CHAPTER 4

From Winnowers to Vermillion: Exploring Ritual Meals and Materials of Chaṭha

Chaṭha Pūjā provides a significant context for examining the intricate relationships between belief, materiality, and religious experience. The festival involves a series of rituals rich in symbolic material elements such as water, milk, and offerings of fruits and sweets. These materials are not merely accessories to the ritual but central to worshippers' expression of beliefs and devotion. In the present study of the lived religious experiences of worshippers during Chaṭha Pūjā, the researcher draws inspiration from the approach of examining belief as not just an abstract concept but as something that is practised, lived, and intertwined with material objects and practices. To interrogate ritual practices, the researcher approaches beliefs as something practised or lived and often in and through material objects, coming into being and gaining salience in and through material practices, and in this case, also bodily adornment. These forms of materiality – 'sensations, things, spaces and performance – are a matrix in which belief happens as touching, seeing, hearing and tasting, feeling and emotion, as will and action, as imagination and intuition' (Morgan, 2010, p. 8). Belief, in this sense of the word, is central to the religious and ritual worlds of our respondents, of which Chaṭha ritual practices are a part. By focusing on the material dimensions of Chaṭha Pūjā, the researcher aims to demonstrate how objects and substances central to the ritual are not mere backdrops but active participants in the religious practice. These materials, as Bourdieu's concept of habitus suggests, are embedded in the practices and routines of the devotees, shaping and being shaped by their actions and beliefs (Bourdieu, 1977). Miller's emphasis on the interrelatedness of materiality and immateriality further supports our exploration, highlighting how tangible objects mediate intangible spiritual

goals, such as devotion and purification (Miller, 2005). Through this lens, the study of Chaṭha Pūjā will reveal the intricate ways in which material culture sustains and enriches religious life, allowing devotees to experience and express their faith in deeply embodied ways. This chapter will also consider the communal aspect of Chaṭha Pūjā, examining how shared material practices during the festival foster a sense of community and collective identity among the worshippers. The preparation of the *prasāda*, *arajiyā* (standing in the river water), and the communal meals are all instances where material practices and social interactions intertwine, creating a complex tapestry of religious experience beyond individual belief. By focusing on the ritual materials and their role in the festival, the researcher aims to gain insights into the ways in which materiality is not just a backdrop to religious practice but is actively involved in shaping the experiences and meanings of faith. This approach, which resonates with the understanding of belief as something lived through material practices, offers a rich avenue for exploring the nuances of religious experience during Chaṭha Pūjā and the broader implications for the study of lived religion.

Material objects that have transcendent importance – ritual materials, texts, ritual clothes, and offerings – raise problems and questions for scholars of religion. First, what makes an object 'religious' or 'sacred' and hence requires engagement on this plane of inquiry? Religion is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, making it challenging to establish clear boundaries. Scholars may have varying interpretations and criteria for what constitutes religious or sacred objects. A second challenge is that the sacred beliefs and practices of makers, users, and their descendants mean that these objects often require special care in handling and interpretation (Moore, 1994). Yet the fact that these objects carry significance, shared meanings and assist human beings in the fundamental ordering of their worlds makes them especially rewarding as objects of study. Questions about agency, identity, embodiment, and practice, in particular, are

reshaping the way religion scholars understand the way religion happens in the world, creating endless opportunities for material culture scholars to contribute to the conversation. This chapter will address similar questions by studying the nuances of the significance of the ritual materials and ritual means in the festival. Scholars like S. Brent Plate (2015), Elisabeth Arweck & William Keenan (2006), Matthew Engelke (2012) have underscored the fundamental role of material elements in the manifestation and perpetuation of religious traditions. Material religion also offers insights into the sociological aspects of religion, such as identity construction and social differentiation. Arweck & Keenan (2006) highlight how faith communities materialise their religion to assert cultural distinction. This materialisation process is crucial for understanding how religious identities are formed and maintained. Materiality reminds us to focus on the particular, contextual and personal, appreciating the complex networks of human and non-human actors that combine to generate what appears to us as the social (Latour, 2005). Latour critiques a binary distinction between things and people, arguing that they are always implicated one with the other, which is very similar to what Bennett (2010) opines on the significance of materiality in religion. In 'Vibrant Matter' (2010), Jane Bennett introduces the concept of 'distributed agency' to explore the dynamic interactions between various entities, both human and nonhuman, which possess their own form of efficacy or agency. Bennett's aim is to illuminate the role of 'vibrant things' in shaping political events by recognizing their inherent force and influence. She emphasizes that these material actants never operate in isolation but rather form part of larger assemblages, where their efficacy depends on collaborative interactions with other bodies and forces. By reframing nonhuman things as active agents and viewing humans as vital materialities embedded within these assemblages, Bennett offers a fresh perspective on agency that challenges traditional notions of social construction and human autonomy. This concept

resonates with observations made regarding the mutual influence between humans and their material environment within the context of religious rituals like Chaṭha Pūjā.

Material interactions with religious objects and spaces have societal consequences, influencing community orientation and disorientation; the role of materiality in asserting cultural identity and shaping communal experiences is equally important. Several studies have examined the ambiguities and layers of meaning surrounding the ritual materials, highlighting how these have a traditional symbol and a site of negotiation and reinvention in the context of modernity. For instance, Sijapati & Harris (2016) reflect women's creativity, agency, and adaptability in their study of wearing *pote*(sacred thread, worn by married women) in Nepal. It shows how they reinterpret and reinvent traditional modes of religious behaviour, thus providing insights into their shifting worlds and the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in their lived experiences. Dress and adornment are also important to study when analysing ritual materials (Neal, 2014; Arthur, 1999; 2000). Accommodation of marriage-signifying adornments to the necessities of modern lifestyles is seen among Indian Hindu women as well (Shukla, 2007). He notes how, for Hindu women in India, bodily adornments symbolising marriage are felt to provide protection in public spaces, warding off harassment or 'eve-teasing.' It is thus vital to explore the various scholarly perspectives in this direction, highlighting key themes and approaches while examining the interplay between materiality and belief. Following the framework that views material objects as a matrix in which belief happens, the researcher intends to study how the ritual meals and materials involved in Chaṭha Pūjā- the river water, the earthen pots, the bamboo baskets, ritual stuff and the specific food offerings- contribute to the constitution of the religious experience. The chapter will help explore how these materials, through their sensory qualities and their associated actions, such as bathing in the river, preparing

the offerings, and presenting them to the setting and rising sun, facilitate a lived experience of devotion, purification, and connection with the divine.

The division of this chapter into two parts—discussions on (1) ritual meals and the focus on (2) other small and large ritual materials—is designed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how various elements contribute to the religious experience in Chaṭha Pūjā. This structured approach allows for a detailed exploration of the distinct yet interconnected roles that different materials play in the ritual. By dedicating a section to ritual meals, the researcher delves into how specific foods are selected, prepared, and presented, and the sensory experiences they evoke. Food offerings hold a central place in many religious rituals, including Chaṭha Pūjā, and are imbued with symbolic meanings and ritual significance. The preparation and consumption of ritual meals involve various sensory activities—touch, taste, smell—which are integral to the lived religious experience, embodying devotion and facilitating a deeper connection with the divine. Conversely, the use of other ritual materials and specific items used in the rituals, each contribute uniquely to the ritual. These materials play crucial roles in specific ritual actions—such as bathing in the river, using earthen pots for offerings, and employing bamboo baskets etc.—creating a rich tapestry of symbolic meanings and sensory experiences. By separating the discussions into these two parts, the chapter allows for detailed examination of each type of material without oversimplifying or glossing over important details. It also highlights the interconnections and how the combined use of these materials enhances the overall religious experience, while providing a clear structure that helps readers follow and understand the complexities involved in Chaṭha Pūjā. This approach underscores the importance of both ritual meals and other materials in facilitating a lived experience of devotion, purification, and connection with the divine.

The Primacy of Studying Materiality in Religion as Lived and Practised

David Freedberg's 'The Power of Images' (2013 [1989]) and Alfred Gell's 'Art and Agency' (1998) are pivotal works that offer insights into the role of images and objects in shaping social relationships and interactions. David Freedberg's exploration of the power dynamics inherent in images highlights how visual representations can evoke emotional responses and influence human behaviour. On the other hand, Alfred Gell views art objects as agents mediating social relationships and interactions among individuals and communities. While these works do not centre solely on religious imagery, scholars like David Morgan (1998) have applied their insights to the study of material religion. Morgan's introduction to 'Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images' elucidates how religious images participate in the social construction of reality, offering a clear and accessible framework for understanding the role of images in religious practice (1998, p. 2). Similarly, Arweck and Keenan (2006) argue that the idea of religion is largely unintelligible outside its material expressions. Matthew Engelke extends this argument by asserting that all religion is material religion, which must be understood in relation to the media of its materiality (2012, p. 209). This assertion stresses the inseparability of religious experience from its physical manifestations, suggesting that material objects and sensory interactions are integral to comprehending religious phenomena.

David Morgan describes belief as a 'slowly sedimentary practice' built up over a lifetime of repetition and inflected with emotion. When listening to someone speak about their belief, we need to listen to what the believer really feels, smells, hears, and sees when he says he believes (2010, p. 5). Personal doctrine and private encounters are perceived as the true heart of religion,

while materiality is merely its contingent expression. Scholars of material religion often link this dismissive attitude towards materiality to the legacy of Protestantism (see Orsi, 2005; Morgan, 2010; Vasquez, 2011; Engelke, 2012; Houtman & Meyer, 2012). This perspective is rooted in nineteenth and early twentieth-century theories of religion, where religious beings were thought to manifest materiality only in less advanced traditions. In contrast, 'civilised' Protestant Christians, seen as the apex of religious evolution, believed in spirits without physical presence (Engelke, 2012, p. 211). This Protestant prejudice has led scholars to emphasise the superiority of internal and personal religiosity and to overlook or look through the material forms of religion (Houtman & Meyer, 2012, p. 11). According to Meyer, conventional understandings of religion often privilege spirit over matter, leading to a devaluation of material forms in religious practice (Meyer, 2011, p. 58). Scholarly discussions clarify the focus of 'materiality' by framing it in opposition to something else. For example, Houtman & Meyer (2012) posit that 'matter and materiality are – and only make sense as – relational terms that thrive on contrast' (2012, p. 5). S. Brent Plate claims that the study of religion was 'once commonly perceived to be a companion to that of philosophy' (2015, p. 3), and Gregory Grieve suggests that scholars of religion often operate as if people engage the divine primarily through printed scripture (2006). Most commonly, the opposite against which the field of studying materiality in religion is defined is the study of the immaterial aspects, that is, 'beliefs'. Jeremy Stolow & Alexandra Boutros (2015) contend that the study of materials has served as a powerful vehicle for exploring a range of ways that religion extends beyond the seemingly abstract world of symbols and propositional claims about knowledge and belief. However, belief can also be studied from a materialist perspective when a particular religious group tries to promote a 'project of immateriality' or seeks to create a religion in which things do not matter (Engelke, 2005, pp. 118-119). Beliefs are

learned, experienced and adapted through embodied engagement in rituals, relationships and practices (Strhan, 2015).

But why must we consider the material elements involved in religious practices? The answer can be that the terms 'religion' and 'materiality' can be understood only through 'a network of interrelated concepts, such as 'body,' 'sensation,' 'thing' and 'touch' (Meyer, 2011, p. 5). The study of lived religious experiences through the lens of material religion, as advocated by scholars like David Morgan (2010) and S. Brent Plate (2015), focuses on how physical objects, spaces, and sensory experiences are integral to religious life. These scholars emphasise that religion is not merely a set of abstract beliefs or doctrines but is deeply rooted in the tangible and material world. Morgan introduces material religion in terms of 'ritual, daily practice, imagery, objects, spaces, and bodies' (2010, p. xiii), or 'sensations, things, spaces and performance' (2010, p. 8). As Morgan points out, objects do not always have a definable meaning, because 'human beings do not translate everything significant or compelling into words' (2010, p. xiii). S. Brent Plate (2015, p. 3) bases her arguments on the use of 'symbolic objects', sacred texts, special foods, buildings and human-made landscapes to understand religious beliefs as lived, practices and experienced. According to Plate, the key point is the primacy of materiality; things are not just expressions or manifestations of ideas; on the contrary, 'ideas, beliefs, and doctrines begin in material reality' (2015, p. 4).

Birgit Meyer's (2008) perspective on the role of materiality in religion challenges conventional definitions that tend to marginalise the significance of things or material objects. A focus on religious things invites scholars to take seriously the often downplayed material dimension of religion, which seems key to the making of religious identity. Meyer suggests that

religious identity is not solely formed through abstract beliefs or doctrines but is also shaped by the material objects, symbols, and rituals individuals engage in while leading religious lives. Thus, she advocates for re-evaluating the role of materiality in religion and emphasises the importance of integrating the study of religious things into the broader field of religious studies. Meyer's perspective highlights the need for scholars to move beyond traditional dichotomies between the religious and material realms and to recognise the relationship between material culture and religious identity. By acknowledging the significance of ritual things, scholars can gain a more nuanced understanding of how materiality informs religious practice, belief, and experience.

David Morgan's (2010; 2016) exploration of the importance of studying materials in religion underscores a fundamental shift from traditional discourse-based approaches to a more concrete understanding of cultural construction. While discourse analysis has historically dominated cultural studies, Morgan highlights the theoretical richness of investigating material culture, which offers tangible insights into how everyday life is shaped and maintained. This shift allows scholars to move beyond the confines of textual analysis and delve into the physical manifestations of culture, revealing the intricate relationship between people, objects, and practices. As defined by Morgan (2010, p. 15), material culture encompasses physical artefacts and associated emotions, values, and behaviours. It emphasises the study of practices—what individuals do with objects—and recognises that meaning is constructed through interaction. Scholars gain deeper insights into how objects acquire significance as they move through various social settings and cultural contexts by focusing on the exchange and circulation of objects. This approach highlights the dynamic nature of material culture and its role in shaping social identities and relationships. Furthermore, Morgan argues that understanding religion requires a

shift from focusing solely on creeds and doctrines to examining the practices and rituals that constitute religious experience. Material culture provides a window into these lived practices, offering a more holistic understanding of religion as it is practised and experienced by individuals and communities. Scholars can uncover the underlying beliefs and values that inform religious practice by studying how people engage with objects in religious contexts—whether through worship, ritual, or iconoclasm. Central to Morgan's argument is recognising the significance of visual culture within material culture. Visual media, including but not limited to fine art, play a crucial role in religious expression and identity formation. By studying visual culture within the broader material culture framework, scholars can better understand how individuals construct their worldviews through visual representation. This inclusive approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of religious practices and their cultural significance. As a material culturist, Morgan offers a fresh perspective on the role of objects in religion by conceptualising them within an interactive web, an 'ecology' that imbues these objects with agency and power (Morgan, 2011). In his theoretical discussions, Morgan passionately argues against the dematerialisation of religion and advocates for a more abstract understanding of religion. Morgan examines specific objects and their agency, history, and interrelationships with their associated religions. Aligning with current academic trends, Morgan emphasises the agency and interrelationships of objects, challenging the traditional view of objects as mere symbols in a static religion. Instead, he presents objects as dynamic, integral, and transformative, fundamentally shaping the history and nature of their religions. This innovative approach situates Morgan as a significant figure in the relatively new field of material religion, advancing our understanding of how objects and materiality influence religious practice and belief.

Webb Keane (2004; 2008b) contends that even though belief may be central to religious practice, it cannot exist in isolation; it must manifest in material forms for it to be transmitted and sustained over time. Keane argues that ideas cannot be transmitted telepathically; they must be externalised through various means, such as words, gestures, objects, or practices, to be shared among individuals and communities (2008a). Keane asserts that understanding the materiality of religion is essential because it reveals the irreducibly social and historical characteristics inherent in religious phenomena. Acknowledging the material manifestations of religious ideas, one can grasp the dynamic interplay between religious beliefs and their socio-historical contexts. Religion, therefore, is not merely a set of abstract beliefs but a lived experience embedded within material culture, shaped by social interactions and historical dynamics. Keane's exploration of the materiality of religion emphasises three key points: (1) Material forms are essential for the transmission and recognition of ideas. Regardless of how unique or idiosyncratic religious experiences may be, they must ultimately take some recognisable material form to endure over time and circulate within societies. This applies to experiences, rituals, institutions, symbols, and other aspects of religion; (2) Material objects have open-ended significance beyond intention. Material objects, including religious artefacts, are not reducible to specific intentions or meanings. They possess a bundled quality, where various characteristics combine to create meanings and interpretations that may exceed the intentions of their creators. This open-endedness allows for diverse interpretations and uses of material objects within religious and social contexts; (3) Materiality connects religions to social and historical dynamics, that is, material forms of religion are enmeshed in a world of causes and effects, leading to their autonomy from their original producers. As a result, material manifestations of religious ideas can enter into new combinations and contexts, influencing and being influenced by different

cultural, social, and historical factors. This dynamic interplay between materiality and society underscores religion's inherently social and historical nature. Thus, Keane's major argument is that understanding religion's materiality is crucial because it reveals how religious ideas are transmitted, interpreted, and transformed within societies. Material forms of religion are not static but dynamic, continually interacting with social, cultural, and historical contexts. Therefore, the study of religion must consider its material manifestations to grasp its full complexity and significance in human societies.

S. Brent Plate posits that religious traditions originate and survive through bodily engagement with the material elements of the world (2015, p. 3). This perspective challenges the conventional understanding of religion as primarily abstract and doctrinal. Instead, it emphasises the tangible aspects of religious practice, arguing that ideas, beliefs, and doctrines emerge from material reality (Plate, 2015, p. 4). Plate further argues that understanding the significance of materiality in human society can help us better understand religion. He writes, 'Religious traditions themselves originate and survive through bodily engagements with the material elements of the world' (Plate, 2015, p. 13). Therefore, an investigation of the interactions between human bodies and physical objects, both natural and human-made, is important. It is so because much of the interaction occurs through sense perception, and in special and specified times and places to orient and sometimes disorient communities and individuals toward the formal strictures and structures of religious traditions. This working definition has the advantage of pointing to growing areas of inquiry in the field of religion: the entanglement of people and things in action, the primacy of bodies and embodiment, identity and community formation, and belief and tradition as something humans do as much as they think.

Bennett (2010) explores the political agency of non-human elements—such as trash, food, weather, and electricity—to analyze how these phenomena influence and shape human politics and social interactions. Similarly, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger's works (2006; 2013; 2015; 2020) on material acts in everyday Hinduism provide valuable insights into objects possessing agency—having effects and causing events beyond the intentions of their human creators—and offer a compelling lens through which to examine the everyday Hindu practices. She highlights the significant role that objects and materials play in religious practices; these objects possess agency, influencing events and experiences beyond human control and intention. This perspective enriches our understanding of Hinduism as a lived religion, where materiality and rituality are deeply intertwined, and objects are recognised as vital components in the ongoing interaction between the human and the divine. Her working definition of 'agency' is the capacity of a subject to act, to cause an effect. To assert that materials can be agents does not imply consciousness or will on the part of that material object; the very presence of a material object or structure, without will or intention, may have an effect on both other materialities and human subjects. Agency may be distributed between human and nonhuman subjects, but human will or intention regarding the creation or use of material does not limit or control what that material may create (Flueckiger, 2020, p. 12). Thus, her research emphasises the active role of objects and materials in religious practices, demonstrating how they contribute to the lived experience of the divine and the sacred in ways that extend beyond human intention and control. Flueckiger argues that in everyday Hinduism, materials and objects are not merely passive recipients of religious significance; instead, they actively participate in the religious life of devotees. This participation can be seen in various ways, from the veneration of idols and the use of sacred substances to the performance of rituals involving specific objects. These materials can

influence events, emotions, and perceptions, shaping religious experiences. For instance, in her exploration of the agency of objects, Flueckiger discusses the concept of *prasāda*, which refers to the material substance first offered to a deity and then consumed by devotees. *Prasāda* is imbued with the deity's presence and blessings, transforming it from a material object into a powerful conduit of divine grace. The consumption of *prasāda* is believed to confer ritual benefits, protection, and healing, highlighting how a material object can significantly affect the well-being of devotees. Another example is the role of idols in Hindu worship. Idols are not simply representations of deities but are considered living embodiments of the divine once they are consecrated through ritual. Devotees interact with these idols as they would with a living being, offering food and clothing, and performing rituals that acknowledge its agency. The idol, in turn, is believed to respond to the devotees' offerings and prayers, granting boons or guidance. This interaction underscores the mutual relationship between humans and objects in Hindu religious practice. She also points out that the agency of objects can extend to less formal, everyday contexts. For example, the ritualistic uses of turmeric, vermilion, and other substances in household rituals are not just symbolic acts but are believed to effect real changes, such as protection from evil or the promotion of marital harmony. These substances are treated with a reverence that acknowledges their inherent power and capacity to influence the world. By examining these examples, Flueckiger's argument demonstrates that material acts in everyday Hinduism are integral to the practice and experience of the religion. Objects and materials are not merely tools used in the service of religious practices; they are active participants that shape and define the religious landscape. Their agency reflects a broader Hindu understanding that the divine permeates all aspects of the material world and that human interaction with these materials can facilitate a direct engagement with the sacred.

4.1 Ritual Meals of Chaṭha

Preparing, presenting, and consuming ritualistic foods foster a sense of communal unity and connection with cultural traditions. In his seminal work, 'The Raw and the Cooked,' expounded upon in the first volume of 'Mythologiques', Claude Levi-Strauss posited that culinary processes embody a mode of communication that unveils societal structures; he has also shown that one of the codes in North and South American myths is alimentary (1983). Each day of Chaṭha is characterized by distinct traditional ritual food, a salient facet of the celebrations. Elaborate dishes, such as *ṭhekuā* (fried cookies), *dostī roṭī* (a variety of chapati), and *kasār* (a sweet delicacy made of wheat flour mixed with ghee) are meticulously prepared and offered to the deities, underscoring an ethos of gratitude (Singh, 2010). With agrarian ties to the Gangetic plains, Chaṭha's gastronomic rituals offer insights into how religious beliefs adapt and intertwine with socio-cultural dynamics, redefining their bearing within specific contextual milieus. Beyond satiating palates, Chaṭha's culinary practices are a visual conduit for apprehending worshippers' societal frameworks and worldviews. Within the ritual schema, the exchange of nourishment assumes a pivotal role, emblematic of the broader ceremonial sequences in the context of *pūjā* (Babb, 1970). Rooted in agrarian cycles, the prominence of food transactions is accentuated as a post-harvest observance. A defining hallmark of the festival is the adherence to proscribed guidelines governing the preparation, consumption, allocation, and disposal of specialized ritual foods, intrinsically interwoven with the festival's religious tenets and practices. This culinary tapestry encapsulates more than mere gustatory indulgence; it exemplifies reverence, cultural heritage, and communal norms. This documentation undertakes an exploration of the ritual

materials, ritual meals, culinary practices, cultural identity, and religious expression within the context of the Hindu festival of Chaṭha.

Several works have focused on how biological, sociocultural, cognitive, and economic aspects impact people's foodways (Cussler et al., 1952; Solien de Gonzalez, 1969; Hill & Mathews, 1982). Using food as an ethnic, racial, or class identifier can indicate fulfilling affective needs related to food behavior (Bennett, 1943; Cussler et al., 1952; de Garine, 1972; Khare, 1978). In addition, food preparation, arrangement, consumption, and distribution on certain occasions reflect cognitive needs, gender role allocations, social order, and worldview (Bott & Spillius, 2014; de Garine, 1972; Birdsall, 1972; Montgomery, 1972; Burt & Hertzler, 1978; Douglas, 1978). Food and foodways can also serve as a means of communicating reality within a social group (Douglas, 1978). Foodways are infused with layers of meaning at multiple levels (Brown, 1984; Palmié, 2009). These layers can promote the act of eating as a religious ritual and aid in constructing and maintaining group identity and solidarity (Williams, 1974; Baumann, 2009). Ideational factors associated with food behavior include knowledge and beliefs about what and how often one should eat (Leach, 1976). Ritual meals, however, do not solely establish connections with imperceptible entities but also fulfill critical sociocultural functions (Narayanan, 2000). Engaging in communal eating within ritual settings holds the potential to reaffirm or reshape relationships with visible counterparts, a notion comprehended by scholars like Munn (1992), Murphy (1986), Buitelaar (1993), and Brown (1995). However, these dynamics persist even when participants in a ritual meal bring divergent religious perspectives, as illuminated by the work of Beatty (1999). The nexus of rituals and beliefs intertwined with food's significance assumes an additional dimension in its capacity to delineate religious and ethnic boundaries firmly. The powerful interplay between rituals, culinary practices, and identity

dynamics reinforces distinct religious and cultural demarcations (Bahloul, 1989). Therefore, exploring how food becomes an interface for rituals, symbols, and belief systems emphasizes its multifaceted role in human culture and religiosity. Additionally, the choice of ritual foods, fasting, and feasting on festive occasions foster relationships and act as a way to express hospitality.

While studies have explored various aspects of foodways, religion, and culture, this work combines these threads by focusing on Chaṭha's gastronomic practices and hints particularly at the socio-cultural and religious aspects. It integrates various socio-cultural dimensions, such as caste roles, gender dynamics, and ritualistic taboos, to offer a nuanced understanding of how food-universe (Krögel, 2009), i.e., procurement, preparation, and consumption, intricately reflect and shape communal identity and solidarity. By documenting the culinary practices of the Hindu festival of Chaṭha, the section attempts to shed light on the relationship between food and religion and how it entails foodways in a festive setting, unlike everyday notions of fooding and feeding. The researcher takes a holistic approach to understanding the intricate interplay between religious devotion, cultural practices, and societal structures, all within the framework of food-related behaviors during a significant Hindu festival. The study goes beyond mere surface descriptions of food items, uncovering the deep-rooted religious, cultural, and social significance of food practices during the festival. The section of the chapter navigates through layers of meaning associated with ritual meals and materials in ritual settings; revealing how selecting, offering, and consuming specific materials and foods is a powerful means of communication, hospitality expression, and religious devotion. It also highlights the crucial role of negations and prohibitions in these culinary practices, illustrating their ties to religious beliefs and their contribution to the immersive ritual experience. Doing so advances our understanding of how

food-related behaviors go beyond mere sustenance, evolving into profound expressions of religious connectivity and collective bonding, ultimately contributing to the enriched discourse on the intricate connections between food, culture, and religion. The insights garnered from this research possess broader implications, potentially informing our understanding of how food functions as a symbolic conduit within various cultural and religious contexts, thus enriching the discussion surrounding the intricate interweaving of food, culture, and religion. The researcher addresses these complexities through the case of gastronomical activities in Chaṭha by identifying two simple categories of ritual food behaviour and a few subcategories in each (Figure 1). The two categories are (A) religious characteristics and (B) food activities, each with sub-categories.

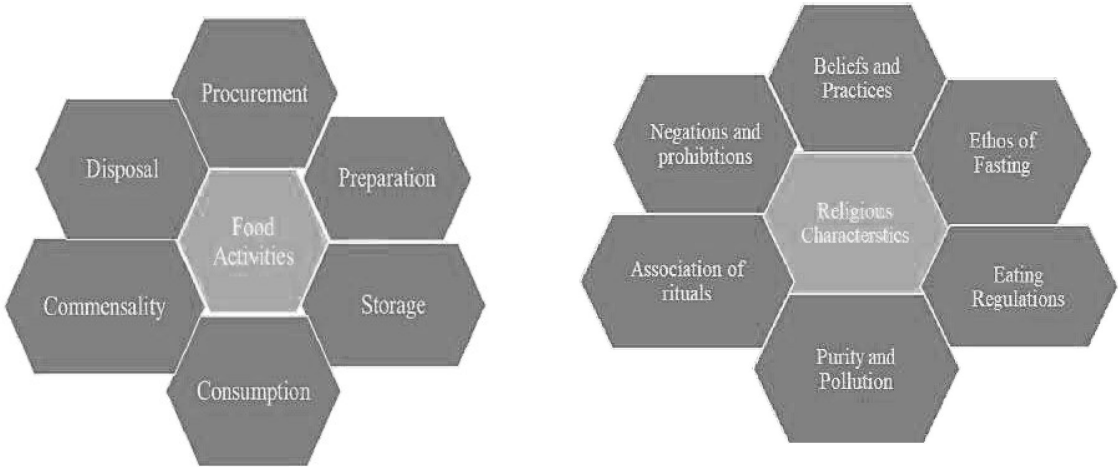

Figure 1. Dynamics of culinary features prevalent in religious and festive settings.

We have documented below the method, that is, how the activity is carried out; space, which is where the activity is carried out; temporality, that is when the activity is carried out; participation, that is, who is carrying out the activity; and content, that is, which food items are cooked on the particular occasion. When questioned about why certain foods were prepared in

specific ways, our respondents responded, 'That is just the way it is done,' 'That is how we have seen our mothers and mothers-in-law do these,' or 'That is how our family likes it.' Ethnic food patterns are conservative; food is the last aspect of an ethnic culture to be lost (Spiro, 1955). The primary cause of such conservatism is that food socialisation occurs early and is a highly affective and sensory experience. It was evident in how the respondents gave accounts of their preparation of *ṭhekuā*, the leading ritual food in Chaṭha. Below is the description of the food activities, expanded to reflect on its religious characteristics to reflect on the socio-cultural dimension of ritual food/meal in Chaṭha.

Procurement

While discussing the metaphysical aspects of an *Oglala* food system, Mary Douglas stated that every food system comprises several components, and all are hooked to each other in a plenary manner. She views procurement as how people select and collect their food and that it carries profound metaphysical meanings (Douglas, 1984). Procuring food offerings in Chaṭha is significant because it involves carefully selecting and collecting ingredients. During the Chaṭha *pūjā*, procuring ingredients denotes some societal norms and religious conduct flourishing among the laity. The beliefs surrounding these procurement practices in Chaṭha are a notable example and can be seen in two ways- (a) What form of an ingredient qualifies to be a part of the offering? (b) Where should it come from to mark its ritual appropriateness?

A noteworthy point in this context is the importance of procuring raw vegetables and fruits in their whole form, with leaves, roots, shoots, and peels intact. The idea behind such stringent criteria is the importance of the whole and natural forms of fruits, vegetables, spices, etc. Banana stems, whole sugarcane, spices and rare seasonal fruits become a common sight

during the festival and are difficult to find otherwise. As a post-harvest festival, the food items consist of wheat and rice, freshly brought from the farms and picked carefully, leaving no stones and pebbles. The sugarcane sticks are picked with their leaves intact, and the *rawā guṛ* (liquid jaggery) is preferred as a sweetener because it is considered fresh and pure. Vegetables such as bottle gourd are compulsory food items to be prepared on the festival's first day to prepare the body for the upcoming arduous starvation. The emphasis on preserving the natural and whole forms of fruits, vegetables, and spices reveals a connection between gastronomical practices and the environment. This facet of the festival underscores the delicate balance between human sustenance and the ecological context in which it thrives. It allows us to explore the historical, ecological, and economic factors that have shaped these practices, shedding light on the reciprocal relationship between culture and nature.

Another procurement criterion indicates the significance of caste-based material production concerning the rules of material usage. One of the necessary items for use- the *sūpa*, also called *sūplā* (winnower), used as a container for offerings to Chaṭhī Māī has to be specifically procured from persons belonging to the *Ḍom* community. *Ḍom* is otherwise considered to be of low caste, and contact with them is considered to be defiling. However, the *sūpa* is considered to be usable and 'pure' only when a *Ḍom* makes it. Other required materials that form a part of the food offering are obtained from people belonging to the *Baniyā* (local merchant), *Gwālā/Ahīr* (herdsmen), *Kumhār* (potter), and *Mālī* (gardener) castes. This indicates how different communities have a definite and specific role to play in the preparations for the festival and worship. Purity and pollution assume a new definition here, where that object is considered to be pure (ritually pure), which is made and procured in accordance with the occupational definitions of or prescriptions for particular castes/ communities. The role of ritual

here is to preserve the functional role of castes within the society. This ensures the maintenance of the social order based on the functional roles of different castes and a rule-bound interaction between people from different castes in a religious and ritual context. As our fieldwork testifies, this strengthens communal ties between members of the different castes and illustrates that the oft-assumed caste hierarchy does not define purity and pollution.

The following folk songs were recorded in Varanasi in November 2021:

kahān pāebo sūpawā?
kahān ho pāebo dūdhwā?
kahān pāebo devā ho suruj bābā araghiyā ke jor?
Ḍomwā ghare bāns ke sūpawā,
Ahīrwā ghare dūdh.
Gaṅgā ghāṭe pāibo suruj bābā araghiyā ke din.

The researcher has translated the song as-

Where shall I find a winnower?
Where shall I find milk?
Where shall I see the Sun God so whom I can offer arghya?
In the Ḍom's house, you shall find the winnnowers.
In the house of Ahīr (herdsmen), you shall find milk.
On the riverside of Gaṅgā, you can see the Sun god and offer arghya.

This song intricately winds together elements of occupation, culture, religion, and geography within the context of a community's identity and practices. It speaks of the links between different occupational groups and their roles in providing essential resources for religious rituals and daily life. The '*Ḍom*,' associated with winnowers, and the '*Ahīr*,' connected to milk production, embody the social and economic diversity within the community. These references reflect the historical division of labour and the interdependence of various groups for sustenance. Embedded within the verse is a blend of cultural and religious practices. The quest to find a winnower, milk, and offering *arghya* to the Sun God signifies the convergence of practical needs

and religious devotion. This fusion of the sacred and mundane is emblematic of many traditional societies, where daily life and religious observances are intertwined seamlessly. The mention of the Gaṅgā riverbank as a place to perform the *arghya* ritual adds a geographic dimension, emphasising the community's connection to revered natural landmarks.

The portrayal of gastronomical practices within the festival unveils a rich tapestry of anthropological exploration, inviting us to delve deeper into the cultural nuances that shape this significant event. As we dissect the layers of these practices, we unearth a wealth of insights that resonate profoundly with the core tenets of anthropology. The meticulous process of procuring ingredients takes center stage, emerging as a window through which we can peep into the cultural psyche of the participants. This act of procurement transcends mere practicality; it is laden with symbolic meaning and is reflective of the festival's intricate web of beliefs, values, and social dynamics. The deliberate selection and collection of foodstuffs are not isolated actions but threads interwoven into the larger fabric of cultural identity. The foods chosen and how they are acquired offer a glimpse into the community's reverence for nature, reliance on local resources, and ability to navigate complex social structures. The mention of caste-specific roles in material acquisition is a thought-provoking entry point into exploring social hierarchies and power dynamics. The interplay between caste occupations and the procurement of specific items highlights the festival's potential to reinforce and challenge existing social structures. This phenomenon beckons us to delve into questions of agency, resistance, and the negotiation of identity within the framework of tradition.

Storage and Spaces of Cooking

A group of people may view the location of a ceremonial food event as sacred (Khare, 1978). As the festival of Chaṭha is heavily associated with the notion of *sāf-safāī* (which can be variously translated as cleanliness and purity, both of which carry different meanings), devotees are extremely mindful of storing food items and spaces for cooking religious meals. They make sure that the place where all ingredients are accommodated should be clean, dust-free and ritually pure. The *parvaitin*, mostly but not necessarily a woman, takes up the arduous task of segregating a sacred space from the domestic space meant for everyday activities. This is done to ensure the purity of stored food and prevent pollution arising out of mundane activities associated with daily life. In addition to impacting food choices, culture also plays a role in food-related etiquette (Sibal, 2018). Several regulations operate in the ritual context of Chaṭha as well. The creation of a separate sacred zone is important. The purity of the place is maintained by thorough cleaning and keeping it away from everyday activities. The purification of the physical setting and the principal actors becomes essential before approaching the deity. Once the purification process is complete, worshipers can proceed with the prescribed ritual sequence to connect with the divine. The space is also significant because it becomes the site for storing and preparing ritual foods for the occasion. However, during Chaṭha, the sacred zone serves as a make-shift cooking space and a ritual space. Such preparatory practices unveil a multifaceted interplay between culture, ritual practices, and the spatial dimensions of food preparation, inviting us to examine these dynamics through key anthropological concepts.

Exploring storage and cooking spaces in Chaṭha provides a lens through which we can look at oral traditions that circulate among the worshipers and have been passed on from their mothers and mothers-in-law. These regulations and rituals governing food preparation and storage during the festival also embody cultural etiquette. The deliberate demarcation of sacred

and domestic spaces, coupled with adherence to purification rites, reflects symbolic actions that communicate reverence for the divine and underscore the cultural importance of upholding food-related practices within a specific framework. The importance of designating the location of a ceremonial food event as sacred underscores the cultural and religious significance attributed to the act of food preparation. It resonates with the concept of sacred space, where specific areas are imbued with ritual meaning and separated from everyday activities to establish and re-establish purity and avoid all possibilities of ritual pollution. The painstaking attention given to ensuring cleanliness, purity, and the separation of spaces for storing and cooking food exemplifies concepts of ritual purity and spatial boundaries, showcasing how cultural beliefs shape practices associated with food.

Creating a dedicated sacred zone, maintained through isolation and rigorous cleaning, offers an insight into the core ritual performance, as it involves a sequence of culturally structured actions infused with symbolic significance. The ritualisation of space and activities, including purification rituals, speaks of the performative nature of identity and community belonging. It demonstrates how such rituals reaffirm group identity, reinforcing shared values and belonging. Besides, the adaptive transformation of the sacred zone into a cooking space during the festival highlights cultural adaptation. This phenomenon illustrates how traditions evolve while retaining core elements. The dual functionality of the space, serving as both a sacred zone and a cooking area, illustrates how cultural practices respond to practical demands while preserving their inherent ritual significance. In sum, such preparatory actions deepen our understanding of how food-related activities as a ritual action or in a ritual setting transcend mere sustenance, signifying cultural values and forging profound ritual connections.

Utensils and Other Cooking Equipment

The meal format is grounded in the prescriptions of purity-pollution in the ritual sequences concerning the food offerings. Therefore, creating a sacred space becomes mandatory in which the deity is approached and a ritualistic offering of certain cooked or raw food items is made. During Chaṭha, there is a unique practice of preparing offerings on earthen stoves. These stoves are prepared by people living near the Gaṅgā using a slurry of water mixed with mud from the riverbank. In our fieldwork, the researcher witnessed the craftsmanship of local artisans living near the riverside engaged in the traditional art of making earthen stoves, a vital component of Chaṭha Pūjā preparations. These artisans, predominantly women from economically marginalised backgrounds, exemplify the intersection of culture, tradition, and socioeconomic resilience inherent in the observance of the rituals. Through their labour-intensive work, they contribute to the material aspects of Chaṭha Pūjā and embody the religious significance and communal solidarity associated with the festival. Making a single *chūlhā* (earthen stove) is a time-consuming and labour-intensive process spanning approximately 4-5 days. These stoves need to be new for each annual worship and are disposed of after the festival. The utensils, on the other hand, are usually earthen *puccā* vessels. Sometimes, brass utensils are also used to prepare and make offerings to the deity. It depends on the fulfilment of vows and, obviously, the financial resources of the devotees. While the earthen vessels must be new for each annual worship, the brass vessels are kept aside and used only for religious purposes. It marks the importance of unused utensils or utensils used only for ritual purposes. Once a utensil is used for other purposes, it becomes impure and unfit for religious and ritual purposes. Other significant utensils are bamboo baskets and winnowers, which must be bought annually and are meant only for ritual purposes. These new winnowers accommodate raw vegetables, fruits, *ṭhekuā* (cooked cookies) and sometimes *pūrī*s (fried bread).

Figure 2 showing earthen utensils used for Chaṭha
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)

The configuration of utensils and other cooking equipment holds significance within the festival's culinary rituals, reflecting the relationship between gastronomical practices and cultural beliefs. The structure of the meal adheres closely to the rituals of purity-pollution governing food offerings, necessitating the establishment of a sacred space for approaching the deity and making ritualistic food presentations. A distinctive facet of the festival involving the primacy of earthen stoves reflects a practice embedded in a unique rural cultural tradition. These stoves exemplify a fusion of natural elements- a slurry of riverbank mud and water and hint at a gendered lens for understanding the culinary customs. Notably, these stoves are discarded post-festival, symbolizing a cycle of renewal and temporality that become essential markers of ritual purity. The act of creating these stoves signifies not only the physical labour involved but also the symbolic role women play as keepers of tradition and purveyors of ritual purity. The duality between material types embodies a unique aspect of material culture and sacred practice. Unlike everyday utensils, bamboo baskets and winnowers assume an exclusive function during the festival. This demarcation between ritual-use utensils and everyday items is a testament to the

intricate choreography of material culture in religious contexts. It also embodies a gendered manifestation of the ritual-culinary domain. This duality stresses women's contributions to upholding the religious integrity of the festival, illustrating how their actions extend beyond the culinary realm to encompass the preservation of cultural and religious values. We can decipher how culinary rituals become expressions of cultural beliefs and values, transcending mere sustenance to embody religious connections and cultural identity. This exploration enriches the anthropological understanding of gastronomical activities by showcasing how everyday objects and practices intersect with larger cultural narratives, offering insights into how food, ritual, and tradition converge in meaningful and complex ways.

Viewed through a gender perspective within the framework of anthropological analysis, the documentation of utensils and cooking equipment in the festival discloses an intriguing narrative of gendered roles, symbolic representation, and the ritual responsibilities women undertake. This exploration helps us comprehend how gender dynamics and cultural practices intersect in the realm of gastronomical activities. Buying, storing, using, and handing down some of these utensils to the generations unveil layers of significance that reflect not only culinary practices but also gender roles, power dynamics, and social constructs, all of which intertwine to shape women's experience within this cultural context. Women, predominantly referred to as *parvaitin*, are responsible for the arduous task of segregating a sacred space from the domestic realm dedicated to everyday activities and undertaking ritual preparation. This space division accentuates women's roles as caretakers of tradition and custodians of ritual purity. This spatial separation aligns with the broader concept of a gendered division of labour, where women's responsibilities often encompass domestic and ritual spheres and that of men in accommodating the raw food ingredients from the market. The procurement and management of bamboo

winnowers serve as another illustration of women's central role in the festival's gastronomical activities. The annual purchase of new winnowers, storage of the other utensils, and their exclusive use for ritual offerings depict women's stewardship over sacred materials. This practice reinforces their role in preparing offerings and accentuates their agency in facilitating the sacred connection between food, ritual, and the divine. The meticulous care taken in storing and preparing food in spaces associated with religious meals reflects the gendered expectations placed upon women. Ensuring the cleanliness, purity, and segregation of these spaces highlights how women's roles extend beyond mere cooking to encompass the preservation of cultural and ritual values. It underscores the concept of 'women's work' as culinary and as guardians of cultural heritage.

Precautions and Prohibitions

Religious beliefs and customary practices exert a potent influence over dietary behaviours, often manifesting through a framework of food laws and taboos that dictate restrictions on the consumption of specific sustenance items (Kwon et al., 2015). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced during the observance of the festival, where meticulous protocols underscore the imperative of circumspect culinary conduct. A rigorous commitment to upholding standards of cleanliness becomes an overarching principle, spanning from the initial phase of sourcing ingredients to the partaking of sacred repasts. The disposal of culinary remnants, both cooked and uncooked, is reserved until the culmination of the festival, observed with care to preclude any interaction with animals and human presence alike. Devotees, following traditional tenets, don new attire as they engage in the preparation of ritual offerings. Old clothes are considered to be defiled. Insights gleaned from respondents highlight the ritual import of employing bamboo

receptacles, referred to as *sūpa*, as vessels for veneration and the presentation of nourishment to the divine, eschewing the use of utensils crafted from steel and glass. Prohibitions against consuming onion, garlic, and non-vegetarian fare throughout the festival duration are grounded in Hindu religious beliefs, deeming these victuals as incongruous with sacred practice (Kwon et al., 2015; Ali & Nizar, 2018). Deliberation in selecting the *prasāda* preparation site is mandatory, complemented by utilising a new clay stove. Intricately assembled *prasāda* takes on a dual role: initially offered to the deity as a profound expression of devotion before being shared among the community and then becoming the first consuming item by the *paravaitin* (primary worshipper, who undertakes fasting and makes offerings by standing in the Gaṅgā). The imposition of food regulations and taboos, notably restrictions on specific food items, shows how religious principles influence dietary choices and are deeply embedded within the cultural fabric. This symbiotic relationship between food and religiosity indicates the profound role of gastronomy as a ritualistic expression and cultural heritage. The precautions observed throughout the festival, encompassing processes from procurement to consumption, exemplify the fusion of ritual purity and culinary practices. The conscientious disposal of leftovers and the stringent measures to avoid impurities embody the broader concept of ritual hygiene, highlighting the interplay between the material and the sacred.

When viewed through a gender lens, these practices acquire a nuanced layer of meanings. The stipulation to don new attire and participate in *prasāda* preparation emphasises the performative aspect of religiosity and reveals gendered roles within these practices. It also raises questions about women's agency in adhering to or challenging these norms within a patriarchal context. Intermingling food regulations, rituals, and gender dynamics provides a rich landscape for understanding how culinary practices are essential for negotiating tradition, religiosity, and

cultural identity. Also, the gendered aspect of food-related etiquette emerges as women engage in practices that embody cultural expectations. The adherence to regulations and rituals shows how women, as *parvaitin*, not only prepare food but also navigate a complex web of symbolic actions that communicate respect for the divine and adherence to cultural norms. It resonates with the concept of embodied culture, where gender roles are enacted through everyday practices. The spatial division, responsibilities, and rituals associated with food preparation serve as a lens to scrutinise the nuanced ways in which women contribute to and navigate their roles within this cultural context.

Preparing and Offering the Meal: Food for Gods and Worshippers

Our documentation categorises the food items prepared in Chaṭha as traditional food. Foods can be considered traditional in that the knowledge, techniques, or practices of traditional food are handed down from one generation to another (Rocillo et al., 2021). It should use raw materials that are locally available and have strong recognition within a territory (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996). Sociologists look at traditional food as representing a group or culture, implying that the cooperation of individuals is a part of traditions that ensures its continuity (Pieniak et al., 2009; Guerrero et al., 2009; Guerrero et al., 2016; Jordana, 2000).

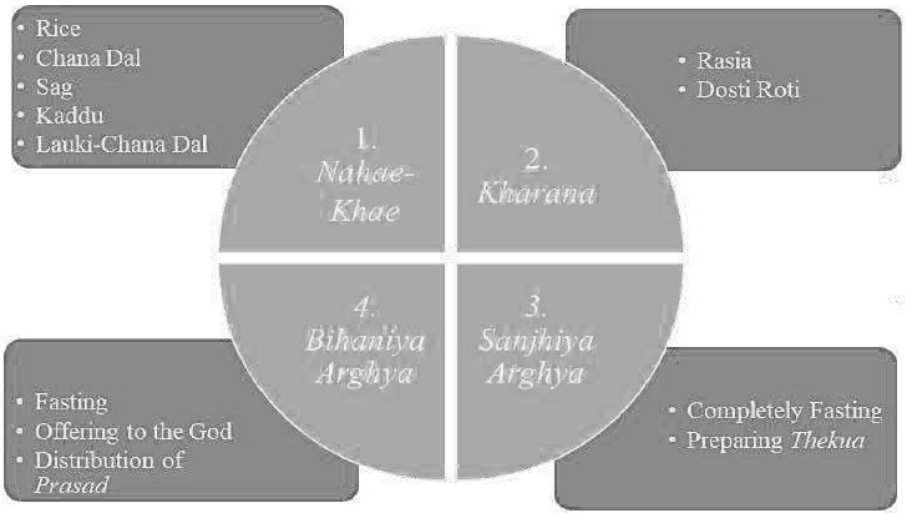

Figure 3. Pattern of Food and Foodways during the four-day festival of Chaṭha

Day 1. Nahāe-Khāe

During the auspicious period for purification rituals, which falls on the fourth day of the waxing fortnight of Kārtika (October-November), *nahāe-khāe* is celebrated. It can be considered auspicious for the cleansing rite (Singh, 2010). On this day, devotees dip in a holy river or pond before preparing and consuming a special meal. Water has been believed to be the central purifier and is very significant in various rituals associated with Chaṭha Pūjā. The food cooked and consumed on this day is generally simple and vegetarian. *Lauwā-bhāt,* or *laukī-bhāt* (bottle gourd and rice), are the primary food to be consumed on this day. These food items are prepared using rock salt, turmeric and other newly bought spices. They must be cooked on an earthen stove, using mango wood and cooked in more than subsistence so that they can be distributed to neighbors and served to the guests. Some portion is set aside and offered to the deity and is first consumed by the *parvaitin* before serving it to others- family members and guests.

Figure 4 showing ritual meal prepared for *nahāe-khāe*
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)

Laukī and its cleansing properties: In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā and many other Hindu rituals, certain foods are believed to possess qualities that contribute to the purification of the body and mind. Bottle gourd (*laukī*) is one such food, and its use during the festival carries symbolic and practical significance. *Laukī* is also classified as a *sattvic* food, making it an ideal choice for rituals and fasting, as it helps maintain a calm and focused state of mind. *Laukī*'s simple, unassuming nature aligns with the principles of purity and simplicity central to many Hindu rituals. Its inclusion in the diet during Chaṭha Pūjā reflects the devotee's commitment to consuming pure and wholesome foods that support ritual practices. The preparation of *laukī*, like other vegetables, is done with great care to ensure it is clean and free from contaminants. This meticulous preparation reflects the overall emphasis on purity integral to the festival. As devotees often fast or consume simple, vegetarian meals during Chaṭha Pūjā, *laukī* provides essential hydration and nutrients without overburdening the digestive system. Its light, easily digestible nature makes it suitable for maintaining physical strength and energy during fasting

periods. By consuming foods as *laukī*, devotees aim to purify their bodies and minds, creating a conducive environment for ritual practices and connecting more deeply with the divine. The consumption of pure foods supports mental clarity, calmness, and focus, which are essential for the devotional activities of Chaṭha Pūjā. *Laukī*'s cleansing properties are rooted in its physical health benefits and symbolic significance within Hindu dietary practices. Its high water content, nutrient density, and *sattvic* qualities make it ideal for supporting the purification processes central to Chaṭha Pūjā. By including *laukī* in their diet, devotees benefit from its health-promoting properties and align themselves with the principles of purity and simplicity essential to their ritual observances.

Day 2: Kharanā- Rasiyā* and *Dostī Roṭī

Figure 5 showing *rasiyā and dostī roṭī* prepared for *kharnā*
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)

The day before *Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī*, which falls on the Pañcamī of the Kārtika month, is referred to as *kharanā*. On this day, followers observe a fast and partake in a single meal after sunset,

refraining from food and water for 36 hours. The evening meal, typically consisting of sweetened rice, *pūrī*s, fruits, and desserts, is dedicated to the Sun God at sunset before being consumed by the primary worshiper. An exclusive type of chapati called '*dostī roṭī*' is prepared, where flour is mixed with *ghee* and pure water purified using Gaṅgā *jal*. The resulting dough is flattened, cut into small rounds, and cooked on a flat pan using ghee. The layers of the *dostī roṭī* are separated with care before they cool down as they are offered to Chaṭhī Māī. During cooking, only three chapatis are made at a time, and the layers are separated shortly after cooling. It is important to handle the chapatis delicately to prevent tearing or overcooking and to avoid talking or creating airflow during the process, as it may lead to the defilement of the items. The chapatis are served with '*rasiyā*,' a sweetened rice dish made by boiling rice in an earthen pot with '*rawā gur*' (liquid jaggery) and milk. A portion of the food is dedicated to the deity and served in earthen bowls or on banana leaves, which are washed and adorned with *sindūra* (vermilion), betel leaves, and nuts. Uncooked milk is used for the *arghya* (ritual ablutions of water and/or milk), offered first by the *parvaitin* and then consumed by all the fasting individuals. During preparation and offering rituals, participants wear clean attire and avoid tying knots in their clothing. *Dhotīs* are preferred as they are considered pure being unstitched. The *parvaitin* performs ceremonial cleansing and prayers before consuming the *prasāda*, which serves as their final meal for the ensuing 36 hours. Silence is maintained during the consumption of the *prasāda,* as sounds are considered to cause pollution. The *parvaitin* has to immediately stop eating the *prasāda* upon hearing any sound; the transgression of this ritual regulation may annoy Chaṭhī Māī. The *kaptī* (earthen bowls) used for the offering are not to be taken outside the sacred room, and only men are allowed to partake in the offerings. A few male close relatives of the family can also consume the *rasiyā*, after which the vessel is placed in a corner of the room.

Day 3- Day 4: Sanjhiyā Arghya* and *Bihāniyā Arghya

Figure 6 showing preparations for *Sanjhiyā Arghya* and *Bihāniyā Arghya*
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Patna, 2022)

The offering of fruits marks the last two days, and sweets like *kasār* and *ṭhekuā* in the winnowers, along with water and/or milk ablutions. The *parvaitin* makes the offering by standing in the Gaṅgā, or any waterbody, and offers *arajiyā* (prayers), holding the winnowers facing the setting and rising sun, respectively. These two days are also marked with other significant offerings like *kosiyā*, consisting of a canopy made by tying a few whole sugarcanes in a red cloth, along with fresh grains and sweets.

***Prasāda* and Commensality in Chaṭha Rituals: Sacred Offerings, Religious Merit, and Social Bonds**

Alike other *pujā* practices, the Chaṭha rituals involve offering food to the deity, a central aspect of Hindu worship (Singer, 1984; Khare, 1992; Toomey, 1994). Worshipers engage in this sacred

act in a segregated place, in a state of ritual purity of the body and mind. The offering of food items complements this sacred connection, albeit with subtle variations in the variety of food offerings. Generally aligned with human consumption, the offerings lean towards vegetarian options, deemed suitable for the deities. Irrespective of the particulars, the process of presenting food to the divine adheres to a uniform structure: preparation within a clean physical setting, presentation to the deity, reclamation, and subsequent consumption or distribution to others in the form of sacred share. These edible offerings are a significant element of the ritual framework, aligning with Lawrence Babb's idea of counter-prestations (1970). In the context of Chaṭha, ritual food is offered within the purified space dedicated to preparation and storage. The *parvaitin* retrieves the ritual food post-offering, reserving a token portion for the deity. The ritual's culmination is marked by the offering of ablutions using milk, symbolizing the consummation of food by the god. The *parvaitin* then partakes in this act, occasionally extending the privilege to immediate family members. It is pivotal to discern that the food consumed by both the deity and the *parvaitin* is markedly distinct from *jūṭhā* (leftover), a category typically regarded as defiled or impure. Instead, this act echoes devotion, embodying a symbolic means for religious blessings and merit. The apprehension of contamination cedes to the embrace of *prasāda*, transforming retrieved offerings into the remnants (*jūṭhā*) of the deity (Morris, 1961). This intriguing paradox may be termed ‘respect pollution’, signifying the intentional embrace of an action that could conventionally be perceived as polluting, executed to demonstrate reverence and deference (Harper, 1964).

Commensality emerges as a salient aspect of Chaṭha, characterized by its distinctive guest composition delineated along ego-centric lines, encompassing kin, colleagues, and neighbours, chosen based on their proximity and rapport with the host. The meals served during this

communal engagement are primarily traditional and materialise in *prasāda*, drawn from the ritual space. Consequently, the guests' repast commences after a portion of the meal is presented to the deity and then first consumed by the *parvaitin*. An additional layer of significance unfurls during the phase of food distribution within the ritual sequence. Here, the devotees ascribe intrinsic importance to the act of distributing, receiving, and soliciting these consecrated food offerings, intertwining it with notions of religious merit or *puṇya*. While invitations are extended to neighbours and relatives to partake in *prasāda*, not all may attend. In such instances, family members of the *parvaitin* dutifully carry *prasāda* to each household. *Prasāda* transcends the boundaries of ordinary nourishment. In the ritual milieu, the conventions of commensality navigate extraordinary pathways, diverging from the dietary restrictions observed in everyday social interactions. The sharing or dissemination of 'contaminated' food (*jūṭhā*), now transmuted into repasts sanctified by the deity, transiently suspends intra-group schisms. Declining *prasāda*, however, transcends mere culinary choice, encompassing implications of disavowal toward the deity to whom the offerings were dedicated. Such actions are perceived as transgressions, impelled by immorality and sacrilege, capable of inciting divine displeasure and evoking a sense of sinfulness.

Ritual Food or Food Ritual?

What are the functions of such ritual foods, and what is the relation between meals and rituals in Chaṭha? Rituals have multifaceted functions, particularly in tackling uncertainty, anxiety, and disarray (Myerhoff, 1984). The preparation and consumption create social order, security, and identity during such ritual events, and ritual meals themselves become 'the ritual'. The meal itself as a ritual assumes clarity during the four days, centered around the preparation,

consumption, and distribution of the food offerings. A significant example is the *nahāe-khāe* or *kaddu-bhāt,* or *laukī-bhāt*. The festival's first day marks the transitioning ritual purity of the *parvaitin* and the household where the festival is observed. Having spent days on rigorous cleaning and purifying the space and body, *nahāe-khāe* is an entry point for the devotee to observe ritual regulations finally as *parvaitin*, the primary worshiper. The importance of the caste of *nāun* (barbers) becomes mandatory to establish and re-establish ritual purity and aid in the effectiveness of the upcoming rituals. Also, defilement by used, old, and unstitched clothes, leftovers, dirt, spices, and non-vegetarian food is checked to collectively ensure the ritual purity of ablutions, which is an integral ritual act in the festival. Anchored in religious commitment, ritual meals illustrate the interweaving of material and metaphysical realms. The offerings, ranging from fruits and vegetables to cooked delicacies, mirror and reproduce the broader spectrum of religiosity, where the material and the religious coalesce. This convergence is emblematic of Roland Barthes' notion of a 'system of communication,' wherein food transcends its nutritional utility to symbolize a lexicon of cultural expression (1997). This symbolic duality of sustenance and religiosity invites anthropological inquiry into the cultural meanings enshrined within these edible offerings. Similarly, Chaṭha unveils the elaborate choreography of food within the ritual framework, echoing anthropologist Mary Douglas' assertion that food is a code that expresses a society's structure (Douglas & Gross, 1981). The categorization of utensils, the strict adherence to food preparation norms, and the designated spaces for offerings resonate with Douglas' structuralist perspective. This careful orchestration reinforces social norms, delineates hierarchies, and embodies a 'protocol of usages' that reflects broader societal arrangements (Barthes, 1997).

There is a general food sharing at religious festivals like Chaṭha. Scholars have emphasized many ritual components that serve as instruments for upholding order and reconciling boundaries within potentially convulsive contexts. Its repetitive and sequential nature is of utmost significance, imparting a sense of structure and predictability. In Chaṭha, ritual meals readily demand sticking to a predetermined timetable, orchestrated through rituals enacted in particular sites, featuring important culinary offerings in a meticulously organized sequence. Any deviation from this established framework can cause the deity's displeasure and, thus, the failure of the ritual effectiveness. As Myerhoff (1984) articulated that, rituals beckon our active engagement with symbols, encouraging us to partake in their narratives by embodying meanings that may surpass our cognitive grasp or acceptance. Again, the ritual food emerges as a potent symbol, constituting yet another pivotal facet of rituals. Ritual performances in Chaṭha are elaborately staged, and the devotees are flooded with the symbolic messages that the array of rituals portrays. The relationship between meals and ritual is variable and complex, as sometimes meals are either only marginally ritualized or may involve meals only symbolically. If the symbolic meaning is given phenomenological proof by stimulating one's senses, as Myerhoff maintains, it seems logical that meals should be ritualized. Meals can stimulate several senses: taste, smell, feel, vision, and hearing at the same time. In Chaṭha, meals are dedicated to the divine by praying before or after and imbuing the foods that function as symbols with social and religious meanings. Meals are especially ritualized when preparation and eating is considered a religious act. It is not surprising, therefore, that, in Chaṭha, as in many other contexts, it is a highly ritualized set of actions. Just as daily meals strengthen the family's relations, ritual meals can establish relations outside the family. The commensality during the festival illustrates accepting the relation and respect that is offered through the food. The sharing of food thus

reinforces one of the functions of rituals mentioned by Turner, a mode of social interrelatedness, which he calls *communitas* (1986).

The Chaṭha festival, entrenched in Hindu tradition, offers an entry point for anthropological exploration into the interplay between gastronomy, rituals, and cultural symbolism. Ethnographers have unveiled a multifaceted tapestry wherein food serves as a means to connect the sacred with the mundane and the divine with the human, revealing a rich interplay of rituals, symbols, and belief systems. Within this cultural landscape, the act of offering food to deities on such festive occasions takes on profound significance. It represents a tangible channel for devotees to establish a connection with the divine, epitomizing a sacred dialogue encoded within culinary practices. The meticulous procurement and preparation of ingredients, coupled with the pure setting where these offerings materialize, highlight the careful choreography of this gastronomic ritual. However, the question is, how do different stages of ritual meals operate in the festival to make the worship effective? Through the related oral narratives, these ritual meals emerge as an emblematic lens through which cultural messages are conveyed. Just as Barthes (1997) deconstructed food's syntax to reveal its meanings, the oral narratives surrounding Chaṭha illuminate the nuanced expressions of symbolic significance of food. These narratives allude to the aberrations in food practices, strategically employing deviations to underscore the importance of adhering to cultural norms and values. This tactic reveals how ritual meals are a powerful mechanism for reinforcing group identities and familial bonds, harmonizing with the commensal dynamics intrinsic to such communal celebrations. The festival is a microcosm of cultural intricacies and unveils a realm where food becomes an eloquent language, conveying messages of religiosity, social harmony, and cultural heritage. This intricate fusion of gastronomy, ritual,

and symbolism beckons researchers to delve further into the layers of meaning encapsulated within the offerings presented to deities during the festival.

4.2 Ritual Materials in Chaṭha

***Sūplā* :** The *sūplā* crafted by the *Ḍom* community of Mallick artisans for Chaṭha Pūjā serves as a profound example of how material objects facilitate religious experiences and embody cultural and religious values. Material religion emphasises the significance of physical objects in religious practice, viewing them not merely as symbolic but as active participants in the enactment of belief. The *sūplā* exemplifies this as a central ritual object carrying deep ritual and cultural meanings. The creation of the *sūplā* begins with the selection of bamboo, a process imbued with ritual significance. This selection is not arbitrary but involves a careful consideration of the material's purity and suitability for sacred use. The craftsmanship involved in transforming the bamboo into a functional winnower and sacred artefact is a meticulous process that reflects the artisans' reverence for their work and their commitment to maintaining ritual purity. The artisans adhere to purification rites and avoid contact with polluting substances, ensuring that the *sūplā* they create are suitable for religious rituals.

Figure 7 showing bamboo *Sūplā*/*Sūpa* and Ḍālā used for Chaṭha Pūjā
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Varanasi, 2021)

Figure 8 showing decorated *sūplā*/*sūpa* and brass *sūplā*/*sūpa* used for Chaṭha Pūjā
(The pictures were taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Patna, 2022)

This process aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, where the artisans' skills and practices are shaped by their cultural and social context, reflecting a deep-seated understanding of their craft's religious and social significance. The *sūplā* is not just an object but a manifestation of the artisans' embodied knowledge and cultural heritage. The intricate designs woven into the winnowers are a testament to the artisans' skill and creativity, showcasing the community's rich cultural heritage and aesthetic sensibilities. Daniel Miller's (2005) emphasis on the relationship between materiality and immateriality is also evident in the use of *sūplā*. The *sūplā*'s physical presence and sensory qualities—its texture, weight, and the natural smell of bamboo—enhance the religious experience, making the rituals more tangible and immediate. The *sūplā* serves as a medium through which the divine is experienced, connecting the devotees to their faith in a direct and sensory manner. Furthermore, the artisans' practice of embellishing *sūplā* to fulfill *manautī* or personal vows underscores the object's role in personal and communal expressions of faith. The use of locally sourced materials and natural dyes not only highlights sustainable practices but also reinforces the cultural authenticity inherent in their craft. The *sūplā*'s role extends beyond religious ceremonies to include social and economic dimensions, demonstrating the adaptability and economic viability of traditional crafts. The artisans' ability to cater to various demands, such as weddings, illustrates how traditional craftsmanship can thrive in contemporary contexts while preserving cultural identity and fostering community cohesion.

The Earthen Ritual Materials in Chaṭha Pūjā: In the fieldwork, the researcher had the privilege of immersing herself in the vibrant traditions surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā by visiting the families of potters residing in Patna. These families, known as *Prajāpatī*s, have inherited the

ancient craft of pottery-making, which holds significance in the observance of Chaṭha Pūjā. Our interactions with the *Prajāpatī* families provided invaluable insights into the role of earthen wares, particularly *kaccā* pots, *kaptī, dhaknī* and *kosiyā*, in the rich tapestry of Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. The potters elucidated how *kaccā* pots serve as essential reciprocatory offerings for individuals making *manautī,* or personal vows, during the festival. These pots are revered for their mystic powers and are rarely sold to the general public. Instead, the potters exercise caution and discretion, ensuring they are entrusted only to reliable individuals who understand and respect their sacred nature.

Kosiyā are the earthen elephants adorned with studded oil lamps and cavities in their humps for stuffing with fruits and edible offerings. *Kosī bharanā or Kosiyā* filling up an earthen pot as a celebratory repayment is another popular kind of vow and obligation undertaken by *parvaitin* among the other Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. For the ritual, *Kosī* is placed inside a canopy of odd numbers of sugarcane tied together with a red or yellow cloth. The canopy is made using an odd number of sugarcane sticks; sugarcane represents the new yield from the harvest and prosperity, and its inclusion in the ritual signifies the hope for a prosperous life. The canopy structure adds a decorative and symbolic element to the ritual setup. The hollow bowl like structure on the earthen elephant is filled with rice, sweets and *chivaḍā* (rice flakes). *Chivaḍā*, or rice flakes, are among the traditional offerings placed in the hollow bowl-like structure on the earthen elephant. Rice flakes symbolize simplicity and sustenance, representing the basic necessities of life. Offering *chivaḍā* signifies gratitude for the harvest and a wish for continued abundance and prosperity. It is a staple food item that holds cultural significance in various Hindu rituals of north India. Various fruits of the season and sweets are used to fill the *Kosiyā*. These offerings symbolize abundance and the bounties of nature. Fruits and sweets are

traditional symbols of hospitality and gratitude, reflecting the devotee's thankfulness for divine blessings and the wish for continued prosperity. Fasting females smear the earthen elephant with *sindūra* (vermilion) and a mixture of water, rice flour and turmeric powder *(aeypan)* after placing the holy *kosī* and the attached lamps around it are lighted. The offering of *kosī* in pairs is mainly preferred and is carried out in the evening of *Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī* called *sanjhīyā aragh*, offering oblations to the Sun. After the *sanjhīyā aragh,* the ritual is performed in the courtyard (*āṅgana*) or terrace of the worshipper's house when the family members return from the ritual site. During this time, women express their happiness and gratitude by singing folk songs and staying awake all night, which they term as *rat jaggā*. The same ritual of *Kosī* is celebrated on the *ghāṭ* early in the morning before *bhorwā* or *bihānī aragh*. The *Kosī* is then immersed in the Gaṅgā or the waterbody, which forms the primary ritual site. The holy *Kosī* symbolises a fulfilled vow and an offering of the first crops, reciprocated by stuffing the vessel with numerous items.

Cow Dung and Mud: In Hinduism, cow is revered as a sacred animal, a belief that significantly influences the ritual use of cow dung. Several findings suggest that the ritual use of cow dung may have originated from its practical secular qualities learned through extensive folk experience (Ram, 1927, pp. 149-159; Jani, 1938, pp. 152-153). However, the sacred status of cow dung in Hindu rituals is not solely based on its utilitarian benefits. Harper (1964) explains that cows are considered deities or inhabited by deities, making their faeces purer than those of any human, even a Brahmin. This divine association renders cow dung a purifying agent capable of removing human pollution (Harper, 1964, pp. 182-183). The dual nature of cow dung—as both pure and impure—is a recurring theme in Hindu thought. Carstairs (1957) notes the ambivalent view of cow dung among Hindus, where it is seen as 'dirty stuff' yet acknowledged for its purifying

properties due to its association with the sacred cow (Carstairs, 1957, p. 323). This ambivalence is reflected in various ritual practices across different regions. Scholars like Babb (1970, p. 300). Iyer (1912, p. 87) describe how mixture of cow dung with water or clay are commonly used for purification purposes. In Bengal, Hindus often prefer Ganges water for purification, as it is considered equally effective and less labour-intensive than cow dung preparations (Bose, 1929, p. 103). Cow dung mixtures are employed regularly to cleanse the living quarters of the house, especially on occasions when there is a need for ritual purification (Crooke, 1896, p. 28; Thurston, 1909, p. 372; Briggs, 1920, pp. 118-119, 199; Srinivas, 1952, pp. 162-169; Tiemann, 1970, p. 481; Srinivas, 1955, pp. 21-22; Wiser, 1936, p. 107; Simoons, 1974).

The utilization of cow dung and mud in rituals, as exemplified by its significance in the Chaṭha Pūjā mirrors its multifaceted role in various cultural contexts. Just as described by Noterman (2019), cow dung holds diverse meanings depending on the context in which it is encountered. In the urban setting, it may be perceived as an obstacle to be avoided, while in rural areas, particularly among women participating in rituals like Chaṭha Pūjā, it is revered for its symbolic and practical value.

Below is an excerpt from one of the respondents. The interview was recorded on November, 2022 in Varanasi:

Now the house is also cleaned properly, washing etc. is done. Earlier, our house was made of mud and we used to smear everything with cow dung. If it is not made of mud, then we try to wash the whole house…. fresh… by adding Ganga water. Garlic, onion etc. is not added. Then here too we paint with cow dung. We do it by making an altar. The people of the house come and prepare bedī and then paint it with cow dung and then we light a lamp and keep the lamp lit continuously throughout the night.

In the Chaṭha Pūjā, cow dung plays a crucial role as a material for crafting ritualistic figurines and as a source of organic fertilizer. Its importance is heightened within the ritual context, but its

significance is rooted in the daily lives and ecologies of the participants. The ritual intensifies the pre-existing relationship between the worshippers and the substance, amplifying its importance through creativity, symbolism, and communal participation.

Below is a folk song that is popularly sung on the occasion:

Kōpī kōpī bōlelī chaṭhī maiyā, suni ē sēvak lōg,
Morā ghāṭē dubiyā upaj ga'ilē,
Makarī basērā lihalē,
Makarī basērā lihalē.
A hāth joṛī bōlē le Dayā Śaṅkara Dēv,
Sunā hē Chaṭhiyā Mātā!
A ra'urā ghāṭē dubiyā chhilvā'ī dēbō, makarī ujārī dēbō.

Kōpī kōpī bōlelī chaṭhī maiyā, suni ē sēvak lōg,
Morā ghāṭē dubiyā upaj ga'ilē,
Makarī basērā lihalē,
A ra'urā ghāṭē dubiyā chhilvā'ī dēbō, makarī ujārī dēbō.
A ra'urā ghāṭē Candana *chiṛkāī dēbō, makarī ujārī dēbō.*

Kōpī kōpī bōlelī chaṭhī maiyā, suni ē sēvak lōg,
Morā ghāṭē dubiyā upaj ga'ilē,
Makarī basērā lihalē

The respondent explained the folk song as:

This means that the Goddess, Chaṭhī Māī is angry and is voicing her displeasure about the neglected state of the riverside, which is overgrown with grass and covered in spider webs. To this, the worshippers with their folded hands ask for forgiveness and ensure her that they shall clean the riverside; they promise to remove the grass and spiderwebs. They also ask the goddess to bless them with a son, and they would clean and purify the riverside with the hot and fresh cow dung and also make an altar, place lamps and worship. All these!

The above song thereby shows how cow dung, and mud are integral in transforming the neglected riverside into a sacred space worthy of the goddess' presence and blessings. Drawing from Bell's concept of ritual as intensified participation and communication, we can understand how the ritual amplifies the significance of cow dung for participants. The ritual serves as a

platform for expressing reverence for cows and their produce, while also symbolizing fertility and prosperity. The destruction of the figurines made of cow dung, followed by their use as fertilizer, reflects a lifeworld where context is fluid, transitioning seamlessly between ritualistic and practical applications. However, the precarious ecology of these lifeworlds, threatened by factors such as urbanization, industrialization, and cultural change, underscores the need to recognize the importance of preserving traditional practices. This serves as a reminder that the cultural significance of cow dung extends beyond religious rituals, encompassing broader ecological and socio-economic contexts.

Āltā refers to round, flattened structures made of soft cotton, typically coloured red, orange, or pink. During Chaṭha Pūjā, these *āltā* are sprinkled with water and stuck on the door frames of the house where the festival is being observed. This practice serves a dual purpose: it signals to others that they can request *prasāda* (sacred food offerings), and it also that the family has observed the festival, thus politely declining any additional offerings. Moreover, *āltā* is considered purifying and auspicious, enhancing the sanctity and positive energy of the domestic space where the festival is celebrated.

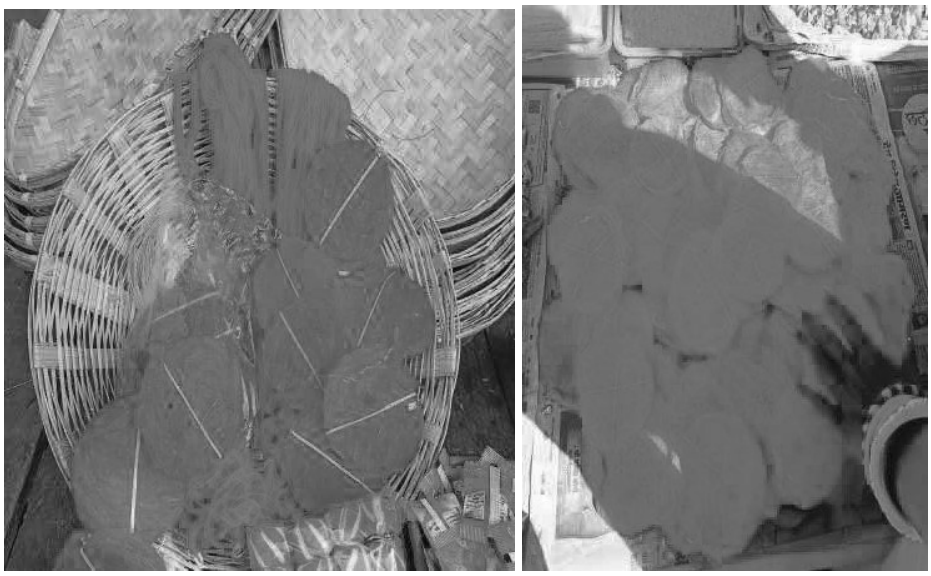

Figure 9 showing *Āltā* used for Chaṭha Pūjā
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)

Mahāvar is a dark red liquid used to decorate the palms and feet and is seen as a sign of marriage and a good material for painting the feet with this red colour and enhancing the beauty of the feet. It is also known as *āltā,* which is sometimes also dark pink; it is given the form of sixteen adornments. The red colour of the dye represents the *suhāga* of a married woman and is almost an inseparable part of a bride/married woman in Bihari culture. Another notable thing about its importance is that its colour is red, symbolising prosperity. When any married woman applies it to her feet, it symbolises prosperity for her and her family. During religious ceremonies like Chaṭha Pūjā, weddings or other festivals, applying *mahāvar* on feet is considered very auspicious, which reflects the sanctity of the occasion and enhances the importance of that occasion. It is considered very important for married women to apply it at any festival of the Hindu religion. Bright red, the traditional *mahāvar* was made with the help of beetle levees, nuts, and lac. The beetle leaves were soaked in water for a long time, resulting in a thick red colour.

Painting the heels or soles with this red dye and adorning the upper foot with elaborate designs to bring out the beauty of a traditional Indian bride is common in the north, central, and eastern parts of India. Our respondents often referred to its most evident visual reference as associated with Hindu goddesses, like Lakṣmī and Durgā; it is noteworthy that Kṛṣṇa, a male deity, is also very associated with wearing the red dye.

Besides its religious and cultural significance, the red dye was said to have additional benefits that contributed to its practical use beyond mere adornment. It is known to have a cooling effect on the body, making it particularly soothing for women when applied to the skin; these women often deal with their heavy household chores, so they have cracked heels. Additionally, its medicinal properties are valued for their ability to prevent bacterial infections when applied to cracked heels. This dual function of the aesthetic and medicinal red dye adds to its importance in traditional cosmetics and rituals. In post-wedding rituals, *mahāvar* plays a crucial role, symbolising the entrance of Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, into the household. When a new bride enters her in-law's house for the first time, she customarily dips her feet in a plate of *mahāvar* before stepping inside. As she walks through the house, her feet leave a trail of red marks, symbolising the auspicious presence of Lakṣmī and invoking blessings for prosperity and harmony in the new home. This ritual holds deep symbolic meaning, signifying the bride's role as a bearer of good fortune and the embodiment of Goddess Lakṣmī within the household. This post-wedding ritual contrasts with another tradition observed in many North Indian villages, where a married daughter visiting her parents' home has her feet adorned with *mahāvar* before departing. This ritual signifies her transition from being a *kanyā* (unmarried girl) to a married *suhāgin* (married woman). It also reflects patriarchal constructs, ensuring that

when the daughter returns to her in-law's household, she carries the revered status of Goddess Lakṣmī, symbolising prosperity and auspiciousness.

During the researcher's interactions with the ritual participants, we've learned that *mahāvar* is applied with utmost care and reverence. It's not just about adorning the feet; it is about invoking the divine blessings of Goddess Lakṣmī. However, there is a subtle yet crucial detail to remember – the direction one faces while applying *mahāvar*. According to astrological beliefs ingrained in our customs, *mahāvar* should never be applied while facing south. Instead, one must ensure they face either north or east, aligning themselves with the auspicious energies of these directions. Applying *mahāvar*, like many other traditions, comes with its customs and beliefs that must be adhered to with care and respect. Another crucial aspect to consider is the timing of when *mahāvar* is applied. It is believed that *mahāvar* should not be applied on a Tuesday, as it is considered inauspicious. This attention to timing reflects the deep-rooted beliefs in auspiciousness and the influence of celestial bodies on our daily lives. Furthermore, applying *mahāvar* is not just about creating intricate designs on the feet; it is about completing the design with care and attention to detail. Married women are particularly mindful of this, ensuring that the design covers the entire foot, from the forefoot to the heel. Leaving any part of the foot bare is considered inauspicious and may invite negative energy. After applying *mahāvar*, it is advised not to wash the feet immediately. Doing so is believed to bring bad luck to the husband and may indicate potential crises in the marital relationship. Additionally, intentionally removing *mahāvar* from the feet is considered disrespectful to the adornment and may disrupt marital harmony.

Aeypan is a sacred paste from water, rice flour, and turmeric powder. This paste marks the sacred space where the Kosi ritual is performed. The markings, usually made in the *āṅgana* (courtyard)

or on the terrace, signify the area's sanctity and are considered an invitation to the divine presence. The preparation and application of *aeypan* serve as the initial steps in setting the stage for the preparatory rituals of preparing a ritual space at the *ghāṭ*, decorating and awakening the *vedī/bedī*. The paste, carefully made from natural ingredients, symbolises purity and auspiciousness, creating a tangible representation of sanctity within the designated area. Whether in the *āṅgana* (courtyard) or on the terrace, the markings made with *aeypan* delineate the boundaries of the sacred space, inviting the divine presence to bless the proceedings. Beyond its physical manifestation, *aeypan* carries symbolic significance. Applying *aeypan* is not merely a mundane task but a sacred act, an expression of devotion and respect towards the divine; it serves as a visual and symbolic representation of purity, auspiciousness, and devotion, setting the tone for a meaningful and transformative experience for all involved.

Sindūra, or vermilion, is a red powder commonly used in Hindu rituals. During Chaṭha Pūjā, *sindūra* (vermilion) holds cultural and ritual significance, particularly for married women. They apply *sindūra* in a distinctive manner, drawing a line from the tip of the nose up to the parting of the hair in the middle of the forehead. This long streak of *sindūra* symbolises marital status, devotion, and the wish for a prosperous and long married life. Married women often apply *sindūra* to each other, fostering a sense of mutual respect, support, and community bonding. This ritual signifies their prayers for each other's well-being and happiness in married life. The vibrant red colour of *sindūra* draws from the red colour of the blood, and represents power, strength, and energy, qualities essential for a fulfilling marriage. Through this ritual (at the end of the festival), as my female respondents explained, women share their auspiciousness of being a *suhāgin* (a woman whose husband is alive) and possessing fertility with one another. During the festival

rituals, the women ensure that their *sindūra* on their hair parting is prominently displayed. The application of *sindūra* is a mark of devotion and a celebration of the institution of marriage, reinforcing the collective wish for prosperity and harmony in married life. These styles of applying vermilion are not just decorative; they have an effect; they do something: they shield; they make a whole; they create auspiciousness; they signal and help to create regional, caste, and class identities; they reflect and create relationships. They also make vermilion marks in odd numbers on ritual materials like *sūplā*, on all the fruit and cooked offerings placed on the *sūplā*, on betel leaf and betel nuts that they hold on their palms while standing in *arajiyā* (*hāth phailānā*) and also during *Kosī bharnā.* They believe that it adds to the material's purity and beautifies it. The assumption is that the materiality of *sindūra* is not only reflective of an intended marital and fertility status but also that such decoration has agency to both transform and maintain these statuses of a woman. The agency works at several levels by strengthening a woman's inherent auspiciousness. For married women, the vermilion and other women's things like bangles, etc. (which has been discussed later in this section) protect and strengthen her marriage; it also creates and sustains a ritual relationship with Chaṭhī Māī (as narratives often portrayed her as a female counterpart of a male god)—both frameworks within which the female worshippers can perform their female auspiciousness.

Piyarī: The observance of Chaṭha Pūjā is steeped in a meticulous regard for the purity of attire, reflecting profound cultural and religious convictions concerning sanctity and auspiciousness. Participants are obliged to don pristine, unstitched garments, as the stitching is deemed to make the cloth impure. Of particular significance are *dhotī*s, long pieces of cloth wrapped around the waist and legs sans any stitching, revered for their association with ritual purity. These *dhotī*s are

often adorned with turmeric called *piyarī*, symbolising purity and auspiciousness. They are worn devoid of knots. Knots in clothing are regarded as ominous and contaminating, and they are believed to disrupt the essential flow of positive energy requisite for the ceremonies. Both men and women diligently eschew tying knots in their attire, with women elegantly draping their sarees or *dhotī*s around their waist sans knots, aligning with the shared commitment to upholding purity. This steadfast practice underscores a unified dedication to preserving the sanctity of the rituals. The emphasis on unstitched, immaculate clothing and the avoidance of knots are deeply ingrained in indigenous beliefs concerning purity, serving as a poignant tribute to ancestral practices and an unwavering commitment to safeguarding the sanctity of the rituals. Thus, the meticulous preparation and wearing of clothing during Chaṭha Pūjā play an indispensable role in ensuring the integrity and ritual efficacy of the ceremonies. The *dhotī*, when worn during Chaṭha Pūjā, transcends its utilitarian purpose and transforms into a sacred garment laden with symbolism and significance. Adorned with turmeric, known as '*piyarī*,' the *dhotī* assumes a vibrant yellow hue that not only pleases the eye but also carries deeper ritual connotations. Turmeric, esteemed for its antiseptic properties and integral role in religious rituals, symbolises purity, health, and auspiciousness. Applying turmeric to the *dhotī* is not merely a superficial embellishment but a profound invocation of divine blessings and protection from the celestial realms, aligning the wearer with the benevolent essence of the Sun God. Moreover, the tradition of wearing *dhotī*s without knots during Chaṭha Pūjā imparts additional layers of meaning and symbolism to this practice. Knots, often perceived as disruptions or impediments to energy flow, are consciously avoided to maintain an unbroken continuity of purity and devotion. The seamless nature of the *dhotī*, devoid of any knots, is a powerful metaphor for the devotee's unwavering commitment to preserving an unblemished state of being, free from the taint of impurities and

obstacles. This aspect of the attire is not merely a matter of aesthetics but a profound expression of ritual readiness and receptivity, essential for establishing a harmonious connection with the Sun God during the rituals of Chaṭha Pūjā.

Figure 10 showing women wearing *piyarī* for Chaṭha Pūjā
(The pictures were taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Varanasi, 2021)

Chaṭha Pūjā, characterised by its rigorous practices and disciplined observances, demands utmost dedication and sincerity from the worshippers and their family members. Fasting, standing in water, and offering prayers to the rising and setting sun are sacred rituals performed during this auspicious occasion. The attire worn by devotees, especially the *piyarī*, serves as a tangible manifestation of their reverence and devotion, reflecting their commitment to upholding the sanctity and solemnity of the festival. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the *piyarī* becomes a sacred garment imbued with potency, facilitating a deeper communion between the devotee and the divine. The significance of the *dhotī* in Chaṭha Pūjā transcends its physical attributes and extends to embodying the core values and beliefs that underpin the festival. It is a tangible expression of the devotee's reverence towards the Sun God and their unwavering dedication to ritual purity and

discipline. Wearing a *piyarī* becomes a sacred ritual in itself, symbolising the purification of both body and mind and a solemn vow to uphold the sacred traditions of Chaṭha Pūjā. Preparing Chaṭha Pūjā involves meticulous attention to detail, including carefully selecting and preparing the *piyarī*. The turmeric used for adorning the *dhotīs* is often meticulously sourced and processed at home, ensuring purity and authenticity. This preparation process becomes an integral part of the rituals, underscoring the importance of maintaining high standards of cleanliness and sanctity in every aspect of the observance. During the festival, the sight of devotees draped in bright yellow *piyarī* creates a visually captivating spectacle that underscores the collective spirit and unity of the community. The uniformity in attire symbolises the shared devotion and commitment towards worshipping the Sun God, fostering a sense of camaraderie and solidarity among the devotees. Moreover, the vibrant colour and symbolic significance of the *piyarī* contribute to creating a ritually uplifting atmosphere, enhancing the overall experience of the festival. Furthermore, the *piyarī* serves as a poignant reminder of the timeless traditions and cultural heritage intricately woven into the fabric of Chaṭha Pūjā. It connects the present-day celebrations with the ancient practices of ancestor worship and nature reverence, reinforcing the continuity and enduring relevance of such traditional beliefs. By donning the *piyarī dhotī*, devotees pay homage to the Sun God and honour their ancestors and the rich cultural legacy they have inherited, fostering a deep reverence and gratitude towards their cultural heritage.

***Lāha* bangles**: Women play a crucial role in maintaining ritual purity during Chaṭha Pūjā. They wear clean, traditional clothes, ornaments, and, most importantly, bangles made of *lāha* (lac). These bangles are significant because glass bangles are considered impure, while *lāha* bangles are ritually pure. Adhering to traditional attire and ornaments is a visible sign of their

commitment to purity, emphasising their role in upholding the festival's sanctity. The agency of *lāha* (lac) bangles in the context of Chaṭha Pūjā offers profound insights into the lived religious experiences and material culture of the practitioners. These bangles are not merely decorative objects but are embedded with layers of cultural, social, and ritual significance that actively shape and are shaped by the practices and beliefs of the community. In anthropological terms, material culture encompasses the physical objects, resources, and spaces people use to define their culture. *Lāha* bangles, particularly in Chaṭha Pūjā, are pivotal elements of this material culture. Women play a crucial role in maintaining ritual purity during this festival, and their adherence to wearing *lāha* bangles—considered ritually pure as opposed to glass bangles—highlights the cultural constructions of purity and impurity. This distinction in material choice reflects deeper beliefs about the intrinsic qualities of materials and their impact on ritual efficacy. The colours of *lāha* bangles carry significant semiotic weight within the cultural context. Each colour—red for energy and prosperity, yellow for happiness, green for fertility and good fortune—is a symbolic code that communicates specific cultural values and aspirations. From a semiotic perspective, these colours function as signs that convey complex cultural narratives and emotional states. The selection and wearing of these specific colours during Chaṭha Pūjā are acts of communication that express the wearer's intentions and engagement with these cultural symbols.

For anthropologists, it emphasises how material objects like bangles serve as vessels of cultural memory and identity, preserving and transmitting cultural values across generations. Different regions in India have unique rituals and meanings associated with bangles, reflecting the diverse cultural landscape of the subcontinent. For example, in Southern India, gold bangles are considered auspicious, while in Maharashtra, brides wear green glass bangles alongside gold

ones to symbolise creativity, new life, and fertility. In Bihar, *lāha* bangles are a mandatory adornment for brides, signifying good omen. In contrast, in West Bengal, brides wear *Śākhā Polā* (conch shell and red coral bangles) as sacred symbols of marriage. These regional variations reveal how material culture intersects with social structure, regional identity, and local customs. The use of *lāha* bangles in Chaṭha Pūjā exemplifies how religious beliefs and practices are mediated through material objects. Material religion recognises that objects like bangles are not passive but actively shape religious experiences and meanings. The belief that glass bangles invite auspicious vibrations illustrates how these objects are imbued with agency. These beliefs underscore the active role that material objects play in facilitating ritual experiences and practices. For women participating in Chaṭha Pūjā, the lived religious experience is deeply intertwined with the materiality of *lāha* bangles. Wearing these bangles is a performative expression of faith, purity, and cultural identity. Anthropologists understand performativity as the process of constructing social identities through ritualistic and repetitive behaviours. The wearing of *lāha* bangles is a performative act that reinforces the wearer's identity within the cultural and religious context. It is through these tangible objects that abstract religious ideals are made concrete and experienced in daily life.

Ḍholnā: Besides the widespread practice of wearing *maṅgalasūtra* among married women in India, unique cultural traditions in different regions signify marital status through distinct ornaments (Flueckiger, 2020). One such tradition, particularly prevalent in North India, is the custom of presenting a *ḍholnā* to the bride by the groom during wedding ceremonies. While *maṅgalasūtra* have largely replaced *ḍholnā*s in contemporary times, understanding the significance of *ḍholnā*s offers insight into historical marital customs and beliefs. The *ḍholnā*, a

cylindrical pendant traditionally worn by married women in North India, holds deep cultural and symbolic significance. In earlier times, the *ḍholnā* served as a potent symbol of marital commitment and protection. The folklore surrounding the *ḍholnā* further enhances its agency as a protective talisman; it is believed that the *ḍholnā* contained a small amount of poison, and according to folklore, if a woman found herself or her husband's life in danger, she could consume the poison from the *ḍholnā* to protect their lives. This belief underscores the idea that marriage is not only a union of two individuals but also a bond of mutual protection and safeguarding. Unlike other ornaments that may be bought, sold, or redesigned for various reasons, the *ḍholnā* is treated with utmost reverence and care. It is not meant to be traded or altered in any way, as it symbolises the sanctity and permanence of the marital bond. Even if damaged, the *ḍholnā* is repaired rather than replaced, preserving its original form and significance. This practice highlights the cultural importance of the *ḍholnā* and its enduring commitment. During festivals like Chaṭha Pūjā, married women choose to adorn themselves with traditional ornaments, including *maṅgalasūtra* as well as *ḍholnā*s, depending on regional customs and personal preferences. While the use of *ḍholnā* has declined over time, they remain a poignant reminder of ancient marital traditions and beliefs, reflecting the cultural diversity and richness of Indian heritage. As a symbol of marital commitment and protection, *ḍholnā* holds a special place in the cultural fabric of North Indian society. Although their use may have diminished in modern times, the significance of *ḍholnā* is a testament to the enduring bonds of love and loyalty that unite couples in matrimony. Additionally, the *ḍholnā* is a custodian of cultural continuity, preserving ancestral traditions and beliefs within North Indian society. Its immutable nature and reverence reflect its agency in upholding the integrity of marital customs and resisting the forces of modernization.

In addition to its symbolic significance, the *ḍholnā* possesses agency through its physical properties and material composition. Gold, the primary material used in crafting the *ḍholnā*, carries inherent qualities that contribute to its agency. In various cultural contexts, gold is often revered as inherently pure (*śuddha*) (Madan, 1985, p. 17). This inherent purity of gold is believed to extend beyond its material form to purify whatever or whoever comes into contact with it. The physical properties of gold, including its lustre, durability, and rarity, imbue the *ḍholnā* with a sense of prestige and value. Its shimmering surface reflects light and cultural ideals of purity and auspiciousness, enhancing its symbolic significance within marital traditions. Furthermore, the durability of gold ensures that the *ḍholnā* remains intact and unchanged over time, symbolising the enduring nature of marital commitment and love. Moreover, the rarity of gold contributes to the *ḍholnā's* agency by bestowing it a sense of exclusivity and reverence. Gold is often considered a precious metal, coveted for its scarcity and intrinsic beauty. As such, the *ḍholnā*, crafted from this precious material, holds a special place within marital customs, symbolising the unique and cherished bond between spouses.

***Naharnī**:* The trimming of nails with the *naharnī*—a sharp knife-like instrument used specifically for this purpose—is considered purifying. The mere touch of the *naharnī* is believed to cleanse and purify the individual, establishing a state of ritual cleanliness necessary for participation in the sacred rites of Chaṭha Pūjā. This belief highlights the symbolic significance of the *nāun*'s role and the tools she uses in the purification process. The *naharnī* itself, with its sharp, precise form, is more than a tool for cutting nails; it is an instrument of ritual purity. Its use by the *nāun* transforms a mundane activity into a sacred act, reinforcing the cultural importance of purity in Hindu religious practices. The act of nail cutting by the *nāun* is not

merely a hygienic task but a ritualistic process that aligns with the broader religious and cultural values of maintaining purity. In addition to nail trimming, the application of red dye on the nails, prepared by mixing a powder with water, further enhances the state of ritual purity (discussed above). The dyeing process, conducted by the *nāun*, integrates both aesthetic and ritual dimensions, reinforcing the sacredness of the individual's involvement in the festival. The ritual concluded with family members touching the feet of the *nāun*- a gesture signifying respect and acknowledgement of their role in purifying us. This act is part of the broader cultural practice of seeking blessings from those who facilitate and uphold ritual purity, further embedding the values of respect and reverence within the community. Interestingly, the *nāun* left without receiving payment for her services initially puzzled me. We learned that this was due to salt on *nahāe khāe*, rendering us ritually impure for the next three occasions. Sweeping the *naharnī* over our cut nails was necessary to re-establish the purity of our bodies. The deferred payment also reflected her longstanding relationship with the family and a history of financial and social dynamics. Despite past tensions, these people are treated with respect, and an unexpected visit is also accommodated, illustrating the complex social bonds and obligations intertwined with ritual practices. Thus, these services, employing the *naharnī* and red dye, are essential for establishing and maintaining ritual purity during Chaṭha Pūjā. These practices underscore the cultural and religious significance of purity, transforming everyday actions into sacred rituals. The *nāun*, through her tools and actions, embodies the intersection of tradition, respect, and communal values, reinforcing the intricate and deeply rooted cultural practices that define the festival.

Emphasis on Authenticity and Communality: Avoiding Market Infiltration

Chaṭha Pūjā is characterised by its emphasis on authenticity and communality in every aspect of its management. Authenticity is paramount, from the procurement of traditional materials to the organisation of rituals and ceremonies. The use of natural ingredients for offerings, the meticulous preparation of *prasāda* (offerings), and the adherence to strict fasting rituals reflect a deep reverence for tradition and a desire to maintain the purity of the festival experience. This act of procurement in the festival transcends mere practicality; it is laden with symbolic meaning and reflects the festival's intricate web of beliefs, values, and social dynamics. The deliberate selection and collection of foodstuffs are not isolated actions but threads interwoven into the larger fabric of cultural identity. The foods chosen and how they are acquired offer a glimpse into the community's reverence for nature, reliance on local resources, and ability to navigate complex social structures. The mention of caste-specific roles in material acquisition is a thought-provoking entry point into re-exploring social hierarchies and power dynamics. It provides a glimpse into the systemic communality that forms the basis for the role definition of different communities in managing the festival and associated rituals. Thus, the interplay between caste occupations and the procurement of specific items highlights the festival's potential to reinforce and challenge existing social structures. This phenomenon beckons us to delve into questions of agency, resistance, and the negotiation of identity within the framework of tradition. In the tapestry of the Chaṭha festival, these practices emerge as significant routines and living expressions of a community's shared history, values, and aspirations. Thus, we can also see how seemingly mundane actions such as ingredient selection and ritual preparation become avenues for conveying metaphysical meanings, negotiating societal roles, and managing change. The authenticity of ritual materials required for Chaṭha Pūjā lies in the deep-rooted relationship between the customers and the craftsmen, where trust and generational knowledge

outweigh profit maximisation. This trust is built on the craftsmen's reliability and expertise in maintaining ritual purity, which is essential for the festival's observance. Unlike the intrusion of modern market forces, which often introduce cheap plastic goods and mass-produced items, the emphasis on authenticity is a bulwark against such commercialisation and consumerism. The worshippers thus resist being part of such trends, prioritising tradition, sustainability, family customs and community values. By upholding orally transmitted knowledge of the festival and its rituals, worshippers reaffirm their connection to their cultural heritage and reverence for the divine. The researcher recorded various devotional songs that women sing during the festival, reflecting the symbolic meaning of their rituals. Such songs encapsulate the interwoven threads of culture, religion, economy, social roles, and traditions, offering a holistic understanding of the community's identity and dynamics. As a vessel of oral tradition, it is functional in transmitting cultural knowledge, norms, and values across generations. It reflects the community's collective memory, values, and beliefs and solidifies its shared identity and heritage. At the same time, the verses also hint at social hierarchies and identity within the community, evident through allocating specific tasks to distinct occupational groups. Despite these distinctions, there is an underlying unity in the communal endeavour to acquire resources and participate in rituals. These also offer an insight into the community's intricate social fabric, economic practices, religious beliefs, and collective identity.

Conclusion

In examining the meals and materials used in Chaṭha Pūjā, the theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Daniel Miller (2005), Webb Keane (2008), Birgit Meyer (2011), and S. Brent Plate (2015) offer insightful perspectives on the interplay between material culture and religious

practices. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of ‘habitus’ highlights how material objects enable the social, economic, and religious classification of individuals through their practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Applying this to Chaṭha Pūjā, ritual objects such as offerings, vessels, and decorations play a crucial role in reflecting and shaping the social identities and hierarchies within the community. The meticulous preparation and use of specific materials can signify the devotion and socio-economic status of the participants, thereby reinforcing social stratification. Daniel Miller’s perspective focuses on the interrelatedness of materiality and immateriality, arguing that material objects are integral to the manifestation of beliefs and practices, where intangible goals are pursued through tangible means (Miller, 2005). In Chaṭha Pūjā, devotees seek blessings, health, and prosperity through physical acts of offering prayers and performing rituals with specific materials. The sacred water, offerings, and ritual objects used in the Pūjā are imbued with cultural and ritual significance, making them central to the religious practice.

Webb Keane's concept of semiotic ideology explores how material objects mediate religious experiences and convey religious meanings (Keane, 2008a; 2008b). In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, the materials involved in the rituals—such as the sacred river water, earthen pots, bamboo baskets, and specific food offerings—serve as signifiers that communicate the devotees' reverence and devotion. These materials are not just physical objects but are imbued with symbolic meanings that facilitate a connection with the divine. The sensory qualities of these materials, their textures, colors, and smells, enhance the devotees' ritual experiences and reinforce their religious beliefs. Birgit Meyer emphasizes the role of ‘sensational forms’ in shaping religious experiences through sensory engagement (Meyer, 2011). The rituals of Chaṭha Pūjā, including bathing in the river, preparing offerings, and presenting them to the setting and rising sun, engage the devotees' senses in profound ways. The tactile experience of handling the

ritual materials, the visual spectacle of the offerings, the sound of prayers, and the aroma of food all contribute to a lived experience of devotion, purification, and connection with the divine. These sensory engagements are crucial for making the divine tangible and for fostering a communal religious experience. S. Brent Plate highlights the importance of material objects in religious practices, arguing that they serve as mediators between the sacred and the mundane (Plate, 2015). The ritual meals and other materials used in Chaṭha Pūjā exemplify this mediation. The preparation and consumption of ritual meals are not merely about sustenance but about creating a sacred space where the divine is honoured, and the community is brought together. The food items, collected and prepared locally, reflect regional traditions and religious customs, serving as vessels of memory and markers of cultural identity.

The integration of these perspectives reveals that the materials used in Chaṭha Pūjā are essential in understanding the lived religious experiences of the devotees. They help shape social identities, mediate ritual experiences, and reinforce cultural traditions. The ritual meals, viewed through the lens of material religion, are not just culinary exercises but expressions of cultural, religious, and social dimensions. They encapsulate the festival's folk origins, employing indigenous ingredients and preparation techniques sanctioned by religious customs. The meals prepared and consumed during Chaṭha Pūjā are not only culinary exercises but also intricate expressions of profound significance, encompassing a spectrum of cultural, religious, and social dimensions. Deeply rooted in local traditions, these culinary practices witness the festival's authentic folk origins, encapsulating indigenous ingredients, preparation techniques, and religious sanctions (Peres, 2017). The materials used in these meals serve as mediators between the sacred and the mundane, reflecting and reinforcing social hierarchies, cultural identities, and communal bonds. The preparation, distribution, and consumption of ritual meals during Chaṭha

Pūjā are embedded within a broader web of cultural and religious practices. Tacit protocols and communal norms govern these practices, functioning as silent architects of communal bonds and social hierarchies. The deliberate preference for certain foods and the rituals surrounding their consumption serve as expressions of religious devotion, social status, and cultural identity.

In conclusion, the meals prepared and consumed during Chaṭha Pūjā are not merely acts of sustenance but are integral components of a complex web of cultural identity, communal cohesion, and religious devotion. Viewed through the lens of material religion, these meals serve as tangible expressions of religious beliefs and practices, embodying the intersection of the sacred and the mundane. Through the integration of various theoretical perspectives on material culture and religion, we gain a deeper understanding of the significance of these meals within the broader context of Chaṭha Pūjā. Moreover, the rituals associated with food during Chaṭha Pūjā serve as opportunities for sensory engagement, evoking profound religious experiences through sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound. The sensory qualities of food and the rituals surrounding its preparation and consumption enhance the devotees' ritual experiences, creating a deeper sense of connection with the divine and with one another. Thus, the ritual meals of Chaṭha Pūjā are not only about nourishment but also about the reaffirmation of religious beliefs, the preservation of cultural traditions, and the strengthening of communal bonds. Through the lens of material religion, we come to appreciate the significance of these meals as integral components of the religious practice, embodying the complex interplay of materiality and rituality in the lives of the devotees. Also, other materials used in Chaṭha Pūjā—whether they are ritual objects, sacred water, food offerings, or the crafted *sūplā*—are not passive tools but active agents that shape religious experiences. They embody faith, reverence, and cultural identity, enriching the cultural tapestry of Chaṭha Pūjā celebrations and highlighting the enduring significance of traditional

craftsmanship in contemporary religious practices. This comprehensive analysis underscores the importance of material religion in understanding how material objects and sensory engagements shape and sustain religious practices and beliefs.