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Unconventional Transformations: A Study of Goddess Śītalā in Mumbai and Environs

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Abstract: The unconventional nature of idols of deities causes a challenge in academia to comprehend the true significance and value of their cultural heritage due to the profound changes in their notions and beliefs over time. The frequent risk of losing or misunderstanding the original meanings and identities of Indian deities primarily stems from significant temporal and contextual changes. Societal evolution has substantially transformed their identities. These alterations in worship practices have implications for cultural studies and religious fusion. It is crucial to explore how various theories, iconography, and symbolism enhance our understanding of the evolving dynamics in religious practices over a period. Accordingly, this study will examine the unconventional transformations of deities' identities, with icons of goddess Śītalā, serving as the primary case. Goddess Śītalā is an Indian Hindu goddess associated with epidemics, who serves as the patron deity for both smallpox and chickenpox. The study will concentrate on the port sites of Mumbai and its suburbs, including Greater Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Thane, and Palghar with the primary aim of comprehending the multifaceted aspects associated with the unconventional nature of icons of goddess Śītalā.

Keywords: Epidemic Goddess, Goddess Śītalā, Iconic Worship, Cultural Transformation, Archaeology of Religion, Mumbai

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Religiosity, rituals, and beliefs have always had a variegated presence in India. Each place has derived and appropriated deities and rituals to fit them into the lived realities of people in their respective

geographical locations. The study of Indian deities is complex due to the evolving nature of their representations and worship practices. Over time, the meanings and identities of these deities have been deeply influenced by societal changes and shifting religious contexts. This spatial and temporal difference is especially evident in the worship of goddess Śītalā, who has been traditionally worshipped and whose cult gradually spread across different regions of India over time. The mythologies and rituals surrounding the goddess have metamorphosed into a situational and region-specific tapestry where its representations have accrued a stark difference from how it was represented through the traditional iconic form of goddess Śītalā. Understanding this evolution is key to appreciating India's rich cultural heritage and the complex dynamics of religious practices. In the Indian subcontinent, Śītalā has been acknowledged as a minor deity, but she has gained widespread veneration as an epidemic goddess by being associated with diseases like smallpox and chickenpox (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Goddess of Smallpox-Śītalā (Courtesy: Sitala, Indian goddess of smallpox and other epidemics. Watercolour. (n.d.). [1 painting: watercolour]. Wellcome Collection. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.24793420>)

This research paper explores the unconventional representations of Goddess Śītalā found in Mumbai and its adjoining suburban port towns. The notion of ‘unconventional’ is reflected in those representations of goddess Śītalā that show variations in her identity from the traditionally established form of the goddess seated on a donkey. The study concentrates on Śītalā idols enshrined in Hindu temples in Dahanu, Nallasopara, Vasai, Mahim, Ghodbunder, Thane, Kalyan, Belapur, and Panvel (Figure 2), primarily focusing on Śītalā's role within the Hindu religious context, particularly as a goddess associated with epidemics. The research will focus on two main objectives: one, is the study of Śītalā idols, and her worship pattern in Mumbai and its suburban port town; and second, understanding the variations of her idols in Mumbai and the suburbs underlying her causes, inferences for the cultural and religious understanding of the contemporary society. To study these objectives, the paper is structured in three parts: the first provides an overview of the Śītalā cult in different regions

of India, and the second examines her worship in Maharashtra. The third part analyses the distinct nature of her iconography in the study area, exploring its underlying causes and broader implications for cultural and religious understanding in contemporary society.

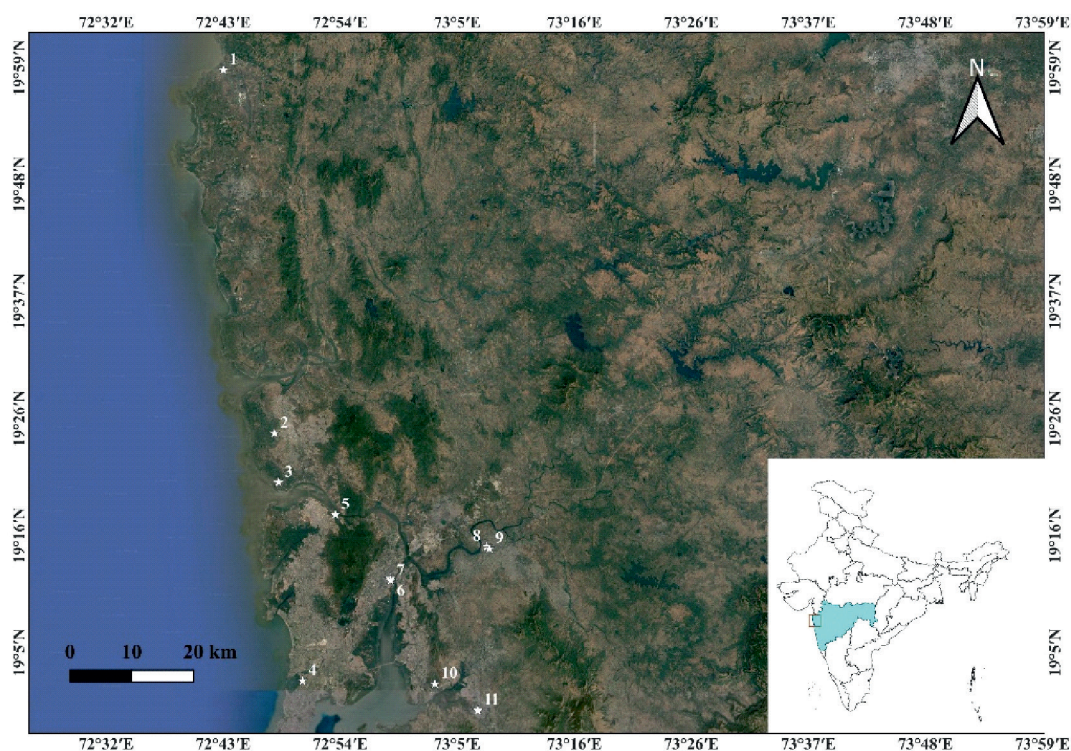


Figure 2: Google Earth Map of the Eleven Samples, credits: Siripuram Samanvith

Overview of Śītalā Cult

Śītalā, a Hindu goddess in the Indian subcontinent has gained prominence across the India with regard to its etymology, mythology, ritualistic practices and geographic distributions in the past century. It is important to look at these aspects to make sense of the multifaceted ways in which the goddess is established at different places. An extensive look into the literature surrounding it will also help in tracing the genealogy of scholarly thought on goddess Śītalā and the surrounding discourses on worship, epidemics and vernacular religiosity.

The name ‘Śītalā’ was derived from the Sanskrit word which is frequently interpreted as ‘cold’. This etymology is cited in encyclopedias (Shastri 1898; Jordan 1941; Prabhudesai 1968; Joshi 1977) and in subsequent foundational work on Śītalā, particularly in the context of her association with epidemics (Wilkins 1882; Vaidya 1929; Maury 1969; Wadley 1980; Nicholas 1981; Zha 1989; Jordan 2004).

In this way, the goddess is linked to fever-causing diseases and is worshipped as a goddess of disease who helps to cure or remove fever, especially during times of epidemic. Numerous scholars have worked on Śītalā’s concept, rituals, and evolution. While earlier scholars have examined the goddess in considerable depth—offering detailed analyses and diverse interpretations (Misra 1969; Jash 1982; Thein, Goh & Phua 1988; Naraindas 2003; Ferrari 2010; Ghatak 2013), more recent studies have approached Śītalā from varied and interdisciplinary perspectives (Ferrari 2015; Sohail 2015; Chakraborty 2019; Devika 2022; Saha 2023). Current academic inquiries continue to explore

her evolving role in contemporary contexts, including public health, environmental discourse, and vernacular religious practices.

The earliest epigraphic record mentioning her name is found at the Sacyā Mātā temple, Osian, Rajasthan. The facade of the sanctum bears an inscription stating the installation of idols of goddesses Sacyā, Śītalā, and Caṇḍikā around the eleventh century CE (Tiwari & Giri 1983). The textual reference of Śītalā can be seen in the Prabhāsakṣetramāhātmya of Skandapurāṇa (7.1.135.1-7). It talks about the goddess Śītalāgaurī, for alleviating the suffering of the Kalī Yuga, by offering instructions on how to worship the goddess, highlighting her capacity to cure illnesses such as chickenpox, smallpox, and boils (Balooni & Panda 2015: 403-404). Similarly, Ayodhyāmāhātmya of Skandapurāṇa (2.8.8.21-28) indicates the worship of goddess Śītalā as a part of pilgrim of Ayodhyā, discussing the Śītalā temple alongside other associated deities like Baṇḍī and Cuḍaka (Joshi 1905: 356). Shrī Bṛhad-Nārādīya Mahāpurāṇa (1:117.94-99) includes chapter Dvādaśamāsa-sthitāṣṭamīvrata-nirupaṇam containing prayers associated with Śītalā, providing details about her representation and rituals (Zha 1989). Bhāva-Prakāśa, medieval period Ayurvedic literature, has a chapter on Masūrikādhikāraḥ dealing with smallpox and boils (Bhāva-Prakāśa 4:9.1-38). A subchapter of the same, on Śītalādhikāraḥ includes Śītalāstotra, prayer to goddess Śītalā, being an epidemic goddess (Vaidya 1929: 681-682).

Shrī Bṛhad-Nārādīya Mahāpurāṇa I:117.96¹ and Bhāva-Prakāśa 4:9.21² details her iconographic description as riding on a donkey and carrying attributes such as a broom, winnowing fan, and water pot. The earliest iconographic antiquity of Śītalā, includes the Śītaleśvara temple at Jhalrapatan, Rajasthan (Cunningham 1871; Singh 2002; Mankodi 2019), and the shrine at Surya-Kunda of Modhera Sun Temple, Gujarat (Fischer 2014). At the Śītaleśvara temple in Jhalrapatan, Rajasthan, dating to 689 CE, the images of seven goddesses are placed near the main temple. Their depiction, which includes nudity and the presence of attributes like a broom, a winnowing fan, and a donkey as a mount, is closely associated with the iconography of Śītalā (Mirza 2006). The shrine of Śītalā at Modhera Sun Temple dating to the eleventh century CE has a sculpture that appears to be from the same time period as the temple. Here Śītalā has twelve hands, some of them are broken, while others holding attributes like a thunderbolt, sword, water pot, and winnowing fan above her head. She is seen sitting on an animal (unidentified as the head of the animal is broken), which might be a donkey (Burgess & Cousens 1974; Tiwari and Giri 1983; Fischer 2014). This portrayal of Goddess Śītalā is observed across India. However, in rural areas worshippers often use stones adorned with vermilion for aniconic veneration (Shastri 1898). In Bengali vernacular poetic compositions from early modern period known as Mañagalakāvyaś, she is portrayed as a married Brahmin woman wearing a white sādī with a red border, adorned with long hair and a large round mark of kumakuma on her forehead. However, her essential attributes remain consistent with those mentioned earlier (Wadley 1980; Ghatak 2013).

The goddess is worshipped through various rituals across different regions of India, each with its own customs and dates. The cultic worship of Śītalā can be seen in states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal (Wadley 1980; Nicholas 1981; Ferrari 2010, 2015). Here she is worshipped not only as an epidemic goddess but also venerated as a village deity (grāmadevatā), who is sought for ailments of diseases, good fortune, and the well-being of children. In Gujarat, she is venerated as a giver of good fortune to husband and children, embodying a cool goddess who absorbs heat (Wadley 1980). The establishment of Śītalā's cult in Varanasi can be traced to sixteenth-century textual sources, specifically, the Kāśī-khaṇḍa of the Skandapurāṇa, which attributes to her the power to heal smallpox in Kāśī (Nicholas 1981). In states like West Bengal and Gujarat, her worship is especially prominent. One of the main rituals associated with her is Śīlī Saptamī, where offering stale food plays a central role throughout India (Wadley 1980; Ghatak 2013).

Other common offerings include coconuts, garlands, betel leaves, fruits, sādīs, and food (naivedya). Rituals also involve bathing the goddess with water, milk, or curd. Over time, her worship has come to be associated with diseases such as AIDS, HIV, and cholera, especially in West Bengal, with similar traditions seen in other parts of the country (Ferrari 2010). She is known by many names, including Olī Bībī (goddess of flux/cholera), Basanta Buḍḍhī, Saḍela Mātā, Cecaka Mātā, Raktīvatī, Choṭī Mā, Baḍī Mā, Mātāṅgī, Mahākālī, Jyeṣṭhā, Ṣaṣṭhī, and Kālarātrī, reflecting her widespread presence across India (Shastri 1898; Ferrari 2010; Ghatak 2013).

As noted earlier, there is an established cult of Śītalā in Gujarat, where she is traditionally worshipped as a goddess associated with epidemics, following conventional iconographic forms (Fischer 2014). While this form of worship is well-rooted in Gujarat, Śītalā is also venerated in Maharashtra, though in more localized and indigenous ways. This variation may be linked to migration patterns around 1960 CE, when many Gujaratis moved to Maharashtra, especially to the Greater Bombay region, now known as Mumbai (Zachariah 1966). As a result, Śītalā's worship can be observed in Mumbai and its surrounding port towns, although it does not follow the same organized cultic structure seen in Gujarat. These aspects of her worship practices in Maharashtra and the notable differences are explored further in the paper with specific examples.

Śītalā in Maharashtra

Being the minor goddess, she is venerated for ailments of diseases like smallpox, chickenpox, measles, mumps, etc. The practice of Śītalā worship is particularly unique in Maharashtra, and its historical presence is attested by the earliest known idol found at the Śiva Temple in Mukhed. Although identified as Jyeṣṭhā by Dr. G. B. Deglurkar (2019), the idol provides evidence of Śītalā worship in Maharashtra as early as the twelfth century CE. This can be affirmed by her prominent attributes like a broom, sword, sifting fan, and kapāla, with two skeleton figures and a donkey in front of her as her mount. Two living temples of her in Maharashtra, at Kelve-Mahim, and Chaul, (Enthoven 1923: 179, 268) are important centers for observing rituals of goddess Śītalā by people suffering from epidemics.

Building upon our analysis, we found a noticeable geographical gap regarding Maharashtra's exclusive study on Śītalā worship, despite some mentions in various works (Raghunathji 1895; Enthoven 1923; Dallapiccola 2004; Vicziany & Bapat 2009). Although Maharashtra lacks a prominent cult dedicated solely to Śītalā, her significance in worship is still evident. The ports and suburban regions of Maharashtra were explored to understand her worship pattern in Maharashtra. The ethnographic study seeks to understand the nuances related to her identification, interpretation, and veneration in the selected geographical location.

Goddess Śītalā in Selected Localities of Mumbai and Environs

The temples of Goddess Śītalā were found along the ports of Mumbai and other suburban regions. Documenting these temples paved way to make sense of the nuances worship patterns that were prevalent in Maharashtra. There is a total of eleven samples documented, each in respective ports, namely Dahanu, Sopara, Vasai, Mahim, and Ghodbunder; two in Thane, two in Kalyan; again, each one at Panvel, and Belapur (refer figure 2). Different methods, such as exploration, surveys, and interviews with temple priests and locals, have been employed to gather information, resulting in documentation of temples and idols dedicated to the goddess Śītalā. This documentation encompasses photographs taken by the first author from November 2023 to March 2024 and a detailed description of iconography, including style and distinctive features. Additionally, interviews have been conducted to record the rituals, customs, and festivals observed at these sites to understand her role as the goddess of the epidemic.

Table 1 is a comprehensive list of the Śītalā temples documented for the present research, considering her temple location in the settlement and details of her veneration. Each sample is recorded sequentially as Sample 1, Sample 2, Sample 3, and so on to denote the idols in the temples of Śītalā for better understanding. In the process of writing acronyms such as S1, S2, S3, etc. are used for convenience. Sample 3 which is located in same temple sanctorum at Vasai as two idols of Śītalā in worship associated with two different communities and belong to two separate categories. Hence, they are referred as 3A and 3B to mark the difference. (refer Table 1).

Table 1: Comprehensive List of the Śītalā Temples Documented

<i>S. No</i>	<i>Name of the Temple where Śītalā shrine is located</i>	<i>Location of the Śītalā shrine in the settlement</i>	<i>Is Śītalā a Primary Deity</i>	<i>If not then, who is the Primary Deity</i>	<i>List of Secondary Deities</i>	<i>Primary Veneration of Śītalā is for ...</i>	<i>Other Veneration of Śītalā, if available</i>	<i>Communities Associated</i>
S1	Mallikarjuna and Śītalā Devī Mandir, Dahanu, Palghar	At the old village, near Dahanu fort	No	Śīva	Gaṇapaṭī Māruṭī Śītalā	Smallpox and Measles	-	-
S2	Chakreshvar Mahādeva Mandir, Nallasopara, Palghar	Near Ancient Chakreshvar Lake in the old settlement	No	Śīva	Gaṇapaṭī Viṣṇu-Lakṣmī Māruṭī Śītalā	Chickenpox and Measles	-	-
S3A and S3B	Śītalā Devī Mandir, Vasai, Palghar	Fishermen's settlement at old Vasai village	Yes	-	-	Chickenpox Smallpox Measles Mumps	-	<i>Kolis</i> (fishermen), and Gujarati speaking
S4	Shri Śītalā Devī Mandir, Mahim, Mumbai	-	Yes	-	Gaṇapaṭī, Māruṭī, Śīva Viṭṭhala-Rakhumāī Māruṭī Trimukhī Mahākālī Mātā Khokalā Devī Śāntā Durgā	Smallpox, Chickenpox, Measles, Cough and Cold.	Guardian deity of fishermen community	<i>Bhandaris</i> (toddy tappers), <i>Dhangars</i> (shepherds) and <i>Kolis</i>
S5	Amruteshwar Mandir, Ghodbunder, Thane	On the shore of Retibunder	No	Śīva	Gaṇapaṭī Gaṃgā Hanumāna Śītalā	Smallpox	-	-
S6	Kopineshwar Mandir, Thane	Near the ancient Masunda Lake	No	Śīva	Śītalā Dakṣiṇa Mukhī Hanumāna, Datta, Gaṇapaṭī-Māruṭī, Hanumāna Kālabhairava Pañcamukhī Śivaliṃga Rāma Vasiṣṭha Munī Viṭṭhala-Rakhumai venerated stone	Smallpox and Chickenpox	-	-
S7	Shri Śītalā Maa Mandir, Thane	-	Yes	Śītalā	-	Smallpox	-	Gujarati speaking

S. No	Name of the Temple where Śītalā shrine is located	Location of the Śītalā shrine in the settlement	Is Śītalā a Primary Deity	If not then, who is the Primary Deity	List of Secondary Deities	Primary Veneration of Śītalā is for ...	Other Veneration of Śītalā, if available	Communities Associated
S8	Shri Śītalā Devī Mandir, Kalyan	The eastern boundary of old Kalyan	No	Gaondevi	Śītalā Gaṇapaṭī	Smallpox and Chickenpox	Boundary and Guardian Deity	-
S9	Śītalā Devī Mandir, Kalyan	In the locality of Teli Community	Yes	Śītalā	Gaṇapaṭī	-	Guardian Deity (Kshetrapal)	Telis (oil merchants)
S10	Santoṣī Maa Mandir, Belapur, Navi Mumbai	Mata Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar	No	Santoṣī Mātā	Śrīyāde Mātā Ayappā Muthappana Madappurā Gaṇānana Mahārāja Śītalā Durgā Mātā Hanumāna Amāja Mātā Pahāḍeśvara Mahādeva Mahalakṣmī	-	-	Malyali, Gujarati, and Marathi speaking
S11	Shri Śītalā Devī Mandir, Panvel, Raigad	Near the old Ballaleshwar lake of old Panvel village	Yes	Śītalā	-	Smallpox and Chickenpox	-	-

In the documentation it is seen that all these are living temples. At some shrines, Śītalā was found draped in cloth, which made it difficult to document the idols in detail, however, the best attempt has been made. The study of the goddess Śītalā provides a multifaceted understanding of her worship in the ports of Mumbai and its surrounding suburbs. The analysis of these samples explores various dimensions, including iconography, the unconventional forms of her representations, community associations, status, and related goddesses. Based on the observation of the nature of the data, the idols of Śītalā (samples) are categorized into three types: iconic forms, anthropomorphized, and stone worship, which are discussed in the following section.

Iconic worship refers to the veneration of an image or idol that materially represents a deity. As described in *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, such images are sculpted with multiple hands holding specific attributes, seated in defined postures, often on a designated mount (Rao 1968: 27). Another form of worship is aniconic worship (Eck 1986), which can be categorized into two types: anthropomorphic representations and stone worship. Anthropomorphic worship involves objects like trees or stones that are modified to resemble a deity. These modifications may include the application of facial features, sculpting and the draping of cloth to create a human-like appearance. This form of worship attributes human characteristics, emotions, or intentions to non-human objects (Shaman, Saide, and Richert 2018). On the other hand, stone worship differs slightly, as it involves the veneration of unmodified stones, random pieces without added features treated as sacred without giving them a human-like form (Lahiri and Bacus 2004).

Study of Śītalā's Documented Idols

Table 2: Detailed Description of Icons of Śītālā

Sample No.	Nature of the Icon	Location of the Deity	Pose and Posture of a Deity	Deity is seated on	Mount or Vahana	No. of Hands	UR	LR	UL	LL	Is the Deity wearing a Crown (Mukuta)	Dress	Ornaments	Remarks
S1	Following Iconographic Scheme	At the sanctum doorway	Standing in Samapada	-	Donkey (Standing next to her at the bottom left)	4	water-pot	Broom	Winnowing Fan	The severed head of the demon	Yes	Lower garment and <i>uttariya</i> can be seen flanking the lower two arms	Earrings, Necklace, armlets, and bangles	The face has incurred some damage, resulting in weathered facial features.
S2	Following Iconographic Scheme	Behind the Mārufī Shrine on the marble platform	Seating in Lalitāsana	Donkey	Donkey (Mounted on)	4	Winnowing fan	Bowl	Waterpot	Broom	Yes, with a halo	Saree	Earrings, necklaces, armlets, bangles	-
S3 A	Anthropomorphic Stone	On the marble platform	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	No	-	Kumkum, Bindī, Nose pin	Another small anthropomorphic stone alongside the main deity. The facial features are painted
S3 B	Following Iconographic Scheme	On the marble platform	Seating in Lalitāsana	Donkey	Donkey (Mounted on)	4	Winnowing fan	Bowl	Waterpot	Broom	Yes	Saree	Necklace, Bangles, Waistband	-
S4	Anthropomorphic stone	Installed in the pit on the marble platform	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Yes	-	Earrings	Bust with prominent applique eyes and intricate carved facial features
S5	Misfit- iconographic not following scheme	Placed on the wall	Seating	Animal (unidentified)	Animal (unidentified) Mounted on	4	Plough	Trident	Disc	Unidentified object	Yes	Lower Garment	Earrings, Necklace	A thick layer of vermillion is seen
S6	Iconographic not following scheme	On the Marble Platform	Seating in Lalitāsana	Lotus	-	4	Abhaya mudra	Varada mudra	Sword	Unidentified object	Yes	Saree	Necklace, Bangles	-
S7	Iconographic not following scheme	On the Marble Platform	Seating in Lalitāsana	Lotus	-	4	Covered with cloth	Placed on lap	Covered with cloth	Varada mudra	Head covered with cloth	Saree	Necklace, Bangles, <i>Mangalsutra</i>	Prominent applique eyes, nose, and mouth
S8	Anthropomorphic stone	On the Marble Platform	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Draped in cloth and flower garlands

Sam- ple No.	Nature of the Icon	Location of the Deity	Pose and Posture of a Deity	Deity is seating on	Mount or Vahana	No. of Hands	UR	LR	UL	LL	Is the Dei- ty wearing a Crown (Mukuta)	Dress	Ornaments	Remarks
S9	Iconographic not following scheme	On the Marble Platform	Seating	Tiger acc. to locals but can't be seen due to clothes	Tiger acc. to locals but can't be seen due to clothes Mounted on	2 (other two hands maybe there but can't be seen due to clothes)	Trident	-	Noose	-	Yes	Draped in cloth	Nosepin, Neck- lace, <i>Mangal- sutra</i> , Bangles	-
S10	Stone	Shrine on the ground	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Covered in vermilion
S11	Anthropomor- phic stone	In the pit on the ground	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<i>Mangalsutra</i>	Applique eyes and thick layer of vermilion

Table 2 presents the nature of the documented data, including details about Śītalā's worship at each temple, the temple's location, her pose and posture, a detailed description of her iconography where applicable, and any additional remarks. A closer analysis of this data suggests that the samples can be grouped into the three categories mentioned earlier (Figure 3), based on their form, mode of worship, and process of deification. The following discussion is therefore organized according to these categories. The reasons for this classification are explained through the discussion of selected samples (Table 1).

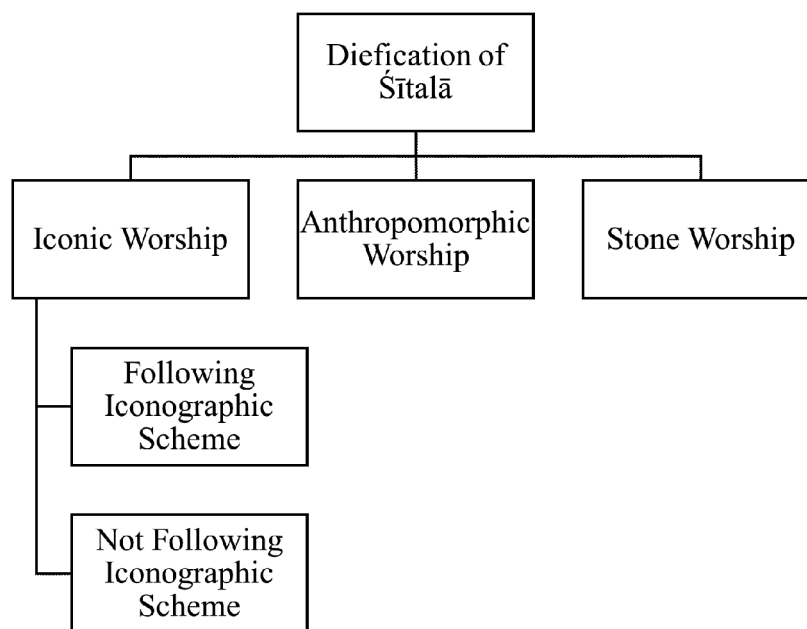


Figure 3: Categories of the Icons of Goddess Shitala

The first category focuses on the worship of the goddess Śītalā in iconic forms, where her idols are actively venerated. Within this category, there are two subtypes based on the representation of the idols.

The first sub-category includes idols that follow the traditional iconography of Śītalā - depicted riding a donkey and holding a bowl, waterpot, winnowing fan, and broom. As the goddess of epidemic, her mythology includes her slaying Jvarāsūra, or demon Jvara, the personification of fever. Usually, her mount donkey symbolizes Jvarāsūra in her idols and riding on him portrays her conquer over Jvara, both demon as well as fever. Examples of this type are Samples S1 (Figure 4), S2 (Figure 5), and S3B (Figure 6) from Dahanu, Nallasopara, and Vasai respectively. Among the idols of Śītalā, following traditional iconography, S1 (refer Figure 4) from Dahanu shows a variation. Here, Śītalā is standing in samapāda mudrā instead of riding on a donkey; so, the donkey is depicted beside her at the left bottom. All other attributes of her, i.e. waterpot, winnowing fan, and broom are consistent in this idol, but there is an additional attribute in her lower left hand: the severed head of a demon which is not typically depicted in her iconography. In this idol, she is holding a severed head, which can be considered as demon Jvara. The presence of idols with traditional iconography at these three locations may be due to their proximity to the Maharashtra-Gujarat border, where the influence of Śītalā's cult is more prominent. The installation of such idols following an iconographic scheme suggests that the cult of Śītalā was well-established in Gujarat and likely gained further prominence during the period of epidemics. However, the subsequent categorization not only takes a different route altogether but also extols the indigenous nature of worship that was unique to Maharashtra.



Figure 4: S1, Goddess Śītalā at Dahanu



Figure 5: S2, Goddess Śītalā at Nallasopara

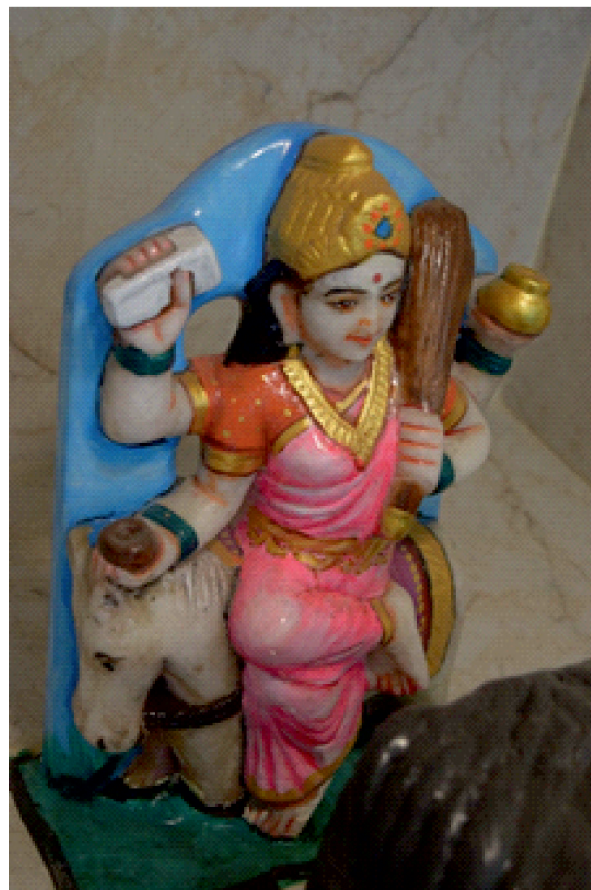


Figure 6: S3B, Goddess Śītalā at Vasai

The second sub-category includes idols that do not follow the traditional iconographic scheme of the goddess, such as Samples S5, S6, and S7 from Ghodbunder and Thane respectively; and S9 from Kalyan. Among the idols that do not follow Śītalā's traditional iconography, S5 (Figure 7) of Ghodbunder is worshipped as Śītalā but has a masculine torso and holds attributes that do not match her usual symbols. The animal behind the figure also cannot be clearly identified as a donkey. Samples S6 (Figure 8) and S7 (Figure 9) at Thane show the goddess seated on a lotus and holding objects like a sword and a noose. In contrast, S9 (Figure 10) from Kalyan is actually an image of the goddess Ambā Mātā, holding an axe and a sword, but it is still worshipped as Śītalā.



Figure 7: S5, Goddess Śītalā at Ghodbunder



Figure 8: S6, Goddess Śītalā at Thane



Figure 9: S7, Goddess Śītalā at Thane



Figure 10: S9, Goddess Śītalā at Kalyan

The second category is between the abstract and iconic worship of Śītalā, which includes anthropomorphized depictions. In this case, mainly stones, fragments of old idols or temples, and eroded sculptures with no visible features are anthropomorphized by adding symbolic markings to indicate the presence of the goddess. These markings often symbolize the eyes, mouth, other body features, or sometimes even materialistic features such as clothes and ornaments. The practice of worshipping facemasks or ritual heads, known as mukhavaṭā in the local language, is common in goddess worship across India (Dahejia 1999; Redij 2012, 2024; Redij & Joglekar 2011; Kale 2022). Samples S3A, S4, S8, and S11 are examples of anthropomorphized worship of Śītalā in Mumbai and its suburbs.

S3A (Figure 11) at Vasai is a carved stone in worship, resembling the facemask or ritual head, highlighting the facial features of her on a large scale. At Mahim, S4 (Figure 12), A stone is anthropomorphized into a face of a sculpture that may have lost its original context over time and is now worshiped as Śītalā. The S8 (Figure 13) at Kalyan is the stone in worship with no carved features or external features such as applique eyes or mouth; but it is draped in cloth and flowers. S11 (Figure 14), located at Panvel is a fragment of a sculpture that appears anthropomorphized due to additional symbols i.e. applique eyes. The face of the sculpture is partially visible as well as a thick vermilion layer obscures its full identification. Therefore, these samples can be placed in the second category of anthropomorphized worship of Śītalā, in which she is honoured in a stone form with added features as described earlier.



Figure 11: S3A, Goddess Śītalā at Vasai



Figure 12: S4, Goddess Śītalā at Mahim



Figure 13: S8, Goddess Śītalā at Kalyan



Figure 4: S11, Goddess Śītalā at Panvel

The third category is the stone worship, where random piece of stone is turned into worship of God/ Goddess without giving it form/ features like it was discussed in the category of anthropomorphic features. This is another general phenomenon seen in India where people have turned a normal stone into God/ Goddess by applying vermilion to it; worshipping it and seeking blessings from it. Similarly,

S10 at Belapur (Figure 15), is the only place where we have a notion of the goddess, which is not represented in an iconographic form, and hence, we find a random piece of stone as goddess Śītalā, within a cluster of twelve temples of assorted gods and goddesses. Adjacent to the Santoṣī Mātā temple, a small stone was discovered, leading to the establishment of a shrine for Śītalā Goddess as her symbolic representation with covering in vermillion. Local informants have confirmed that her worship is conducted without a specific focus on disease eradication.



Figure 15: S10, Goddess Śītalā at Belapur

Categorizing the idols into these three categories reveals a unique pattern of worship that is prevalent in Maharashtra. They are not just expressions of devotions but a milieu of local cultures, myths and beliefs. The stark difference in representation and rituals when it comes to the second category of idols in particular reveals that despite its roots in West Bengal and Gujarat, the goddess Śītalā cult has been appropriated and contextualized into the local tapestry of life in the port cities of Maharashtra.

Discussion

The classification into these three categories helps in understanding the patterns of worship of Śītalā in Mumbai and its surrounding areas. While certain common practices, such as idol worship, anthropomorphic representations, or worship through stones, are evident, the expressions of devotion also reflect people's emotions and spiritual connections. Whether she is worshipped through a traditional idol, an idol that does not follow standard iconography, or without an idol at all, her role as

an epidemic goddess remains central in the region. However, there are a few exceptions to this pattern. Therefore, the following discussion analyzes the documented data to present various perspectives explored by the authors during their study.

Identity and Status of Goddess Śītalā in Temple Premises

Śītalā's role as a goddess and her placement in the temple complex enhance the understanding of her deification and worship. Goddess Śītalā at Vasai (S3A & 3B), Mahim (S4), Thane (S7), and Panvel (S11) where she is worshipped as an epidemic goddess shows her primary position, having a separate temple or shrines. At Dahanu (S1), Nallasopara (S2), Ghodbunder (S5), and Thane (S6) she is worshipped as an epidemic goddess, but her separate shrine/ temple is absent. Instead, she is placed within temple complexes alongside other deities, often with Śiva as the main deity (Samples – S1, S2, S5, and S6). This indicates her secondary status in such settings. While her connection to Śaivism is notable, it is difficult to define or explain this relationship clearly. As a goddess within the Śākta tradition, her status as a local and minor deity complicates efforts to fully understand the Śaiva-Śākta connection in this context.

Although broader discussions exist about Śītalā's association with both Śaivism and Śāktism, in this localized context (Mankodi 2019), she is primarily a disease-eradicating goddess within the larger group of epidemic deities. This allows for a possible link to Śaivism, but it is not definitive. Additionally, fieldwork revealed two temple clusters, one in Mahim and another in Belapur where many small shrines to various gods and goddesses are present (refer Table 2). This suggests that Śītalā's worship is not limited to a Śaiva context. Therefore, while the connection between Śaivism and Śāktism can be observed in a broader sense, it is not clearly reflected in the specific study area of Mumbai and its suburbs.

At Belapur (S10) a separate shrine is there outside the Santoṣī Mātā Mandir, where she is worshipped only as one of the goddesses and has no connection with the epidemic, indicating her minor status. The absence of rituals, a defined icon, and iconography at Belapur highlights the minor status of the deity. Both, S8 and S9 at Kalyan are individual temples of goddess Śītalā, where identifying the position of goddess Śītalā as primary or secondary is difficult. Śītalā at Kalyan (S8) marks the old eastern boundary and is venerated as a village deity along with epidemic. In the case of S9 she is only worshipped as a guardian deity and has no connection with the epidemic.

The other idols of Śītalā can be seen at Thane (S6 & S7), and Kalyan (S9) where the goddess is either sitting on a lotus flower/tiger, holding attributes like sword which is opposite to the traditional iconography of Śītalā. This demonstrates the idea that her status as a goddess was enhanced. Despite her veneration here as an epidemic goddess, her identity as a divine goddess becomes apparent across time. This demonstrates her elevated position through unconventional idols, attaching the foundational idea of Śāktism to her primary identity.

Also, at Vasai (S3A), Mahim (S4), Kalyan (S8), and Panvel (S11), there are anthropomorphic stones in worship where we can see her identity being intact as a goddess of epidemics with an absence of any kind of traditional iconography. This might be the case of syncretism which is the merging or blending of different religious beliefs or practices, that can further diversify the identity of deity. In regions where multiple religious traditions coexist, elements from different traditions are incorporated, leading to ambiguity in identification along with the emotional sentiments of people.

It is important to look at the implications of the emotional sentiments of people that primarily guide any forms of worship. It can at times pave the way for an entirely new discourse that is affective in origin. The probability of this kind of detour is especially high in the case of Goddess Śītalā worship

due to the increasing affinity of people towards the deity as well as the changing demographic patterns in the port city.

Misidentification

Among the idols that do not follow the iconographic scheme, Sample S5 (Figure 15) from Ghodbunder requires special attention regarding misidentification. The idol is covered in a thick layer of vermilion and, being old and not well preserved, many of its features have faded, making it difficult to clearly identify the idol. The idol, worshipped as Śītalā, has a masculine torso and holds a trident, plough, and disc, with one possibly obscured attribute in the lower left hand. It has prominent ears, a crown, and a robust appearance. The figure is also shown riding an animal, but its features are too unclear to identify. Despite these features, locals associated this idol with Śītalā Goddess, likely due to the animal it is mounted on. However, understanding the features of the idol, it can be identified as the Bhairava and a dog, the mount of Bhairava. Although this idol is popular as goddess Śītalā among the folks for eradication of smallpox and chickenpox, surprisingly, no distinct rituals are found to be observed here. This reflects a loss of context of an idol. This might be due to the strong emotional or spiritual connection of people with a particular deity or religious figure, influencing their perception of sculptures. Out of fear of the pandemic, residents of Ghodbunder might have transformed Bhairava into Śītalā when smallpox caused deaths in the Thane district from 1877 to 1881 (Pathak 2007). The psychological state of people during crises can explain this misidentification. As in times of pandemics, people think emotionally and overlook details like iconography and symbolism. Hence, they seek idols for worship without being aware. This emotional attachment can sometimes cloud their judgment and lead to misidentification based on personal bias or preference.

Community Association

When examining the connection of communities with the Śītalā worship in Mumbai and its suburbs, there are two types of communities involved: natives and non-natives. Among the native communities that worship Śītalā, the origins of her worship can be traced at Mahim (S4), and Kalyan (S9). In Mahim (S4), the temple was constructed by the Bhamḍārī (toddy tappers), Kolī (fishermen), and Dhanagara (shepherds) communities for whom she is the goddess of epidemic. However, the Kolī community reveres her as the goddess of epidemics and the village deity. In particular, the community has a distinct practice of offering sādīs to the goddess at the beginning of every auspicious occasion to honour her as their village deity. In Kalyan (S9), the local Telī (oil merchants) community has established a temple, where she is worshipped as their guardian deity (kṣetrapāla). Non-native communities, mainly Gujarati-speaking migrants who arrived in Mumbai during the colonial period, also worship Śītalā. The Śītalā temple in Thane (S7) has its name scribed in Gujarati script, indicating the community's significance despite the lack of detailed ritualistic information.

In some cases, we see a blend between native and non-native communities. In Belapur (S10), around 1987, locals and migrant communities, including Malayalam, Gujarati, and Marathi-speaking people, established 10 temples. One among them is the shrine of Śītalā goddess, which is located outside the Santoṣī Mātā temple which implies the incorporation of goddess Śītalā into the midst of idol worship amongst the non-natives.

However, the case of Vasai is unique regarding the role of communities in the establishment of the Śītalā temple. In Vasai, there is an established temple of Śītalā by the Kolī and Bhamḍārī communities, where both anthropomorphic (S3A) as well as iconic (S3B) worship of Śītalā can be seen. Anthropomorphic stone of worship is installed by the local residents of the old Vasai village

settlement. However, sample 3B which is following the iconography of Śītalā, seating on a donkey and holding attributes like a winnowing fan, bowl, waterpot, and broom is installed by Gujarati speaking community who got migrated from Gujarat to Vasai around 1984 as confirmed by the local informants. The installation of the idol following an iconographic scheme is possibly because the Gujarati speaking community believed that goddesses could protect them from smallpox. It could be because of the prevalence of smallpox despite the efforts of the National Eradication Program which started in 1965 (Pathak 2007). It can also be the result of Śītalā's cult being prominent in Gujarat, with distinct rituals and iconography (Wadley 1980; Fischer 2014).

However, some Śītalā temples do not have specific community associations. For example, the temples in Dahanu (S1), Nallasopara (S2), Ghodbunder (S5), Thane (S6), and Panvel (S11) [refer Table 1] are managed by trusts and are worshipped by the entire village or multiple community settlements, showing no exclusive association with any particular community.

Association with Goddess Khokālā

At three locations Nallasopara (S2), Vasai (S3), and Mahim (S4) another disease goddess namely Khokālā has been found along with goddess Śītalā. The name of the goddess had derived from a native term for the cough. Hence the goddess is worshipped for curing cough and cold. The concept of goddess Khokālā is a newly emerged notion around the twentieth century (Vedak 2018). We find her worship and shrines in Mumbai and its suburbs for the eradication of cough and cold. Even though she is worshipped, there are no distinct iconographies associated with her due to its nascent nature. At Nallasopara (S2) an idol of the goddess Khokālā (Figure 16) is placed next to the goddess Śītalā. Here



Figure 16: Goddess Khokālā at Nallasopara

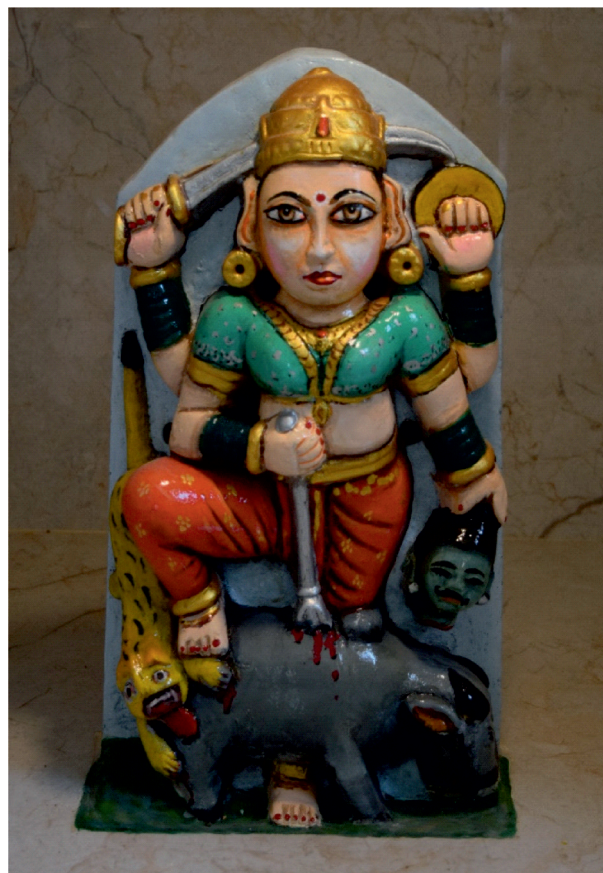


Figure 17: Goddess Khokālā at Vasai



Figure 18: Goddess Khokalā at Mahim

she is depicted with standard features of goddesses such as seated on the lotus flower in *lalitaāsana* posture, with two hands in *abhaya* and *varada mudrā*, adorned with crown, halo, and ornaments. At Vasai (S3) the idol of *Mahiṣāsūramardinī* is in worship as goddess *Khokalā* (Figure 17). Goddess *Śītalā* in Mahim (S4) was also worshipped to eradicate cough, and cold along with smallpox, chickenpox, and measles. A recent installation of a separate shrine of goddess *Khokalā* (Figure 18), by locals under the tree in front of the temple at Mahim, has moved the focus of veneration for cold and cough, from *Śītalā* to *Khokalā*. The idol of goddess *Khokalā* is covered in a thick layer of vermillion making it difficult to identify, only applique eyes and *dhyāna mudrā* of sculpture can be seen here. This trajectory of worship and associations leads to the finding that the rituals and practices surrounding goddess *Śītalā* heavily banks on local beliefs and histories. It also points out to a unique contradiction where ritualistic associations like the one between *Khokala* and *Śītalā* can be ephemeral and yet transient, ever evolving and yet omnipresent.

Concluding Remarks

On the basis of the data discussed, all eleven samples belong to the colonial period, which is famous for the constant invasions, migrations, and epidemics that spread throughout Mumbai and its suburbs. During the colonial period, diseases like plague, cholera, smallpox, and influenza broke out in Mumbai and its suburbs, starting in 1850 (Pathak 2007). Although smallpox and other diseases likely existed in the area before colonization, mass migrations during this period turned them into epidemics. Many factors, such as invasions, colonialism, and the cultural and social contexts in the post-colonial era, have influenced religious notions throughout Mumbai. This has led to the emergence of new traditions within existing ones. The outbreaks of chickenpox and the smallpox pandemic during colonialism

led to the glorification of the already established venerations of goddess Śītalā (Kunte 1977; Pathak 2007).

These historical and cultural dynamics surrounding disease outbreaks and religious adaptation laid the foundation for the enduring belief in Śītalā's power, which continues to shape contemporary religious practices and perceptions today. These religious beliefs, combined with advanced medical facilities, play a crucial role in disease eradication. Belief in Śītalā's worship remains significant in Mumbai and its suburban regions even today. It is visible through people's strong sentiments, as evidenced by the eleven documented samples of living temples where Śītalā is still worshipped for the eradication of smallpox and chickenpox. This research paper examined the concept of unconventional idols of goddess Śītalā by exploring factors such as cultural and religious context, iconographic similarities, regional variations, syncretism, emotional and spiritual connection, and loss of context. The unconventional idols of goddess Śītalā, indigenous practices of worship that changed spatially and temporally has led to the formation of varied religious notions associated with her, as an outcome of community involvement and the historical context of epidemic and pandemic.

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Authors Contribution

The first author developed the research paper's concept, carried out the fieldwork, including exploration and interviews with temple priests and locals, and also worked on the initial draft. The second author focused on final editing and worked on the theoretical concepts associated with the research paper. Both authors collaboratively worked on the final draft.

Notes

1. वन्देऽहं शीतलां देवीं रासभस्थां दिगम्बरम् | मार्जनी कलशोपेतां विस्फोटकविनाशिनीम् || (Nāradya Mahāpurāṇa: I:117.96)
Tr. I bow to the cool goddess, who rides a donkey, is naked, holds a broom and a pot, and destroys smallpox.
2. नमामि शीतलां देवीं रासभस्थां दिगम्बरम् | मार्जनीकलशोपेतां शूर्पालङ्कृतमस्तकाम् || (Bhāva-Prakāśa 4:9.21)
Tr. I bow down to the goddess Śītalā who is naked, who rides a donkey, holds a broom and pot in her hands, and has a winnowing fan above her head.

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