

Religious and Cultural Significance of Chhath Puja in Bihar: Analysis of Tradition and Rituals of Purity, Faith and Sun Worship

Dr. Vikramendra Kumar*

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology

Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, New Delhi

Email: bardhan.vikramendra@gmail.com

Abstract

Chhath Puja is a sacred occasion that pays homage to the solar deity and is unique among festivals across the world in that it is observed when the sun sets and rises. As a Hindu ritual, Chhath Puja is carried out six days after Deepawali. Chhath is a festival that follows the festival of lights, Diwali, by one week. To honour the Sun God, the locals really spend a night and a day camped out by a river or other body of water and perform a sacred sacrifice. Remember this lucky day on the festival calendar with the name Chhath, which means “six.” The banks of the Ganges River seem like the perfect place for this one-of-a-kind festival, considering how the river flows through Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Bengal in India. Some believe that by doing Chhath, one may show gratitude to the Sun for helping them achieve their objectives and for the many other blessings that life brings to Earth. Devotees traditionally offer offerings accompanied by holy water and take a cleansing dip on the night before the actual devotion, ideally in the Ganges. There is a special way to commemorate these days. Devotees keep the fast during the day and into the night after performing their first worship at home.

Keywords

Ritual, sacred, festival, worship, nature, holiday, religious, devotees, river

Introduction

Prayer, chastity, seriousness, and self-control are the hallmarks of this holy season, the Chhath holiday. We greatly appreciate and respect it. The colourful Chhath festival calls upon devotees to don new clothes. Many people sing folk and religious songs both at home and along the riverside. People gather along the Ganges River’s banks to celebrate, and the atmosphere is rejuvenated with sacred fervour. People do not miss the Chhath celebration. Prayer, cleansing, darkness, and severe discipline characterise this season. Not only is it revered, but it is also treasured. The seriousness of Chhath sets in soon after the festivities of Diwali end. All of the Puja preparations are done by the women of the house.

While the younger women and children tend to perform day-to-day household tasks, the older women start by cleaning all of the ingredients that will be used to make the Prasad, which are culinary offerings to the Sun God. Everything has to be cleaned, even the cooking utensils and chulhas.

The procession is almost astonishingly on time, and the prayers are recited precisely when the sun sets, even though no one announces the hour of prayer. An outstretched arm is supporting the polished bamboo trays and baskets while the early winter western sky becomes pink, creating a coordinated vision of piety. A choir of hymns fills the air as the covert oil lamps gradually blaze. As individuals begin to move back to the riverside, time passes and their faces are lost in the throng.

One possible place of origin for the Chhath Puja celebration is the Vedic period, when hymns to the Sun God are found and similar rituals are described in the Rigveda. The Sun Goddess Draupadi is praised in the age-old Sanskrit epic Mahabharata. Draupadi solved an immediate problem and helped the Pandavas reclaim their lost realm by worshipping the Sun God. Some believe that Karna, the son of Surya (the Sun), was the one who first established Chhath. Anga Desh, modern-day Bhagalpur district, Bihar, India, was ruled by Karna Surya Putra, or Sun Son, during the Mahabharata era. But its yogic and scientific origins go all the way to the Vedic period.

Rituals Performed during the Festival

Chhath is a festival that is highly esteemed. For the Vrati, everyone is expected to dress in their most sophisticated, freshly laundered garments. Vrati is obligated to sleep on the floor and wear unstitched garments. Sacred music fills the room with a cleansing sound. Countless individuals are packed along the banks of the Ganges River. Streets leading to the river are adorned with colourful decorations, flags, and posters by groups of volunteers who also keep the streets spotless.

In Bihar, Chhath is a four-day religious and cultural celebration with deep historical significance. This began in antiquity as Suryashashthi, but it eventually evolved into Chhath, a special and revered ritual. Only man-made and natural water features, such as rivers, ponds, and lakes, are used for the unique and sacred ritual of Chhath. During this celebration, devotees also perform Surya Arghya by submerging themselves in water, praying to the setting sun, and doing the Puja with Surya Arghya again at dawn the next day. The event, which has a long history, has not only spread throughout the country but is today regarded as one of the most significant celebrations of ecological importance worldwide. Chhath upholds the sacred deeds that are necessary for humanity and encourages goodness. In their efforts to maintain biodiversity and purify water, devotees carry out all rites and activities meant to convey messages of well-being. In addition to rice and wheat, Chhath's offerings include bananas, sugarcane, eggplants, turmeric, lemons, and other agricultural items that promote both a healthy lifestyle and higher agricultural output.

For craftspeople producing clay pots and winnowing baskets made of bamboo sticks, the event provides enormous economic possibilities. Above all, as a symbol of solidarity and devotion to duty, the worshippers simultaneously honour the rising and setting suns. One of the largest welfare-based celebrations in Bihar, Chhath incorporates the assimilation of various agricultural products and emphasises both humanity and scientific ideas.



Figure 1: Devotees carrying holy offerings for the prayers and ritual performances

Offering Prayer to Nature

Celebrated in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh, Chhath is a significant Hindu holiday with a deep cultural, religious, and social background. As such, it is highly esteemed in the region. Because it honours the Sun deity Surya and Chhathi

Maiya, who is believed to be his mistress, the festival is known as Surya Shashti. Bihar and other areas of India, including Uttar Pradesh, celebrate Chhath with great fervour (four days of rites and celebrations). It typically takes place six days after Diwali and consists of rigorous fasting, ceremonial washing, and morning and nightly prayers to the Sun God. Its importance extends beyond religious practice to include cultural, economic, and social facets. As an age-old custom passed down through the centuries, Chhath is profoundly ingrained in the culture of those who worship it. The family gets together to perform certain rites that fortify the family and the community, and the rituals are focused on discipline and purity. Chhath promotes wealth, health, and longevity in families in addition to the religious benefits of giving thanks to the Sun God, who sustains the family.



Figure: 2 Vratī offering prayer to the Sun God

The celebration unites individuals of all faiths and backgrounds, fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and fostering societal peace. The practice revolves around environmental preservation rites, such as taking a dip in a natural body of water at sunrise and sunset. The necessity of maintaining ecological balance is emphasised via these ceremonies, which are linked to purifying the body and spirit.

Beyond its traditional festival status, Chhath represents the vibrant cultural life, unwavering religious faith, and social peace of the people. It celebrates the shared cultural history of the community and promotes environmental, spiritual, and disciplinary values. An integral part of the cultural heritage of Nepal and India, Chhath represents reverence for the natural world and thankfulness to the Sun God, Surya, for providing life. Through shared religious practices, folk melodies, and language, this event strengthens ties between Nepal and India. It acknowledges that the open-border states of India have a common cultural heritage and that there is good cause for them to celebrate and protect it.



Figure 3: Holy gathering of devotees at the Ghats

The majority of the festival's participants are women, and the Puja can be performed without the presence of male priests or the reciting of mantras. As a symbol of brotherhood and equality among believers, it stresses the need to keep water bodies (such as rivers, ponds, and lakes) clean. It lauds community, equality, and cleanliness, basically. Chhatha is a religious offering for the well-being of the family, symbolising the sacrifices women make for the sake of their husbands' and families' lives and prosperity. The narratives of this event that are under-represented in popular literature are explored in this book. These customs are being kept through oral traditions and might be lost forever if they are not documented, promoted, and embraced by future generations. The practice of Chhath is deeply rooted in the culture of its practitioners, drawing on long-standing customs passed down through generations. Families get together to perform rituals that promote unity and communal spirit, and there is a focus on cleanliness and discipline. Chhath has a religious purpose of honouring the Sun God, the giver of life, but it also serves as a reminder to families to prioritise health, wealth, and longevity.



Figure 4: Nature worship with vermilion mark

Regardless of one's religious affiliation, the event unites individuals of all walks of life, fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and appreciation. Bathing in natural sources of water at sunrise and sunset is a tradition that is observed during these ceremonies; it is believed to cleanse the body and spirit

while also reinforcing the importance of keeping ecological equilibrium. To some extent, Chhath is more than simply a celebration; it is a declaration of the highly cultured, religious, and socialised nature of the people. It defends a common culture that unites civilisations and spreads the values of discipline, dedication, and sustainability. Chhath is an enduringly significant component of Bihari and Indian culture, representing reverence for the natural environment and devotion to the life-giving Sun God, Surya.

Preparations for the rituals

Devotees of the Chhath Puja make a solemn oath at the beginning of the festival to fast until the end of the celebration, avoiding all processed foods, onions, garlic, and meat. In simpler terms, it's giving oneself up to God. In order to demonstrate their humility and dedication to worshipping God during Puja and seeking his blessings in all areas of life, devotees refrain from eating non-vegetarian, onion, and garlic meals. Here is how the first-day festivalgoers make a solemn vow: they will not eat any meat, fish, or any non-vegetarian food for the whole four days of the festival. Many people consider Nahay Khay to be the first step in doing Chhathi puja. Yeah, that's kind of right. The Puja starts the day before Makhmaruwa Barnai, also known as Nahay Khay, when the entire family makes a solemn vow to abstain from eating anything contaminated with garlic or onions, as well as any meat or shellfish. Before dining on this day, devotees bathe and worship to the Sun God. The worshippers are offered food that is produced in their kitchen. Consuming food purchased from a market or a hotel is a sacrilegious act. According to Kharna, the second day has passed. Fasting continues all day long for the devout till Kharna ends in the evening. As the sun sets in the late afternoon, the family offers the deity Puris and Kheer, a sweetened milk and rice beverage. For the duration of the Chhath celebration, the traditional method of cooking is with an earthen hob known as Chulha, often fuelled by mango wood.

Evening and Morning offerings

Another name for the third day's evening offering is Pahila Arghya, although it's also known as Sandhya Arghya or Sandhya ka Arghya. It is said that this is the most trying day of the year for the majority of devotees, who are women. As part of their fast, they don't consume any food or water for a set amount of time. They will wait for the sun to go down before going for a swim in one of the local rivers or ponds throughout the night. As an offering to the Sun God, they make a spread of fruits and Prasad in their home kitchen. This includes Thakuwa, Bhuswa, Khaja, Mithae, or blanco grapefruit, sugarcane, and bananas. Worshippers bring Supa, a bamboo winnowing basket filled with delicious pastries, coconuts, and seasonal fruits, as part of the Prasad offering. The following day, at dawn, they bring their offering back to the Ghat. During the morning offering ceremony, also known as Usha Arghya or Bhor ka Arghya, believers pray to the rising sun to break their fast on the fourth day. They dive into the river once again to offer all the Prasad to the Sun God. Usha and Pratyusha, the consorts of the Sun God Surya, are another intriguing facet of Chhath Puja due to their simultaneous devotion. In the evening, we worship Usha, the first ray of the rising sun, and in the closing rituals of the day, we worship Pratyusha, the final light of the sun. This double dedication represents the recurrence of both the solar cycle and the cyclical character of life itself.

Please remember that the Sun God is the one who should receive all gifts. Upon believing that the goddess has consumed a portion of the offerings, the devotees are bestowed with sweets as a token of her favour. The devotee's loved ones are supposed to help the fasting person (Brati) receive and offer the Prasad to the deity. A religious faster at the Ghat first thing in the morning, the Brati wishes younger ladies good health, wealth, and happy weddings. Sarva, a clay vessel holding the Kuwa, Bhuswa, and other Prasad of Chhath, is traditionally offered to married women as part of the ceremonial known as

Khoichh. The delivery of Prasad is a religious ceremony, seen as a gift from the ancestors to the future generation.

At one point in the story that one of the Ghat's followers relates, Chhathi Mata gives Ankuri (sprouts) to the crowd. To the Ghat, these sprouts represent the pinnacle of Prasad. Before eating the Prasad, it is considered holy to consume sprouts at the Ghat. Before sharing the Prasad with loved ones, the penultimate step is to make the morning offerings, which are prayers. Here is how the worshippers fast for 36 hours, from Sandhya Arghya (Saunjh ka Arghya) to Usha Arghya (Bhor Ka Arghya), without food or drink.



Figure 5: Devotees at the Ghats during performing rituals

Fasting: A symbol of devotion

Most importantly, the festival is associated with the altruism and dedication of worshippers, especially ladies. To earn the Chhathi Maiya's blessings for their family's prosperity, believers observe a 36-hour fast without water and sprinkle vermilion over themselves and their belongings. This exemplifies the fact that family comes first for moms and wives in our region of the world. They also fast strictly in the hopes of winning God's favour and, by implication, their family's financial success. According to popular belief, a fertile couple can petition the Sun God for a child by fasting. During the Upavaas (fast) season, the faithful adhere to a strict routine of lying on the floor and leading an austere lifestyle.

Devotions at the Ghat

The Ghat is the site of several religious observances. One example is the practice of ladies putting vermilion on each other's foreheads at the Ghat, which refers to the banks of rivers or streams. The Sun God is said to be best honoured in this manner. Long strands of yellow vermilion draped over noses and hair are believed by many to placate Chhathi Maiya, goddess of marriage and riches. The Bratis are fast-breakers with the deepest devotion; every morning at the Ghat, they wish the younger women good health and a happy marriage. It is a good act to bow down to the elders, particularly Bratis, and ask for their blessing. Worshippers at the Ghat put the Deep, a solid light made of earth, on rice straw and let it float downstream on the river in the hopes that God would grant them success and wealth. It also includes a religious procession that tells the tale of the Chhathi Mata. A devout follower reads the story while seated on the Ghat. As a special pre-prasad snack, ankuri, also known as sprouts, are presented at the end of the narrative. After the morning prayers are over, the last tradition is to share Prasad with those you care about.

The festival's vibrantly decorated ponds, rivers, and Ghats are a magnet for photographers and media professionals. They capture religious women who are standing fifty feet below the water's surface, with flashy orange Sindors dangling from their haircuts to their noses. Additionally, people pray to Chhathi Mata for specific things like conception (particularly the birth of a child), a bumper harvest, excellent health, a job, and a wealthy life. The goddess is generous in her pledges but may be stern when worship or related ceremonies are violated, therefore one must be careful while paying her devotion.

Devotional songs at the Ghat

In addition to singing at home, the whole family gathers at the Ghat to sing devotional songs. The trend of listening to music while dressing has just emerged. In fact, folk songs can't change on their own; they're born inside a civilisation and change with it. Devotional lyrics set the scene for the festival's rituals in traditional Chhath music. These musical compositions are a kind of public expression that captures the essence of this momentous event and passes it on to subsequent generations. Several well-known devotional songs detail the Chhath ceremony. As part of the Chhath ritual, the Prasad is ceremonially put in a Bhar, which is really a pair of Tokari baskets made of bamboo sticks, together with a lengthy bamboo staff. In the expectation that Goddess Chhathi Mata would grant their wishes, the people give the Bhar to her. Furthermore, the lyrical repetition stands for the unfaltering loyalty of the listeners, regardless of their financial situation. They have faith that God will value their sacrifice and reward them abundantly. These traditional songs beautifully portray the significance of the Chhath festival by showcasing the rituals and devotion associated with the occasion. The core idea is that total submission and obedience to God is the only way to earn his favour. God will prosper his believers as time passes if he is pleased with them.

Festival of Environmental Conservation

The event cannot take place without green, clear water. This promotes an environment devoid of air pollution. Chhath aspires to bring the community together in the battle against environmental dangers. Male family members are expected to draw a circle or square in the sand to reserve a position on the ghat, the bank of the watercourse, on the third and fourth days, when the family meets for morning and evening prayer. When everyone in the family takes a seat here, it will provide some much-needed shade. When it comes time to prepare for the ghat, every household gets out the broom and hoe, and believers will fight tooth and nail for the best sites. Hundreds of clay lamps and lights illuminate our ornate tents, creating a mesmerising scene for our Chhath celebration. Light symbolises understanding in Hinduism, whereas darkness stands for lack of knowledge.

In the Mithila region, it is also considered lucky to clean a beach or place of worship with cow dung. The removal of filth and grime from the region makes it fit for god worship, according to the belief that cow dung has purifying properties. The Chhath festival is a significant part of the Hindu calendar in Bihar and India. It is a time for worship, celebration, and the elaboration of sacred ideas. An integral part of the festival with strong religious and social origins is the value of cleanliness, or Suddhi, one of these principles. Hygiene, or Suddhi in Sanskrit, refers to more than just one's bodily cleanliness; it also includes one's mental and spiritual well-being. A pure mind, body, and spirit, as well as total harmony with oneself and the universe, are components of it. People purge themselves and their communities during festival days, when the concept is most obviously applied.

Values of social cohesion and integration

Integrity, solidarity, equality, and brotherhood are entwined in this festivity. Everyone who wants to offer a sacrifice to the Almighty does so in basically the same way, making the same Prasad and other meals. The Indian Constitution guarantees religious freedom, which includes the preservation of long-

established practices like offering food to deities called Bhog. Regardless of their socioeconomic standing, colour, or financial condition, the worshippers congregate at the sides of water bodies to prolong their prayers. In my view, this is a joyous occasion honouring nature, equality, socialism, fraternity, and cleanliness. That is one area where all citizens are treated equally. This event is based on the principles of brotherhood and equitable treatment. Additionally, if there is a celebration, it does not require male priests or Sanskrit mantras. On the last day, Bhorka Arghya, a female devotee recounts the origins of Chhatha puja and how it became an intrinsic element of the festival at the ghat (riverbank). It is possible that this event may include a strong female figure. It is a holy deed to get a blessing from the elder Brati. At the Ghat, devotees pay homage to the old Brati by touching their feet as a sign of prayer. In addition, this ceremony helps people feel more connected to one another. Constitutionalists argue that the Chhath festival is a great opportunity to spread messages of acceptance and tolerance. The faithful pray for a long and fruitful life so they can unite in a society that upholds the principles of socialism, equality, justice, fraternity, and environmental protection. Among the numerous aims of the festival are the values of the Constitution and international treaties that the nations have adopted at various conferences. Clean air, plenty of trees, gender equality, fraternity, and self-sufficiency in food production are all features of this utopian society. Even more surprisingly, these are the objectives of the Chhath festival. The festival promotes social integration and teamwork.

Conclusion

Truth, honesty, nonviolence, equality, fraternity, devotion, and preservation of natural resources are just a few of the various meanings that the Chhath festival has taken on throughout the years. Tourism can potentially be promoted during the festival. In order to promote and fund cultural festivals like Chhath, the Indian government may establish a festival tourism effort that highlights the good effects of these events on both people and the environment. These measures will also put the Chhath festival one step closer to its global objective of attracting more visitors to the Chhath Ghats. Even those Chhath devotees who reside in other countries, such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Qatar, and many more, join in the celebrations. The festival's traditional music and rituals are now more widely available because of online resources, social media, and digital platforms. The younger generation and festivalgoers may better grasp the festival's *raison d'être* thanks to this expansion. It is evident that the festival-goers are in favour of green measures as they help to clean up the area and get the Ghat ready for the event. Chhath is characterised as a socialist, brotherly, and egalitarian festival due to its emphasis on togetherness and equality. Furthermore, ladies fast for up to 36 hours as a sign of the high importance they place on family members.

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