

CHAPTER 7

Conditional Vows: Exchange and Reciprocity between the Deity and Laity in Chaṭha

The festival of Chaṭha is marked by rigorous fasting, water ablutions, and a series of intricate rituals, highlighting the region's deep-rooted cultural and ritual practices. Chaṭha is celebrated as the *lok'parva* (people's festival) of Bihar; its increasing popularity across India and among the Indian diaspora has drawn scholarly attention, not only for its ritualistic fervour but also for its implications for nature worship, female participation, and health benefits (Singh, 2010, pp. 59–80; Wickramasekera, 2013; Singh et al., 2016, pp. 217–225; Hallén, 2020; Pandey et al., 2019, pp. 84–88). However, the fieldwork brought out the prominence of the efficacy of conditional vows as a significant factor in the increasing popularity of the festival amongst its worshippers. These vows are pivotal in creating a web of reciprocal obligations between Chaṭhī Māi and her worshippers and forge a durable bond wherein the deity is expected to fulfill the worshipper's desires, and the worshipper, in turn, must honour the deity through rituals and penances. Among the many aspects of Chaṭha, the practice of conditional vows, known as *manautī*, stands out as a critical component of the worship experience. These vows are conditional, as they depend on the deity fulfilling the desire of the vow-maker. This fulfilment serves as the precondition for the vow. *Manautī* involves making vows to the deity with the promise of reciprocal actions if the wishes of the devotees are granted. These actions often include additional worship, penance, and the performance of specific rituals during the Chaṭha festival. The underlying principle of *manautī* is the exchange and reciprocity between the devotee and the deity, creating a binding obligation that must be fulfilled to maintain divine favour. If a wish remains unfulfilled, the devotee is not obliged to perform the promised actions.

However, failure to reciprocate a granted wish can invoke the wrath of Chaṭhī Māī, illustrating the seriousness of these vows.

Manautī, a practice wherein devotees make vows to the deity with the expectation of reciprocation, highlights the transactional relationship between the worshipper and the divine. These vows, made throughout the year, obligate the devotee to perform certain actions or rituals during the Chaṭha festival if their wishes are granted. Chaṭhī Māī is supposed to reciprocate the worshipper's act of *mānanā*⁹ by fulfilling their wish. The failure of the deity to fulfill a wish annuls the devotee's obligation, whereas not fulfilling a granted wish can provoke the deity's wrath, demonstrating the high stakes involved in these ritual exchanges. This complex interplay is central to understanding the religious and social dynamics at play during the festival. The practice of *manautī* is not merely a religious act but a socio-cultural phenomenon that reinforces communal ties and ensures the continuity of worship across generations. When a devotee makes a vow, they enter into a binding agreement with the deity that necessitates fulfilment through specific ritual actions. This bond, referred to as *bhār* (literally, weight or debt), signifies the heavy responsibility that the worshipper carries. Suppose the devotee cannot fulfill their vow due to circumstances such as a death in the family or health issues. In that case, they must arrange for a proxy to perform the required rituals, highlighting the seriousness and communal aspect of these obligations. The rituals associated with Chaṭha, including the *sūpa* (the winnowing basket used during offerings), play a central role in the worship. The act of *sūpa denā*, or transferring the ritual responsibility, ensures that the bond between the worshipper and Chaṭhī Māī is preserved, even if the original vow-maker is unable to continue. This practice illustrates the collective nature of the festival, where the entire community may become involved in fulfilling

⁹*mānanā* here means the act of vow-taking by the worshipper.

the vow, thus maintaining the continuity of the tradition. The ritual of *parva uṭhānā/hāth uṭhānā*, which marks the commencement of the annual worship, signifies a renewed commitment to the deity. This initiation involves meticulous preparations and communal gatherings, reflecting the collective spirit of the festival. The *Kosī bharanā* ritual, wherein decorated earthen elephants with twenty-one lit oil lamps are placed under a canopy of five sugarcanes tied together, symbolises prosperity and divine blessings. The act of *daṇḍavat*, where devotees prostrate and roll on the ground, represents an intense form of penance and devotion, highlighting the physical and ritual rigour of the festival. The importance of these rituals extends beyond their immediate religious context. They play a significant role in reinforcing social structures and community bonds. By participating in these rituals, devotees reaffirm their cultural identity and collective memory, ensuring the transmission of these practices to future generations. The social dimension of these rituals, where entire communities come together to support and participate in the worship, underscores the festival's role in fostering social cohesion and solidarity.

An anthropological perspective on these practices illuminates the dynamics of ritual performance and underscores the significance of reciprocity in sustaining religious traditions. The acts of giving and receiving within the context of *manautī* reflect a nuanced form of social and ritual exchange, where both the devotee and the deity are engaged in continuous negotiations. This interactive aspect of rituals underscores the deity's accessibility and instrumental role in fulfilling worldly desires, reinforcing the worshipper's faith and devotion. This chapter delves into the details of *manautī* and related ritual practices such as *parva uṭhānā/hāth uṭhānā* (the initiation of the annual worship), *Kosī bharanā* (a ritual involving the offering of decorated earthen elephants with lit oil lamps), and *daṇḍavat* (a form of penance where devotees prostrate and roll their bodies on the ground). These practices, observed during

extensive fieldwork in Varanasi, Patna, and Sahibganj, reveal the profound connections between ritual actions and the maintenance of religious and social bonds. The interviews, conducted in Hindi and Bhojpuri, provided rich insights into the personal and communal significance of *manautī*. The thematic analysis of these interviews reveals that conditional vows serve as a crucial mechanism for devotees to seek divine intervention while reinforcing their commitment to the deity through prescribed ritual actions. Thus, this chapter explores how *manautī* and associated rituals create a cycle of reciprocal obligations that bind the worshipper and the deity in an enduring relationship. By examining these practices from an anthropological perspective, the chapter highlights their role in sustaining religious traditions, fostering community cohesion, and perpetuating a deeply embedded cultural heritage. This exploration enhances our understanding of the Chaṭha festival and contributes to broader discussions on the nature of ritual practices and their social functions within specific religious communities. This exploration can deepen our understanding of how conditional vows shape and are shaped by the socio-religious landscape of North India. Focusing on these interactive and negotiatory aspects of these rituals, provides a comprehensive view of the dynamics that sustain and perpetuate the Chaṭha festival, illustrating the intricate web of relationships and obligations that define this vibrant cultural phenomenon.

7.1 *Vrata* (Vows) and *Manautī* (Conditional Vows): Personal Commitments and Social Dynamics in Chaṭha

Max Müller, a renowned philologist and Orientalist, made significant contributions to the understanding of ancient Indian texts and languages. In his 1869 work, Müller delved into the etymology of the Sanskrit word '*vrata*'. According to Müller, the term '*vrata*' is derived from

the root ‘vr̥,’ which means ‘to protect.’ He traced the evolution of its meaning through several stages: initially, *vrata* referred to something that is enclosed or protected, suggesting a physical or metaphorical barrier safeguarding something within. The term then evolved to signify something that is set apart or designated for a specific purpose, implying a special status or distinction. Subsequently, *vrata* came to mean something that is settled or determined, indicating a sense of resolution or decision, often linked to vows or commitments. As the term developed further, it encompassed the meaning of law or ordinance, reflecting its societal and communal aspects as a binding principle or rule. Ultimately, Müller concluded that *vrata* signified sway or power, highlighting its authoritative and influential nature, potentially in both a spiritual and temporal context (Müller, 1869). The St. Petersburg Dictionary (1852–75) lists various meanings for the word *vrata* including ‘will, decree, command, statute, order, dominion, province, sphere ... vow, religious observance, duty, obedience, service.’ *Vratas* can be expiatory (*prāyaścittas*), obligatory (such as those undertaken by a celibate *brahmacārī* or a householder), or voluntary, aimed at achieving a specific goal.¹⁰ Thus, *vrata* may be considered as closely associated to *dharma*; although their meanings overlap in some passages of the Ṛg-veda, *dharma* eventually evolves into a comprehensive concept, while *vrata* becomes more narrowly defined (Sengupta, 2020). The word *vrata* is a synonym for action, having the sense of abstaining: because it enjoins. Another meaning of *vrata* is vow, and is derived from the same root also because it chooses. Food is called *vrata* also, because it covers the body (Sarup 1920, p. 30.) *Vrata* also refers to sacred vows and rules of conduct that individuals observe, either as community members or on a personal basis (Kane, 1958, pp. 1–21; Dasgupta, 1962, pp. 268–84; Thapar, 1978, pp. 23–35; Olivelle, 2009; Hiltebeitel, 2011).

¹⁰ Carl Cappaller, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Based upon the St. Petersburg Lexicons, available at: <https://archive.org/details/sanskritenglishd00cappalrich/page/8/mode/2up> (accessed 17 December 2019).

Panduranga Kane says the root ‘*vrt*’ means ‘to be, to remain, to abide.’ P.V. Kane (1958) notes that the word ‘*vrāt*’ occurs in the Ṛg Veda just over 200 times, alone or in combination with other words. In early Vedic literature, the *vratas* of the gods are seen as manifestations of divine will, observable in natural patterns and processes, such as the flow of water. More specifically, the *vratas* of individual gods reflect the primary attributes or special functions associated with each deity. Additionally, some passages in the Ṛg Veda anticipate this meaning by explicitly associating it with a concrete set of rites. This highlights the integral role of *vratas* in Vedic religion, linking natural phenomena, divine intention, and ritual practices, thereby demonstrating how early Vedic texts combined cosmology, theology, and ritual to interpret and engage with the world.¹¹ Kane (1958, p. 41) divides *vratas* into two categories: (1). Religious observance or vow, including restrictions on food and behaviour when one has undertaken a religious vow, and (2). The special food is prescribed for sustenance when a person is engaged in a religious rite. D.D. Kosambi (1953, p. 205) observed that ‘the word *vrāt*, which now generally means “observance”, initially meant ‘behaviour like a particular creature’ and is perhaps evidence for derivation from once stronger totemism.

Ramane (2016) characterises *vrata* as a set of behavioural rules rooted in tradition, as described in the Garuda Purana: it is accompanied by a *sankalpa*, or mental resolve, indicating a commitment to undertake the vow. These may be day-specific or deity-specific. These descriptions from sacred texts underscore the diverse nature of *vratas*, ranging from daily observances to more rigorous and long-term commitments; each imbued with religious significance and ritual purpose (Garuḍa Purāṇa; Agni Purāṇa; Matsya Purāṇa). *Vrata* encompasses various acts and restrictions governing daily duties during the specified period, like holy bathing, adhering to specific dietary restrictions, performing worship rituals, and abstaining

¹¹ Lubin, 2001, p. 574-76.

from certain items like salt, honey, pungent substances, alcohol, and meat, as detailed in the Agni Purāṇa (Ramane, 2016, p. 161). Tracy Pintchman (2006, p. 219) advocates for translating ‘*vrata*’ as ‘vow,’ underscoring the personal nature of these commitments. Similarly, Bose (2010) also translates vows as *vart*, essential for the family’s well-being and popular among women in rural Hindu homes. He argues that this practice of taking vows to observe particular ceremonies as offerings of pleas or thanks to a deity is of ancient heritage, mentioned in the Purāṇas, for instance, in a text as old as the Padmapurāṇa from the beginning of the common era, and set apart as sacred rites for the home for special occasions. Mary McGee describes *vratas* in their contemporary form as acts of self-discipline ‘dedicated to a particular deity and having a specified, personal desire or outcome in mind’ (1987, p. 33). As a type of religious observance, these may involve a variety of activities, including fasting or some form of food abstention, ritual worship (*pūjā*) of a deity or deities, recitation of narratives associated with the observance (*kathā*), the giving of gifts or offerings (*dāna*) etc. (Pearson, 1996, pp. 2–3). Ritual elements of *vrata* may include fasting, special worship, recitation of deity-associated narratives, and offerings (Pearson, 1983; 1996, p. 296).

Vrata exhibit remarkable elasticity, spanning duration, purpose, obligation, and deity focus. These diverse characteristics highlight the complexity and flexibility of *vrata* practices (Pechilis, 2006). Although *vrata* has been defined as vow by many scholars, as we have seen above, vows, in particular, have come to include many more forms, exhaustive tasks undertaken to please or thank the deity, and can, thus, occur in a multiplicity of combinations. As a category, these vows in or as rituals can be seen to have great elasticity. It is popular across all religions, castes, classes, genders, and communities and has become integral to South Asian religious practices; it constitutes a fundamental aspect of what scholars have termed as a ‘single South

Asian tradition' (Raj & Harman, 2006, p. 2). These lay vows are undertaken without priestly mediation and represent deeply personal commitments, unlike what scholars have considered categorizing as *vrata*. *Vrata* may only be one component of these conditional lay vows; they are made internally, unmediated, and often kept secret until their fulfilment (Dubisch, 1990, pp. 113–139; Christian, 1981, pp. 31–32). Raj & Harman (2006) have suggested a typology of these vows based on their collection of scholarly studies of vows among various groups. These vows may be categorised into mundane and soteriological vows. Mundane vows aim to obtain desired outcomes, while soteriological vows aim to fulfill deeper ritual needs (Pechilis, 2006). The mundane vows are more about getting what one wants, while the soteriological vows are directed to get what one needs (Raj & Harman, 2006). The distinction between the two is only sometimes clear-cut, as mundane vows may lay the groundwork for soteriological fulfilment. These mundane vows appear to be more folk as they preoccupy the religious imagination and are present in the everyday ritual devotions of South Asians, unlike the soteriological vows. However, the distinction between the two vows is not always clear-cut. The road to achieving mundane vows may ultimately prepare the ground for the fulfilment of the soteriological vows. The difference between wants and needs may be understood as being saved from all unpredictabilities of life and living well in the present moment (Raj & Harman, 2006; Pechilis, 2006). These vows are deeply ingrained in everyday ritual devotions, illustrating their folk nature and prevalence in South Asian religious life (Raj & Harman, 2006). They can also take on transgressive or identity-forming qualities, defying normative boundaries and shaping individual or group identities. These mundane vows can further be categorised as down-payment vows (a promise to pay after you receive), fulfilment vows pay only when it is fulfilled), tribute vows (pay before you demand and offer in regular intervals) and dedication vows (dedicate the

firstborn or the first crop to the divine). Transgressive vows occur as promises made apart from one's tradition, thus giving rise to the liminal religious condition of the devotees. The defiance and transgression of one's normative boundaries of tradition in terms of space, actions, time, sacred figures, etc., is usually the case in such vows, unlike the normative vows taken in line with one's religious traditions. Identity-forming vows are instrumental in representing an individual or a group (Raj & Harman, 2006). It can be long-term or short-term, constitutive or instrumental, ontological or conditional, duty-bound or voluntary, directed toward a specific deity or aimed at transforming one's life path to increase one's ritual status-or, seeming. These terms appear in binary opposition, but they may always occur in various combinations (Pechilis, 2006). Unlike many other religious festivals characterised by elaborate ceremonies and formal rituals, the essence of Chaṭha Pūjā lies in its deeply personal and informal nature of *manautī*, which is also an individualised tradition without a formal structure. No ritual specialist is guiding the worshipper; in that sense, it is a vow. However, it is a conditional vow as it has underlying obligations that give rise to a cycle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating. The respondents explained *manautī* as 'what is asked for' or 'what is to be offered to reciprocate after their vow had been granted'. These vows are aimed chiefly at attaining mundane pursuits like recovery or healing, progeny, employment, marriage, and other personal gains. Once the desire is fulfilled, people start making offerings on the specific annual days of the month of Kārtika.

Such conditional vows are made as an agreement (with an expectation of a positive result) to do or not to do something or with an intent to achieve a particular objective (Rao, 1969, pp. 1–15; Kelting, 2006, pp. 188; Dickie, 2021, pp. 741–767; Gunasekera, 2006). They may also become an instance of socialisation (Baumann, 2006, pp. 129–146). These vows are called conditional because they are contingent upon fulfilling the worshipper's wish to the deity.

Fasting, worship, and other associated rituals and penances are to be undertaken as reciprocal acts to repay the obligation arising from the grant of a vow or fulfilment of the wish by the deity. Unlike the *vrata* (vow), fasting and worship are to be done only after the fulfilment of a wish by the deity. These lay vows, characterised by their intrinsic informality, spontaneity, and flexibility, serve as a testament to the individual's deep-rooted faith and unique relationship with the divine. In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, lay vows are deeply personal and often shrouded in secrecy, representing a sacred pact between the devotee and the divine. The decision to undertake a vow is a spontaneous expression of devotion, driven by an inner calling and a desire to connect with the divine presence. Unlike institutional vows, solemnised through formal ceremonies and public declarations, lay vows in Chaṭha Pūjā are self-initiated and self-monitored, allowing devotees to chart their religious journey according to their beliefs and convictions. This autonomy empowers individuals to customise their vows based on personal circumstances, cultural traditions, and familial influences, resulting in a diverse tapestry of ritual practices and observances.

The informality of lay vows in Chaṭha Pūjā is further underscored by their fluidity and adaptability to changing circumstances. Whether it be fasting, prayer, meditation, offerings, exhaustive tasks or acts of charity, devotees can choose the form and duration of their vows, tailoring them to suit their individual capacities and ritual needs. This flexibility accommodates the diverse lifestyles and commitments of devotees. It fosters a sense of inclusivity and accessibility, making Chaṭha Pūjā a festival for all, irrespective of social status or religious affiliation. For many marginalised groups, like people of lower castes, classes, and even transgenders, these vows serve as a beacon of hope and empowerment, offering an avenue for religious participation in a public space where vows can be undertaken and reciprocated without the need for official sanction or approval. From rich and high-caste people to poor, marginalised

women and transgenders striving for autonomy and agency, lay vows provide a pathway to transcend social barriers and connect with the divine on a deeply personal level. Moreover, lay vows serve as a means of accessing and seeking divine intervention in times of need, offering solace and comfort to those facing adversity and hardship. Thus, they also carry social and religious significance, catalysing community cohesion and collective celebration. The public performance of vows serves as a platform for devotees to showcase their piety and devotion, enhancing their social prestige and earning the admiration of their peers. From elaborate rituals to simple acts of devotion, lay vows in the festival allow devotees to reaffirm their faith and express their gratitude towards the divine, fostering a sense of unity and camaraderie within the community. The observance of lay vows in the festival is also a communal expression of faith and solidarity. Families and communities come together to support and encourage one another in their ritual endeavours, sharing in the joy and blessings of the festival. Whether it be through collective fasting, communal prayers, or acts of charity, Chaṭha Pūjā fosters a sense of unity and interconnectedness among devotees, transcending social, cultural, and religious differences.

7.2 Exchange and Reciprocity in *Manautī* in Chaṭha Pūjā

Gratitude and reciprocity are central to such vows (which includes *vrata*), with devotees expressing gratitude for received blessings and mandating reciprocity in their vows (Komter, 1996; Schwartz, 1967). The exchange, reciprocity, and social structure are intertwined through the imperative of gratitude, which shapes social and cultural dynamics. Many festivals and ceremonies embody reciprocity and exchange, illustrating the cyclic nature of giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Strauss, 1987). The common denominator of such vows and discharge obligations is an expression of gratitude. One does not reciprocate as promised but is also grateful for receiving what was requested. Expressing gratitude has an implicit ‘imperative force’

that mandates reciprocity (Komter, 1996). The relationship between such exchange, reciprocity and social structure can be understood by analysing the gratitude imperative (Schwartz, 1967). Gift-giving and reciprocity should not be understood in the context of tangible results alone. A symbolic message is always conveyed with the act of giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Strauss, 1987). One can also gauge social and cultural influence of gratitude when focussing on the mutual relationship between the recipient and the giver. Reciprocity is undoubtedly an underlying principle behind gift exchange, with connected feelings of gratitude functioning as the moral cement of society and culture. Without gratitude, social continuity is an impossibility because it acts as a force to foster and maintain the network of social that binds social beings (Komter, 1996). The underlying assumption is that by demonstrating such devotion, devotees anticipate receiving blessings or boons from the deity to whom the *vrata* is directed. Stories and popular beliefs surrounding *vratas* frequently emphasise its association with positive outcomes, both worldly and religious, for those who undertake them. However, despite these expectations, there is no guarantee that the desired results will be achieved. Individuals may perform numerous *vratas* throughout their lives without experiencing the anticipated benefits, and in some cases, they may even face significant hardships or tragedies (Pintchman, 2006, p. 220).

The observances associated with Chaṭha Pūjā encompass a rich complex of customs and practices, each imbued with profound symbolism and significance. Among these rituals are a plethora of acts as part of lay vows, ranging from reciting prayers called *arajiyā* to offering various items (in quantity and quality), culminating in acts of devotion that demonstrate unwavering commitment and reverence to the deity. These *arajiyā*, offered with sincerity and devotion, serve as channels for communication with the divine, expressing gratitude, seeking blessings, and reaffirming faith. Beyond the rituals of prayers, devotees engage in acts of

offering, presenting a diverse array of items to the deity as symbols of devotion and reverence. Fruits, sarees, hair, coconuts, and representations of body parts crafted from precious metals (gold and silver) are among the offerings, each carrying its symbolic significance. These offerings, made with utmost sincerity, symbolise the devotee's willingness to offer material possessions in return for granted vows by the deity. In addition to these offerings, demanding sacrifices, spending a night standing in the sacred waters of the Ganges with minimal clothing, and continuous singing throughout the night (*rāt-jaggā*) are among the acts undertaken by devotees in their quest for divine favour. Though physically demanding and challenging, these acts are undertaken with unwavering faith and devotion, symbolising the devotee's readiness to endure hardship and sacrifice in the pursuit of divine intervention to grant the vows. The vows in the festival also incorporate rituals such as *daṇḍavat* and *Kosiyā*, wherein devotees prostrate themselves before the deity, offering obeisance and homage in a gesture of humility and submission. Through these acts of reverence, devotees express their acknowledgement of the divine sovereignty and their own insignificance in comparison, surrendering themselves entirely to the will and mercy of the deity. Among the most striking rituals associated with the vows in the festival is the symbolic offering of a child into the sacred waters of the Gaṅgā. Though seemingly extreme, this act is imbued with deep symbolism, representing the devotee's willingness to offer up what is most precious and cherished in the fulfilment of a vow made to the deity. Though the child is immediately rescued, the act is a powerful testament to the devotee's commitment and devotion, symbolising the ultimate sacrifice in pursuing divine favour and blessings. Thus, *manautī* in Chaṭha Pūjā represent complex and multifaceted religious practices embedded in cultural values of reciprocity, gratitude, and personal commitment. These rituals exemplify the complex dynamics between personal devotion and communal frameworks,

providing significant insights into the area's religious and cultural landscape and the extraordinary ways ordinary lay people navigate the complexities of their everyday lives. Individuals seek divine intervention or blessings to address their concerns by making these vows, demonstrating a deeply personal engagement with their faith.



**Figure 1 showing the practice of *daṇḍavat* in Chaṭha Pūjā
(The picture was taken by the researcher in her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2022)**

7.3 *Manautī* (Conditional Vow): Further Categorisations

Our research uncovered several synonymous or closely related terms used by respondents, such as *mannat*, *mānanā*, *manokām'nā*, *gach'nā*, *gach'tī*, *māntik*, and *mānā huā*. Among these, *mannat*, originating from Persian, signifies favour and encompasses prayers, offerings, and associated obligations. As popular vows, *mannat* is widely practised among Muslims and is associated with power and blessings, saints, *pīrs* and *mazārs*. While prevalent among Muslims, it shares similarities with *manautī* in its emphasis on seeking blessings and fulfilling vows and adds to the economic vitality of the ritual space (Uddin 2006, p. 87). The *manautī* made by the worshippers on the occasion of Chaṭha is also popular among communities celebrating the

festival, and the exhaustive or demanding reciprocatory acts gain considerable recognition and respect from others and are also seen as an effective solution to their everyday problems of marriage, fertility, sickness and health etc. Since these conditional vows are directed towards worldly and mundane outcomes, not otherworldly outcomes, they can thus be categorised as mundane vows. They also appear as down-payment and fulfilment vows because worshippers give back only after the vows have been materialised. Another significant aspect of *manautī* is featured in the offerings made in the annual worship. The offerings in Chaṭha include particular items and a variety of the first crop in their complete and natural form as dedication vows. They can also occur as transgressive vows when people cross (or transgress) religious boundaries to seek the favours of favourable and accessible deities (Rao, 1969, pp. 1–15; Raj & Harman, 2006, p. 252). The vows in Chaṭha have grown in importance and attract a few non-Hindu worshippers. The researcher could record interviews where Hindu worshippers served as proxies to deliver offerings for the non-Hindu worshippers. There have also been reports of *kinnars/hijrās*¹² on several media platforms, celebrating Chaṭha and undertaking *manautī* for their *jajamān*.¹³ Sometimes, worshippers would also make vows, which, when fulfilled, would be reciprocated by organising a dance of *kinnars/hijrās* (*hijrā nāc*) to reciprocate for their vows that have been granted. Some *hijrās* reportedly participated in Chaṭha fasting, indicating a willingness to engage with and adopt Hindu ritual practices. Such instances have also been reported in news items. Such defiance and transgression of boundaries regarding space, actions, time, and sacred figures, which Raj & Harman (2006, p. 03) call corruption, occurs in the form of vows made apart from one's normative religious tradition.

¹² *Kinnars/Hijrās* are transgender persons in South Asia, and are also categorised as Third Gender.

¹³ <https://youtu.be/zvooeHd4Pfl?si=AssUSCvO3I7pa0Sl>.

***Manautī*: The Challenges and Seeking Solutions**

Scholars have documented vows and fasting as necessary features of women's religiosity in South Asia (see Wadley, 1980a, pp. 103–113; Pearson, 1996, pp. 344–383; McGee, 1987, pp. 388–416; Raheja & Gold, 1994, pp. 166–167; Knott, 1996, pp. 15–35; McDaniel, 2003, pp. 79–95). Conditional vows, known as *vrata*, hold significant importance in Hinduism (Jolly, 1921, pp. 656–657). Associated with specific ritual practices, *vrata* aims to achieve various goals such as acquiring a spouse, children, wealth, employment, or recovery from illness and have always been primarily managed by women (Wadley, 1980b, pp. 33–62; McDaniel, 2003, p. 79; Llewellyn, 2006, pp. 235–245; Pechilis, 2006, pp. 147–163; Bose, 2010; Dumas et al., 2021, p. 298). These goals are intertwined with broader gender ideologies, granting women a sense of temporal and religious power, reflecting a direct and intimate relationship between the devotee and the divine. However, it is important to note that women perform *vratas* for the sake of the family, and the understanding that the family revolves around its male members is crucial to the effort put into the *vrata*. In that sense, a *vrata* can hardly be called a liberating opportunity for women (Bose, 2010).

During fieldwork, the researcher discovered that making unmediated personal vows, referred to as *manautī*, was particularly significant among women. In the case of *manautī* or conditional vow-making, most of the vow-makers have been women among our respondents. However, our fieldwork reveals instances where men actively engage in *manautī* and *parva ūṭhānā*, and thus, transgress the gender norms surrounding these practices. At least four respondents were men who undertook fasting to fulfill specific wishes. One respondent desired the birth of a daughter, another desired the birth of a son for a sister, and the other two desired the recovery of their sons from illness. Additionally, some men take on the role of proxies,

fulfilling ritual responsibilities on behalf of female family members. Moreover, interactions with the *hijrā* (*kinnar*) community indicate a willingness to engage with Hindu ritual practices, as *hijrās* participate in Chaṭha fasting and even organise dance performances as part of reciprocal actions. These practices and transgressions highlight the dynamic and adaptable nature of religious rituals, demonstrating how individuals and communities may challenge or expand traditional gender roles and religious boundaries based on their needs, desires, and social interactions.

Sometimes, such vows also consist of the worshipper's *manautī* to beg and gather alms to make the offerings, irrespective of one's class and social status. Thus, they are intense in demanding a forgetting of or overcoming one's status consciousness. Further, these vows are also intense because the wishes are mostly mundane and worldly and demand fulfilment shortly. For example, if the birth of a son is the wish of the worshipper, it has to be granted by the deity soon before the worshipper crosses the fertile age. Similarly, if the wish is to marry one's son or daughter, it has to be granted soon before the age of marriage is over. Thus, the objectives of these conditional vows are 'immediate' or 'urgent' in nature, making them intense. Most of the objectives are short-term goals with an expectation of immediate fulfilment; hence, they are reciprocated with severely exhaustive and sometimes dramatic actions like *daṇḍavat*. *Manautī* encompasses the desires of the primary worshipper that have been granted, such as the birth of a son or the well-being and prosperity of family members. In return, they expect blessings, protection, or assistance from the divine, thus establishing a bond of trust and mutual obligation. Also, in instances of ritual lapses or errors, reparation vows serve to rectify mistakes and reinstate purity, emphasising the significance of upholding reciprocal connections with the deity (Raj & Harman, 2006, p. 03).

By *mānanā*, or doing *manautī*, the worshipper places trust in the deity, who is expected to reciprocate by fulfilling the worshipper's desire. In turn, the worshipper has to reciprocate or, to say, give back through *vrata* (votive fasting), offerings and labours of worship. This faith in the powers of the deity is evident from the following folk songs that the researcher could record during the fieldwork.

babuā je rahite ta Māi-Māi kahite
Ihe ego āsarā nā pūral ho
Duniyā ke ai Chaṭhī Māi sab kuch dihalū
Hamrā lā kuchū na jural ho
Bilakhī-bilakhī rove ghāṭe bāñjhiniyā
Chaṭhī Māiyā sun lī gohār
Ghāṭe kosī bhartī, Ādit nām dhartī
Lāgal asarwā ke tural ho
Sun lī pukār Māiyā,
Bhar dī godiyā hamār māiyā
Sabhe barat karatā, kosiyā ke bharatā
Dekhi nainā dhāre hamār lor
Hasī-hasī duniyā ho kahatā bāñjhiniyā ho
Sunī man pawan holā thor

The song has been translated as-

If I had a child, he would call me "Mother"
This one hope remains unfulfilled Chaṭhī Māiyā,
you give everything to the world
But nothing has come together for me
The childless woman cries desperately at the riverbank Chaṭhī Māiyā, hear my plea
Filling the basket at the riverbank in the name of Aditya,
The hope seems to have been broken. Hear my call, Mother. Fill my lap, Mother.
Everyone performs the fast and fills the basket
Seeing this, my eyes shed tears
The world laughs and calls me barren
Hearing this, my heart feels so heavy

This Bhojpuri song vividly portrays the emotional plea of a childless woman to the goddess Chaṭhī Māiyā, worshipped during the festival. The woman expresses her sorrow and longing for

a child, contrasting her unfulfilled desire with the blessings that others have received. Central themes include longing, despair, faith, and hope, with the woman's unwavering faith in Chaṭhī Māīyā evident in lines like '*Chaṭhī Māīyā sun lī gohār*' (Chaṭhī Māīyā, hear my plea) and '*Bhar dī godiyā hamār māīyā*' (Fill my lap, Mother). The poem also touches on social comparison, highlighting that others who perform the rituals seem to have their wishes granted while she remains childless, as seen in '*Sabhe barat karatā, kosiya ke bharatā*' (Everyone performs the fast and fills the basket). The poem also illustrates the concept of a conditional vow, focusing on exchange and reciprocity between the worshipper and the deity. The childless woman places her trust in Chaṭhī Māīyā, making a vow (*manautī*) with the expectation that the deity will fulfill her desire for a child. In return, she promises to give back through specific acts of devotion, including votive fasting, offerings, and ritual labour. This reciprocal nature of the vow is highlighted as she contrasts her unfulfilled desire with the blessings others receive from similar vows. The woman's offerings, such as decorated winnowers, brass winnowers, whole dried coconuts, banana stems, and sarees, represent her side of the reciprocal agreement. The invocation of Māī (Mother) appeals to her compassion and maternal aspects, reinforcing the personal and emotional nature of this exchange. Thus, the song encapsulates the activities and obligations of giving, receiving, and giving back (reciprocity) that define the ritual actions involved in *manautī*. Through this heartfelt plea, the poem portrays the complex interplay of conditional vows, exchange, and reciprocity in the cultural context of the festival, capturing the intense emotions of a woman yearning for the blessing of a child. The cultural importance of the festival and its associated rituals is evident through references to practices such as '*Ghāṭe kosī bharī, Ādit nām dharī*' (Filling the basket at the riverbank in the name of Aditya). Literary devices like repetition, imagery, contrast, and personification enhance the emotional depth of the

poem, making it a powerful expression of longing and devotion. The repeated invocation of Māī (Mother) underscores the speaker's deep emotional connection and desperation, while vivid descriptions create a poignant image of her sorrow and yearning.

The following song was recorded in Munger in March, 2023.

*Tānā deke kahe le gotiniyā ī bāñjhiniyā nu ho,
Bābā sunī-sunī boliyā gotiniyā mo lorwā bahāilā ho,
Chup raho dhīr karūn dukhiyā nā sun rahi kokhiyā nu ho
Bas āju ke nav ye mahinawā horilā muskailā ho.*

The song can be translated as

*Teasingly, the sister-in-law says, "She is barren, isn't she, sister?"
Listening to these words, my eyes fill with tears
I stay silent and be patient my dear; the womb does not hear
Just today, the new moon has smiled upon us*

The above Bhojpuri lines offer a glimpse into the emotional turmoil and societal challenges a woman grappling with infertility faces. The neighbour's teasing remark about her barrenness - underscores the prevailing social stigma surrounding infertility in the community. In response to her distress, the woman beseeches Chaṭhī Māīyā for assistance, expressing her longing for a child and her anguish over her inability to conceive. The woman's tear-filled response poignantly reflects her emotional pain and vulnerability in the face of such insensitive comments. It can be seen as a vow made to the deity, wherein she promises to devote herself wholeheartedly if her desire for a child is fulfilled. Despite her suffering, she is advised to endure silently echoing the cultural expectation for women to bear hardships stoically. However, amidst her anguish, there is

a glimmer of hope symbolised by the mention of the new moon, suggesting the possibility of renewal and a brighter future through the potential fulfilment of her vow.

In the interviews, the worshippers explained the need for amanuti as a way to seek solutions to several challenges of their everyday life. They described various challenges, including *putra saṅkaṭa* (son-related difficulties), *nainā saṅkaṭa* (eye-related troubles), and *kāyā saṅkaṭa* (bodily afflictions). Through a plea, they seek divine intervention to remove or solve these challenges through divine intervention. The significance of such vows, especially those that involve begetting a child (specifically, a son), brings attention to the patriarchal culture and values (Kohli, 2018, p. 05; Klaus & Tripndjan, 2015, pp. 77–102; Karve, 1965; Dyson & Moore, 1983, pp. 35–60; Arnold et al., 1998, pp. 301–315; Kishor, 1993, pp. 247–265). These concerns for family welfare in women have a lot to do with them being spiritual guardians of family members, noting that ‘women whose secular lives revolve around love and care’ for family members also develop kin-centered religiosity (Sered, 1992, pp. 26–27). Sered calls this the ‘domestication of religion,’ which she defines as a process in which people who profess their allegiance to a wider religious tradition personalise the rituals, institutions, symbols, and theology of that wider system to safeguard the health, happiness, and security of particular people with whom they are linked in relationships of caring and dependence (1992, p. 10). Mary McGee (1987, p. 418) makes a similar observation that the primary aim of these female votaries is the attainment of *saubhāgya* or *suhāg*, that is, ‘good fortune embodied in the form of a good husband, healthy children, and a happy home life.

This is also evident in the folksongs that were collected during the multiple rounds of fieldwork.

nirdhan koṛhī rāhe bāṭe thār he
nirdhan koṛhī rāhe bāṭe thār he!

*uga ho suruj dev aragh ke ber
uga ho suruj dev aragh ke ber!
aragh ke ber ho pūjan ke ber*

The researcher has translated the song as-

*The poor and the leper are standing
The poor and the leper are standing
Dear Sun God, rise as it is time for ablutions
Dear Sun God, rise as it is time for ablutions
It is time for ablutions and your worship*

These lines depict a scene where the poor and the leper stand, invoking the Sun God to rise as it is time for ablutions and worship. These lines signify the devotees' plea for divine intervention to alleviate their hardships in the context of vows made to ask for something from the deity. The mention of the poor and the leper highlights the marginalised and vulnerable members of society who turn to the Sun God in their time of need. The repetition of the plea emphasises the urgency and sincerity of the devotees' invocation as the devotees seek blessings and assistance in overcoming their challenges by invoking the Sun God for ablutions and worship.

Another similar song sung by the women-

*Ek tha andharā purush
ankhiyan diyate gey ablā
ah lagal eti bair
Ek thā khoriyā purush
kāyawā diyāitey gey ablā
eh lāgal eti bair*

*Andharā pukāre dev
Dunu kar jorwā*

*Arag ke re berwā
Pūjan ke re berwā ho
Nirdhan pukāre dev
Dunu kar jorwā
Arag ke re berwā
Pūjan ke re berwā hoo
Kodhiyā pukāre dev
Dunu kar jorwā
Arag ke re berwā
Pūjan ke re berwā hoo
Langrā pukāre dev
Dunu kar jorwā
Translation-*

*There was a blind man
Give him eyes,
Why are you delaying O Sun God!
There was a leper,
Give him good skin
Why are you delaying O Sun God!*

*The blind man call you,
By joining his hands
It is time for arghya
Its tine for your worship O Sun God!
The destitute calls you,
By joining his hands
It is time for arghya
Its tine for your worship O Sun God!
The leper calls you,
By joining his hands
It is time for arghya
Its tine for your worship O Sun God!
The handicapped man (without legs) calls you,
By joining his hands
It is time for arghya
Its tine for your worship O Sun God!*

In an anthropological context, these verses offer an insight into the lived experiences of marginalised individuals within a religious and cultural framework. Each verse vividly portrays individuals facing different forms of adversity, such as blindness, poverty, leprosy, and physical disability. These afflictions symbolise the challenges faced by marginalised members of society

and serve as potent metaphors for broader social and economic inequalities. The symbolism of tears flowing from the eyes of the blind and impoverished individuals encapsulates the profound sense of helplessness and despair experienced by those living on the margins of society. These tears serve as poignant expressions of their suffering and longing for relief from their hardships. This expression of unfairness resonates deeply within anthropological discourse, highlighting the structural inequalities and systemic barriers that perpetuate the marginalisation of certain social groups. Calling out to the gods with folded hands and offering worship reflects the intersection of religious belief and cultural practices in coping with adversity. Despite their dire circumstances, these individuals demonstrate a profound faith in the power of divine intervention to alleviate their suffering. This act of invoking the divine underscores the role of religion as a source of solace, hope, and resilience in the face of adversity. Furthermore, including diverse individuals facing different challenges underscores the universality of human suffering and the shared human experience of seeking assistance and support in times of need. This diversity highlights the interconnectedness of social, economic, and religious dimensions in shaping individuals' experiences of adversity and resilience within society.

Thus, the act of *mānanā* takes on a profound significance, revealing intricate dynamics of exchange and reciprocity within religious and cultural milieus. These conditional vows extend beyond individual acts of devotion, embodying structured transactions within a broader social and religious framework. When worshippers make vows, they engage in a complex exchange system, promising offerings or sacrifices to the deity in exchange for desired outcomes. These offerings may range from material goods like food, clothing, or monetary donations to more symbolic gestures such as fasting, begging, prostration or participating in rituals. Thus, the act *mānanā* initiates a form of reciprocal giving, where worshippers offer something of value to the

divine, expecting a reciprocal response through blessings, protection, or assistance. By pledging offerings or acts of devotion, worshippers demonstrate their faith and commitment, anticipating a reciprocal relationship wherein the deity acknowledges their supplication. This reciprocal dynamic establishes a foundation of trust and mutual obligation, reinforcing social cohesion and religious identity within the community. Furthermore, *mānanā* serves as a mechanism for negotiating power dynamics within society. For marginalised individuals or groups, making vows offers a means of asserting agency and challenging existing social hierarchies. They serve as vital mechanisms for ordinary worshippers to negotiate their relationship with the divine, reaffirm their faith, assert agency, and preserve cultural heritage within the broader social and cultural landscape.

7.4 Post-*Manautī*: The Ritual of *Parva Uṭhānā* in Chaṭha Pūjā

Devotees believe that deities, particularly goddesses, are worshipped through obligatory ritual actions following the making of a vow (McDaniel, 2003, p. 30). In the Chaṭha Pūjā, *vrata* is intertwined with *parva uṭhānā*, a ritual undertaken once the desired wish is fulfilled or granted by Chaṭhī Māī. *Parva uṭhānā* marks the initiation of Chaṭha worship, to be observed annually thereafter, thus becoming a family tradition. Unlike *manautī*, where the vow-maker typically seeks short-term goals, *parvaitin* now vows for long-term objectives such as the ongoing prosperity and well-being of the family. *Parva uṭhānā* entails fasting, worship, and the obligation to ensure its continuation across generations despite intermittent challenges. It represents the culmination of this reciprocal relationship, wherein worshippers undertake the ritual of worship following the fulfilment of their desires or the granting of their conditional vows by Chaṭhī Māī. This ritual marks the beginning of an annual tradition observed by families across generations,

signifying the continuity of religious and cultural practices. Unlike the initial *manautī*, which may be made for short-term goals or specific desires, *parva uṭhānā* signifies a shift towards long-term aspirations, such as the prosperity and well-being of the family. The worshippers commit to undertaking the ritual of worship annually, regardless of the challenges they may face. This demonstrates their enduring faith, dedication to the deity, and responsibility towards maintaining religious traditions within the family. The observance of *parva uṭhānā* involves various rituals and obligations, including fasting, worship, and ensuring the continuity of the tradition across generations. These rituals are not merely acts of devotion but also symbolic gestures of reciprocity towards the deity, acknowledging the blessings received and reaffirming the worshippers' commitment to their religious beliefs.

However, the failure to observe the *vrata* is believed to incur a *bhār* (debt) upon the worshippers, which must be repaid through subsequent offerings and rituals. This highlights the consequences of failing to uphold one's obligations within the reciprocal relationship with the divine. Despite valid reasons such as ritual impurity due to childbirth or death in the family, worshippers remain indebted and are required to fulfill their obligations at a later time. Subsequent annual offerings may need to be doubled or tripled for each missed year. Circumstances such as ritual impurity due to childbirth or death in the family may necessitate skipping the ritual. Yet, the worshippers remain indebted, with the responsibility to reciprocate not permanently waived. This underscores the belief in the dual nature of the deity – benevolent and malevolent – activated based on the worshippers' ability to reciprocate.

The concept of permanent and long-term reciprocity within the context of *parva uṭhānā* reflects the belief in the dual nature of the deity – benevolent and malevolent – whose actions are

contingent upon the worshipper's ability to reciprocate. Worshippers who fulfill their obligations are rewarded with blessings and protection, while those who fail to do so may face adverse consequences. In cases where worshippers cannot fulfill their obligations due to unforeseen circumstances, the tradition allows for the transfer of ritual responsibilities to a proxy, typically a ritually pure family member. This proxy assumes the duty of performing the rituals on behalf of the vow-maker, ensuring that the reciprocal relationship with the deity is maintained. The transfer of responsibility must adhere to specific timing and ritual purity rules, underscoring the importance of upholding religious traditions within the family. Thus, through the observance of *parva uṭhānā*, worshippers reaffirm their bond with the divine, seeking blessings and protection in return for their devotion and obedience.

7.5 Proxy Participation: Facilitating Conditional Vows by *Sūpa denā*

Understanding the dynamics of conditional vows involves recognising the key players involved and their roles in regulating these rituals. In the context of the festival, which is deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, the vow-maker, the deity, and occasionally a proxy play crucial roles in ensuring the fulfilment of these ritual obligations. When unforeseen events prevent the annual worship, a solution is sought through a proxy who fulfills the ritual obligations on behalf of the vow-maker. The transfer of responsibility must adhere to specific timing and ritual purity rules. Sometimes, the duty may be temporarily transferred to another *parvaitin* fasting for Chaṭṭha Pūjā, and sometimes it results in entrusting the responsibility permanently. The appointment of a proxy, particularly in cases where the vow-maker cannot fulfill their obligations due to reasons such as ritual impurity, adds a unique dimension to the interplay of obligations and reciprocity within the festival. Various combinations emerge to facilitate the fulfilment of ritual intentions in the intricate web of relationships between the deity, the worshipper, and the proxy. The proxy often

performs the rituals on behalf of the vow-maker, ensuring the continuity of religious practices even in challenging circumstances. Through mandatory giving, known as *sūp denā*, devotees ensure the annual worship continues unabated every Kārtika month.

Following is an excerpt from one of the interviews conducted in Varanasi, on 9th November 2021:

I did not make a vow. My mother-in-law made a manautī (conditional vow) for my husband when he was young. When she became old, she gave me the responsibility of doing it annually. We both fasted and then came down to the Gaṅgā during Chaṭha, where she handed me the winnow (sūp) full of offerings and asked me to perform the annual worship. She said she would not be able to do it further. The following year, I started doing Chaṭha. Also, I was blessed with a son the following year.

It is a revealing excerpt from an interview that sheds light on the role of a proxy in the rituals. In this instance, the mother-in-law made a vow for her ailing son (respondent's husband) when he was young, and he soon recovered. As her mother-in-law grew older, she entrusted the respondent with the responsibility of performing the annual worship. The following year, the respondent and her husband were blessed with a son, further reinforcing the significance of the annual offerings initially made by her mother-in-law. This example highlights how conditional vows, particularly those associated with childbirth, underscore gender roles in the transference of and taking up ritual responsibility by having a proxy for life. The proxy is entrusted the *bhār* of reciprocating for the rest of their lives, and daughters-in-law are preferably the ones who are entrusted with the task without the payment of *majdūrī* (a wage for labour in return for relieving the other of the *bhār* or debt) .

When a conditional vow is made, responsibilities are shared between the deity and the primary worshipper. In cases where a proxy is designated, the worshipper's obligations are transferred to the proxy, who then assumes the duty of performing the rituals on their behalf. However, it is important to note that the positive or negative consequences ultimately fall upon the worshipper alone, not the proxy. If the desired outcomes are not granted by the deity, both parties' obligations become null and void, sparing the worshipper from severe consequences. The exchange or reciprocity between the worshipper and the proxy is influenced by cultural norms and religious beliefs. According to respondents, it is essential to limit reliance on material and non-material assistance from others, appointing a proxy only when indispensable. When the proxy is a family member, no explicit compensation is expected, as it is considered part of familial duty. However, when the proxy is not a family member, it is customary to offer compensatory payment, known as *majdūrī*, in return for their assistance. Acting as a proxy serves a dual purpose of helping fellow worshippers fulfill their obligations and pleasing the deity, potentially earning religious merit. While it may appear as a selfless act of assistance, it is rooted in the desire to attain religious merit and public applause. This reflects the interconnectedness of vow-makers, the deity (Chaṭhī Māī), and the proxies, who navigate a complex web of obligations and reciprocity to ensure the fulfilment of conditional vows within the festival.

7.6 The Success and Failure of Vows

The fulfilment of conditional vows, including *manautī*, *parva uṭhānā*, *Kosiyā*, *daṇḍī*, and begging, serves as a narrative that authenticates the practice of worship, drawing more believers into these ritual actions. These rituals unfold a ritual dialogue, enhancing the vitality of

conditional vows, with women actively participating as agents in the process (Raj & Harman, 2006, p. 03). Worshippers may reciprocate by offering a specific ritual material (like a particular type and number of winnowers, fruits, or clothes), increasing the quantity or enhancing the quality of offerings already made. The promised offering to the goddess could be a special material they used to prepare the *prasāda*, for example, the use of decorated winnowers, brass winnowers, amount of whole dried coconuts, banana stems and materials like sarees. Thus, such vows as ritual actions include the activities and obligations of giving, receiving, and giving back (reciprocity) by the worshipper and the deity. In the pilot study conducted in 2021, the respondent observed that women were often encouraged to make *manautī* and initiate annual worship. Over time, this practice has become an integral part of their family traditions, and worshippers prefer to maintain the annual worship despite financial, health and other in-between challenges of everyday life. In the context of the Chaṭha festival, conditional vows manifest through profound outward expressions, including public performances and displays such as processions, *daṇḍavat*, filling up *Kosī*, begging, and standing in water for long durations; these rituals involve both outward expression and the sustenance of an interior dimension (Raj & Harman, 2006, p. 03).

The common thread among these ritual actions is the expression of gratitude in return for an answered vow, motivating others to believe in the efficacy of the worship and associated vows. The expression of gratitude carries an imperative force, mandating reciprocity. It is not merely an external formality (Komter, 2005, p. 56). Reciprocity, in this context, extends beyond tangible results and conveys a symbolic message through giving, receiving, and reciprocating (Strauss, 1987, p. 28). The social and cultural influence of gratitude is evident in the mutual relationship between the recipient and the giver, functioning as a moral cement (Mauss, 1990,

pp. 7–10). Reciprocity, thus, becomes unavoidable, often framed as an act of thanksgiving (Godelier, 1999, p. 52) or rooted in the principle of 'give-and-take' (Malinowski, 1922, p. 190). The practice of *daṇḍavat* holds significant prominence in Chaṭha worship, serving as a crucial aspect of reciprocation for worshippers. During this practice, worshippers prostrate themselves on the ground at regular intervals, often after walking a few steps, while others assist them in standing up again. This physically demanding activity poses risks such as illness, fainting, and injuries. However, it is precisely the inherent risk that empowers worshippers in their negotiations with the divine. Participation in *daṇḍavat* subjects the body to exhaustion, pain, suffering, and other health risks, underscoring the intensity of devotion and commitment involved in reciprocating the positive response received from the deity. When undertaken in conjunction with conditional vows, these physical penances become a means through which worshippers express their devotion and seek validation, enduring severe exertion, exhaustion, and exposure. In preparation for this ritual, the surrounding roads, typically unclean spaces, are cleaned by various community members, including households, clubs, committees, volunteers, and municipalities. As worshippers engage in *daṇḍavat*, individuals rush to touch the feet of those performing the ritual, careful not to cause harm. The worshippers are supported and provided unimpeded access by everyone present to carry out their prostrations without hindrance. This public display of devotion for fulfilling vows impacts individual worshippers and underscores the significance of such ritual practices within the Chaṭha tradition. Despite any obstacles arising from temporary circumstances like migration or menstruation, worshippers continue to engage in these activities, reaffirming the efficacy of their vows and the divine power of Chaṭhī Māi to fulfill their desires.



Figure 2 showing the worshippers preparing their *Kosī* in Chaṭha
(The picture was taken by the researcher in her fieldwork in Varanasi, 2021)

Kosī bharanā, or the filling of *Kosī*, stands as a pivotal ritual within the framework of Chaṭha Pūjā ceremonies, particularly embraced by individuals who have experienced the fulfilment of specific desires or wishes, often centred around familial prosperity and well-being. This ritual, deeply entrenched in symbolism and tradition, unfolds as a rich tapestry of sacred offerings and ceremonial gestures, encapsulating the devotee's gratitude and reverence towards the deity. Traditionally undertaken by mothers whose prayers for significant life events, such as the birth of a son, the marriage of their children, the procurement of employment opportunities for offspring, or the acquisition of new homes for their families, have been answered, the *Kosī* ritual embodies a profound expression of abundance and gratitude. It is a tangible manifestation of the devotee's acknowledgement of divine blessings and their desire to reciprocate through ceremonial acts of devotion and thanksgiving. At the core of the *Kosī* ritual lies a meticulously crafted canopy,

fashioned from an odd number of sugarcane stalks intricately bound together with vibrant red or yellow cloth. One end of the cloth is tied like a small pocket filled with *ṭhekuā*, *kasār* (a sweet made of wheat flour, sugar, dry fruits, and ghee), seasonal fruits, whole ginger, and flowers. Symbolising fertility, prosperity, and auspiciousness, this canopy serves as a sacred space wherein the divine offerings are meticulously arranged and presented. The intricate arrangement of offerings within the canopy reflects the devotee's desire to express profound gratitude and reverence towards the deity. Central to the *Kosī* ritual is the preparation and adornment of an earthen vessel or elephant, symbolic of divine blessings and prosperity. Adorned with vermilion and a sacred mixture of water, rice flour, and turmeric powder, the earthen vessel becomes a focal point of veneration, radiating divine grace and auspiciousness. Surrounding the vessel, numerous offerings, including rice, sweets, fruits, and traditional delicacies, are meticulously arranged, symbolising the abundance and prosperity bestowed upon the devotee by the benevolent deity. The ritual culminates in a series of sacred observances, beginning with offering oblations to the Sun deity during the *sanjhīyā aragh*, a ceremonial act of gratitude and reverence towards the celestial forces. Following this, the ritual continues within the sanctified confines of the worshipper's home, where family members gather to partake in the festivities. Against the backdrop of joyous celebrations and heartfelt expressions of gratitude, the devotees engage in traditional folk songs and communal rituals, fostering a sense of unity and ritual harmony. As the first light of dawn breaks for *bhor'vā* or *bihānī aragh*, the devotees embark on a sacred procession to the *ghāt*, or riverbank, where the culmination of the ritual awaits. Here, amidst the tranquil waters of the Gaṅgā or other sacred water bodies, the sacred vessel, laden with offerings and blessings, is ceremonially immersed, symbolising the cyclical nature of life and the eternal flow of divine grace. This poignant act of offering signifies the devotee's commitment to

reciprocity and their enduring faith in the benevolence of the deity. Conditional vows also include acts of reciprocation through offering specific materials (like *nāriyal lutānā*, that is, the *parvaitin* throws away coconuts in the Gaṅgā and the coconuts are then collected by competing worshippers who consider getting those coconuts as good omens and blessing of the deities) or rare ritual items, such as uncooked earthen vessels. These offerings, though rare, signify the worshipper's dedication to reciprocating the deity's blessings, even at a personal cost.



**Figure 3 showing begging as a reciprocatory practice in Chaṭha
(The pictures were taken by the researcher in her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)**

When vows fail to deliver what they promise, it prompts a profound exploration into the complex interplay between belief, expectation, and lived experience. Tracy Pintchman (2006, p. 220) delves into this intricacy, shedding light on the emotional and ritual turmoil that can arise when devout practitioners face unfulfilled promises despite their faithful observance of *vratas*. She

critiques the notion put forth by Keyes (1983, p. 17) that individuals may attribute the failure of their vows to karmic destiny, emphasising the discrepancy between the explanation one might offer and the emotional and religious impact of the experience. Pintchman illustrates how the performance of *vratas* is deeply intertwined with a larger ethic of trust in the divine, ritual observance, and kindness towards others; these are not merely isolated acts but expressions of personal virtue and religious dedication, with the expectation of divine reciprocity. Moreover, Pintchman highlights the gendered dimensions of the experience of failed vows.

Following is an interview excerpt from a flower seller in Varanasi in August, 2021.

I did not do Chaṭha for many years. I had made a vow to Chaṭhī Māī that if my daughter's heart operation is successful, then I shall do the annual worship for five years. We took her to Lucknow for the operation, which was successful. But the following year, my husband died, and then his death was followed by the death of my daughter (who had recovered)... so, I seek forgiveness. Maybe I had made some mistakes. Forgive me, Chaṭhī Māī!

This excerpt highlights a deeply personal experience of failed vows within the festival context. The narrative underscores the emotional impact of unfulfilled promises as the individual grapples with feelings of confusion, disorientation, and a sense of betrayal. The speaker recounts a heartbreaking series of events involving the health struggles of their daughters and the tragic loss of their loved ones. The interviewee expresses their belief in the power of Chaṭhī Māī to fulfill her vows. She narrates how she vowed to perform the rituals for five years if her ailing daughter recovered from a heart operation in Lucknow. Fortunately, her daughter survived, and she committed to fulfilling their vow. However, despite her dedication, tragedy struck when their husband passed away the following year, followed by the heartbreaking loss of their daughter the year after. In the face of such devastating events, the interviewee seeks forgiveness from the goddess, acknowledging that something went wrong and expressing remorse for their perceived

mistake. It provides an insight into the significant impact of failed vows on individuals and families; it reflects the emotional turmoil experienced when promises made to the deity are not fulfilled as expected. Through this narrative, we witness the complexity of human faith and the challenges of reconciling religious devotion with the harsh realities of life's uncertainties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the practice of conditional vows in Chaṭha illuminates the inherent norms of reciprocity and exchange that characterise the relationship between the human and divine realms. These vows facilitate a ritual dialogue, transcending cultural boundaries and fostering increased interaction among communities, castes, and classes. The centrality of these obligations can be understood through their function as mundane, down-payment, and fulfilment vows, which establish a more intimate connection with the deity. Ritual actions such as *parva uṭhānā* and tribute vows further underscore the significance of maintaining familial prosperity, peace, health, and wealth. Through acts like begging, *Kosiyā*, and *daṇḍavat*, worshippers express their devotion in dramatic and public displays, solidifying their relationship with the deity. These ritualistic exchanges, accompanied by acts of charity and contribution, reinforce the bonds between giver and recipient, divine and human. These actions serve to symbolically elevate the mundane items of our daily existence into significant offerings aimed at pleasing and pacifying the goddess. The effort involved in sourcing, purchasing, cleaning, washing, and preparing each ritual item illustrates the ability to establish a sense of intimacy with the deity amidst the backdrop of our routine material transactions. The ritualistic exchange and reciprocity described are intertwined with considerations of benefits, yet feelings of gratitude remain paramount. Motivated by the anticipation and pleasure of receiving and reciprocating profound thankfulness,

worshippers often continue making offerings even after fulfilling their vows. The resulting dynamic reflects what anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2017, p. 176) calls ‘balanced reciprocity,’ wherein both the divine and human participants, acting as givers and receivers, anticipate reciprocal giving in proportion and frequency. Any disruption in this balance may evoke a sense of injustice, potentially provoking the displeasure of Chaṭhī Māī. Such balanced reciprocity ensures harmony in the divine-human relationship, guided by moral, religious, and cultural principles. These narratives passed down through oral tradition, sustain and authenticate the efficacy of these practices across generations and geographical boundaries. Ultimately, conditional vows empower worshippers to navigate life's uncertainties and cultivate a connection with the divine.