti*.<sup>11</sup>

The worship of Śītalā in Bengal rarely occurs on a fixed *tithi*. Although the Bengali almanacs list Phalgun<sup>12</sup> *kr̥ṣṇāṣṭami* as the proper day for Śītalā’s worship, only a few household *pūjās* are held on this day. Villages arrange their collective *pūjās* according to financial circumstances and the availability of performers to sing Śītalā’s *maṅgal-gān*. The hot season months of Caitra and Baisakh are the principal

10. For further discussions of the Bengali Śītalā and her *maṅgal*, see Nicholas, Bang, and Bhattacharyya (N. 3 above) and Nicholas and Sarkar (N. 4 above). The later source contains two Śītalā *maṅgal* in English translation.

11. Nicholas and Sarkar (N. 4 above), p. 25.

12. I have not used diacritics for the vernacular versions of the months of the year as the names of the months and their spellings shift from language to language and dialect to dialect. Hence spellings for all regions follow a common Hindi variant. The twelve months of the year and their English counterparts are: Caitra (March–April), Baisakh (April–May), Jeth (May–June), Asarh (June–July), Shraavan (July–August), Bhadrapad (August–September), Asvin (September–October), Kartik (October–November), Aghan (November–December), Pus (December–January), Magh (January–February), Phalgun (February–March). For northern India three seasons are recognized: hot (Phalgun–Jeth); rainy (Asarh–Asvin); and cold (Kartik–Magh).

months for these *pūjās*, but they start in Phalgun and go on through Jeth. Smallpox is generally known as *basanta rog* (the "spring disease") in Bengal because epidemics strike in the spring. The virus is serially transmitted and travels furthest and fastest when the air is dry. Thus, epidemics abate quickly in Asarh when the rains begin.<sup>13</sup>

Ethnographic and textual evidence unite to form a consistent picture of Śitalā as the goddess of smallpox in the Hindi-speaking region of North India. Examination of eleven Hindi versions of the *Fairs and Fasts of the Twelve Months* (popular manuals of religious instruction, see Appendix A) reveals two versions of her *vrata kathā*,<sup>14</sup> the story of the fast and the rules for her worship.

#### Śitalā's *Kathā*: Version A

On bright eighth of Caitra the *pūjā* of Bhagavatī Śitalā is held. There are no particular rules for the *pūjā*, but after this *pūjā*, completely cold foods are served. On the previous day, everything is cooked and all kinds of goods are collected for the *pūjā*. The women who do the *pūjā* eat stale food on this day. The women doing Bhagavatī Śitalā's *pūjā* go to her hut or shrine. In the hut at the end of the *pūjā*, this *kathā* is told:

*Kathā*: Once upon a time, pox (*chechak*) appeared on the oldest son of a king. At the same time in the same city, pox appeared on the son of a farmer (*kāchī*). The farmer was very poor and a devotee of Bhagavatī. From the light of religious knowledge and understanding all the essential rules, he was esteemed for his righteousness. (Such rules are) to keep houses very clean, to spread cowdung every day (on the floor), to do the *pūjā* of Bhagavatī, to not eat salt, to not season foods, to not fry things, to not put anything on the pot, to not yourself eat hot things nor feed them to a pox victim, to serve only very cold things, etc. From following all of these rules, his son quickly got well.

Elsewhere because of the appearance of the pox, the king sat in the shrine of Bhagavatī reading the hundred names of Candī. Everyday he

13. This information on Bengali worship was provided by Ralph W. Nicholas. Village Survey monographs from the 1961 Census of India confirm that Śitalā is worshipped in Caitra and Baisakh on unspecified days in West Bengal. See *Census of India 1961 West Bengal and Sikkim*. vol. XVI. Part VI (4) Village Survey Monograph, Raibaghini, Bankura District. (New Delhi Superintendent of Printing, 1967), p. 129; *Census of India 1961, West Bengal and Sikkim*. vol. XVI. part VI (5) Village Survey Monograph, Bhumij Dhan Sol, Midnapore District. (New Delhi, Superintendent of Printing, 1967), p. 197.

14. A *vrata* is a fast or vow performed usually by women. In addition to fasting, a *vrata* includes a *pūjā* (worship ceremony) and the recitation of a *kathā*, a religious story that acts as the native exegesis for the *vrata*. Fuller explanations can be found in Susan S. Wadley, *Shakti: Power in the Conceptual Structure of Karimpur Religion* (Chicago: Department of Anthropology, The University of Chicago, Series in Social Cultural and Linguistic Anthropology, No. 2, 1975).

had *havan* and sacrifices performed. The king's family priest did Bhagavatī's *pūjā*, but in the king's palace they used the pots every day, made various kinds of hot and spiced foods, and also made meat with spices. Because of the odor of the cooking of spiced foods, the prince also demanded spiced food and because of his demands, he was served it. Therefore Śītalā's anger with the prince grew and grew. On his whole body huge itchy sores appeared and he began to burn up with fever. The king and queen schemed to obtain the peace of Śītalā, but everything was futile. Śītalā's anger grew even greater.

Then someone brought the news that, along with the prince, pox had appeared on a farmer's son and he had been completely cured. Hearing this, the king became extremely jealous and he thought, "Why has Bhagavatī been so unjust to my family? Daily I am spending thousands of rupees on rituals, but still the prince becomes weaker." His anger was due to the fact that the farmer could not do any kind of *pūjā* and service (i.e., spend money), but his son quickly got well. Wrapped up in these thoughts and reasonings, the king fell asleep.

Manifesting herself in a dream, Bhagavatī said to him, "I am pleased with your service and for that reason your son is still alive. But, really, you did not maintain the necessary nourishing rules for the time of Śītalā and gave me much trouble. In such times the use of cold things cannot be ignored. From eating salt, the illness of lumps and itchiness befalls: therefore salt is banned. Likewise, to season foods in the house entices the mind of the sick one with its odor and he demands it. Because people go here and there and meet with others, there is a rule that the sick one should not be with others. Therefore if you want happiness for yourself and your son, from today do not eat from the pot (i.e., do not eat cooked foods). For the sanity of Śītalā, give only cold things to me for offerings and also to the prince." Saying this much Devī disappeared.

In the morning the king organized all work in accordance with Bhagavatī's injunctions. With a very faithful devotee, he did Bhagavatī's *pūjā* properly. From that day, the prince's condition began to improve and after some days, he was completely cured.

The day on which the king had Bhagavatī's *darśan* (vision) in his dream was the seventh of the dark half of Caitra. The king gave a proclamation to his people that on the eighth day, everyone should do Bhagavatī's *pūjā* with stale grain and cold foods for offerings. This *aṣṭamī* (eighth) was called *śītalā aṣṭamī*. Since this it has been customary to perform Śītalā *Aṣṭamī*.

I am giving these instructions for the essentials of the *pūjā* of Śītalā *Aṣṭamī*. At the time of the illness *śītalā*, I went somehow to live and in some way want to do Śītalā's *pūjā*.<sup>15</sup>

15. Translated from the Hindi in Ram Krishnadas Agrawal, *Varṣ bhar ke vrat aur tyauhār*, (Delhi: Dehati Pustak Bhandar, n.d.), pp. 161-163. Variants of this

A different *kathā* and fuller details on the mode of worship of Śītalā are given in this version:

Śītalā's *Kathā*: Version B

Do this *vrāt* on the dark eighth of Caitra bathe with cold water. Do the *pūjā* of Śītalā Devi by offering every kind of dried fruit, sweets, rice, lentils, bread, vegetables, pulse cakes, sweetmeats and all kinds of things to eat and drink as well as many perfumes. After offering these, eat them yourself. Stay awake at night and look always towards the light of a lamp.

In our country this *vrāt* occurs twice. The first time is on this eighth. The second is in the month of Baisakh and occurs on some Monday in the dark half. Doing it a second time is best. The eighth of Caitra is called 'Bāsoṛā' and the time in Baisakh is 'Būṛha bāsoṛā'. For the dark eighth of Caitra, all kinds of goods are necessary, requiring the preparation of many special foods. Hence with much commotion, the work is all done. 'Būṛha Bāsoṛā' is held in great comfort and ordinary cold food is served. If for any reason you cannot perform the *vrāt* in Caitra, then do it the same way in Baisakh. For two Mondays in the dark half of Jeth and on two Mondays in a cold month all women should honor Śītalā. By making preparations on the previous day, they eat stale food.

In every village and city there is a shrine to Śītalā. Śītalā's image is of her riding on a donkey. But sometimes it is simple stone with very small holes on it. In the dark half of Caitra when the seventh day occurs, on this day all preparations should take place for the whole of the eighth day . . . (continues with detailed description of *pūjā*) . . .

*Kathā*: In some village lives an old woman. The Bāsoṛā of Śītalā Mother arrived and she prepared cold food. She filled the pot and made cold food. One time a fire broke out in the village and the whole village burned. The Lord of the village came to see what had happened. He saw that one old woman's hut was spared while the rest of the village was only heaps of rubbish. The Lord asked the old woman the reason for this. The old woman replied, "King Sahab, my hut was spared because of the mercy of Śītalā Mother. I give her honor. I prepare cold food."

The king then had a drum beaten throughout the village and proclaimed that from now on everyone should do the Bāsoṛā of Śītalājī. Oh Śītalā Mother, in the manner in which the old woman served you, in like

---

*kathā* are also found in Kunvar Kanhaiyaju, *Hinduon ke vrāt aur tyohār*, (New Delhi: Sasta Sahitya Mandal, n.d.), p. 25; Rajesh Dikshit, *Vrāt parv aur tyauhār*, (Kanpur: Dip Prakan Mandir, 1967), p. 57; Sri Satyabhakta, *Vrāt aur tyauhār*, (Mathura: Akhanda-jyoti Press, 1962), p. 93; and Premalata Vatsyayan, *Vars bhar ke vrāt-kathaen aur tyauhār*, (Delhi: Hind Pustak Bhandar, n.d.), p. 15.



manner everyone must act.<sup>16</sup>

The manner of worship given in these two texts is consistent with reports in ethnographic accounts from the Hindi regions. No ethnography reports a *kathā* for Śītalā, but it appears that the two versions given here have widespread validity, though no identifiable source. (Other evidence suggests that authors of these manuals regularly borrow from one another. If this is the case, then one local variant could obtain wider recognition through the medium of the vernacular printing press.)

It is Śītalā as the goddess of smallpox who is widely worshipped in Hindi-speaking regions. Her worship is always associated with stale or leftover food and occurs during Caitra (March–April) or Baisakh (April–May), hot season months when the annual epidemics of smallpox begin. In most instances Śītalā is worshipped on the eighth day, but the month and the half (*pakṣā*) of the month vary. Major fairs are held in honor of Śītalā on the dates associated with her worship: in Jaipur District (Rajasthan), the Śītalā fair is attended by over 100,000 persons. Throughout the Hindi-speaking regions, Śītalā's festival is commonly termed Bāsoṛa (or some variant thereon), literally 'Leftover Food Worship'<sup>17</sup> and the dominant feature of her ritual is the offering and eating of cold and/or stale food.

This association of Śītalā with stale/cold food is in stark contrast to Bengal, where Manaṣa, the goddess of snakes, is the deity with whom *arandhan* (no cooking) is most closely associated. No cooking there is done on important rainy season days, when snakes come into houses and are thought to want to lie in the hearth, which is kept cold so that they will meet no harm. In Bengal, the absence of cooking is also associated with the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī, when on *śītalāṣaṣṭhī* no cooking is undertaken as an austerity to honor the goddess directly.<sup>18</sup> As we shall see, the absence of cooking connected with the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī has important ramifications for recent north Indian innovations in Śītalā worship.

Gujarat presents yet a third variation of Śītalā as the goddess of

16. Translated from the Hindi in Pandit Gaur Sankar Sarma 'pujari, ' *Bārah mahīne ke vrat aur tyauhār*, (Delhi: Garg and Co., n.d.), pp. 192–196. A variant of this *kathā* is found in Roop Kishore Bharatiya, *Barahon mahīne ke sampūrṇ vrat aur tyauhār*, (Mathura: Govardhan Pustakalay, n.d.), p. 228.

17. See McKim Marriott. "Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization," in M. Marriott (ed.): *Village India*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 192.

18. I am indebted to Ralph Nicholas for this information on Manaṣā and Ṣaṣṭhī.

smallpox. The most immediately striking feature here is that Śītalā is not worshipped in the hot season, but during the rains, specifically on the dark or light sevenths of Shravan (July–August).<sup>19</sup> In addition, Śītalā is associated with Balia Kaka (The Powerful Uncle) who is also worshipped when smallpox is present. Food is cooked on the previous day, known as Rāndhan Chath (Cooking Sixth) and stale food is eaten on the seventh. As a further anomaly, one author reports that in Kutch, Śītalā is sometimes worshipped on the thirteenth of the light half of Baisakh a day known as *śītalā terash*.<sup>20</sup> (See Table 1 for a survey of the dates of Śītalā worship in northern India.)

In all three regions, aside from the association of heat (the disease) and coolness (the goddess) as underlying themes of both Śītalā's worship and the cure of her disease, several other attributes are common. Śītalā is often thought of as one of seven sisters.<sup>21</sup> Also she sometimes has a brother or other male associate.<sup>22</sup> And she is sporadically associated

19. See Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice-Born*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 306 and R. K. Trivedi (ed.), *Census of India 1961*, Gujarat vol. V, part VII-B. Fairs and Festivals. (New Delhi: Superintendent of Printing, 1965), p. 93.

20. Trivedi, (N. 19 above), p. 95.

21. See Bang, (N. 3 above), p. 85; Lawrence C. Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, p. 129; George Weston Briggs, *The Doms and Their Near Relations*, (Mysore: Wesley Press and Publishing House, 1953), p. 53; Indira Y. Junghare, "Songs of the Goddess Shītalā: Religio-cultural and Linguistic Features." *Man in India* 55 (1975), p. 302; and Hari S. Upadhyaya, "Some Annotated Indian Folksongs." *Asian Folklore Studies* 25 (1967), p. 91.

22. See Bang (N. 3 above), p. 91; Junghare (N. 21 above), p. 302; Upadhyaya (N. 21 above), p. 91; and K. S. Mathur, *Caste and Ritual in a Malwa Village*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964), p. 110.

23. (1) Bharatiya (N. 16 above); (2) Pandit Balmukind Ratna, *Bārah mahīne ke vrat aur tyauhār*, (Mathura: Syamlal Hiralal, 1974); (3) Agraval, (N. 15 above); (4) Hiramani Sinh 'Sathi', *bārahon mahīne ke sampūrṇ Hinduon ke vrat tyahār*, (Allahabad: Sri Durga Pustak Bhandar, n.d.); (5) Campadevi Rajagariya, *Bārah Mahīnen kā tyauhār*, (Calcutta: Hari Art Press, n.d.); (6) Dikshit (N. 15 above); (7) Kanhaiyaju (N. 15 above); (8) Satyabhakta (N. 15 above); (9) Vatsyayan (N. 15 above); (10) Sarma (N. 16 above); (11) Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India*, (New York: Vintagtt Books, 1965); (12) Wadley (N. 14 above); (13) Babb (N. 21 above); (14) Marriot (N. 17 above); (15) B. R. Chauhan, *A Rajasthan Village*, (New Delhi: Vir Publishing House, 1967); (16) & (17) S. L. Srivastava, *Folk Culture and Oral Tradition*, (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1974); (18) Mathur (N. 22 above); (19) Nicholas (N. 3 above); (20) See N. 13 above, vol. XVI, Part VI (4); (21) See N. 13 above, vol. XVI, Part VI (5); (22) Stevenson (N. 19 above); (23) Trivedi (N. 19 above); (24) Trivedi (N. 19 above); (25) Ratilal G. Panchal, *vrat kathāo* 23rd ed., (Ahmedabad: Sri Pustak Mandir, 1976); (26) Krishnaprasad Bhatt, *Vratasangraha*, (Ahmedabad; Mahadev Ramshandra Jagushte, 1975).

TABLE I The Dates of Śitalā Worship (As Goddess of Smallpox in Northern India)

Place <sup>23</sup>	Caitra					Baisakh			Kuar	Shravan		
	1 : 7	1 : 8	1 : 9	2 : 8	2 : 9	Varied	1 : 8	1 : 13	Varied	2 : 1-9	1 : 7	2 : 7
<i>Hindi Region</i>												
(1) Mathura							×		×			
(2) Mathura		×										
(3) Delhi				×								
(4) Allahabad							×					
(5) Rajasthan		×							×			
(6) Kanpur		×										
(7) Delhi				×								
(8) Mathura				×								
(9) Delhi		×										
(10) Delhi		×										
(11) Delhi	×											
(12) Karimpur, U.P.		×										
(13) Chhatisgarh							×					
(14) Kishan Garhi, U.P.												
(15) Rajasthan		×										
(16) Rajasthan			×									
(17) Eastern U.P.				×								
(18) Malwa										×		
<i>Bengali Region</i>												
(19) Midnapore						×			×			
(20) Bankura District						×			×			
(21) Midnapore District						×			×			
<i>Gujarati Region</i>												
(22) (general)											×	×
(23) (general)											×	×
(24) (Kutch)								×				
(25) Ahmedabad											×	
(26) Ahmedabad											×	×

with cats and dogs.

The image of Śītalā that predominates is one of basic danger. Śītalā is feared as one fears the disease that she brings. She can and does protect, but her primary association is with the disease that shares her name. Yet this image of danger is being tempered. A prime example is a modern printed Hindi *Śītalā cālīsā* (Hymn in Forty Verses) by one Prabhudas, in which the demon Visphoṭak dispenses the pox while Śītalā cures its victims:

Visphoṭ was a huge demon with the form of flames  
and of great strength.  
He entered house after house—no one was safe;  
Assuming the form of disease, he devoured children.  
The whole world cried out in anguish,  
When no one could avert the calamity.  
Then the Mother (*maiyā*) assumed a wonderful form,  
Taking a broom (*marjanī*) and a winnowing fan (*sūpā*)  
in her hands.  
She took hold of Visphoṭak  
And showered him with blows in various ways. . . .  
The burning body (*tan*) is cooled,  
and Visphoṭak flees in great fear.<sup>24</sup>

The *cālīsā*, with its accompanying *ārti* (salutation), conveys a mood of deep devotion from a true *bhakta* (devotee). To Prabhudas, Śītalā is much more than the goddess of smallpox, rather she is the savior of the world and the protector of children.

*The Protector of Children*

Oh Mata, you gave us children,  
Now protect them from disease.<sup>25</sup>

It is not uncommon for Śītalā to be thought of as a protectress: after all, she can prevent the pox. Babagrahi Misra notes that she has been transformed into a children's deity,<sup>26</sup> but this is an oversimplification. In the Hindi-speaking north, through a complex mingling of characteristics, Śītalā has become associated with the Bengali goddess Ṣaṣṭhī, whose domain is the bestowing and protecting of children. Śītalā's connections with Ṣaṣṭhī in the Hindi-speaking region are all the more

24. Translated from the Hindi by Veena Das. Ramsundar Prabhudas, *Śītalā cālīsā*, (Allahabad: Sri Durga Pustak Bhandar, n.d.).

25. Lewis (N. 23 above), p. 200.

26. Babagrahi Misra, "Śītalā: The Small-pox Goddess of India." *Asian Folklore Studies* 28 (1969), p. 134.

peculiar because the Bengali pairing is of Manaṣā and Ṣaṣṭhī, not Śītalā and Ṣaṣṭhī.<sup>27</sup>

In Bengal, Ṣaṣṭhī is worshipped on the sixth day after the birth of a child and also on the sixth day of many lunar fortnights. A common *vrāt* is in January on the bright sixth of Magh, while another common observance occurs on the bright sixth of Jeth.<sup>28</sup> In the Hindi-speaking region, the goddess Chaṭṭhī is worshipped on the sixth day after a child's birth. Briggs associates Chaṭṭhī with Ṣaṣṭhī and also claims that she is commonly worshipped during the rainy season by the lower castes as the goddess of lockjaw.<sup>29</sup>

Srivastava also associates Chaṭṭhī with Ṣaṣṭhī and finds an annual rite for Ṣaṣṭhī and Chaṭṭhī in both Rajasthan (Ubchhath on the dark sixth of Bhadon) and eastern Uttar Pradesh (Tinchhatthi, also on the dark sixth of Bhadon).<sup>30</sup> These, however, are the only ethnographies I have found that identify an annual rite to either Ṣaṣṭhī or Chaṭṭhī for either the Hindi or Gujarati-speaking regions. As I have located no stories for the Hindi Chaṭṭhī, it is impossible to say if she is closely related in character to the Bengali Ṣaṣṭhī.<sup>31</sup>

The Hindi manuals of rituals for the twelve months present a totally different picture, most probably borrowed from Bengali sources. Seven of the eleven Hindi manuals record a *vrāt* to Śītalā, a *vrāt* called *Śītalāṣaṣṭhī*, on the dark or bright sixths of Magh. The associated *kathā* comes in two versions.

#### *Śītalā's Katha: Version C*

The *vrāt* of Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī occurs on the light sixth of Magh. Its motive is desire for progeny. In the eastern regions it is called *Bāsiyaura*. In the morning of this day, you should bathe and make preparations. Doing all the sixteen kinds of worship of Śītalā Devī and offering her cold food, you yourself eat stale food. The *kathā* of this fast is given here.

*Kathā:* A Brahman and his wife has seven sons. All were married, but none had any children. One day an old woman gave the rules for having the sons and daughters-in-law do the fasts of Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī. The Brahman woman had her daughters-in-law do this fast with great

27. See Edward C. Dimock Jr., "Manasā, Goddess of Snakes: The Ṣaṣṭhī Myth." in Joseph M. Kitagawa and Charles H. Long (eds.) *Myths and Symbols: Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 217 ff.

28. From Ralph Nicholas, personal communication.

29. Briggs (N. 21 above), p. 283.

30. Srivastava (N. 23 above), p. 158.

31. Intuition, if valid in scholarship, makes me doubt any strong resemblance in personality and attributes.

faith and after a year all the daughters-in-law had sons playing in their laps. One day the Brahman woman, doing the fast negligently, bathed with hot water and made fresh food. Along with her daughters-in-law she did this. That night the Brahman woman was startled into awakening from a nightmare. Getting up, she tried to wake her husband, but he was dead. Seeing him, the Brahman woman began to scream with grief. Looking toward her sons and daughters-in-law she saw that they too had all died. Then her composure deserted her and she began to wail loudly. Hearing her screams, her neighbors awoke and came to her. These people said that this is the result of the anger of Bhagavati Śītalā.

Hearing this, the Brahman woman went crazy and screaming and crying she ran toward the forest. On the road she met an old woman who was burning up with fever (literally 'agitated by the heat of fire'). Upon inquiring, she came to know that this was the reason for her sorrow: the old woman was none other than Śītalā Devī herself. Bhagavati Śītalā asked the Brahman woman to bring a clay jar filled with curds to relieve her of the heat of the fever. The Brahman woman sped away and quickly brought the curds. She spread curds on the body of Śītalā: from this the fever was reduced and her body became healthy and cool. The Brahman woman felt very sorry for herself and she begged again and again for forgiveness for her bad actions and she prayed for the lives of her family. Then Śītalā Devī was pleased and told her to put curds on the heads of the dead. Quickly returning home, the Brahman woman spread curds on the heads of all the dead: then being awakened from sleep, they all sat up.<sup>32</sup>

#### Śītalā's *Katha*: Version D

The bright sixth of Magh is called Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī. Keeping a fast on this day, eat only cold food. With curds and tamarind, put a *tīkā* on the heads of dogs. This festival is observed chiefly in Bengal and the eastern regions.

*Kathā*: In the family of a Brahman, there was one son and the son's wife. The time came that the wife was pregnant, but much time passed and there was no child. One day she went to the river for water: there her feet slipped and from her stomach a hollow gourd appeared. Upon setting this gourd in oil, seven sons were born. After some time, they all grew up and the Brahman thought about their marriages. By chance there was a nearby Brahman with seven daughters. He had his sons married to them. Then the day of Śītalā Ṣaṣṭhī came. Because it was winter, the old grandmother bathed in hot water and told the

32. Translated from the Hindi in Agraval (N. 15 above), pp. 148-9. Variants of this *kathā* are found in Vatsyayan (N. 15 above), Dikshit (N. 15 above), and Bhartiya (N. 16 above).

daughters-in-law to prepare a meal of hot rice. Therefore the seven sons, cows, bullocks and all the animals died. Now she was very grief-stricken.

In a divine trick (*daiva-yoga*) on the night of the sixth, Śītalā Devī came in the disguise of an old Brahman woman and told of the error of hot water and food. She then said, "Tomorrow you do the *pūjā* of dogs or asses with cool curds and tamarind and tie tamarind in the hands of children, so my obstruction will be removed." The old woman did this and her whole family lived. Śīkṣā: Do not insult the dogs, your welfare will be in their minds.<sup>33</sup>

Both of these *kathās* exist in Bengali manuals of the rules for *vrats*, although the Bengali versions are more elaborate.<sup>34</sup> The critical factor is that in the Bengali versions it is Śaṣṭhī who is honored, while in the Hindi versions Śaṣṭhī has been transformed into Śītalā. Moreover, several Hindi texts identify the *vrat* as *Bāsiyaura*, *BāSORA*, etc., i.e., Leftover Food Worship, the name normally applied to the worship of the smallpox goddess that takes place in Caitra or Baisakh. This may be a contributing factor to the confusion surrounding the identity of Śītalā across regions. There is no evidence that Śītalā in Bengal is worshipped with cold or stale food; rather, Śaṣṭhī is. In Uttar Pradesh and other northern states, it is Śītalā who is the Leftover Food goddess. Adoption of the Śaṣṭhī *vrat*, also called Śītalā Śaṣṭhī (Cold Sixth) plus the already known association of the Hindi Śītalā with stale food renders total mixing of identities. A new Śītalā emerges.

Śītalā as the protector of children has no related Sanskritic tradition except that derived from her benefactor Śaṣṭhī. Dimock finds Śaṣṭhī mentioned in the sixteenth century text the *Tantrasāra*, as well as in the *Skanda-purāṇa* and the *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa*.<sup>35</sup> The Śaṣṭhī / Śītalā of the *vrat kathās* is not related to the Sanskritic traditions as elaborated by Dimock, nor is the Hindi Śītalā / Śaṣṭhī related directly to the Śaṣṭhī of the *maṅgal kāvyas*. According to Dimock, it is Śaṣṭhī's *vāhana* (vehicle), a cat, who is dangerous when offended. Whereas the cat steals children, Śaṣṭhī returns them. The goddess herself is completely benevolent. But without doubt the Cool Śaṣṭhī

33. Translated from the Hindi in Ratna (N. 23 above), pp. 155-6. No other manual contains a version of this *kathā*.

34. I am indebted to Ralph Nicholas for providing translations of two Bengali *kathās*, taken from Madhusudana Bhattacharyya (ed.), *Meyeder Vratākathā*. (1371, orig. 1329, 1922-23). Revised and enlarged by Sasibhusana Kaviratna. (Calcutta: Orient Library, 1964-65) and Kaliprasanna Vidyaratna (ed.), *Meyeder Vratākathā*. Corrected and revised by Vinaya Caudhuri. (Calcutta: Aksaya Library, n.d.).

35. Dimock (N. 27 above), p. 219.

of the Bengali *vrat kathās* and the Śītalā of the Hindi *vrat kathas* are malevolent as well as benevolent. When they are heated, despite the cold weather that prevails in Magh, they become angry and take revenge upon their devotees. Here the seasonal time interacts with the ritual rules to create a situation of real austerity—cold baths and cold food on a cold day. If the austerities undergone in worshipping a given deity are indeed related to that deity's potential powers,<sup>36</sup> then it is proper for Śītalā, The Giver and Protector of Children, to demand greater austerities than Śītalā, the Goddess of Smallpox.

*The Giver of Good Fortune*

O you who give good fortune and sons to women,  
O Cool One! Please accept these offerings  
made to you on the seventh day of the dark  
half of Shravan.<sup>37</sup>

A variety of materials from Gujarat present us with a third Śītalā, the Goddess of Good Fortune. Two variants of her story have been identified. The first is found only in a manual of the *vrats* of the twelve months.

Śītalā's *Katha*: Version E

The dark seventh of Shravan. In the morning, get up early and take a bath with cold water. Throughout the day eat stale food, do not light the hearth and listen to Śītalāma's story.

There are two wives (*vahus*) in a certain home. One was the younger son's wife (*Derāñi*) and the other the older son's wife (*Jeṭhani*). The day of Randhan Chath (Cooking Sixth) came. The younger wife was asked to cook. At midnight the younger wife was tired of cooking. In the meantime her son started to cry, so she sat down to feed him.

Being tired and still awake at midnight she began to doze off and so she slept. The hearth remained lighted. After midnight, Śītalāma came out for a walk. She came to the younger wife's home. Rolling in the hearth, Śītalāma received burns all over her body. She gave a curse: "Let your stomach (*peṭa*) receive burns just as my body did." The wife got up early the next morning. The hearth was still burning. She looked at the crib and found the corpse of her son, his whole body burning!

The wife clearly realized that they were afflicted by Śītalāma's curse! She started to cry bitterly. Because of this, the older wife's long-held anger was fulfilled. However, the mother-in-law (*sāsu*) had great affec-

36. See Wadley (N. 14 above), p. 155.

37. Visvanatha, *Śrīvratarāja*. (Bombay: Srivenkateshvar Press, 1963), p. 310.



tion for the younger wife and she asked her for patience and said: "What will you get by crying? Go to Śītalāma; your son will get life again."

After taking her mother-in-law's blessings, the younger wife put the dead son in a basket and went off. On the way she came to two ponds, the water of the two flowing into each other. The ponds were overflowing so much that even sparrows wouldn't dare take water from them! On seeing the wife, the ponds said, "Sister, where are you going?"

The younger wife said, "I have received Śītalāma's curse. My son is dead. I am going to Śītalāma to get the curse removed."

The ponds said, "Sister, don't drink our water. Whosoever drinks our water dies. What sins have we committed? Find out the remedy for our sins."

Moving ahead she met two bulls. They had stone disks of a hand mill (*ghanti*) tied to their necks and were fighting. On seeing the wife the bulls said, "Sister! Where are you going?"

The young wife said, "To Śītalāma, to get the curse remedied."

The bulls said, "What sins have we committed that we do not cease to quarrel? Please ask the remedy for our sins."

Walking further the wife reached the forest. Under the Boradi (*Zizyphusjuba*) tree an old woman was sitting. She was scratching her uncovered head. On seeing the wife the old woman said, "Sister, where are you going?"

"To Śītalāma."

"Why not check my head?" (Possibly for lice).

The wife put her son on the old woman's lap and started to check her hair. Thus the old woman was cured of her head itch. The old woman gave her blessings. "Like my head (cooled), let your stomach cool off." Upon her saying this, the boy in the old woman's lap started to get restless. The boy came to life!

The wife was thunderstruck. Her heart was overflowing with joy and she took the boy in her lap and started kissing him.

Then the wife bowed (*page lāgi*) to the woman. She realized that this was Śītalāma. With her hands folded the wife said, "Your blessings have given life to my son, otherwise it could not have happened. Śītalāma! You cooled my stomach (fulfilled my desires)."

The wife then asked, "While coming I met two ponds. No one drinks their water. What sins have they?"

Śītalāma said, "In the previous birth both of them were step-wives. They used to quarrel every day and they never gave buttermilk and vegetables to anyone, and even if they served them they would dilute it all with water. Because of those sins no one drinks their water. You should drink their water! Thereby their sins would be removed."

The wife then asked, "On the way I met two bulls. Tied to their

necks were stone disks of a hand-mill. They fought each other every-day and no one separated them. What sins have they?"

Śītalāma said, "In a previous birth they both were younger-brother's wife and older-brother's wife (*deranijethaṇi*). They would not allow anyone to grind or pound. Because of that sin their necks have stone disks of a handmill. You remove those disks. Their sins will be remedied."

Upon receiving Śītalāma's blessings, the wife went home fondling her son. On her way she met those bulls. She told them Śītalāma's tale and removed the stone disks from their necks. They both stopped fighting. Moving ahead she came to the ponds. The wife told the ponds Śītalāma's story and drank their water. The ponds became filled with birds and animals. Everybody drank their water.

The wife continued home with the boy and her mother-in-law was delighted to see the boy. But the poison in the mind of the older brother's wife increased.

Next year at Cooking Sixth (*Rāndhan Chath*) the older brother's wife felt that she too should act like the younger brother's wife so at night she left the hearth burning and went to sleep.

That night Śītalāma came and rolled in the hearth. Her whole body burned. She gave a curse. "Just as my body burned, let her stomach burn."

The next day when the older brother's wife looked in the crib, she found her son's corpse. Śītalāma's curse was felt.

Like the other wife she took her son in a basket and walked to meet Śītalāma. On her way she met two ponds. The ponds asked, "Sister, where are you going?"

"To Śītalāma," she replied.

The ponds asked, "Can you take our message?"

The older wife replied in anger, "I am not idle like you. I have a son who has been turned into a corpse."

Moving ahead she met two bulls. They asked, "Sister, sister, where are you going?"

"To Śītalāma."

"Can you take our message?"

Saying, "I am not idle," she proceeded further. The older wife went far into the forest. In the forest she saw Śītalāma under a Boradi tree in the form of an old woman, scratching her head.

The old woman asked, "Sister, sister, where are you going?"

The wife replied, "To Śītalāma."

The old woman said, "Why don't you examine my head?"

The older brother's wife answered scornfully, "I am not idle like you. I have a son who is turned into a corpse."

Having said this she walked away. Wandering the whole day she counted all the trees, but without seeing Śītalāma. Wandering till late

night, she became tired and returned home wailing, with the son's corpse!

Jai! Let Śītalāma be pleased with us as she was with the younger brother's wife!<sup>38</sup>

The second story of the Goddess of Good Fortune is found in several sources: it is mentioned in the Fairs and Festivals volume of the 1961 Census for Gujarat.<sup>39</sup> It appears in *Śrīvratārāja*, an eighteenth century Sanskrit law digest (*nibandha*) composed in Banaras, and it also surfaces in a Gujarati manual of the *vrats* of the twelve months. The latter rendition is given here.

#### Śītalā's *Katha*: Version F

On the Śītalā Sātām day have a bath before afternoon and place a pitcher on a floor which has been cleaned with cow's dung. Put Śītalā Mātā's image on that and perform the *pūjā*. And according to your ability (*yathāśakti*) feed Brahmans and give them gifts (*dāna*).

*Kathā*: There was a king in Hastinapur. His name was Indraduman. His queen's name was Dharmāśīlā. Dharmāśīlā had qualities in keeping with her name. Her faith in religion cannot be overstressed. The almighty had given the couple a daughter. Her name was Śubhakārī. She too was religious like her mother. In beauty she was like a heavenly nymph (*apsarā*). When she grew up her parents got her married to Guṇavāna (virtuous), the son of the king of Kaudinyanagar. After her marriage Śubhakārī went to her *sāsarā* (home of in-laws). From her *sāsarā* she returned to her *piyar* (home of parents).

After a few days the prince Guṇavāna came to take Śubhakārī back. It was *śītalā sātām* day. So Śubhakārī's parents told her, "Stay here, whether it is possible or not. It is *śītalā sātām* today. Mā Śītalā is going to bestow *Akhanda Saubhāgya* (complete good fortune). Therefore, you go after performing that *vrata*." After saying this the king started to make preparations for the *vrata*.

Śubhakārī was sent to the pond for a bath with the priest and his wife. The three of them were moving here and there in the forest. But the pond could not be seen anywhere. Fatigue is the word for their condition. Śubhakārī was exhausted. She had never walked so much. But even then she went on walking by taking the name of Śītalā. The tired priest was lying under the tree. The Brahman's wife sat nearby. But Śubhakārī went ahead in search of a pond. In the meantime she saw an old woman. She managed to go near the old woman and asked, "Dośima, Dośima, have you seen a pond in the vicinity? I have Mā

38. I owe thanks to Bharat Bhatt for this translation from the Gujarati. It is taken from Panchal (N. 23 above), pp. 57-62.

39. See Trivedi (N. 19 above), p. 91.

Śitalā's *vrat* today. I am the king's daughter. I have come for the bath."

The old woman felt pity for Śubhakārī. She told Śubhakārī, "It is good you have come, come on, I shall show you the pond. Take a dip in the pond, perform the *pūjā* of Mā Śitalā and your husband will live a long life (*chiranjīva*)."

Barely able to walk Śubhakārī went with the old woman. Walking some way, they came across a pond. There Śubhakārī took her bath. She performed the *pūjā* for Mā Śitalā. Śitalāma was pleased. And she gave her a divine favor (*varandāna*).

Feeling pleased Śubhakārī started going home. On the way she saw the Brahman's wife crying. On seeing the wife crying, the princess started to cry. After some time when they stopped crying, the Brahman's wife said, "Sister (*bahen*) I shall be a *sati* after my husband. My husband died from the bite of a sinful serpent, and what is the worth of my living?"

The princess became sad on hearing the story of the priestess and started to remember (pray to) Śitalāma.

Meanwhile the Brahmani said, "Till I go on the pyre do remain here. While saying those words she readied herself to become a *sati*."

The princess started to pray to Śitalāma. Being remembered, Śitalāma appeared and said, "Child, why did you remember me?"

While crying the princess said, "Mā, Mā, you are a remover of widowhood, please have mercy for me, give life to this priest."

Śitalāma told the princess, "Child, give the merit of the *vrat* done today, and her husband will come alive." The princess gave the merit of her *vrat* to the Brahman's wife and thereby the priest got life. On seeing this the Brahmani also thought of performing the *vrat* of Śitalāma. She told the princess, "Sister, tell me the method of the *vrat*. Whether it is something that can be told or cannot be told, I wish to do Śitalāma's *vrat* and perform the *pūjāna*." The princess showed her the method of the *vrat* and the Brahman's wife performed the *pūjā* to Śitalāma.

Meanwhile the prince started to worry as the princess was gone for a long time. He left home to find the princess. In the meantime the princess, the priest and the priest's wife were going along the road. The princess saw her husband dead. She started to cry. And she wouldn't stop. Seeing her crying, the trees, the animals and the birds also started to weep. Thereupon Śitalāma appeared and said, "Child, the one who performs Śitalāma's *vrat* never gets widowhood; so go and wake up your husband." On saying those words the goddess disappeared.

While remembering (praying to) Śitalāma the princess awakened her husband. The prince woke up the way he would, after a restful sleep, at home. Thereby Śubhakārī told the old woman, "Mā, give me such a favor that I would never get widowhood, not see poverty and not be

separated from my husband.”

Thereon the old woman took the form of Śītalāma and said, “ So, be it, whoever does the *pūjā* with complete faith (*bhaktipūrvak*) and hears this *kathā* shall never have the occasion to be a widow.” On saying this the goddess disappeared. Afterwards the princess worshipped Śītalāma, and took her *prasād*.

Let Śītalāma be pleased (*prasanna*) with all and fulfill their desires as she did those of the princess.<sup>40</sup>

This third Śītalā is notable for her lack of malevolence, especially in Śubhakāri's story; and her lack of association with smallpox. Śītalā continues to be worshipped in Gujarat on the light or dark sevenths of Shravan as the goddess of smallpox as well as being honored as the goddess of good fortune.<sup>41</sup> It is most peculiar, however, that these *kathās* are silent on Śītalā's association with the dreaded pox.

Surprisingly, there is a Sanskrit tradition that is equally uncontaminated by the smallpox associations. The *Śrīvratarāja*, presents a glowingly benevolent portrait of Śītalā, based on both the *Skanda-pūraṇa* and the *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa*. The *kathā* that is related is an elaborated version of Śubhakāri's story as told by Bhatt in Version F.

The surfacing of a Śītalā with no apparent connection with smallpox in eighteenth century Banaras is, to my mind, remarkable. Moreover, the attribution of Śītalā's story to the *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa* is hitherto unnoticed. Like the *Skanda-purāṇa*, the *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa* is a late, largely derivative work; Hazra dates its composition to between 500 A.D. and 1200 A.D.<sup>42</sup> That Śītalā is given recognition in a *nibandha* indicates that she was probably widely worshipped: whether or not she was honored by the masses as the goddess of smallpox or the giver of good fortune is unknown. It would appear, however, that Visvanatha had two extant traditions from which to choose in delineating the rules for Śītalā's *vrat*. For reasons unknown, he chose the giver of good fortune. Further exploration of other *nibandhas* will some day add insight into this development.

To what extent and for how long the Goddess of Good Fortune has been current in Gujarat is unknown. If it were not for the Banaras *nibandha* tradition, I would suggest that this is a rather new Śītalā. Clearly, though, the Goddess of Good Fortune has been known for

40. Bharat Bhatt provided this translation from the Gujarati version found in Bhatt (N. 23 above), pp. 194-199.

41. See Stevenson (N. 19 above), p. 306 and Trivedi (N. 19 above), p. 95.

42. R. C. Hazra, *Studies in the Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs* (2nd ed.), (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1975), p. 188.

some hundreds of years. Yet a new emphasis on this personality may be timely. With the scourge of smallpox removed and modern medicines making inroads on measles, chickenpox, and other childhood illnesses, Śītalā may need a new image in order to survive into the twenty-first century. The Śītalā *cālisā* of Pradhudas presents a similar image of Śītalā. While her association with smallpox remains, as was shown above, it is the demon Visphoṭak who gives smallpox and Śītalā who removes it. She is also the giver of children—and much more.

You Śītalā, are the Mother of the World  
 (*jaḡ ki mātā*),  
 And you the Father (*pitā*); giver of  
 happiness to the world.  
 You are the Preserver of the World (*jaḡaddhātrī*),  
 you who are easily pleased (*sukh sevī*),  
 Obeisance to you, Goddess Śītalā.<sup>43</sup>

Only time can tell if this 'Cool One' will gain widespread acceptance and devotees.

#### *The Cool One*

Oh wife of Bhat. You have refreshed us and  
 cooled our bodies. May the heat of the pox  
 afflicting your children subside and become  
 cool likewise.<sup>44</sup>

Oh Devi . . . Oh One who is All Coolness.<sup>45</sup>

The theme of Śītalā as 'The Cool One' is well developed in the texts and ethnographic accounts from all three regions considered here. Regardless of variations in the dates of her worship, its performance, its justifications, or its rewards, Śītalā is always 'The Cool One.' She abhors heat and all things hot and she eats primarily stale (cold) food and other cool things.<sup>46</sup> She destroys those who heat her and rewards those who bring her coolness. The coolness of the goddess is the one element common to all three Śītalās discussed above and the associated

43. Prabhudas (N. 24 above).

44. Quoted in Dubey & Mohril (eds.), *Census of India 1961 Madhya Pradesh* Vol. VIII, Part VII-B. Fairs and Festivals. (New Delhi: Superintendent of Printing, 1965) p. 93.

45. Visvanatha (N. 37 above), p. 310.

46. Bengal may provide an exception here: according to Nicholas the goddess is offered fish curries and other hot foods. See Ralph W. Nicholas, "The Village Mother in Bengal" in James Preston (ed.), *Mother Worship*, in press. Yet others note that victims of Śītalā are cooled (Bang, N. 3 above).

*vrat kathās*. This is the 'true' Śītalā.

A critical aspect of Śītalā's connection with coolness is her association with the cooled ashes of a hearth. A Bengali account of her origin states that she is born of the cooled ashes of a sacrificial fire: when Brahma asked her name, she had no answer, so he gave her the name *śītalā* to designate her origin.<sup>47</sup> In Gujarat she is believed to sleep on the domestic hearth on the days of her worship; thus fires are banned on those days.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, the critical episode in the *vrat kathā* given in Version E is Śītalā's rolling in the hearth. Śītalā reacts to heat with great anger: upon rolling in the still-lit hearth, she gives a curse: "Let your stomach (*peṭa*) receive burns just as my body did."<sup>49</sup> Only when Śītalā is once again cooled by the devotee's picking lice from her head is she forgiving.

The *vrat kathā* in Version C related the anger of the goddess when a fire is lit for the mother-in-law's bath on the day of Śītalā worship: after killing off the woman's family, Śītalā relents only when she herself is cooled with a bath of yogurt. If Śītalā's devotee, victim or house is heated, the goddess too is heated. When she is cooled, she in turn cools her devotees.

Śītalā often cools only after first bringing heat: The disease of smallpox is the goddess and Śītalā herself is within her victims and burns them. Yet when she and the victim are cooled, she can remove the heat of the illness:

When the body burns with poisonous eruptions,  
You make it cool and take away all pain.<sup>50</sup>

The *vrat kathā* given in Version A reiterates this theme: only when the king follows the rules of cooling his son by banning cooked and spicy foods in his house does Śītalā herself become cool and the son cured of the pox. Certainly the threat of the heat of the disorder (rage) of smallpox (Śītalā) is ever present.<sup>51</sup> If Śītalā is kept cool, her heat cannot develop and all are protected.

An eighteenth century Sanskrit text of ritual rules suggests yet another mode of cooling Śītalā. In *Śrīvratarāja* (supposedly following the *Skanda-purāṇa*) the goddess is invoked with these words:

47. See Nicholas (N. 3 above) and Bang (N. 3 above).

48. Stevenson (N. 19 above), p. 306.

49. Panchal (N. 23 above).

50. Prabhudas (N. 24 above).

51. The multiple meanings for *prakop* and *śītatā* create ambiguities in interpretation that are perhaps intended.

Oh Śītalā. Please burn (*dagdha*)  
 all of my sins (*pāṇon*). Give me gifts of  
 sons and grandchildren, wealth and prosperity,  
 Oh Devī . . . Oh One who is All Coolness.<sup>52</sup>

This passage presents the possibility that Śītalā remains cool by having devotees' sins to burn, hence expending her heat. If Śītalā is intrinsically cool, which her origin and hatred of heat suggest, the cooling mechanism of burning devotees' sins is an important component of her nature.

When the protective mechanisms of devotion and of not lighting a fire on the days of Śītalā worship fail, the goddess appears as the dreaded pox and must be cooled. Two forms of cooling dominate both ethnographic accounts and texts—swinging the goddess and cooling her with branches of the *nim* tree.

References to swinging are found in both oral and written texts: this line occurs in the *Śītalā cālīsā* of Prabhudas:

May you rock Mother, in a swing in the cool shade.<sup>53</sup>

In a similar fashion, we find swings mentioned in this song sung during epidemics in Nagpur District:

Oh carpenter of Neri village, fix iron bars  
 and chains on the cradle,  
 Your swing will be hung in the sky,  
 Oh Mother Mata. . . .  
 Mata May has come; she has come in the summer,  
 Offer Mother Mata a seat on the swinging cot,  
 Oh Mother Mata.<sup>54</sup>

Patients also are swung to cool them, as they too are the goddess.

The *nim* (margosa) tree is thought to be intrinsically cooling and using its branches and leaves to cool patients—and hence the goddess—is common. In Chhattisgarh, *nim* leaves are dipped in water and applied to the patient's body.<sup>55</sup> In Nagpur District, the swinging cot is surrounded by *nim* leaves and *nim* is referred to in song:

Cow's urine; a branch of a *nim* tree,  
 Bayya, fan (my child) gently, Oh Mother Mata.  
 Mother Mata's house is under a *nim* tree,

52. Visvanatha (N. 37 above), p. 310.

53. Prabhudas (N. 24 above).

54. Junghare (N. 21 above), pp. 301–307.

55. Babb (N. 21 above), p. 130.



Please make the shade cool, Oh Mother Mata.<sup>56</sup>

In Bhojpur branches of *nim* are hung at the door of the patient's room and the patient is fanned with *nim*. A Bhojpuri folksong reiterates the theme of the *nim* tree:

Oh Devi ji, in whose courtyard is the neem tree . . .  
Oh devotee, in the courtyard of my  
worshipper is the neem tree . . .<sup>57</sup>

In West Bengal, too, *nim* branches and leaves are spread about the room of a patient.<sup>58</sup> And it is common for the goddess to be worshipped at a *than* (place of worship) under a *nim* tree, i.e., she lives where coolness prevails.

Śītalā, 'The Cool One,' is intrinsically cool and her name is not an euphemism as Babb and Nicholas suggest.<sup>59</sup> Rather Śītalā is born of cooled ashes and is heated only when angry or when heated by others. Even then she seeks coolness. And she retains her own inner nature of coolness by burning the sins of her devotees, thus expending her own heat.

This essence of Śītalā links the six versions of Śītalā's *vrat kathās*. In each, the true Śītalā is shown to be the cool one. In each when she is angered, she burns; when she is cooled, she forgives. She is angered—and burns—and is cooled and forgives—in a variety of ways, associated with the particular personality of that Śītalā. Yet despite curses of smallpox or the destruction of a son and gifts of health and good fortune, Śītalā remains true to her name: She is 'The Cool One.'

Śītalā, the 'cool one,' exists only in northern India. Nevertheless, her Tamil counterpart, the smallpox goddess Mariamman, shares many of her characteristics. In particular Mariamman too seeks coolness, living often in a well and she, like Śītalā, was born of coolness. Likewise, she too when enraged attacks with the poxes. Moreover, Brenda Beck records a local myth in which the goddess, as in Śītalā's *vrat kathā* Version E, is recognized after having lice picked from her hair.<sup>60</sup> Yet in many respects these two goddesses are different: Śītalā is not concerned with the rains nor is she necessarily a territorial goddess. Their manners of worship are vastly different (in part due to

56. Junghare (N. 21 above), p. 309.

57. Upadhyaya (N. 21 above), pp. 86-87.

58. Bang (N. 3 above), p. 84.

59. See Babb (N. 21 above), p. 130 and Nicholas (N. 3 above), p. 25.

60. See Brenda E. F. Beck, "Māriyamman: The Vacillating Goddess," (unpublished paper, 1971).

other structural features of South Indian versus North Indian ritual patterns) as are their mythologies. Yet the connection of hot and cold, smallpox and the goddess, remains, highlighting yet one more consistency in the ever changing complexity of Hindu belief and ritual.

The processes that led to Śītalā's presence throughout northern India remain obscured. Probably the most important factor in her development is the prevalence in South Asian thought of an idiom of heating and cooling. Heat, although a life-giving substance, must be controlled and directed. Moreover excess heat can be destructive. Heat then should be balanced by coolness. But excessive coolness, too, is dangerous as it connotes non-life and non-energy, inertness. Yet some excesses of both hot and cold are allowed: in either case, power results. For example, an ascetic gains his power through *tapas*, heat generated by the withholding of semen—but this heat is controlled. Likewise the early morning baths of women in Magh (January–February) are cruelly cold, but the performance of the austerity itself is merit-making or power-making. Yet normally heat and cold are balanced. My friends in Karimpur, Uttar Pradesh, firmly believe that hot things should be eaten in the cold season and cold things in the hot season. To them, eating peanuts (a hot food) in June is a sure guarantee of illness or some physical impairment. In a similar manner, a feverish body is rubbed with different oils depending upon the season in order to create the right (healthful) balance of temperatures.

Margaret Egnor has pointed to yet another aspect of hot and cold which may be related to Śītalā and her actions. In Tamilnadu thought, coolness is associated with union (and midnight and mountains) whereas heat is associated with separation (death, midday and deserts).<sup>62</sup> Śītalā when cool is united with her devotees in a bond of devotion and protection. Śītalā when heated causes separation and death. Moreover, Śītalā expects coolness at midnight (the unlit fire) and is often cooled, as the *pūjā* rules demonstrate, at midday.

The personalities of Śītalā are constructed (as they would be by Levi-Strauss's bricoleur) out of this idiom of hot and cold. Śītalā, born of cooled ashes, is by nature cold. As a result, maintaining the necessary balance between hot and cold is for her a delicate matter. She, 'The Cool One,' is more easily burned than are others; what is

61. See Babb (N. 21 above) and Brenda E. F. Beck "Color and Heat in South Indian Ritual" *Man*, n.s. 4 (1969), pp. 553–572 for further discussions of hot and cold in South Asian thought.

62. Margaret Egnor, *The Sacred Spell and Other Conceptions of Life in Tamil Culture*. (The University of Chicago, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1978), pp. 100–102.

to others acceptable heat is to Śītalā excessive. Hence a hot bath in January is too hot for Śītalā. As the excessive heat of summer builds up, Śītalā must be cooled or she will burn—and in her rage will burn others (who are then cooled by concerned relatives, thereby cooling the goddess herself). Moreover when Śītalā is worshipped, she is able to expend her excess heat and maintain her necessary coolness by burning the sins of her devotees.

The idiom of hot and cold and a goddess named Śītalā have been interacting for centuries. Time and circumstances permit new variations on the theme of coolness so that an author of an eighteenth century ritual text can choose among several ‘Cool Ones.’ In modern times, the printing press and greater literacy have led to increased familiarity with local practices in other regions. One result is Śītalā, the Protector of Children. The theme of coolness is well-known to Hindi authors, while the Bengali goddess Śaṣṭhī is not. Working with the familiar idiom, they create a new Śītalā. She remains, as she no doubt will remain in the future regardless of her other attributes, ‘The Cool One.’ Ultimately, Śītalā is not saying something about smallpox, sons, or husbands; rather the meaning and the message of Śītalā is a reminder and warning to humans of the necessity of maintaining the proper balance of heat and coolness.

#### *Appendix A: Śītalā: The Textual Evidence*

A variety of texts are used in the preceding analysis. In order to render them, and Śītalā’s presence within them, more intelligible, they are briefly discussed below.

##### *Sanskrit Texts*

Śītalā is not well-known in classical Sanskrit sources, but she does appear in a variety of later works. Nicholas notes that Śītalā appears in brief passages in Sanskrit in the *Picchilā Tantra*, “a work of such obscurity that it does not even merit attention in Kane’s History of the Dharmasastra, and the *Skanda-Purāṇa*, a late largely derivative work.”<sup>63</sup> She also merits mention in the *Bhāvaprakāśah*, an Ayurvedic medical text, and the *Bhaviṣya-Purāṇa*.

Śītalā appears in *nibandhas* of the late medieval period. The *nibandhas* are law-digests composed by Sanskrit (Brahman) scholars of Hindu law. The topics covered in these digests are varied, ranging from criminal punishment to the rules of pilgrimage. One of the most popular topics of the digest writers was delineating the time of and

63. See Nicholas (N. 3 above), p. 3.

rules for *vratas* and other rituals. In fact, most *nibandhakāras* (digest-writers) devoted a considerable portion of their works to *vratas* and other rituals. The earliest digests date from the twelfth century, a result of attempts to deal with the masses of texts and commentaries that formed Hindu law. The *nibandhakāras*, in particular, are noted for their acceptance and use of puranic materials. In fact, the *nibandhakāras* performed a critical role in gaining acceptance for new rituals and beliefs by the Brahmanical elite.

These texts are not merely historical facts: as well as being used in law courts, a great many are currently being used by Brahman priests. They are in essence reference works used by the priest to properly guide his clients. Many have been translated into Hindi and other vernacular languages and they are readily available from religious booksellers. Although they are widely circulated, they are expensive and the translations, with a Sanskrit bias, are difficult to read. Hence I doubt if they are used outside priestly or scholarly circles. It should be noted, however, that they are sometimes quoted in the vernacular manuals discussed below.

Śītalā's presence in the *nibandhas* is uneven. Kane in the *History of Dharmasastra* claims references to Śītalā are found in the *Nirṇayasindhu* of Kamalakarabhatta (composed in Banaras in 1610) as well as in the *Vratarka*, composed by Kamalakara's great-nephew Sankar in the late 1600s. The *Nirṇayasindhu* is one of the most widely used *nibandhas* even to this day and Kamalakara is famous for citing 13 works of *śruti*, 131 *smṛti*, 68 *purāṇas*, and 272 digest writers and commentators in composing it.<sup>65</sup> It would not be surprising, therefore, to find Śītalā mentioned. Contrary to Kane, however, I have been unable to find any reference to her in this text (though Kane used an earlier edition with a Marathi translation). As the *Vratarka* is unavailable, this source cannot be checked.

Śītalā's *vrata* is found, however, in a later *nibandha*, the *Śrīvratarāja* of Visvanatha. Unlike the *Nirṇayasindhu* which emphasizes the correct dates and manners of yearly rituals, as well as a variety of other topics (*śrāddha*, pilgrimage, inheritance, etc.), *Śrīvratarāja* deals only with the rules for and rationales of *vratas*. 115 yearly *vratas* are discussed, by no means an excessive number; Hemandri, one of the earliest

64. See D. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*. Vol. I. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1930), p. 632 and D. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*. Vol. V, Part I. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1958), p. 43.

65. Robert Lingat, *Les Sources du droit dans le système traditionnel de l'Inde*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), p. 137.

and foremost *nibandhakāras*, included information on more than 700.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately little is known of Visvanatha aside from the fact that he was a Chitpavan Brahman living in Banaras. Visvanatha does, however, cite his sources and his citations for Śītalā are in themselves fascinating. He first cites the *Skanda-purāṇa*, but without any reference to Śītalā as the goddess of smallpox. All other texts thus far identified that quote from the *Skanda-purāṇa* do so in the context of Śītalā, the goddess of smallpox. Later, he provides a *kathā* for Śītalā's *vrāt*, a *kathā* attributed to the *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa*. No authors that I have seen identify Śītalā with this *purāṇa*, although there is no reason to doubt Visvanatha. But with only this one *nibandha* to enlighten us, and little known of its author or of its composition, the circumstances of Visvanatha's recognition of Śītalā remain clouded.

If and when Śītalā may appear in other *nibandhas* is unknown. I have checked another widely used work, the *Dharmasindhu* of Kasinath Upadhyaya (alias Baba Padhye). Composed in Maharashtra in 1790, the *Dharmasindhu* is modeled after the *Nirṇayasindhu*, but is simplified in tone and style. With Śītalā's absence from the *Nirṇayasindhu*, it is not surprising to find a similar hiatus in the *Dharmasindhu*.<sup>68</sup> A recent listing of *vrats* also excluded Śītalā ('The *Varṣakṛtyadīpaka*, *A Treatise on the Hindu Rites During the Year* by Parvatiya, published in Banaras in 1967).<sup>69</sup> The presence of 'The Cool One' in Sanskrit ritual treatise is sporadic and more exploration is necessary before this aspect of her history can be understood.

### Popular Guides

Manuals of religious instruction in Hindi and Gujarati provide critical data for the preceding analysis. These manuals have been discussed in detail elsewhere:<sup>70</sup> a few comments here on their attributes will place them in context.

The guides to religious practices known by some variant of *The*

66. See Kane 1958 (N. 64 above), p. 47.

67. See Kane 1930 (N. 64 above), p. 632.

68. See Kasinath Upadhyaya, *Dharmasindhu*. Orig. 1710. With a Hindi translation by Pandit Sudama Misra Sastri. (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1968).

69. See M. M. Nityananda Pant Paravatiya, *Varṣakṛtyadīpaka (A Treatise on the Hindu Rites During the Year)*. Completed by Pandit Gopal Shastri Nene. The Kashi Sanskrit Series 96. (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1967).

70. See Susan S. Wadley "Popular Hinduism and Mass Literature in North India: A Preliminary Analysis." In G. R. Gupta (ed.) *Main Currents in Indian Sociology*, (in press).

*Fairs and Festivals of the Twelve Months* are becoming increasingly popular as literacy spreads and migration breaks the old patterns of religious instruction from one's elders. These manuals are sold outside temples, in local markets, and at district fairs. They range in cost from one to six rupees. The earliest that I have found is dated 1962; some are very recent. None are written in literary standard Hindi (or Gujarati) though there is wide variation in linguistic style and tone. Both linguistically and in context, it appears that most are aimed at literate women, both urban and rural. A few publishers also export to Fiji, England and other countries with large Indian populations. In response to a survey questionnaire, some publishers explicitly indicated a large export market: in addition, a number of the books have prices printed in both rupees and shillings.

The explicit aim of these manuals is instructive: each version lists the festivals of the year, usually beginning with the first day of the light half of Caitra (the new year by the North Indian calendar). The information for each festival usually includes the correct date, its purpose and other characteristics, and rules for its proper performance. In addition, relevant stories, myths, and songs may be provided. Some indicate the appropriate drawings to be made (e.g. for *karvā cauth*, Pitcher Fourth on the dark fourth of Kartik) or give color lithographs or line drawings of the deities. Through story, song, and rules, the reader should be able to perform and appreciate all of the festivals of the year.

It is extremely doubtful if any readers perform most of the festivals listed in any one manual: the Hindi versions average 227 pages with an average of 85 festivals discussed. Bharatiya<sup>71</sup> alone lists 144 rituals. Yet while more than 184 different rituals are given, only eight are discussed in all of the books.

These guides reflect the proclivities of their authors: One author told me that his sources included the *purāṇas*, *dharmaśāstras* and his mother: I suspect a similar background for all the others, with a bias towards the mother(s). The variation from one guide to another is extreme and while in some sense these works may be leading to religious standardization, at present they are also diversifying. The presence of *Śitalāṣaṣṭhi* demonstrates this diversification, despite its being also closely allied to standardization.

---

71. See Bharatiya (N. 16 above).