CHAPTER 5

Safāī and *Śuddha*: The Conception of Cleanliness, Purity & Pollution in Chaṭha Pūjā

Belief in purity and pollution are ubiquitous and play a significant role in shaping the cultural fabric of societies worldwide. While these notions permeate the beliefs in almost all known societies, the associated symbolism and practices vary significantly across different cultures. These beliefs are deeply embedded in the daily lives, rituals, and practices of the people. Anthropologoists have extensively explored the ideas of purity and pollution in different societies through the lens of social, symbolic, and biological categorisations. Anthropology examines what shapes cultural understandings of purity and pollution, how these ideas affect and relate to other cultural and social structures, and the reasons behind cross-cultural similarities in concepts that may seem arbitrary (Buckser, 1996). The idea of purity, in various forms, is likely evident in the ideologies of nearly every human society, as these groups often adopt practices aimed at preserving or maintaining objects or values in an authentic or pure state. Although generally connoting a positive condition, purity can only be defined negatively: as an absence of combining or mixing one thing with others (Forth, 2018). At the same time, ideas regarding what should be maintained in a state of purity can vary considerably from one society to another. For instance, Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1974) explains that any member of society may become polluted temporarily or permanently, voluntarily or involuntarily, and women often experience pollution during menstruation and childbirth. These types of pollution are involuntary and temporary, rendering women untouchable and 'unusable' by men during these periods (Ferro-Luzzi, 1975). Douglas (1966) expands on this by suggesting that societies adopt such rites and practices to minimise the perceived ‘dangers’ associated with pollution, linking it to moral

values. Thus, in the study of menstruation within social anthropology, understanding pollution, taboos, and associated rituals—various forms of actions from everyday life—is essential. Thus, taboo, purity and pollution may not carry the same weight in certain indigenous communities' socio-cultural and religious beliefs, and there may not be equivalent terms in their languages. Nonetheless, English words can still be useful for outsiders to describe and understand these concepts. Notions of purity permeate various cultural and conceptual spheres, notably in kinship through endogamy rules, sexuality, and political and theological ideologies (Forth, 2018). The concept is particularly relevant in analysing social systems, especially in the domains of religion and ritual. One striking example is the interpretation of the Hindu caste system as essentially religious (Dumont, 1980; Bouglé, 1908/1971). Cesare Bouglé (1908) examined how religious ideologies perpetuate and justify caste divisions. Louis Dumont (1980) also touched upon similar themes, positing that the system is not merely a social stratification but deeply entwined with Hindu religious principles, suggesting that the caste system shapes and is shaped by the hierarchy and notions of purity in Hinduism founded on the distinction between 'pure' and 'impure.' Both the scholars contribute to the understanding of the caste system as a social or economic hierarchy and a religiously motivated structure that influences various aspects of life in Hindu societies.

The conceptualisation of purity and pollution in Chaṭha Pūjā is multifaceted, influencing various aspects of life, from the individual to the communal level. Practical dealing with impurity often involves purification rituals, which commonly involve washing or immersion in water to remove 'uncleanness' or 'pollution.' Modern anthropologists have usually treated ideas about physical dirt and routine practices of bodily cleanliness as reflecting a more general and abstract notion of pollution (Dant & Bowles, 2003; Järvelä & Rinne-Koistinen, 2005; Campkin

& Cox, 2012). However, purity in the context of Chaṭha Pūjā is perceived as a state of physical, mental, and ritual cleanliness that one must strive to attain and maintain. It encompasses the cleanliness of the body and materials and the purity of thoughts, intentions, and the environment. On the other hand, pollution is seen as a state of contamination or impurity that can affect individuals, objects, and spaces, disrupting the balance and harmony within the community. This chapter delves into the intricate ways the worshippers understand and manage purity and pollution, offering a comprehensive understanding of these concepts. It examines the stages of purity, including the states of impurity, normal purity, and ritual purity. It explores the various methods of purification employed to transition from one state to another. Additionally, the chapter investigates the social hierarchy influenced by beliefs surrounding purity and pollution, highlighting how these notions shape social behaviour and interpersonal relationships. By examining these practices and beliefs, this chapter aims to illuminate the cultural specificity of purity and pollution within the indigenous communities. It provides a detailed analysis of how these concepts are interwoven with religious practices, social norms, and daily activities, ultimately shaping people's worldviews and ways of life. Through this exploration, we gain insight into the broader implications of purity and pollution, revealing their significance in maintaining social order, well-being, and cultural continuity within the ritual community.

5.1 Historical Anthropological Thought on Purity, Pollution, and Classification

The study of purity and pollution has been a central theme in anthropology since the discipline's inception, focusing on how these notions intersect with systems of social, symbolic, and biological classification. Cultures globally differentiate between clean and unclean, pure and polluted, in varying degrees. These distinctions can range from hygiene to significant religious

matters. Anthropologists such as Frazer (1990), Radcliffe-Brown (1964), Malinowski (1948 [1925]), and Durkheim (1915 [1912]) have also utilised this term when discussing exclusions.

Among nineteenth-century writers, W. Robertson Smith (1889) and James G. Frazer (1990) significantly contributed to the understanding of pollution ideas and taboos, treating these concepts as closely linked. Smith and Frazer maintained a distinction between rules designed to protect sacred or holy things and those concerning magical notions of uncleanness, reflecting a dichotomy between advanced societies' religious pollution and primitive peoples' uncleanness (Smith, 1889, p. 143). Frazer (1990, p. 224), in particular, saw taboo as 'negative magic' preventing magical impurity, reinforcing a strict separation between religion and magic as distinct stages of human intellectual evolution. Thus, these early anthropological explanations of Smith and Frazer tended to see purity and impurity as inherent qualities in objects. This view was later advanced by Émile Durkheim, who did not explicitly address purity and pollution in his seminal work on religion but defined religion through the opposition of 'sacred' and 'profane' (Durkheim, 1915 [1912]). Durkheim's concept of the sacred as highly contagious and the need to protect it from the profane through rites and interdictions pointed to a relational understanding of purity and impurity. This relational perspective influenced subsequent analyses, including those of Mary Douglas (1966).

Durkheim's Influence and Structuralist Perspectives

Durkheim's influence extended to structuralist anthropology, prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. His formal analysis of the sacred and profane facilitated a view of purity and pollution relating to significant distinctions and oppositions. This structuralist turn was evident in the work of Edmund Leach (1964) and others who, like Douglas, saw impurity arising from things that did

not fit into predefined categories. In ‘Homo Hierarchicus’ (1980), Louis Dumont applied structuralist principles to the Hindu caste system, arguing that purity and impurity underpin the hierarchical *varṇa* system. According to Dumont, the Brahmins’ high degree of purity necessitated strict purity rules, reflecting a broader principle of ‘hierarchical opposition’ and encompassment that defined caste relationships through degrees of purity. Pollutants can be agents, activities, contracts, periods, or substances. Unlike purity, pollution disrupts a state of balance, destroys desirable boundaries, or creates unwanted conditions. Mary Douglas’s work marked a significant advancement in the anthropological study of purity and pollution. Drawing on Durkheim, Douglas argued that purity and pollution reflect ideas about relationships between categories rather than the inherent qualities of objects (Douglas, 1966). In her influential book ‘Purity and Danger’ (1966), Douglas proposed that pollution results from the transgression of valued category boundaries, symbolising broader social and moral transgressions. She equated Durkheim's ‘contagion’ with ritual purity and critiqued the earlier distinction between primitive hygiene and sacred contagion. Douglas's structuralist approach linked purity and pollution with social classifications, suggesting that cultural schemes impose order on an external world where some items resist categorisation, becoming marginal or impure (Douglas, 1968). Her analysis of Old Testament animal taboos exemplified this theory, interpreting ‘unclean’ animals as those that did not fit neatly into established categories. However, Douglas’s theory faced criticism. Marvin Harris (1974) and Hunn (1979) offered alternative explanations for food taboos that did not rely on classificatory anomalies. Douglas herself revised her views, acknowledging the limitations of her initial thesis. Valerio Valeri (2000) further critiqued Douglas, arguing that classification alone cannot fully explain pollution and taboo. He emphasised the embodied human subject's fear of

disintegration through bodily substances as a primary basis for pollution ideas, a perspective drawing on psychoanalytic insights from Julia Kristeva (1982).

Contemporary Critiques and Developments

Recent scholarship on purity and pollution has moved beyond Douglas's original thesis, which attributed pollution and taboo concepts to classification systems. An alternative perspective considers taboos, particularly around food, as tools for affirming group identity and boundaries against 'the other,' whether defined ethnically or religiously (Rouse & Hoskins, 2004). Douglas originally hinted at this interpretation in her later work, 'Natural Symbols' (1970, pp. 38–41), suggesting that purity rules might not be universally acknowledged or even recognised by all groups. This shift in anthropological thought has also influenced studies on self-denial and abstinence, including premarital sex abstinence, viewed as a form of individual, self-imposed restriction that serves as an identity marker in a consumption-driven society (Mullaney, 2006). Other recent studies have explored purity rules as markers of group identity, maintaining boundaries between ethnic or religious communities (Rouse & Hoskins, 2004). This perspective aligns with Douglas's later work on how purity rules can affirm group boundaries. Anthropological insights into purity and pollution have also informed studies of self-denial and abstinence, examining how these practices reflect individual identity in contemporary societies (Mullaney, 2006).

Contemporary approaches have further nuanced the study of purity and pollution. Valerio Valeri's 'The Forest of Taboos' (2000) critiqued Douglas's emphasis on classification, highlighting the variability of pollution ideas and the importance of social relationships. Valeri (2000, pp. 69-73)

argued that pollution primarily pertains to the human body's integrity, with bodily substances symbolising threats to personal identity and order. Like Dumont (1980), Valeri's book focuses on a small group of hunter-gatherers on Seram Island in eastern Indonesia. He contends that the classificatory irregularity cannot explain all instances of pollution, nor can things regarded as polluted or polluting always be shown to be anomalous, a point made by several other writers. He observes how taboo is not invariably associated with either anomaly or pollution, so neither factor is sufficient to explain taboo.[7] Drawing on the insights of psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1982), Valeri (2000, pp. 102–113) delves into the concept of pollution, primarily relating it to the human body and its influence on the integrity and identity of the individual. This idea holds significant relevance for the widespread cultural aversion to bodily fluids such as excrement, blood, saliva, and semen, which are often seen as substances that should be either avoided or handled with caution. Valeri (2000) concludes that the fear of bodily and personal disintegration forms the core of pollution notions. However, he also notes the fluid nature of pollution perceptions, which can vary based on social relationships, sometimes even being seen as positive or neutral. This perspective also stresses the role of social dynamics in shaping or modifying pollution concepts and accommodating cultural variances (Forth, 1998).

Integrating Bell's (2009) concept of ritualisation with the study of purity and pollution provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how rituals embody and perpetuate social structures. Her work on ritualisation offers a nuanced understanding of how rituals are produced by sociocultural environments. Bell argues that ritualisation is a process where physical movements within a structured context generate a ritualised body through interaction

[7]In this regard, it is interesting that Leach, in his 1964 essay, offered an interpretation of animal taboos that is essentially identical to Douglas's—regarding ambiguity if not so much to anomaly—but that virtually ignores pollution and does not mention purity at all.

with a structured environment. This process involves a circular dynamic where the spatial and temporal environment generates and moulds physical movements within a ritual context. It also involves the construction of binary oppositions, their hierarchisation, and the creation of an integrated whole. Bell highlights how ritualisation sees itself as responding naturally to specific circumstances, failing to perceive its role in actively constructing and reinterpreting these circumstances. This hierarchical structuring of oppositions generates a sense of coherence and continuity, reinforcing the social order and validating the schemes internalised by participants (2009, p. 74). Bell argues that ritualisation is a natural response to specific circumstances, such as a place, event, or tradition. It interprets its actions as appropriate and necessary, not recognising how it actively constructs the circumstances it addresses. This self-perception obscures the fact that ritualisation restructures the environment and reinterprets the circumstances to fit its internal logic, thereby validating and extending the schemes internalised by participants. Ritualisation temporally structures a space-time environment through physical movements, creating an arena that moulds actors and validates the schemes they internalise. This process generates a sense of continuity and order, making the orchestrated environment appear authoritative and beyond the immediate human community (2009, p. 217). Ritualisation thus reinforces the hegemonic social order, presenting it as a redemptive process through communal participation and physical orchestration of various taxonomic schemes. Ritualisation strategically manipulates contexts to produce agents capable of navigating and influencing socio-cultural situations, often without recognising how it actively constructs these circumstances (Bell, 2009; Bourdieu, 1977). Bell references several key scholars to support and contrast her arguments. Bell adapts Pierre Bourdieu's concept of practice to highlight how ritualised actions embed social structures within the body, creating a 'natural logic of ritual' that operates beyond conscious

awareness (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 116-17). Thus, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is crucial to Bell's understanding of ritualization. He argues that social structures are embodied in the physical movements and practices of individuals, creating a natural logic that operates subconsciously. Bourdieu states, 'It is in the dialectical relationship between the body and a space structured according to mythico-ritual oppositions...that one finds the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship' (1977, p. 87). Arnold Van Gennep's work on rites of passage also highlights the correlation between spatial/geographical progression and cultural transitions. This idea is foundational to understanding how rituals mark and facilitate transitions in social status (Gennep, 1960). Mircea Eliade emphasizes the role of rituals in delineating sacred spaces and regenerating time, arguing that ritual activities are inseparable from the creation of sacred places (Eliade, 1959). Victor Turner discusses the creation of 'ritualized space' and the importance of liminality in rituals, exploring how rituals facilitate transitions by creating spaces where normal social rules are suspended (Turner, 1969). Jonathan Z. Smith focuses on the dynamics of controlled environments in rituals, suggesting that rituals help generate the temporal realities of the ritual calendar (Smith, 1987). Lastly, Roy Rappaport also argues that ritual acts like kneeling do not merely communicate messages but actively produce the embodied experience of subordination or other states (Rappaport, 1976). Scholars like J.Z. Smith (1982; 1987) and G. Bateson (1958 [1936]) emphasise the role of oppositions in ritual as assertions of difference, with rituals often creating asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination. Louis Dumont's work on the hierarchical caste system in India, rooted in the opposition of purity and pollution, further supports the idea that ritual processes of differentiation simultaneously generate hierarchical unity (Smith, 1987; Bateson, 1958 [1936]; Dumont, 1980). This process of ritualisation mirrors the dynamics of purity and pollution, where cultural schemes impose order

and designate certain items as marginal or impure based on their resistance to categorisation. For instance, Mary Douglas's analysis of pollution as the transgression of category boundaries aligns with Bell's idea of ritualisation generating a structured environment (1990, p. 310). Both theories emphasise the role of social classifications in shaping perceptions and behaviours, highlighting the relational and constructed nature of purity, pollution, and ritual practices. Valeri's critique of Douglas's focus on classification further enriches this integration by emphasising the embodied experience of pollution and the fear of disintegration through bodily substances, paralleling Bell's emphasis on the physical and embodied aspects of ritualization (Douglas, 1966; Valeri, 2000; Kristeva, 1982).

Classical anthropological works on Hinduism, such as those by Veena Das (1982), Srinivas (1952), Beck (1972), and Dumont & Pocock (1959), have critically examined and problematized categorical distinctions within the religion. These scholars argue that dichotomies like pure/impure, sacred/profane, and purity/pollution do not provide an absolute framework for understanding the complexities of Hindu beliefs and practices. These nuances become even more intricate when examining indigenous groups and sub-groups, which, while resonating with broader Hindu rituals and beliefs, reveal additional layers of complexity. Veena Das's (1982, p. 114) exploration of Hindu concepts of sacredness presents a fascinating challenge to the traditional sacred/profane dichotomy, suggesting a more intricate and intertwined relationship between the sacred and everyday life within the Hindu context building on the work by Inden & Nicholas (1977). She argued that Durkheimian explanation of the sociology where the sacred always appears extraordinary and potentially dangerous, and that the sacred can be evil and eminently so is antithetical to the Hindu beliefs and rituals. Durkheim (1915 [1912]) had divided the sacred itself into the good-sacred and the bad-sacred, both of which retained the quality of

‘sticking out’ from the world of the non-sacred. Hertz (1960) argued that its dangers could be domesticated; he was emphatic that the distinction between the sacred and the profane was not equivalent to the distinction between good and bad. Hertz (1960) used the term ‘profane’ in much the same sense as Durkheim would have used the term ‘negative sacredness’ when he designated the functions of the left hand as those dealing with the profane. Dumont (1971, p. 75) has expressed dissatisfaction with the term ‘bad-sacred’. Dumont considers it a contradiction in terms. Others have argued that in the Indian case, they prefer to use relative and sliding terms such as ‘more sacred’ and ‘less sacred’ rather than the absolute distinction of dividing the sacred into good and bad. Srinivas (1952) argued similarly for conceptualising the pure and impure as ‘relatively pure’ and ‘relatively impure’, designating the normal ritual status as mild impurity. We would suggest that the difficulties that Dumont (1971) and Beck (1972) point out arise from a failure to see that the sacred may be divided and ordered with reference to different kinds of oppositions. Das (1982) posits that whatever the ultimate nature of sacred experiences, the sacred is essentially a human construction for our purpose; it should thus be analysed as all other products of human activity, that is, as a cultural projection that men make to superimpose a system of meanings on their experience. According to Das, the Hindu perspective on the sacred is not simply a matter of good versus bad; it is deeply influenced by the fundamental dichotomy of life and death, resulting in a more complex and nuanced understanding (Das, 1982, p. 114). Stanner (1967) reports his distress at not being able to apply this distinction to all actions and beliefs of the aborigines during his fieldwork among the Mwaimkatta. Similarly, Inden and Nicholas (1977) imply that the sacred impinges on the profane so deeply in Hindu social life that there is little meaning in insisting on distinguishing one from the other. This is, to a large extent, a restatement of the view that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. This perspective

diverges from conventional interpretations, such as Durkheim's framework, which categorises the sacred into binary concepts of good-sacred and bad-sacred. For instance, M.N. Srinivas's study of the Coorgs applies this framework by associating purity with good sacredness and impurity with bad sacredness, creating a hierarchical relationship where ritual status often involves a degree of impurity (Srinivas, 1952).

However, Das (1982) offers a thought-provoking critique of Srinivas's application of Durkheim's model, emphasising that Hindu practices are characterised by the intricate dynamics of life and death rather than simply adhering to binary notions of good and bad. In Hinduism, impurity often symbolises a state of liminality, challenging earlier assertions that pollution is solely incurred through dangerous events and framed within a binary of pure versus impure. Louis Dumont's work also offers an intriguing perspective on the sacred/profane dichotomy, emphasising how it operates at a cosmic level, while the pure/impure dichotomy functions within social constructs. Dumont further suggests an interrelation between the concepts of sacred, pure, and impure, with each term encompassing the next (Dumont & Pocock, 1959, p. 34; Dumont, 1971). Despite these insightful intersections, Das points out the need to reconcile contradictions in theories, particularly in recognising the fundamental role of the life-death opposition in shaping the sacred within Hinduism. In the case of the symbolism of impurity, the peripheries of the body are emphasised. Thus, hair and nails, which figure prominently in this, have a peripheral position in relation to the body as they can both belong to the body and yet be outside it. It is significant that both the hair and nails are allowed to grow in a natural state to symbolise impurity (Das, 1982, p. 127). Das also problemetises the auspicious/inauspicious binary while explaining the left/right dichotomy in domestic Hindu rituals, and argues that these distinctions cannot again fit into clean categorisations of pure and impure; for instance, *aśauca* (impurity) is

seen as both auspicious and inauspicious. She posits that the terms- —*shubha, mangala, kalyana*—are used for auspicious and with reference to each other, and terms for purity—*shuddha, nirmala, pavitra*—are used as a separate set of equivalences. This set does not include the specialized *aśauca*, the term for impurity incurred at birth and death. Therefore, relations between *varṇas*, castes, life and death, and pure and impure are not conceptualized as either homologous or reducible to one another (1982, p. 140).

5.2 Local Conceptions of Purity, Impurity, and Pollution: The Case of Chaṭha Pūjā

The concept of ritualisation is crucial for understanding indigenous practices such as Chaṭha Pūjā, which involves rigorous rituals centered around purity, impurity, and pollution. The festival includes fasting, bathing in rivers, and offering prayers to the Sun God, emphasising the purification of the body and soul. Ritualisation during Chaṭha Pūjā involves creating and maintaining states of purity through structured practices. This includes specific bodily movements, dietary restrictions, and spatial arrangements that demarcate sacred from profane spaces. The rituals mark a transitional period where participants temporarily leave their ordinary lives to engage in acts of devotion and purification, reflecting Turner's concept of liminality (Turner, 1969). Rituals like Chaṭha Pūjā embody cultural values and social structures within the participants, reinforcing community identity and social cohesion. Through ritualisation, participants strategically navigate and manipulate their sociocultural environment, reaffirming their roles and relationships within the community. The process of ritualisation helps elucidate the intricate connections between ritual practices and cultural identity, especially in the management of purity, impurity, and pollution. In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, ritualisation helps elucidate the processes through which purity, impurity, and pollution are managed and embodied, highlighting the intricate connections between ritual practices and cultural identity.

In Chaṭha Pūjā, the delineation of impurity and pollution is tightly interwoven with cultural norms, religious precepts, and communal practices. Among the various elements deemed impure or polluting, the concept of '*jūṭhā'* holds significant prominence. *'Jūṭhā'* encompasses objects or substances that have been in contact with saliva, including remnants of meals, utensils touched by the mouth, or any items tainted by oral contact. This designation of impurity extends beyond mere physical contamination; it embodies a social and ritual dimension, dictating meticulous handling procedures to prevent further spread of impurity. Touch, too, serves as a conduit for impurity transmission in Chaṭha. Individuals deemed impure, such as menstruating women or those who have encountered bodily fluids, carry the potential to render objects impure through touch. Objects fashioned from certain materials, notably leather, also bear associations with impurity owing to their origins from animal products. Consequently, caution is exercised in their handling to forestall contamination and maintain ritual purity. Moreover, bodily excretions like urine and faeces are universally regarded as sources of impurity. Contact with these substances, directly or indirectly through contaminated objects, engenders pollution and necessitates purification rituals to restore cleanliness. Furthermore, adherence to prescribed customs and rituals is paramount in circumventing impurity. Actions performed incorrectly or deviating from established norms risk engendering pollution, underlining the importance of meticulous observance in upholding ritual purity.

In food consumption, particular attention is directed towards managing impurities associated with leftovers, peels, and remnants. These remnants, classified as '*Jūṭhā*,' demand specialised handling to prevent contamination and maintain ritual purity standards. By meticulously managing impure substances and adhering to prescribed purification rituals, the

community safeguards against the encroachment of pollution and upholds the sanctity of ritual purity in the festival.

5.3 Stages of Purity

In Chaṭha, the concept of purity is not merely about being pure or polluted; it is about maintaining purity to the highest degree through a structured process. This process is categorized into three stages: impurity, normal purity, and ritual purity. Each stage has distinct characteristics and implications for the rituals in the festivals that serve as parameters of do's and don'ts for the *parvaitin*.

1. State of Impurity: Impurity in the Chaṭha is associated with both physical uncleanliness and moral defilement. This holistic understanding of purity emphasises the importance of maintaining both bodily cleanliness and moral cleansing to ensure harmony within the community and alignment with cultural and religious norms. Everyday activities often lead to a state of impurity, necessitating regular purification practices to restore balance and sanctity.

Common sources of impurity include contact with death, illness, excreta, urine, sweat, saliva, and certain materials like leather, taboo foods, stale food, leftovers, and everything that people use in their daily lives. Consumption of taboo foods, which are prohibited by cultural or religious norms, also leads to impurity, reflecting the broader symbolic significance of dietary regulations in maintaining purity. This state necessitates purification before the individual or object can reintegrate into normal social and religious activities; this is done by removing, re-washing, and replacing the material. Impurity in the Chaṭha is multifaceted, affecting both the physical body and the intention. For instance, the occurrence of death of even a distant family member, interaction with dead bodies or participation in funerals is believed to bring and transfer

impurity. At the same time, physical illness is seen as contaminating not just the body but also the ritual state of an individual. Similarly, feelings of annoyance, anger of the primary worshipper, and any laxity in carrying out ritual practices are regarded as impure, necessitating special measures to address this state.

Everyday activities significantly contribute to the state of impurity, highlighting the ongoing need for purification. Routine actions and routine objects such as cooking and utensils of regular use, brushes, toothpastes, regular bedsheets, pillows, mattresses, eating, and bodily functions produce waste and physical uncleanliness, which can accumulate and lead to impurity. These everyday activities and interactions are inherent to life but contribute to the cycle of impurity and purification. In densely populated environments, interactions with others expose individuals to various contaminants and potential sources of illness. This constant exposure necessitates regular cleansing practices to maintain a baseline purity level. Life events such as illness and death, unavoidable aspects of daily life, further contribute to this state.

Impurity has significant implications for the festival. Before individuals or objects in a state of impurity can participate in social and religious activities, they must undergo purification. Purification practices are diverse and tailored to address physical and other impurities like dirt. Cleaning the environment is a fundamental practice involving thorough cleaning of the house and its surroundings to eliminate any physical impurities. The pre-festival period, for instance, is a critical time for addressing impurity. Before a festival begins, families engage in thorough and deep cleaning of their immediate environment, such as the entire house and objects of regular use; our respondents said that it is only before Dīpāvalī (which itself involves cleaning and decorating the house) that the family engage in deep cleaning of the house. This process often includes washing and scrubbing surfaces, removing waste, and ensuring the living space is

orderly and clean. They then segregate a room or space to dedicate for Chaṭha rituals and get it painted or at least sprinkle quick lime on the walls and ceiling. Sometimes, the entire house is painted or sprinkled with quick lime; however, the segregated space for Chaṭha has to undergo this treatment mandatorily and is reportedly a restricted area for the family members, especially children. This preparation is crucial for ensuring that both the space and its inhabitants transition from a state of impurity to one of normal purity. By removing physical impurities from their surroundings, individuals can better prepare themselves for participation in the festival and other communal activities.

Personal hygiene is another aspect of purification. Individuals cleanse themselves through bathing and washing, often using water from sacred sources like the Ganges, which is believed to have purifying properties. These personal hygiene practices are essential for maintaining a baseline level of purity and preparing for more significant religious and social events. Females take up hygienic practices of cleaning their hair, and body using soap, cleaning of intimate area, cutting of hair, nails and eyebrows plucking should preferably be done before Caturthī (fourth)/*nahāe-khāe* (bathe and eat). Similarly for men and children, shaving and hair-cutting should be done before *nahāe-khāe.* Avoiding sources of impurity is also an important aspect of this stage. During periods of heightened attention to purity, such as the pre-festival period, from Dīpāvalī onwards (after the house has undergone deep cleaning and purification), there is a conscious effort to avoid contact with potential sources of impurity. This might include avoiding certain foods, spices, and salts and minimising interactions that could lead to contamination. By being mindful of these sources, individuals can better maintain their state of purity and ensure they are prepared for upcoming rituals and ceremonies. The ritual context of impurity is particularly pronounced before festivals, prompting a period of intense

cleaning and preparation. This ensures that participants and their environment are purified and ready for the upcoming festivities. The pre-festival period is a time of heightened attention to cleanliness and order, reflecting the community's commitment to maintaining purity. This stage is foundational because it sets the groundwork for the subsequent stages of purity. Without addressing and eliminating impurity, individuals cannot progress to normal or ritual purity. The transition from impurity to normal purity marks a liminal phase (*nahāe-khāe*) where individuals and their surroundings are transformed, enabling them to engage fully in social and religious activities. This liminal phase is characterised by a sense of final preparation and anticipation as individuals cleanse themselves and their environment to ensure they are ready for the festival.

Understanding and addressing the state of impurity is crucial for the Chaṭha worshippers. By adhering to practices that eliminate impurity, individuals ensure that their community and personal lives are aligned with cultural and religious expectations. This process of purification maintains harmony and sanctity, allowing the community to prepare for significant events and rituals. The ongoing cycle of impurity and purification reflects the dynamic nature of maintaining purity and underscores the importance of regular cleansing practices.

2. **Normal Purity**: This represents a baseline state of cleanliness and is maintained through daily hygiene practices and adherence to social norms on the Caturthī (fourth) day. The practices on this day underscore the festival's emphasis on cleanliness (*safāī*) and *śuddhatā*. The *nahāe-khāe* (bathe and eat) phase of Chaṭha Pūjā exemplifies the liminal phase described by Turner. It marks the beginning of the festival and sets the stage for the rigorous observance of ritual purity that continues throughout the event. This phase is dedicated to preparing both physically and ritually

for the subsequent days of worship and fasting, underscoring the festival's emphasis on cleanliness and avoiding pollution.

The transformation of everyday materials and actions within the ritual context illustrates the process described by Turner (1969). The porch area, a crucial space for initial preparations, is first washed with water and left to dry. This is followed by daubing the area with a slurry of fresh cow dung, mud, and water. This traditional practice has multiple layers of significance. Physical cleanliness is ensured by washing and subsequent coating with cow dung to remove dust, insects, and impurities. Cow dung is known for its religious properties and is traditionally used in many Hindu rituals to purify spaces. The ritual purification achieved by using cow dung is considered sacred, as it is believed to have the power to cleanse and sanctify the area, making it suitable for religious activities. This practice aligns with the broader Hindu belief in the sanctity of natural substances. A heap of mud is stored during the festival for continuous use in maintaining the ritual purity of the space. The *pūjā* room, where the most sacred rituals will take place, is simply broomed, washed with water and mopped dry to avoid any unnecessary disturbance or contamination. The meticulous preparation of these spaces reflects the importance of maintaining an environment free from dirt and impurities. Elements like mud, used in everyday life for cleanliness, acquire new significance in the ritual context of *nahāe-khāe*, symbolising purification and sanctity. This transformation of meaning aligns with Turner's concept of the liminal phase, where ordinary elements and actions are reconfigured to achieve a higher level of ritual significance. Victor Turner's exploration of the liminal phase in rituals provides a crucial framework for understanding the transformational power inherent in ritualistic practices. Turner emphasised that the liminal phase acts as a transitional period where participants are suspended between their previous status and their new status, thus allowing a profound transformation of

identity and social roles. This concept is integral to understanding how rituals like the *nahāe-khāe* phase in Chaṭha Pūjā facilitate deep changes in participants' experiences, identities, and actions.

In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, *the nahāe-khāe* (bathe and eat) phase is crucial for establishing ritual purity, with the *Nāun* (the caste of barbers; male barbers often work in shops, unlike their female kins who undertake this task by visiting door-to-door) playing a central role. Veena Das mentions these castes as mediators who also mediate at rites of passage (Das, 1982, p. 50). Using the *naharnī*, a sharp knife-like instrument, the *Nāun* trims participants' nails, transforming a mundane hygienic task into a sacred ritual that removes impurities and achieves ritual cleanliness. This act, followed by the application of red dye to the nails (*mahāvar*), symbolises and enhances *śuddhatā* (purity), preparing participants for the rigorous worship and fasting. The ritual concludes with family members touching the *Nāun*'s feet respectfully, emphasising her essential role in maintaining ritual and communal purity. Deferred payment for her services underscore the trust and non-commercial nature of the ritual, highlighting the intricate social bonds (continuing for generations among families) and cultural values central to the festival, very similar to the *jajamānī* system. The researcher could observe the *jajamānī* relations more prominently in Sahibganj, Munger, and Patna but not in Varanasi.

The liminal phase is marked by ambiguity and openness, a period where participants exist outside their normal social roles. This stage allows for the reconfiguration of social relations and personal identities. During this time, participants are equal and free from the usual constraints of their everyday lives, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. The suspension of social structures and hierarchies creates a space for new forms of sociality to emerge, which can lead to lasting changes in how individuals relate to each other and their community. Turner's

concept of liminality underscores the potential for profound transformation during rituals. The liminal phase facilitates the stripping of previous identities and the preparation for new ones through symbolic acts and rituals. This transformation is often achieved through performative actions that signify the transition, such as wearing special clothing, purification rituals, and performing symbolic tasks. By the end of the liminal phase, participants are reintegrated into society with a new status, role, or identity, fundamentally changed by their experience.

Meals prepared on *nahāe-khāe* are strictly regulated, with simple, *sāttvica* (pure) meals that adhere to the festival's purity standards. It is also called *lauwā-bhāta* or *laukī-bhāta* (bottle gourd and rice), as these are the primary food to be consumed. 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 neighbours and served to the guests. Some portion is set aside and offered to the deity and consumed by the primary worshippers followed by other family members and guests. The meticulous attention to food preparation in earthen stoves or new stoves (but not the ones of regular use) underscores the importance of consuming pure, uncontaminated food to maintain physical and ritual purity. The *nahāe-khāe,* thus, illustrates how the organisation of ritual performance achieves transformational effects. The day's activities are designed to cleanse and prepare participants, both physically and ritually, creating a conducive environment for the divine blessings sought during the festival. The emphasis on cleanliness and purity extends beyond the physical to encompass ritual and communal dimensions, connecting participants with broader Hindu beliefs about purity and pollution. The rituals performed during *nahāe-khāe* derive their power from their expressive and performative modes. Natural elements like cow dung, mud, and water reflect a harmonious relationship with the natural world, considered sacred

in Hinduism. These practices are symbolic and imbued with profound cultural and religious significance, promoting health and well-being through a focus on hygiene and clean environments. The transformational effects of the *nahāe-khāe* extend beyond the immediate ritual context, influencing participants' social and cultural identities. The communal effort in maintaining ritual purity reinforces social bonds and ensures the continuity of traditions, with elders passing down knowledge to younger generations. Turner’s concept of the liminal phase provides a profound understanding of how rituals like *nahāe-khāe* facilitate transformation. The liminal phase acts as a crucial intermediary stage that prepares participants for their new roles and statuses by suspending normal social structures, transforming identities, and creating *communitas*. The *nahāe-khāe* in Chaṭha Pūjā exemplifies this process, emphasising ritual purity through meticulous practices of cleanliness and fasting. The detailed preparations and collective effort to maintain purity reflect a deep cultural and religious ethos, fostering physical and ritual well-being. Through these practices, devotees aim to purify their bodies, minds, and surroundings, creating a conducive environment for divine blessings and reinforcing their connection to the sacred traditions of their community.

3. **Ritual Purity**: Through specific religious rites and ceremonies, ritual purity is the highest state of cleanliness and sanctity. It is essential for participating in sacred rituals, handling holy objects, and performing religious duties. Participants engage in stringent practices reflecting devotion and commitment to ritual purity. The guidelines for achieving ritual purity during this period are detailed and rigorous, focusing on both physical and mental purification.

One of the most notable practices during Chaṭha Pūjā is fasting. Devotees (from the fifth day, or Pañcamī (also called *lohaṇḍā/kharnā*) and it continues till the Saptamī morning, that is till the *bhorwā/bihānī aragh)* completely abstain from food and water as an exhaustive act of devotion symbolising the surrender of bodily desires to achieve ritual purity. This rigorous fast not only tests physical endurance but also serves as a powerful means of self-discipline. Alongside fasting, participants must avoid anger and annoyance, fostering a calm and peaceful mindset essential for maintaining purity. Minimal speech is another crucial aspect of the ritual, helping maintain mental tranquility and prevent distractions. Devotees often stay in the reserved space of the primary worshipper, usually a sanctified area within the home. This space is meticulously cleaned and free from worldly disturbances, creating an environment conducive to meditation and prayer. Participants can focus more deeply on their ritual practices by limiting their interaction with the outside world.

Sleeping arrangements during Chaṭha Pūjā are designed to maintain high ritual purity. Participants sleep on the floor, using dried grass or hay as a bedding base. This practice is symbolic, connecting the worshipper to nature and simplicity. Washed or new bedsheets are used, ensuring cleanliness and avoiding pillows to emphasise austerity. Walking barefoot is another practice worshippers do to maintain purity for all the rituals. The physical discomfort of walking barefoot also serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made to pursue purity. Bathing rituals are performed with meticulous care. Devotees use *multāni miṭṭī* (Fuller's earth) instead of soap, as it is a natural cleanser that purifies the body without synthetic additives. This natural substance is believed to have purifying properties that align with the festival's emphasis on cleanliness. New clothes are worn during Chaṭha Pūjā to signify a fresh start and purity. These clothes are typically simple, reflecting humility and devotion. Wearing new garments symbolises

shedding past impurities and presenting oneself anew before the deities. This practice underscores the idea of inner and outer purity, which is crucial for participating in the sacred rituals of the festival.

5.4 Noise as Sound Out of Place in Chaṭha Pūjā

In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, noise, as sound out of place, is considered disruptive to the ritual's sanctity, aligning with broader anthropological theories on the role of sound in cultural practices. Noise can be considered polluting because it disrupts ritual spaces and practices' symbolic order and sanctity. Anthropologists have long studied how different cultures imbue sound with meaning and how specific sounds—or their absence—are integral to maintaining social and ritual order. Mary Douglas (1966) explored how concepts of pollution and purity are used to maintain social boundaries and order. In many cultures, certain sounds or noises are considered out of place within sacred or ritual contexts, disrupting the symbolic order and causing pollution. Noise, in this sense, is not just a physical disturbance but a symbolic one, representing disorder and chaos. The question arises as to why certain sounds are deliberately used in rituals while others are prohibited. According to Levi-Strauss (1964, cited in Jackson, 1968), silence receives its meaning only by contrasting with noise, with each type of noise having a corresponding silence that is significant within the ritual framework. Certain ritual occasions demand silence, while others demand noise. This distinction is often overlooked in favour of focusing on the explicit actions and words of the ritual. However, the prohibition or enjoinment of specific sounds is crucial; accidental noises are typically insignificant unless explicitly forbidden, thereby gaining importance. For instance, Douglas (1954, p. 41) discusses how the Lele tribe prohibits daytime noises, such as women pounding grain, during the night and similarly forbids drumming

during periods of mourning. These prohibitions protect the village from dangerous connections with the forest spirits. In Chaṭha Pūjā, controlled auditory elements like devotional songs, chants, and bells through speakers are used to maintain a sacred atmosphere. At the same time, unwanted noise is seen as a pollutant that disrupts the ritual focus. This deliberate use and prohibition of sounds underscore their symbolic meanings and their role in sustaining the sanctity of the ritual (Turner, 1969; Douglas, 1966; Frazer, 1922; Turnbull, 1965). Taking non-musical sounds first, involuntary noises such as sneezing and yawning may be dismissed despite the fascinating associations between these sounds and the other world (Wagner, 1954, p. 43). What is relevant to the choice of sounds in ritual can only be socially produced noise. Two good examples of noise-making are provided by Levi-Strauss (1964, cited in Jackson, 1968), namely the *charivari* and the *vacarne*, the former relating to the noises made at unpopular weddings, the latter to the din made at eclipses. Jackson (1968) cites the scholarly works of Levi-Strauss (1966/1983) and Frazer (1922) to build his argument that the sounds chosen for ritual purposes. Thus, noise or unpatterned sounds reflect uncontrolled situations, transitional states, or threats to the patterned social order (Eliade, 1964/2024, p. 175; Freedman, 1967, p. 17; Needham, 1967, p. 612).

In Chaṭha Pūjā, noise is particularly seen as a pollutant during the fifth day, or Pañcamī before or *kharanā* day, where silence is imperative while the worshipper, or *parvaitin*, partakes in food. One respondent shared an incident highlighting this belief:

There should be no sound when the parvaitin is feeding on food on kharnā. No pebbles in the food while eating the food on kharnā. It is because the goddess herself is having the food, so stop eating immediately. She is here, how can you give her food that has pebbles? And also therefore no sound while the worshipper eats, because it is the goddess who is eating. One has to act on the behalf of the goddess. There has been one case with me, where I could feel a pebble in my food while eating on the day of kharnā. I stopped immediately; the food itself won't go down the

throat. I became furious and that the anger and annoyance came immediately and automatically. So, people around tell us before only to inform them. The inner conscience changes even if you see someone at that moment. It doesn't matter that you have been hungry for a while and that you will have to fast further. One starts feeling very different automatically. There must be no sound. Even the neighbours keep this in mind. It is not the worshipper who leaves eating further; it happens all by itself that one stops eating and can't eat.

This interview excerpt illustrates how noise, even the faintest sound, is considered polluting because it disrupts the ritual environment's sanctity and the symbolic presence of the goddess. As discussed by Eliade (1964) and Sturtevant (1968), the psychological and physiological impacts of sound further reinforce the idea that certain sounds, or their absence, are essential in creating and maintaining the sacred atmosphere necessary for effective ritual practice. This integration of sound regulation highlights the deep cultural and symbolic significance of sound in maintaining social and ritual order within the ritual context.

5.5 Making Space for the Deity

Ritual purity in the context of Chaṭha Pūjā encompasses physical cleanliness and symbolic purification. This dual aspect is critical for creating an environment suitable for divine presence. Ethnographic observations reveal that the purification of the ritual space involves extensive cleaning, often with water and a mixture of cow dung and mud. This practice is rooted in traditional beliefs that associate cow dung with purity and its ability to sanctify spaces. These actions reflect a broader indigenous understanding of purity, where physical cleanliness is intertwined with ritual sanctity. Place-making during Chaṭha Pūjā involves the transformation of ordinary household spaces into sacred sites. This process is achieved through meticulous physical preparations and symbolic actions delineating the sacred from the profane. By vacating an area and performing ritualistic cleaning, participants symbolically and physically prepare the

space to invite and honour the deities. This act of purification is not just about cleanliness; it represents a deeper commitment to creating a pure, sanctified environment that facilitates divine-human interaction. As observed in Chaṭha Pūjā, ritual purity serves as a medium for transformation, both for the space and the participants. The acts of purification and place-making transform ordinary spaces into sacred sites and ordinary individuals into purified participants. This transformative aspect aligns with the anthropological understanding of ritual as a process that induces change and facilitates a deeper connection with the divine. In indigenous cultural contexts, purity is deeply embedded in everyday life and ritual practices; it is not a static state but an ongoing process that requires continual maintenance and reinforcement through ritual actions.

In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, the creation of a separate ritual space or *jagah*, is essential for establishing a sacred environment conducive to the presence and worship of deities. This process mirrors the practices observed in domestic divination and rituals during the festival, where the ritual specialists (in this case the *parvaitin*) engage in 'place-making' to host Chaṭhī Māī and the Sun God. Chaṭha Pūjā involves meticulous physical preparation, such as thoroughly cleaning the designated area, often using water and a mixture of cow dung and mud to purify the space. This act of purification transforms the ordinary household areas into sanctified sites suitable for performing sacred rites. Moreover, the ritual space is symbolically crafted through actions that denote separation from mundane activities and dedication to religious observances. This dual process of physical and symbolic place-making reflects a reciprocal commitment between devotees and the divine, creating a sanctified environment that embodies respect and devotion. By preparing this sacred space, devotees ensure that the deity's presence is invited and honoured, fostering a deeper connection and ritual engagement during the festival. Instead of analysing only the physical aspects of space, an inquiry is made into how the physicality

structures and is structured by practices or how action constructs space and is constructed by it. Space is seen in the context of our daily and institutional practices. Establishing boundaries within the ritual space is another crucial aspect of maintaining ritual purity. Restricting access to the sanctified area, often by closing doors or limiting movement, underscores the sacredness of the space. This practice of setting boundaries ensures that the purity of the space is preserved and free from any external contamination. Such spatial restrictions highlight the indigenous understanding of purity as a condition that must be actively maintained through conscious, deliberate actions. The concept of ritual purity extends to the participants themselves. Engaging in Chaṭha Pūjā requires individuals to undergo purification processes, such as bathing and wearing clean clothes. These practices reflect the belief that bodily purity is essential for effective participation in the rituals.

In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, *jagah* serves as a symbol for the presence, recognition, scrutiny and prestige of the deity being worshipped. Metonymically, *jagah* represents a physical location and divine power associated with that location. When devotees clean, wash, paint and purify a separate room and perform rituals to create *jagah* for the deity, they prepare a physical space and invite the deity's presence and acknowledge its significance in their lives. By creating and maintaining this space, devotees ensure a tangible connection with the divine, allowing for worship, communication, and communion. This act of place-making is not merely about setting aside a location; it's about fostering a relationship with the deity, where both parties mutually acknowledge and honour each other's presence. *Jagah* has a significant role in managing the divine presence and its impact on human life. Just as the deity's power can bring blessings, it can also be overwhelming or destructive if not properly contained or managed. Therefore, the emplacement of the deity within *jagah* serves to regulate and channel its energy in a beneficial

and harmonious way for devotees. Moreover, the transport of deities from one location (home) to another *ghāṭ*, as seen in Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, symbolises physical movement and a transfer of divine presence and blessings. This act underscores the belief that the deity's influence transcends physical boundaries and can be invoked wherever its presence is welcomed and honoured (Mines 2008, p. 204). Scholars have described how moving Gods from place to place is achieved through a 'transfer of soil,' for instance (Daniel, 1984; Dirks, 1987; Mines, 2008). However, as Mines argues, this movement is not a complete transfer as it is 'an extension of the god's name and power over space, for the original site retains the power as the new site also gains it' (2008, p. 204). In Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, deities are not primarily transported through transfer of soil but through the exchange of material substances and symbolic acts between deities and humans from their domestic space to the riverside or the *ghāṭ* or sometimes even the terrace of their houses.

The approach towards analysing spaces is through rituals that occur there. Ritual as a practice can have the involvement of an individual, a family and community. It can include ordinary acts, or acts that occur occasionally like festivals, and rituals related to phases of a person's life. It can also include performative forms like dance, play, and theater among others. Thus, any act that is habitual and structured, has cultural connotations, and leads to a transformed state can be understood as a ritual. Bodily participation is an essential element of ritual. The body becomes a medium to locate rituals in space. Thus, rituals are actions that are built up on layers of meaning. These actions are termed rituals. These rituals have an ability to build on themselves in second, third or higher orders of associations with respect to time and context. It is not possible to understand these rituals by way of observation. They can be understood only through participation. Roland Barthes's book Mythologies (1972) elaborates on the culture-based

meanings that objects and actions acquire through an example of an axe, which denotes a tool for chopping wood, but possessing the same axe in some societies connotes high status. Thus, an object may have the same denotations, but the connotations change with different cultural contexts. Another important factor about rituals are its transformative aspects, referred to as liminality by Victor Turner. The bodies involved in rituals move from their present state into a different state. Thus, there is a change in the state of mind or the body undergoes liminality. This transformation involves changes in moods, feelings, and emotions. Ritual thus acquires an expressive quality; it is well recognized through its exaggerated gestures and special clothing (Bakhtin, 1968). These aspects add to the existing layers of meaning that the performing body signifies. Diane P. Mines (2008), based on fieldwork conducted in Tamil Nadu, demonstrates how bodily movement makes space (Ramanujan, 1985, p. 232, cited in Mines, 2008, p. 203). Scholars of Hinduism writing about other regions of India have described mutually constitutive connections between place, person, and divinity (Daniel, 1984; Mines, 2005; Grider, 2006; Ramanujan, 1985). Building on these works, I emphasize that the efficacy of ritual place-making during Chaṭha Pūjā similarly hinges on powerful, intrinsic links between person, deity, and *jagah*. It represents not only a physical location but also the divine presence, significance, and power associated with it, making 'representation' a fitting synonym in this context. Symbolically, *jagah* can represent the presence of the deity. Through interactions with *jagah*, worshippers can also influence the deity's essence by altering the nature or extent of their relationship, which is enshrined or gathered within that space (Casey, 1996, p. 24). This dynamic interplay between physical space, personal devotion, and divine presence is integral to the place-making in the Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. To make *jagah* for deities, worshippers and their family members perform distinct yet interrelated acts of ritual place-making: (i) Spatialization, i.e.,

vacating completely an area or a room in the house and thus opening space for a deity to enter and inhabit the particular site; (ii) Emplacement, i.e., restricting the boundary for the divine as well as the others, by simply locking or closing the doors, restricting mobility of others or containing or keeping a deity 'in place' and (iii) undertaking all ritual activities in that area only and maintaining the sanctity of the place rigorously.

Several works have explored how geographic spaces are transformed into social places. Phenomenological and social constructionist theorists of space and place have generally examined place-making as 'the conscious and unconscious ways in which we invest places with meaning through our ongoing activities and rituals, contributing to them in ways that express the dreams, passions, needs, and values of those in them in harmony with the physical features of the environment surrounding them (Abe, 2011, p. 153; see also Basso, 1996; Relph, 1976). By contrast, here the concern is not as much about how social places become suffused with meaning, rather about how place-making as a practice is central to how deities interact with their worshippers. The researcher draws on the difference between 'space' and 'place' elaborated by scholars such as Michel de Certeau (1984) and others. In The Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau focuses on the uses of space, 'on the ways of frequenting or dwelling in a place' (1984, p. xxii). Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012), de Certeau distinguishes between place (lieu) and space (espace) in the following way: space is anthropological and existential, while place is geometric. According to de Certeau, space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements, lacking the univocity or stability of place (1984, p. 117).

Building on these interpretations, the researcher argues that this form of ritual place-making that occurs during Chaṭha Pūjā creates a context, because space, unlike place,

allows for two entities to coexist in a location. In contrast to space, de Certeau describes place as excluding "the possibility of two things being in the same location (place) (1984, p. 117). Giving *jagah*, in this case, ritually transforms a space (which is otherwise a part of the family home) into a dwelling place of a deity, and is thus a form of spatialization (Jassal, 2017). Here, de Certeau highlights the stability and exclusivity of place, which closes, partitions, and establishes limits on a spatial field. The physical aspect of *jagah* limits forms of undesirable contact and consequences between deities and humans. As pointed out by various scholars (Dumont, 1980; Fuller, 1992; Shulman, 1980), Hindu deities are powerful, and power is not only creative but also dangerous and destructive; and so is the power of Chaṭhī Māī and Sun God. By bounding a deity, emplacement lessens the negative impacts of her power. Another benefit of keeping deities in place has to do with the stability of the deities' presence mentioned by de Certeau. During the interviews, the interlocutors emphasized that the separate space shall be again brought into regular use for everyday activities after the culmination of the festival. To make *jagah* for a deity is therefore a way of managing the divine presence and making available to humans temporarily; the boundaries of the space may nevertheless be dissolved later through small or elaborate rituals. The boundary-making is done to maintain a balance between the human, natural, and supernatural realms. Separating an everyday space for the deity in a home ensures the deity is accessible and also acts (or requested to act) benevolently towards worshippers, providing blessings and protection from misfortune rather than acting malevolently. This process also involves ethical and moral boundaries, as the deity's placement influences the behaviour of the *parvaitin* and also others who reside in the house and/or come in contact with her. Additionally, such boundary-making stabilizes the presence of the deities, allowing them to dwell reliably and continuously in the homes of worshippers; place-making practices are necessary to ensure that

the deity remains there till the culmination of worship. Thus, making *jagah* is a dialogical process involving both human and divine agency. This concept illustrates that relationships between deities and worshippers are forged as mutually beneficial, negotiated, and reciprocal; this suggests that ideally, dialogical and mutually transformative relationships should exist between deities and worshippers. Humans rely on deities for health, prosperity, and protection, and to harness the beneficial powers of deities, they must both 'open space' for deities and keep them 'in place' (Jassal, 2017).

5.6 Ritual Purity Through *Piyarī*: The Significance of Clothing in Chaṭha Pūjā

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 garment impure. Of particular significance is *dhotī*, long piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and legs sans any stitching, revered for its association with ritual purity. Often, the *dhotī* is adorned with turmeric and is called *piyarī*, symbolizing both purity and auspiciousness, and has to be worn devoid of any knots. Knots in clothing are regarded as ominous and contaminating, 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 *piyarī* around their waist sans knots, aligning with the shared commitment to upholding purity. According to Das (1982, p. 144), purity and impurity pertain to whether a state is bounded and articulated or liminal and disarticulated. In both auspicious and inauspicious events, individuals may find themselves in liminal, disarticulated states. These states are characterized by the body being in a free-flowing condition, indicated by loose hair, unknotted garments, and

unpared nails. In contrast, bounded and articulated states are signified by the tying of hair, knotting of garments, paring of nails, and use of ornaments. These interpretations by Das emphasises the physical markers that denote a person's transition between different states of purity and impurity, and how these markers relate to broader cultural and ritualistic contexts. Thus, emphasis on unstitched, immaculate clothing and the avoidance of knots show a unified dedication to preserving the sanctity of the rituals; these 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 festival.

Unstitched clothes, such as sarees for women and *dhotī/piyarī* for men, are considered purer than their stitched counterparts because they retain their natural, unaltered form. This symbolic purity is vital during Chaṭha rituals, which involves other purification practices, including fasting, abstaining from drinking water, and bathing in holy rivers or water bodies. These practices are meant to cleanse both the body and the soul, enabling devotees to approach the divine in a state of utmost purity. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966), argues that notions of purity and pollution are integral to maintaining social order and categorizing the world. In the context of Chaṭha, the use of unstitched clothes helps delineate the sacred from the profane, creating a purified space that is suitable for divine communion. The act of wearing unstitched clothes is part of a broader ritual purification process. These garments are often freshly acquired and reserved exclusively for the *pūjā*, thereby avoiding any contamination from daily use. In many cultures, clothes that have been worn during everyday activities are considered to carry the impurities of mundane life. By contrast, unstitched clothes, which have not been altered or

subjected to the everyday wear and tear, are perceived as closer to their original, pure state. This practice reflects a broader anthropological pattern in which rituals often require participants to undergo both physical and symbolic purification to approach the sacred. The preference for unstitched clothes also underscores a commitment to maintaining the traditional and unaltered state of the fabric. This tradition symbolizes the devotees' desire to present themselves in the purest and most humble form before the deities. By choosing unstitched clothes, devotees demonstrate their adherence to cultural norms and religious prescriptions, reinforcing the collective identity and continuity of the social and ritual practices endorsed by their community. This adherence is not just a personal act of devotion but a communal expression of shared values and beliefs.

Moreover, the use of unstitched clothes in Chaṭha highlights a form of ritual discipline and renunciation. The festival involves rigorous fasting, often without water, which requires immense self-discipline and physical endurance. Wearing unstitched clothes complements this discipline by signifying a break from the materialistic and altered aspects of daily life. The act of donning these simple, unadorned garments like *piyarī* symbolises a renunciation of worldly comforts and a focus on ritual purity. This practice also underscores the egalitarian nature of the festival. Unstitched clothes, especially *dhotī*s are often simple and inexpensive, making the festival accessible to people from all social and economic backgrounds. This accessibility fosters a sense of unity and inclusiveness among participants, as the festival does not discriminate based on social status or wealth. Everyone, regardless of their position in society, can participate in the rituals and seek the blessings of the deity. This inclusiveness is a significant aspect of Chaṭha Pūjā, emphasizing the communal and collective nature of the worship. Furthermore, the use of unstitched clothes symbolizes a connection to nature and the natural order, aligning with the

festival's reverence for natural elements like the Sun and water. By using minimally processed materials, devotees honour the natural state of the fabric, which complements their worship of natural forces. The rituals, which often take place on riverbanks or close to other water bodies, emphasize the importance of natural elements in sustaining life. The simplicity and purity of unstitched clothes reflect this connection to the natural world and the devotees' desire to maintain harmony with it.

5.7 Menstruation, Purity, Pollution, and Gender

The concepts of purity and pollution extend beyond distinctions among different castes, classes, and occupational groups to include gender divisions, significantly impacting women. This phenomenon intrigues anthropologists because these rules are closely tied to cultural phenomena. De Vos notes that 'purity and pollution in 'sacred' representations become symbolically institutionalized and related to patterns of social acceptability and social deference. The same patterns are also operative in gender relationships in a number of societies' (1994, p. 55). Anthropological literature frequently explores how these concepts influence social life and contribute to gender differences.

In India, social anthropologists have extensively examined the significance of rituals and concepts of purity and pollution within cultural contexts. Menstrual rituals mark the onset of menarche, establishing the foundation for societal perceptions of pollution and restrictions in a menstruating girl's life. These concepts are often associated with the containment of women's power and perceived female inferiority. For instance, Puri (1999, p. 56) highlights the perception of menstrual pollution as a mechanism to control and subordinate women. Vedic texts provide

mythological explanations for women's impurity, such as the story in the Taittirīya Saṃhitā where Indra's curse resulted in menstrual blood being regarded as impure and dangerous (Leslie, 1992, pp. 17-23). These texts have long influenced societal norms and gender roles. The implications of menstrual taboos and associated rituals are profound. Dube (1974, pp. 75-76) argues that a woman's identity requires restricted behavior and protection, with intense control over her sexuality from puberty to menopause. These rituals serve as symbols of gender distinction and reinforce the construction of femininity within a complex web of social relationships. The concepts of purity and pollution are not unique to India but are present worldwide in various forms. Menstrual taboos and prohibitions highlight how societies classify individuals and construct social worlds, with women being considered polluting during menstruation. The conception of menstruation in Chaṭha Pūjā, as described by the respondents, offers a nuanced perspective that contrasts with the notion of menstrual blood itself being polluting. In light of the literature provided, which discusses the prevalence of menstrual taboos and perceptions of pollution in various cultural contexts, the indigenous conception of menstruation in Chaṭha Pūjā enriches our understanding by offering an alternative perspective grounded in local realities. It underscores the need for anthropologists to engage with diverse voices and perspectives to comprehend the complexity of cultural attitudes towards menstruation and challenges dominant narratives surrounding purity, pollution, and gender. This holistic approach fosters a more nuanced understanding of menstruation as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by socio-cultural, and individual factors. The practice of not using clothes during menstruation highlights a practical approach to maintaining ritual purity and hygiene. Rather than relying on cloth pads or other absorbent materials that can become stained and potentially polluting, women in Chaṭha Pūjā opt for changing their clothes multiple times to ensure

cleanliness. This practice not only aligns with cultural norms but also reflects a proactive approach to menstrual hygiene management, minimizing the risk of contamination and promoting personal comfort and well-being. For them, it is the blood-stained pads or clothes that are considered polluting, emphasizing a distinction between the natural biological process of menstruation and the potential contamination of objects used during menstruation. However, a woman menstruating before or during the festival can opt for washing hair with mustard cakes (*sarson kī khalī),* but this aims at only adding to her ritual purity while her menstruating body is still fit for the rituals.

This perspective reflects a deeper understanding of menstrual hygiene and ritual purity within the cultural context of Chaṭha. By recognizing menstruation as a natural process inherent to women's biology, the focus shifts away from stigmatizing menstruating individuals themselves as impure or polluting. Instead, attention is directed towards maintaining cleanliness and hygiene, particularly concerning the management of menstrual blood and its associated materials. By understanding menstruation in this way, as a natural bodily function that does not inherently render individuals impure, Chaṭha's indigenous conception challenges stigmatizing beliefs and fosters a more respectful and inclusive attitude towards menstruating individuals. It also underscores the importance of cultural perspectives in shaping attitudes and practices surrounding menstruation, highlighting the diversity of beliefs and customs regarding this universal aspect of human experience.

We can thus garner valuable insights into the cultural construction of purity and pollution, particularly within the broader framework of purity, pollution, taboo and nature-culture debate discussed in the literature you provided. Firstly, this perspective challenges the universality of

the notion that menstruation itself is inherently polluting or impure. In many cultures, including those discussed in the literature, menstruation is often associated with pollution due to societal taboos and religious beliefs. However, in Chaṭha, the focus shifts towards the management of menstrual materials and menstrual dirt, such as blood-stained pads or clothes, rather than viewing menstruation itself as polluting. This highlights the cultural specificity of beliefs surrounding menstruation and emphasizes the importance of context in shaping perceptions of purity and pollution. The indigenous conception of menstruation in Chaṭha reflects a pragmatic approach to maintaining ritual purity and hygiene; it emphasizes the intersectionality of cultural beliefs with practical considerations, complicating simplistic interpretations of menstruation as solely a matter of ritual purity. This practice aligns with the broader theme in the literature of how rituals and customs surrounding menstruation are deeply intertwined with notions of cleanliness, hygiene, and social acceptability. Moreover, the indigenous conception of menstruation in Chaṭha challenges traditional gender roles and power dynamics, particularly those highlighted in the debates regarding women's subordinate status and the containment of female power through menstrual taboos. By reframing menstruation as a natural biological process rather than a source of pollution or impurity, Chaṭha's cultural practices promote a more inclusive and respectful attitude towards menstruating individuals, thereby challenging existing gender norms and inequalities. This perspective challenges the universal applicability of the purity-pollution dichotomy and reflects a pragmatic response to environmental and socio-cultural factors. Anthropologically, it prompts a reevaluation of how societies construct and negotiate notions of purity and pollution within the context of menstruation, highlighting the importance of local understandings and cultural practices.

An examination of the conception of menstruation in Chaṭha through the lens of the nature-culture debate provides additional insights into how cultural beliefs and practices intersect with biological processes. From a cultural perspective, such understanding of menstruation emphasizes the social construction of purity and pollution. While menstruation is a natural biological process, the cultural norms and practices surrounding it shape how individuals perceive and interact with this phenomenon. In Chaṭha, the distinction between menstrual blood and blood-stained pads or clothes illustrates how cultural beliefs influence the interpretation of bodily functions. This highlights the fluidity of cultural boundaries and the role of social norms in defining what is considered natural or polluting. On the other hand, the nature aspect of the debate acknowledges the biological reality of menstruation. Despite cultural interpretations and practices, menstruation remains an inherent aspect of human biology. However, the cultural context in which menstruation occurs shapes how individuals experience and understand this biological process. In Chaṭha, the pragmatic approach to managing menstruation without relying on cloth pads or absorbent materials reflects an adaptation to environmental factors and resource availability, emphasizing the intersection of nature and culture in shaping everyday practices.

5.8 Ritual Purity and Functionality of Castes in Chaṭha Pūjā

As presented by Louis Dumont in 1971, the concept of caste hierarchy emphasises a structured system based on the dichotomy of pure and impure. However, this model has been heavily critiqued by numerous scholars who argue that Dumont's framework overly simplifies the complexities of caste relations and ignores historical evolutions and regional variations. Critics argue that Dumont's model presents an overly consensual and static view of social rankings within the caste system. For instance, scholars like Cohen (1968) and Dirks (1989a, 1989b,

1987) highlight that caste dynamics are far more fluid and contentious than Dumont's hierarchy suggests. Critics of Dumont's model argue that his notion of caste predominantly reflects a Brahmanical interpretation, which does not hold uncontested authority in Indian society. Berreman (1991) and Burghart (1990) assert that Dumont's framework mirrors a specific Brahmanical view that overlooks the diversity of perspectives and experiences within the caste system. This Brahmanical perspective tends to idealise and perpetuate a hierarchical order that does not universally represent the complex and varied nature of caste relations across different regions and communities in India. Deliege (1993) and Rudolph & Rudolph (1960; 1967) add that caste relations are marked by conflict, negotiation, and power struggles rather than a universally accepted hierarchical order. Furthermore, scholars such as Quigley (1999 [1993]) and Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma (1994) have pointed out that historical changes significantly impact caste structures, which Dumont's model does not adequately account for. These critiques stress the importance of considering the variability and fluidity in caste systems, which differ across regions and over time. The notion of a single, universally applicable caste hierarchy is also disputed by Arun (2007), Ciotti (2006), and Säävälä (2001), who argue that perceptions of caste rankings are subjective and vary significantly depending on the observer. Scheduled Castes often reject the notion of being less worthy, instead promoting a self-image rooted in purity and aspiring to reclaim their rightful status. This perspective is supported by the works of scholars such as Deliege (1993), Gellner (1999), Gupta (2000), and Sahay (2004). These scholars highlight that members of Scheduled Castes emphasise their pure origins and maintain a hopeful outlook towards regaining their deserved position within the social hierarchy. Thus, while Dumont's hierarchical model provides a certain structural understanding of caste, it fails to capture the contested and dynamic reality of caste interactions. The Scheduled Castes' assertion

of their worthiness and the scholarly critique of the Brahmanical bias in Dumont's work underscores the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to understanding caste in India. Like other castes, this subjective nature is evident in the pride lower castes express in their heritage. Origin myths and narratives among lower castes often recount how 'untouchable' castes lost their high status through various means such as foolishness, treason, chicanery, or self-sacrifice.

A concrete example of this complexity was observed during interviews with the *Ḍom Rājā* in Varanasi in 2021. These interviews revealed the nuanced ways caste members perceive and narrate their histories and statuses, challenging the idea of a monolithic caste hierarchy. This underscores the importance of understanding caste as a dynamic and multifaceted social system influenced by historical, regional, and subjective factors. From our interactions, we gleaned insights into the origins of the *Ḍom* community and the intertwined relationship between their traditional occupation and religious beliefs. The story recounts how Hariścandra, tested by Sage Viśvāmitra, found livelihood and sustenance through the services provided by Kallu Dom, thereby establishing the foundation of the *Ḍom* community's role in cremation rituals. The exchange-based nature of their services, rooted in religious sanctions for attaining *mokṣa*(salvation) for the deceased, underscores the sacred significance of their duties. The act of offering *dāna* (donation) in return for these services highlights the reciprocity inherent in their societal role, where both the service provider and the recipient engage in a transaction imbued with ritual implications. The narrative emphasises the notion of *karma*, suggesting that the performance of their duty to cremate the dead is an inherent part of their destiny. Despite the variations in payment, driven by individual capacities and preferences, the *Ḍom* community fulfills their responsibilities dutifully, recognising their role as ordained by fate. Another

narrative emphasised that they perceive themselves as *Ḍom* by *karma* (deed and action) rather than by caste. The *Ḍom Rājā* recounted a story that sheds light on the historical significance of their role in Varanasi. According to the tale, in ancient times, when Varanasi was known as *ānandavana,* even deities like Śiva and Pārvatī graced the Manikarnika Ghat with their presence. Pārvatī, inadvertently losing her earrings on the riverside, prompted Śiva to request the people for returning them. However, when Kallu Ḍom, a community member, found the earrings but chose not to return them, he evoked Śiva's displeasure. In response, Śiva labelled Kallu *Ḍom* as a *caṇḍāla* and cursed him. Realising his mistake, Kallu *Ḍom* pleaded for forgiveness. Śiva declared him the Rājā (king) for a day, with the proclamation, '*jītē paṇḍit, martē ḍom*' (until one lives, one would need a *paṇḍita*, and when one dies, they would need a *Ḍom*). This divine decree bestowed upon the *Ḍom* community a position of respect and authority, affirming their role in the societal fabric of Varanasi.

Das (1982) highlights that relations between castes in everyday contexts are governed by notions of separation and ranking. For instance, a *Ḍom*, considered untouchable in daily life by even the most exclusive Brāhmaṇa, plays a crucial role in the sacred context of cremation rituals by providing fire. This juxtaposition underscores a significant disjunction: while impure castes hold essential roles in rituals, they remain marginalised in everyday life. Thus, it is important to focus on the separation of roles in everyday interactions versus their critical positions in ritual contexts. Our interactions with the *Ḍom Rājā* revealed that the *Ḍom* involved in the last rites and the *Ḍom* who makes winnowers, baskets, and other bamboo items for occasions like marriages and festivals belong to different sub-castes. Despite this distinction, both sub-castes assert that their exclusive expertise in bamboo craftsmanship for the Hindus is a unique skill possessed only by the Ḍom. Thus, the functionality of caste in contemporary Indian society continues to be a

subject of significant interest and debate. Through fieldwork conducted among various communities, including the *Kumhār, Ḍom, Nāun*, and *Prajāpati*, insights into the intricate interplay between occupational roles, social structures, and cultural practices emerge. These communities, each with their own traditional crafts and economic activities, provide compelling case studies. Their ways of life intertwine economic pursuits with cultural and religious practices, shedding light on how caste functions as a social identity and a means of economic sustenance. This exploration reveals the adaptability and resilience of caste-based communities, showcasing how traditional roles evolve to meet modern economic demands while maintaining cultural coherence. Das (1982) notes that rituals such as marriage do not involve impurity; they evoke ideas of danger. She argues that the role of impure castes, such as barbers and washermen, in these pure rituals like marriage, and festivals is to protect the participants from the danger of the evil eye or disarticulated cosmic entities like ghosts. Wedding rituals in Bengal involve women making sounds to ward off evil forces (Inden & Nicholas, 1977).

1. Ritual Purity Established by the Service of *Nāun*

Scholars have described the roles of barbers and washermen in weddings or festivals and other rituals to ward off evil forces (Kaushik, 1979; Belliappa, 1980; Das, 1982). The study of death rituals by Kaushik (1976) also shows that the barber has an important role in death rites of the Hindus as he is one who prepares the corpse, and shaves the head of the mourner at the beginning of cremation. Das (1982, p. 147) notes that in many events the affines may substitute for members of the servicing castes. However, our interactions with the *Nāun* revealed that they also substitute for the kins in rituals of marriage; especially a male *Nāun* may carry out the

rituals entitled for a brother of the bride. Hence, it is crucial to analyze the sequential progression within a ritual as the functions of these impure castes in pure rituals become evident when we accord equal significance to the ideas of auspiciousness, inauspiciousness, in addition to the concepts of purity and impurity (Das & Uberoi, 1971; Das, 1982). The role of the *Nāun* in Chaṭha Pūjā offers a compelling lens through which to explore the intricate dynamics of ritual purity, caste hierarchies, and economic activities within Hindu culture. In the context of this festival, the *Nāun*'s responsibilities extend far beyond the realm of practical tasks, embodying centuries-old traditions and social structures. Through the specialised tools, knowledge and skills, passed down through generations within specific caste communities, the *Nāun* plays a pivotal role in upholding and reinforcing the cultural significance of ritual purity.

Figure 1 showing *Nāun* using her *naharnī* to apply *mahāvar*
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)

In the observance of Chaṭha Pūjā, the role of the *Nāun* (male and female barbers; they are barbers by caste and not just occupation) is crucial in establishing and maintaining ritual purity,

particularly through her services involving the trimming and decoration of nails. The *Nāun*'s visit and activities underscore the intricate interplay between cleanliness, sacred rituals, and cultural traditions. During the preparations, the researcher witnessed how her services are vital for ensuring ritual purity. 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. The act of nail cutting by the *Nāun* is not merely a hygienic task but a ritualistic process that aligns with broader religious and cultural values surrounding purity; its use by *Nāun* transforms a mundane activity into a sacred act, reinforcing the cultural importance of purity in Hindu religious practices. 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. This red dye is not only decorative but also holds symbolic significance. The colour red, often associated with auspiciousness and divine blessings in Hindu culture, is a visual marker of purity and readiness for religious ceremonies. 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. It was told that this was

due to the use of salt on *nahāe-khāe*, rendering the worshipper ritually impure for the next three occasions. Sweeping the *naharnī* over the cut nails was necessary to re-establish the purity of the bodies of the participating worshippers. 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 the 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. Thus, the *Nāun*'s role offers insights into the broader caste dynamics at play during Chaṭha Pūjā. Traditionally, the *Nāun* belongs to a specific caste group with assigned roles and responsibilities within the community. While some may perceive her duties as menial, they carry immense cultural and symbolic significance within the context of the festival. Despite the hierarchical nature of caste relationships, the *Nāun* commands respect and recognition within the community. Her specialised knowledge and expertise in ritual purity elevate her status and position her as a central figure in the festival preparations. The deference shown to the *Nāun* by other community members reflects not only cultural norms but also the recognition of her indispensable role in upholding the sanctity of the rituals.

Thus, the involvement of these lower castes shows the enduring influence of caste-based divisions of labour on religious practices and communal interactions. Some more examples are given below including the folk songs that the researcher recorded during fieldwork.

The following folk song was recorded in Varanasi in November 2021.

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

The song has been translated 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 Dom'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 discusses the links between occupational groups and their roles in providing essential resources for religious rituals and daily life. 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 water bodies.

Are, are Ḍom bhaiyā! sūpa dehū Swāmī jī ke bāndhe dhārū re
Kārtika māse barat lāgī ghar meṁ arath nāhī hai.
Are, are Yādav bhaiyā! Swāmī jī ke bāndhe dhārū re,
Kārtika māse barat lāgī ghar meṁ arath nāhī hai.

Are, are Mālī bhaiyā! phūl dehu, beṭā morā bāndhe dhārū he,
Kārtika māse barat lāgī ghar meṁ arath nāhī hai.
Are, are Baniyā bhaiyā! guṛ dehu bhāī morā bāndhe dhārū he,
Kārtika māse barat lāgī ghar meṁ arath nāhī hai.
Are, are Kumhār bhaiyā! kalsā dehu Swāmī jī ke bāndhe dhārū he
Kārtika māse barat lāgī ghar meṁ arath nāhī hai.
Are, are Bināī bhaiyā! guth dehu gahanā bāndhe dhārū he,
Kārtika māse barat lāgī ghar meṁ arath nāhī hai.
The song has been translated as-

O brother! (one who makes the bamboo winnowing trays) Give me winnowing trays
To fast in the month of Kārtika, I do not have resources at home,
O brother herdsman! Give me some milk
To fast in the month of Kārtika.
O brother Gardner! Give me some flowers
To fast in the month of Kārtika.
O brother grocer! Give me some jaggery,
To fast in the month of Kārtika.
O brother Potter! Give me some earthen pots,
To fast in the month of Kārtika.
O brother Garlander! Make me some ornaments,
To fast in the month of Kārtika.

The lyrics address individuals from different occupations, such as Ḍom, *Gwālā/Ahīr*,' '*Māli*,' '*Baniyā*,' and so on. The ritual purity and pollution in Chaṭha do not vest in a person but are considered subjective states. It highlights the functionality of castes and the interconnectedness of various social roles within the community. The act of requesting items from different individuals indicates the idea of cooperation, support, and solidarity within the community. It reflects a sense of shared responsibility and assistance during fasting and religious observance. The recurring motif of limited resources (*arath nāhī hai*- no money/resources available) suggests that the request for these items is made out of necessity, possibly indicating that those fasting might not always have the means to acquire the required items for themselves. However, annual observance is mandatory and can be achieved with the support of people around. It highlights economic disparities within the community and how economic factors intertwine with religious

observances. This interaction of economic and religious aspects speaks to the community's adaptive strategies in navigating their social and religious commitments. While the song does not explicitly mention gender roles, it is important to note that certain occupations in the lyrics are referred to using masculine terms. It might reflect traditional gender divisions in certain communities, where specific tasks were historically associated with specific genders. In an anthropological analysis, these lines provide a glimpse into the way people of this community engage with their culture, religion, social interactions, and economic circumstances.

The verses of both the songs highlight the specific roles and attributes associated with women from different castes or occupations. This reflects a societal structure where individuals are assigned distinct roles and responsibilities based on their caste or social status. In traditional societies, the functionality of castes revolves around a division of labour and specialization. Each caste or occupation typically has its own set of duties, skills, and contributions to the community. These roles are often interdependent, working together to ensure the functioning and well-being of the community as a whole. For example, the verses mention women from various backgrounds, such as the potter's daughter, the milkmaid's daughter, and others. Each woman is associated with certain physical attributes or tasks that align with the occupation of her family. This reflects how caste-based divisions influence not only one's occupation but also various aspects of daily life, including marriage customs, dietary practices, and social interactions. Overall, the verses offer insights into the social and economic organization of traditional societies, where caste-based functionalities play a significant role in shaping individual identities and community dynamics. While these roles may have evolved over time, they continue to influence social structures and relationships in many communities.

2. The Prajāpati Artisans

In Chaṭha Pūjā, the shared understanding of ritual purity of castes offers an insight into the dynamics of social stratification and economic activity. Despite belonging to lower castes, the Prajāpati families occupy a significant functional space within the festival's cultural and economic ecosystem. Their craft of pottery-making, passed down through generations, serves as a cornerstone of Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, highlighting the interplay between tradition, belief, and community cohesion. The earthen wares they produce, particularly the *kaccā* pots and *Kosiyā*, are not merely utilitarian objects but hold profound religious symbolism, embodying the sacred reciprocity between devotees and divine forces invoked during the festival.

Figure 2 showing Prajāpati artisans and their earthen vessles for Chaṭha Pūjā (The pictures were taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Patna, 2022)

From an economic standpoint, the Prajāpati artisans contribute to the local market economy through their craft, generating income for their families and supporting their livelihoods. During the festive season, their specialized products experience heightened demand, leading to increased market transactions and economic opportunities within their community. Also, the Prajāpati artisans play a crucial role in creating and sustaining market networks, fostering economic transactions and social cohesion within their communities. Through interactions with customers, wholesalers, and traders, they establish relationships that extend beyond the festival period, contributing to the broader economic landscape of the region. Through their craft, the Prajāpati artisans navigate and negotiate their social and economic position within the caste hierarchy, challenging traditional notions of caste-based occupations and identities. Their participation in Chaṭha Pūjā rituals underscores their agency and resilience, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which lower castes contribute to the ritual purity and cultural vibrancy of the festival. Thus, the Prajāpati artisans serve as a compelling anthropological case study, illustrating the complex interplay between caste, economy, and cultural practices within the context of Chaṭha Pūjā.

3. The *Ḍom* Artisans

Figure 3 showing *Ḍom* Mallick artisans making *sūplā* for Chaṭha Pūjā (The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Patna and Sahibganj, 2023)

The skillful craftsmanship of the *Ḍom* community of Mallick artisans, particularly evident in the production of *sūplā* for Chaṭha Pūjā, reflects a profound commitment to tradition, religious reverence, and sustainable material practices. Every stage of their meticulous crafting process, from bamboo selection to final product, is infused with ritual significance and respect. Through their work, these artisans produce not only functional winnowers but also sacred objects imbued with the blessings of ritual purity, thus enhancing the ritual richness of ceremonies like Chaṭha Pūjā. Throughout their crafting process, the *Ḍom* Mallick artisans demonstrate a steadfast

dedication to upholding ritual purity, adhering to purification rites and avoiding contact with substances deemed polluting. This unwavering commitment ensures that the *sūplā* they create transcend the realm of ordinary objects, becoming sacred artifacts fit for religious rituals. The intricate designs adorning the winnowers not only showcase the artisans' skill but also serve as reflections of the community's deep cultural heritage and aesthetic sensibilities. Additionally, the entrepreneurial spirit of these artisans enables them to meet various demands beyond religious ceremonies, including those for weddings, thereby showcasing the adaptability and economic viability of their craft. By seamlessly blending tradition with commerce, they make substantial contributions to the material culture of Chaṭha Pūjā while simultaneously preserving their cultural identity and fostering community cohesion. In the embellishment of *sūplā* to fulfill *manautī* or personal vows, *Ḍom* artisans exhibit aesthetic prowess and a profound commitment to sustainable material practices and cultural authenticity. By utilizing locally sourced materials and natural dyes, they establish a harmonious relationship with their environment, reaffirming their dedication to ecological stewardship. The exclusive handcrafting of these embellishments not only underscores the value placed upon artisanal craftsmanship but also serves as a deliberate affirmation of the community's cultural heritage. Ultimately, the craftsmanship of the *Ḍom* Mallick artisans transcends mere utility; it embodies elements of faith, reverence, and cultural identity. Through their artistic endeavors, they enrich the cultural fabric of the Chaṭha Pūjā celebrations, emphasizing the enduring significance of traditional craftsmanship within contemporary contexts.

4. Earthen Stove-Making by Female Artisans

Figure 4 showing stove-making by female artisans in Sahibganj
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)

During the fieldwork, the researcher observed the intricate craftsmanship of local artisans residing near the riverside, who are engaged in the traditional art of making earthen stoves—a vital component of Chaṭha Pūjā preparations. These artisans, predominantly women from economically marginalized backgrounds, demonstrate how ritual purity intersects with cultural tradition and socioeconomic resilience within the festival's observance. Through their labour-intensive work, these women contribute not only to the material aspects of Chaṭha Pūjā but also embody the religious significance and communal solidarity inherent in the festival. From a ritual purity perspective, the practice of earthen stove-making among these artisans highlights the profound connection between ritual cleanliness, socioeconomic dynamics, and cultural heritage. Their meticulous commitment to maintaining ritual purity before starting their daily

tasks underscores the symbolic importance of purity in Hindu religious practices, elevating their craft to a sacred endeavor. This adherence to ritual cleanliness is not merely a routine but a deeply ingrained aspect of their work that signifies respect for the sacredness of the festival. The involvement of women from marginalized communities in this traditional art form further illustrates how ritual purity transcends social and economic barriers, reinforcing broader anthropological themes of gender, labour, and empowerment. By adhering to ritual purity, these women assert their agency and resilience, navigating socio-cultural landscapes with dignity and reverence for tradition. Their participation in the festival preparations ensures the continuity of traditional craft practices while fostering community cohesion and identity formation. Situating their craft within the broader framework of ritual purity allows us to understand the multifaceted significance of Chaṭha Pūjā as a socio-cultural phenomenon. It reveals how the principles of ritual cleanliness and sacredness permeate the everyday lives of these artisans, highlighting the interconnectedness of religious observance, cultural heritage, and community solidarity.

Conclusion

The concept of ritual purity in Chaṭha Pūjā is multifaceted, encompassing various stages and intricate practices that reflect deep cultural, social, and religious values. The differentiation between stages of purity—state of impurity, normal purity, and ritual purity—demonstrates how these concepts permeate both everyday life and special religious observances. The state of impurity in Chaṭha Pūjā is linked to both physical uncleanliness and moral defilement. Common sources of impurity, such as contact with death, pregnancy, illness, and certain taboo foods, necessitate purification before reintegration into normal social and religious activities. This stage underscores the necessity of maintaining boundaries between the pure and impure to uphold

social and religious order. Normal purity represents the baseline state of cleanliness and moral acceptability, maintained through daily hygiene practices and adherence to social norms. This level of purity is sufficient for most everyday activities and interactions within the community, highlighting the importance of regular maintenance of personal and environmental cleanliness. Ritual purity, the highest state of cleanliness, is essential for participating in sacred rituals, handling holy objects, and performing religious duties. Achieved through specific rites and ceremonies, this stage underscores the elevated significance of purity in religious contexts, marking a clear distinction from everyday practices. The processes of purification—self-purification, space purification, and intention purification—are central to restoring and maintaining purity. Self-purification involves both inner and outer aspects. Inner purification emphasizes the importance of mental and ritual cleanliness, with practices such as meditation, prayer, and self-reflection cleansing the inner self of negative thoughts and emotions. Outer purification is achieved through regular bathing, wearing clean clothes, and using natural substances like water and herbs to wash away impurities.

Space purification involves regular rituals to cleanse homes, communal areas, and sacred sites, removing both physical dirt and ritual pollution. Methods include sprinkling water, burning incense or herbs, marking with vermillion, and performing specific cleansing ceremonies. Intention purification highlights the critical importance of the purity of one's intentions in conducting the Pūjā and assisting others. Lapses in maintaining the sanctity of ritual spaces or offerings can result in the wrath of the goddess, manifesting as unusual skin changes. These ritual errors are corrected by making vows to the deities, such as committing to observe the annual festival. Achieving and maintaining purity in Chaṭha Pūjā involves various methods with both symbolic and practical significance. Water, revered as a universal cleanser, is central to

many purification rituals. The burning of specific herbs to produce cleansing smoke purifies the environment and dispels negative energies. Complex rituals involving chants, prayers, and offerings restore purity after significant defilement.

Maintaining purity requires constant vigilance and adherence to cultural norms. Individuals avoid known sources of impurity, practice daily hygiene, and regularly participate in rituals to prevent ritual pollution. These practices reflect the broader cultural and religious values embedded in Chaṭha Pūjā, where purity is not merely a physical state but a holistic embodiment of physical and moral integrity. The nuanced understanding of *safāī* (cleanliness) and *śuddha* (purity) in Chaṭha Pūjā reveals the intricate interplay between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social structures. The emphasis on maintaining purity through various stages and purification processes highlights the festival's role in reinforcing communal cohesion, individual discipline, and ritual sanctity. This comprehensive approach to purity underscores its centrality in the lived experiences of the community, shaping both their daily lives and religious observances.

The chapter thus, provides an illuminating perspective on how ordinary individuals actively design and prepare for this significant ritual, reflecting Orsi's (2003) notion that religion is the handiwork of man. Unlike other Hindu festivals that often adhere to normative regulations for maintaining purity, such as *ācamana* (ritual sipping of water), Chaṭha Pūjā showcases the extraordinary ways in which people engage with and personalize their religious practices. This festival emphasizes a holistic approach to purity, involving meticulous preparations that integrate both physical and ritual dimensions. The differentiation between states of impurity, normal purity, and ritual purity, along with the processes of self-purification, space purification, and intention purification, illustrates the creative and dedicated efforts of individuals to achieve the highest state of ritual cleanliness. These practices reflect a deep commitment to upholding

religious values and transforming everyday spaces and routines into sacred expressions of faith. By incorporating natural elements like water and herbs and emphasizing communal cohesion and vigilance in maintaining purity, Chaṭha Pūjā exemplifies how lived religion is dynamically shaped by the actions and intentions of its practitioners. This perspective underscores the intricate interplay between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social structures, highlighting the centrality of purity in the lived experiences of the community and demonstrating how deeply religion is woven into the fabric of daily life. Thus, a study of these indigenous understandings of pure, impure, pollution, sacred, and mundane in the festivity show the laypeople's agency and creativity in their autonomous and unofficial religious activity.