

## Abstract

This thesis offers an ethnographic exploration of Chaṭha Pūjā in Kārtika Māsa, positioning it as a site for understanding lived religion and its interaction with broader socio-cultural processes. Chaṭha Pūjā, observed to worship the Sun God and Chaṭhī Maī, is marked by a series of precise rituals that unfold over four days, each symbolising a unique stage of worship. Participants prepare meticulously, engaging in acts of bodily discipline, fasting, and ritualistic bathing that exemplify concepts of purity and pollution. The first day, known as *nahāe-khāe*, signifies the beginning of the purification process. This is followed by *kharanā*, where devotees fast and consume only certain types of food, reinforcing their commitment to self-purification. These actions signify physical discipline and ritual devotion, reinforcing the symbolic dichotomy of purity and pollution central to the festival's observance. On the sixth day or Ṣaṣṭhī, worshippers present their evening offerings, *sanjhiyā arghya*, to the Sun God from the holy waters of the Gaṅgā, using a bamboo winnowing tray known as *sūpa/sūplā*, filled with *prasāda* (food offerings to God). The subsequent morning, they return to the Gaṅgā for the dawn offering, *bihaniyā arghya*, after which they conclude their fast at home. Through rituals of offering (*arghya*), devotees present fruits, grains, and other symbolic items, reflecting a reciprocal relationship of exchange that is both symbolic and materially grounded. Here, the offerings are seen as gifts that reinforce the bonds between the worshippers and the divine, underscoring the relational aspect of religious devotion that goes beyond material exchange. This study also examines Chaṭha Pūjā through the perspective of material religion, highlighting how objects—such as the *sūplā* (winnowing tray), and other ritual implements—play an active role in shaping the religious experience. These objects are not merely passive items but are imbued with ritual significance, mediating between the human and divine realms. The rituals carried out with these items bring the divine presence into the mundane, illustrating how material culture serves as a conduit for ritual meanings within Chaṭha Pūjā. Through these material expressions, the devotees' everyday practices gain a ritualised dimension, blending the secular and the sacred in the act of worship. Another critical dimension of Chaṭha Pūjā explored in this study is embodiment. The festival's rituals require rigorous physical engagement, such as *arajiyā* (standing in water while offering prayers) to the setting and rising Sun, symbolising devotion and endurance. This performative aspect of the festival shows how religious experiences are profoundly embodied, with the physical acts of worship serving as a means of ritual expression and identity reinforcement. The thesis also addresses how the social structures surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā allow for intergenerational transmission of cultural and religious knowledge through *sūpa denā* (giving of the bamboo winnowing tray).

The study, thus, examines how participants navigate their religious beliefs within frameworks of purity, pollution, gift exchange, and embodiment through extensive fieldwork in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Patna and Munger (Bihar), Sahibganj (Jharkhand), including participant observation and qualitative interviews of 50 respondents. The researcher has also reflected upon and engaged with these central debates in anthropological theory by foregrounding the voices and experiences of those participating in Chaṭha Pūjā. The researcher argues that Chaṭha Pūjā is not merely a traditional religious observance but a dynamic and participatory process where worshippers actively reinterpret and renegotiate cultural and religious meanings to address critical life challenges, reinforcing the connection between religious practice and the practical aspects of daily life like include family obligations, gender roles, health, personal goals, and financial prosperity.

## Theoretical Framework and Objectives of the Study

This thesis explores and describes the rituals of Chaṭha Pūjā, aiming to study the religious beliefs and practices embedded within the cultural fabric of the region. The researcher has also reflected upon and engaged with some of the central debates in anthropological theory—purity/pollution, theories of the gift (exchange between the deity and the laity), material religion, and embodiment; this has been done by foregrounding the voices and experiences of those participating in Chaṭha Pūjā. Through multiple field visits, including participant observation and qualitative interviewing, the researcher sought to delve into the lived experiences of devotees as they navigate the habitus of beliefs, practices and festivities. The practitioners of lived religion navigate the scape of religion, thus exercising agency within the structure. In spite of the navigation, they replicate the structure through practices like *manautī*, *daṇḍavat* and other body techniques.

Central to this inquiry is examining how the beliefs, ritual practices, narratives, festivities, and lived experiences of Chaṭha Pūjā offer insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the religious experiences of worshippers in the region. The objective is to understand the relationship between beliefs and the subtleties of everyday life, highlighting how religious and ritual practices of ordinary people exert agency and innovation while taking charge of their religious beliefs and practices amidst the festivities of Chaṭha Pūjā. Their beliefs of the festival and on the deities, the Sun God and Chaṭhī Māī permeate various aspects of everyday life. The aspects of everyday life include family obligations, gender roles, health, personal goals, and financial prosperity. Devotees often take *manautī* (vows) during Chaṭha Pūjā for a range of personal and familial concerns, including the desire for children, career success, recovery from illness, or the maintenance of good health and prosperity. These vows and the corresponding rituals reflect how religious beliefs shape everyday aspirations. Through fasting, offerings, and prayers, individuals seek divine intervention to address critical life challenges, reinforcing the connection between religious practice and the practical aspects of daily life. This study also seeks to contribute to broader conversations about the nature and significance of lived religious experiences in contemporary society by studying everyday aspects of lived religion, of which Chaṭha is an illustrative example. Considering the nuances of the lived beliefs, practices, and experiences of its worshippers, the study, thus, seeks to move beyond simplistic narratives about religion and rituals, emphasising the enduring relevance of traditional practices in shaping individual lives and community dynamics.

This thesis aims to comprehensively investigate participants' lived experiences in Chaṭha Pūjā through a phenomenological approach. By delving into the subjective worldviews, perceptions, and interpretations of Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, this study seeks to uncover how religious beliefs and practices intersect with individuals' lifeworlds. The thesis attempts to answer the following research questions: 1. How do participants in Chaṭha Pūjā perceive and interpret the rituals and practices associated with the festival within their everyday lives? 2. What meanings and significance do participants attribute to their engagement with Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, and how do these rituals intersect with their personal and collective identities? 3. How do participants navigate and negotiate the complexities of religious belief, tradition, and modernity in participating in Chaṭha Pūjā rituals? 4. What ritual experiences emerge from participants' engagement with Chaṭha Pūjā, and how do these experiences shape their perceptions of self, community, and the divine?

Through these research questions, this work aims to comprehensively understand the lived religious experiences of Chaṭha Pūjā participants and their implications for individual and communal lifeworlds. The study seeks to uncover the underlying meanings, motivations, and dynamics that shape religious engagement and practice within the region by employing interpretative phenomenological analysis.

## Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into five sections, each focusing on distinct dimensions of Chaṭha Pūjā as a lived religious experience. Chapters 1 and 2 give an introduction to the thesis, elaborating on the theoretical and methodological approaches that informed this study. It also provides a detailed literature review for understanding lived religion and introduce the conceptual underpinnings of the study.

Chapter 3 records the varied oral narratives gathered through our fieldwork, showcasing the blending of religious beliefs with regional traditions in the imagination of her worshippers. The chapter delves into the narratives that depict the goddess as a healer, protector, and feminine energy tied to the Sun. Our fieldwork in Varanasi, Patna, Munger, and Sahibganj reveals diverse origin stories, showcasing the cultural mosaic of regions venerating her. Three key facets—the manifestation of feminine energy, the significance of the word ‘Māī,’ and the complementary relationship between male and female principles—are explored to provide a nuanced understanding of the goddess's multifaceted identity in North India. The chapter contributes insights into the diverse cultural landscape shaped by the worship of Chaṭhī Māī, emphasising their crucial role in sustaining a living tradition. Linking Chaṭhī Māī to Bihar's regional identity integrates the tradition into daily life, promoting a sense of belonging. Associations with the Sun god, Sūrya and the continuity of divine male-female dynamics provide varied entry points for believers, enabling emotional connections and familial devotion. The duality of malevolence and benevolence adds complexity, making worship dynamic and responsive to challenges. The evolving narratives contribute to the deity's adaptability, relevance, and popularity, with potential for further research exploring folk religions' adaptation to societal changes and the impact of evolving narratives on community dynamics.

Chapter 4 and 5 mainly focus on the beliefs and preparatory ritual practices of Chaṭha Pūjā. Chapter 4 is mainly about the materiality of Chaṭha Pūjā, as it provides a rich context for examining the intricate relationships between belief, materiality, and religious experience. The festival involves a series of rituals incorporating symbolic material elements such as water, milk, and *prasāda* of fruits and sweets. These materials are central to worshippers' expression of beliefs and devotion rather than merely being accessories to the ritual. This study of the lived religious experiences of worshippers during Chaṭha Pūjā draws inspiration from the approach that views belief not just as an abstract concept but as something practised, lived, and intertwined with material objects and practices. By examining belief, as something practised or lived and often expressed through material objects, this chapter delves into how these objects come into being and gain significance through material practices and bodily adornment. Focusing on the material dimensions of Chaṭha Pūjā, this study aims to demonstrate how objects and substances central to the ritual actively participate in religious practice rather than mere backdrops. The communal aspect of Chaṭha Pūjā are also be considered, examining how shared material practices during the festival foster a sense of community and collective identity among the worshippers. The preparation of the *prasāda*, *arajiyā* (standing in the river water), and the communal meals are instances where material practices and social interactions intertwine, creating a complex tapestry of religious experience beyond individual belief. This approach, resonating with the understanding of belief as something lived through material practices, offers a rich avenue for exploring the nuances of religious experience during Chaṭha Pūjā and the broader implications for studying lived religion. Questions about agency, identity, embodiment, and practice reshape how religion scholars understand how religion manifests in the world. Water, for instance, is not just a physical substance but a purifying agent, a symbol of life and renewal, and a conduit for divine blessings. Likewise, the milk and other offerings serve as tangible expressions of devotion and piety, connecting worshippers to the divine

through sensory and symbolic means. The sensory experiences associated with these materials—such as the feel of water during ablution, the taste of *prasāda*, and the sight of the decorated ritual space—are integral to the devotees’ religious experience. These experiences are deeply embodied, engaging the worshippers’ senses and emotions in ways abstract beliefs alone cannot.

Chapter 5 explores the complex concepts of purity and pollution within the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, highlighting their significant role in religious and social life. Purity is seen as a state encompassing physical, mental, moral, and ritual cleanliness, involving the cleanliness of the body, materials, thoughts, intentions, and environment. Conversely, pollution represents a state of contamination that disrupts community harmony. The stages of purity—impurity, normal purity, and ritual purity—are examined, along with various purification methods, such as physical washing, moral cleansing through meditation or prayer, and specific rituals that transition individuals and objects from impurity to ritual purity. The chapter also investigates how beliefs surrounding purity and pollution influence social hierarchy and behaviour, notably within the Hindu caste system. These concepts are deeply embedded in religious practices, social norms, and daily activities, shaping worldviews and ways of life. By examining the cultural specificity of these notions, the chapter highlights their broader implications for maintaining social order, well-being, and cultural continuity. It underscores the importance of shared beliefs and rituals in strengthening communal identity and cohesion, illustrating the active role of purity and pollution in preserving cultural practices and beliefs across generations.

Chapter 6 and 7 form another section, which shows how the worshippers encounter the deities and what relation they tend to forge during ritual practices. Chapter 6 explores the concept of deity embodiment, focusing on the *parvaitin* during Chaṭha Pūjā, a festival where primary worshippers are believed to embody Chaṭhī Māī. Deity embodiment is a profound religious experience where individuals feel a sense of unity with a deity, significantly shaping their sense of purpose and religious understanding. Not all individuals experience this, nor is it a mandatory practice, and such experiences must be critically examined for personal and cultural influences. In Chaṭha Pūjā, the *parvaitin* are seen as direct channels for Chaṭhī Māī, transcending the human-divine boundary through ritual practices, thus carrying significant authority in the ritual space. It is argued that rituals should be recognised as thoughtful practices by physical bodies, emphasising the lived, embodied nature of religious experiences. By focusing on embodiment, the chapter highlights how physicality shapes and is shaped by religious beliefs and practices, challenging abstract approaches to studying religion. The *parvaitin*’s activities during Chaṭha Pūjā, such as fasting, *daṇḍavat* (prostration, wherein devotees lie flat on the ground with intervals, sometimes, marked by a stick), and offering rituals, involve all senses and underscore the embodiment of religious practice. The *parvaitins* are perceived as embodying the deity, with their actions and utterances holding divine significance. Observations and interviews reveal that *parvaitin* experience a profound sense of divine presence, with their physical actions reflecting and reinforcing this embodiment. The chapter explores how these rituals and body techniques create a sense of divine presence, transforming the worshippers’ experiences and blurring the line between the divine and the mundane; it thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of religious experiences and the diverse ways individuals engage with their faith.

Chapter 7 emphasises the significance of *manautī* and associated rituals, creating a cycle of reciprocal obligations that bind the worshipper and the deity in an enduring relationship. *Manautī* involves devotees vowing to the deity, promising reciprocal actions if their wishes are fulfilled. These vows create a binding obligation between the worshipper and the deity, where the fulfilment of a devotee’s wish by Chaṭhī Māī necessitates reciprocation

through specific rituals during the festival. Failure to fulfill these obligations can invoke the deity's wrath, underscoring the severe nature of these vows. The practice of *manautī* reflects a transactional relationship between the divine and the devotee, highlighting the intricate dynamics of ritual exchange and reciprocity. Central to the Chaṭha festival is the ritual of *parva uṭhānā* (the initiation of annual worship), *kosī bharanā* (a ritual in the festival where decorated earthen elephants with lit oil lamps are offered under a canopy of sugarcanes), *daṇḍavat* represents an intense form of penance and devotion, highlighting the physical and ritual rigour of the festival. The interactive aspect of rituals reflects the deity's accessibility and instrumental role in fulfilling worldly desires, reinforcing the worshippers' faith and devotion. The chapter delves into the details of *manautī* and related rituals, revealing the profound connections between ritual actions and the maintenance of religious and social bonds. By examining these practices, the study contributes to broader discussions on the nature of ritual practices and their social functions within specific religious communities.

The final section of the study is Chapter 8, which aims to integrate the empirical chapters, serving as a reflective rather than an analytical chapter. The thesis concludes with a brief chapter that revisits the research questions presented in this introduction. Here, we summarise the main findings and offer suggestions for future research.