

CHAPTER 6

Embodying the Goddess: The *Parvaitin* in Chaṭha Pūjā

Embodying a deity is a religious experience in which an individual feels a sense of oneness or unity with a particular deity. Certain rituals or practices may aid or even trigger the experience of deity embodiment for some, while it may occur spontaneously for others. It is a profound and transformative experience, as the individual has a sense of connection and purpose, which may lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of their religious beliefs. However, it is essential to note that not all individuals experience deity embodiment, nor is it necessarily a mandated religious belief or practice requirement. It is also important to approach such experiences critically and not assume that they indicate objective reality, as personal and cultural factors can influence such experiences. In our fieldwork, the researcher observed that the primary worshipper, known as the *parvaitin*, is considered to be the embodiment of Chaṭhī Māī. The *parvaitin* transcends the human-divine boundary through ritual practices, skillfulness, and body techniques, so her utterances carry significant weight and are treated as divine injunctions. The *parvaitin* is perceived as the channel for Chaṭhī Māī, challenging the notion of being a mere intermediary and exhibiting agency that wields recognition and authority in the ritual space and within the ritual community.

The central base of this chapter is that rituals should be recognised as thoughtful practices carried out by real, physical bodies, thus pushing back against the tendency to categorise them into purely mechanistic or instinctual categories. To participate in a ritual means to do something real and concrete in time and space, and so how the body experiences that action is central to the action itself (Ammerman, 2021). Discussing the lived nature of religious experiences

necessitates focusing on the physical beings who are actively experiencing and enacting these religious practices. This means acknowledging that religious life is not just an abstract concept but is deeply rooted in the physical presence and activities of individuals. Consequently, nearly every scholar who has written about social practices or lived religion starts with the recognition of embodiment as a significant ritual phenomenon. Anthropologists (Csordas, 1990) and feminist scholars (Davis, 1997; Neitz, 2003) have historically examined embodied religious practices despite the fact that they were not explicitly talking about lived religion. By drawing attention to issues such as gender, power dynamics, and embodiment, feminist researchers have shed light on the lived experiences of individuals within religious communities. This integration can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of religious experiences and the diverse ways in which individuals engage with their faith within embodied contexts. McGuire (2008) argues that understanding religious practices requires acknowledging the significance of the physical body, and so, religious experiences and practices are inherently embodied activities. McGuire contends that focusing on the embodied nature of religious practice reveals how physicality shapes and is shaped by religious beliefs, rituals, and everyday activities. She highlights that the lived experience of religion can only be fully understood by considering how bodies engage in and are affected by these practices. This perspective challenges abstract and disembodied approaches to studying religion, advocating instead for a more holistic understanding that includes the physical, sensory, and material dimensions of religious life. This foundational concept underscores that our bodies are not merely vessels but integral to how we experience, interpret, and practice religion. The physical actions, rituals, and habits that constitute religious life are all performed by embodied beings, and this embodiment shapes and is shaped by those practices.

Whether it is fasting for long durations, taking up exhaustive reciprocatory actions for a *manauti*, singing to awaken the *vedī/bedī* (altar), gazing at the Sun with stretched hands in *arajiyā* or standing in the water with the heavy *suplā* full of offerings— all the senses are involved in the religious things that the *parvaitin* undertakes. Religious practice is embodied just as all social practices because individuals act with and through their bodies. The *parvaitin* (and others) see, taste, touch, smell, feel, feast, sing, hear, and move their bodies (Ammerman, 2021). Ammerman argues that when individuals participate in actions that imply the presence of non-ordinary realities, some of them, and even observers, will physically experience the evidence of sacred presence. Others can witness primary participants engaging in certain kinds of movements, conversations, gestures, and attentiveness. Thus, lived religion involves shared embodied knowledge—a concept reminiscent of Schatzki's (2001) definition of practice—as individuals collectively engage in and embody religious rituals and experiences. It is through ritual knowledge, competence and body techniques that the *parvaitin* expresses and experiences religion.

The *parvaitin* seeks to create a vessel through which the deity can act and manifest in the physical world, resulting in a transformative experience that blurs the dichotomy between the divine and the mundane. These ritual practices are characterised by negotiation, transformation, and agency. Other worshippers and spectators create and negotiate shared meanings of such divine presence by participating in fasting rituals and performing specific actions in response to the divine presence of Chaṭhī Māī in *parvaitin*. Diverging from prior research, which often concentrates on intermediary roles or mediums mediating between the divine and the human, this work redirects its focus to primary worshippers, referred to as *parvaitin*, who are perceived as direct embodiments of the deity, Chaṭhī Māī. By delving into the physical and experiential

dimensions of religious practices, encompassing rituals involving body techniques and intense forms of worship such as fasting, this study introduces a new dimension to the comprehension of religious experiences (David, 2009; Malik, 2009; Scarangelo, 2012; Yuhang, 2012; Ettari, 2022). Also, exploring fluidity, negotiation, and transformation within rituals provides insights into the multifaceted manners in which individuals encounter and manifest the divine presence within specific cultural and ritual contexts. The study, thus, seeks to bridge gaps in the existing literature as it attends to the consequences and effects of such interactions, thereby illuminating the perceived outcomes of religious practices. This chapter delves into the significance of embodiment and examines how it informs the study of religion. The focus on embodiment allows us to appreciate the tangible, corporeal aspects of religious life and how they contribute to the overall understanding of religious phenomena.

6.1 The *Parvaitin* in Chaṭha

Central to the celebration of Chaṭha is the *parvaitin*- the primary worshipper, who is believed to embody Chaṭhī Māī during the festival. The festival is mainly observed by women, who fast and offer prayers to the Sun God for the well-being and prosperity of their families. On the first day, the *parvaitin* takes a holy dip in a river or pond and cleans their homes and surroundings. The second day is *kharnā*, during which they observe a day-long fast and prepare special dishes; they then resume the fast for the next day, too. The third day is the most important, *sanjhiyā arghya*, during which the *parvaitin* offers prayers and ritual ablutions to the setting sun. Devotees gather before sunrise to pray for the rising Sun on the festival's final day, *bihaniyā arghya*. The *parvaitin* then breaks her fast with *prasāda* and distributes them among family, friends, and neighbours.

During fieldwork, the researcher recorded people's responses and ritual activities in the *ghāt* and the domestic spaces. Spectators and participants rush to the *parvaitin* during the ritual events to seek their blessings. Also, when *parvaitin* performs *daṇḍavat* (prostration/body rolling), bystanders rush to touch her feet and give way to the ritual space, that is, the *ghāt*. Other devotees would often compete with each other to wash her clothes, rub them all over their bodies, and ask her to give them the *prasāda*, even if they were strangers. The interviews with the *parvaitin* also revealed that they feel 'different' when fasting for Chaṭha. They reported that on the day of *kharnā*, the *parvaitin* must first feed on the food offered to the deity in a quiet place, and the family members are overly cautious about avoiding making noise. Probing further, they said that Chaṭhī Māī in their bodies inhibits them from eating further upon hearing even the slightest of voice. The *parvaitin* cannot continue eating even if they want to, signifying that the divine and the *parvaitin*'s self co-exist in such cases of embodiment, with the divine power often overpowering the self of the worshippers. Initially, it seemed to be a vital ritual regulation to be followed by those who maintain votive fasts for the festival. However, several instances were also narrated where the devotees' transgression of these regulations had severe consequences, like skin diseases, white spots, and accidents, which they believed were due to the goddess's wrath. Other responses also mentioned that one might face severe consequences if they annoy the *parvaitin*, as it arouses the ire of the deity herself.

***Parvaitin* and her Ritual Mastery**

Deriving from Bourdieu's concept of practical mastery, Catherine Bell (1992) describes ritual mastery as the ability— though not equally shared, desired, or recognised—to (1) take and

remake schemes from the shared culture that can strategically nuance, privilege, or transform, (2) deploy them in the formulation of a privileged ritual experience, which in turn (3) impresses them in a new form upon agents able to deploy them in a variety of circumstances beyond the circumference of the rite itself. This fundamental embodied know-how or knowledge of the rituals is central to the ritual competence of an individual (Crossley, 2004a; Hüsken, 2012). The *parvaitin*'s ability to extract and adapt cultural schemes showcases their skillfulness and serves as the basis for her role as an embodiment of Chaṭhī Māī. It exemplifies this circular process, where cultural understanding and practical mastery combine to create meaningful ritual experiences—her 'sense of ritual' functions in how the internalised understanding of rituals works within their culture. Also, even after active participation of the *parvaitin* ceases, physical memory often endures. The enduring impact of religious practices on the body, with the rituals learned in childhood, remains accessible as shared practical knowledge throughout one's life (Ammerman, 2021, p. 79; McGuire, 2008, p. 107). This phenomenon is not exclusive to specific religious contexts; wherever rituals emphasise physical movements and postures, the body's memory can persist long after the initial engagement (Pryce, 2018; Sigalow, 2019; Kucinkas, 2019).

The first aspect of *parvaitin*'s ritual mastery revolves around their ability to extract and adapt cultural schemes from their ritual tradition, narratives, and myths, particularly those associated with Chaṭhī Māī. This process entails an understanding of the symbolic significance of various elements of the *pūjā*. For instance, during interviews, the *parvaitin* comprehended the importance of the Sun and Chaṭhī Māī as symbols of divinity and power, water as a purifying force, fasting as a mode of connection with the divine, and how it is the ritual responsibility of an auspicious married woman. Similar explanations were given for various ritual materials and how

they are symbolic. The central ritual material, *sūplā/sūpa* (winnowing tray), which symbolised *vamśa*, made with bamboo, was significant in aiding ritual purity. Their ritual mastery lies in their capacity to discern the intricate layers of meaning woven into these cultural symbols. They go beyond surface-level interpretations and tap into the deep reservoir of myths, narratives, and historical contexts that inform the Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. Also, the *parvatin* creatively moulds cultural symbols and practices to resonate with the community's beliefs and experiences. These are further employed as extracted cultural schemes to formulate and orchestrate the rituals- a sequence of practices, actions, and offerings strategically arranged to evoke a sense of transcendence and devotion. By doing so, they elevate the rituals beyond mere routines, infusing them with a profound transformative power.

Chaṭha rituals are rich with symbolic elements, including objects, actions, words, gestures, attire, etc. There are also some dominant symbols, owing to their central role within the ritual and, thus, in creating a ritual body, for instance, the *sūplā* and the integral presence of water. These symbols strategically convey messages, establish contrasts, and significantly shape the participant's experience. For example, the *sūplā*, symbolising *vamśa*, is central to the ritual's purpose and meaning. As most responses mentioned the vow to have a male child, it may be discerned how an auspicious married life is envisaged as that marked by fertility, especially the birth of a son. Other explanations by the respondents on using bamboo in Chaṭha and other Hindu ceremonies constituting the rites of passage show that symbols are carefully chosen and imbued with cultural or religious significance, often representing more profound concepts, values, or archetypes (Selwyn et al., 1979). The dominance of such specific symbols ensures that the intended narrative is clear and impactful, can evoke emotional and psychological responses from participants, and is often culturally specific. The emotional engagement these dominant

symbols yield is an essential aspect of the ritual experience. For instance, the respondents reported bamboo plants (used in making *sūplā*) as a symbol of progeny and auspiciousness. The green bamboo is held sacred, while the dried one has no sanctity. As a symbol of progeny, *bāns* (bamboo) was often defined as *bans/vansha*. Using such culturally relevant symbols ensures that the ritual resonates with participants' lives and aligns with their cultural worldview, which can be supported by several scholarly works on the skewed sex ratio in North Indian states (Mitra, 2014; Klaus & Tripandjan, 2015; Kohli, 2018). Through strategically deploying the cultural schemes, the *parvaitin* helps other participants transcend the ordinary and engage with the profound, creating a bridge between the material and the divine.

6.2 Ritualisation in Chaṭha: Embodied Communication and Symbolic Distinguishment

The Chaṭha rituals spread over four days following a sequence that guides the *parvaitin* through a series of actions and transformations. Looking at the initial ritual of *nahāe-khāe* (literally meaning bathe and eat), the sequence unfolds according to the logic established by the initial opposition and the application of symbolic schemes for the next three days of the rituals. The day symbolises the final phase of preparedness for participants, which involves preparatory works to help individuals transition from their everyday state of mind to one receptive to the ritual's meaning and experiences; this shift in perception and experience enhances the significance and impact of the ritual. The repetition of ritual cleansing and purification on this day creates a sense of rhythm and continuity within the ritual, enhancing its emotional and psychological impact on the *parvaitin*, as she now has to abstain from everyday activities and things. They embody the symbolism and logic of the ritual through their regulated ritual actions and behaviours, which, in turn, reinforces the ritual's intended message and contrasts.

Ritualisation involves changes in mindset, behaviour, or identity, aligning with the ritual's objectives and symbolism (Bell, 2009). According to one of the respondents-

Whenever the month of Kārtika begins, we do not eat garlic and onion. We live with purity. We have not eaten garlic, onion, etc., for the last one month. We prepare for it and keep preparing for our Chaṭha Pūjā. Then we also learn songs and sing in the ghāṭ.

The intentional separation of actions and behaviours from conventional ones creates a distinction between what occurs in the ritual and what is part of ordinary existence and has been a characteristic of religious rituals (Durkheim, 1915; Smith, 1982; 1987; Bateson, 1958; Hertz, 2013; Turner, 1984). The notion of a separate ritual space comes from cultural conceptions of the sacred and profane and is integral to creating a relationship with the divine (Eliade, 1959). Smith (1982, p. 63) termed it a 'controlled environment' in generating the temporal realities of the ritual calendar itself. The deliberate selection of specific locations or the construction of makeshift structures also serves as a controlled environment for the Chaṭha festival. It generates the temporal realities of the ritual calendar itself. With the cultural recognition of the sacred, the dedicated space allows participants to engage with Chaṭhī Māī.

The following song was recorded in Sahibganj, Jharkhand in November, 2023:

*Chār hi ke konwā ke pokharwā
Ohe par banal Chaṭhī ghāṭ
Tāhi pokhrā karī tevaeyā
Barat kare jodī hāth
Surūj Dev ke dehlī aragiyā
Bhāī-bandhu ek sāth
Arajī lagāwe lī ādit se
Chār hi ke konwā ke ghāṭ
Piyar-piyar pehnī ke dhotī, sadiyā
achrā rakhī apnī māth
Jode-jode sūpwā sajāel
Gītiyā gāvī Chaṭha ghāṭ*

The song has been translated as:

*By the pond at the four corners,
There is a Chaṭhī ghāṭ (ritual site).
By that pond, they make preparations,
Observing the fast with folded hands.
They offer aragiyāh to Aditya (the Sun God),
Brothers and family together as one.
They offer their prayers to the Sun,
At the ghāṭ by the pond at the four corners.
Wearing clean piyarī (dhotis coloured yellow) and saris,
Keeping the head covered with the achrā (one end of the sari),
Each pair carefully arranges their sūpwā (winnowing trays),
And sings songs at the Chaṭha ghāṭ.*

The mention of ‘*Chār hi ke konwā ke pokharwā*’ highlights a place segregated for ritual activities. The use of local geographical features, such as the pond or water body (‘*pokharwā*’), signifies the rootedness of the ritual in a particular locale. ‘*Ohe par banal Chaṭhī ghāṭ*’ emphasises the creation of a designated ritual space, that is, the ‘*ghāṭ*’. Creating this ritual space reinforces the separation between the mundane and the sacred, an essential aspect of ritualisation. This ritualisation involves a sequence of symbolic gestures and offerings, creating a structured and meaningful engagement with the divine, the Sun God. In addition to spatial separation, the rituals in Chaṭha mark specific stages in the participants' lives or the cultural or religious calendar, emphasising the temporal aspects of the ritual logic. Our interviews reflected that only married women can perform Chaṭha rituals. At the same time, some also consider the birth of a son as a vital marker to start the annual celebration. They use specific objects like separate bedding on the floor, mango and neem twigs for brushing, and *multānī*⁸ soil to bathe and maintain ritual purity. Thus, they engage in actions reserved exclusively for the ritual context

⁸ In religious contexts, *multāni* soil/*mitti* is used for its purity, natural qualities, and its ability to symbolise ritual cleansing and protection. Its use in rituals, and festive decorations reflects its connection to the earth and its role in embodying sacredness in various cultural and religious traditions.

and maintain restricted contact with other participants and devotees. These symbols further establish the boundaries between the *parvaitin* and others.

However, what mandates such categorisation? Rituals operate according to a unique logic of practice that distinguishes them from everyday activities or theoretical systems (Bell, 2009). This practical logic involves several fundamental operations that are central to the understanding of rituals. For Bourdieu (1977), this practical logic of ritual is logical and biological and, as Lakoff (1987) contends, ‘embodied.’ A distinctive feature of ritual logic is that a single symbolic scheme can be applied across various logical universes or contexts within the ritual (Bourdieu, 1977). The ritual logic behind such activities is the maintenance of ritual purity- in terms of (1) cleanliness when the respondents emphasised the regular cleaning of hands and legs before touching any ritual material, (2) avoiding contact with polluting substances, like leftovers, body fluids, leather products, materials of everyday use like beds, pillows, sheets, blankets, toothpaste, soaps, detergents, etc., (3) purifying traits of things like bamboo, brass, *gāṅgājal*, mango wood, earthen stoves etc., (4) polluting events like death, childbirth, pregnancy.

Ritualisation as a type of social practice involves schemes of privileged contrasting as well as the process of internalisation and objectification that occurs mutely in the interaction of a body and a ritually structured environment and is pivotal in creating a ritualised body (Bell, 1990; 2009). Several scholarly works have attempted to study the role of the body within the realm of religious beliefs and practices (Feher, 1989; Daniel, 1984; Austin, 1988; Kasulis et al., 1987; Turner, 2008; Zimmerman, 2009; Malamoud, 2009; Colas, 2009; White, 2009; Freeman, 2012; Sax, 2012; Hüsken, 2012). However, we see that the ritualisation process in the festival helps in creating the ritual body of the *parvaitin*. As individuals who primarily engage in rituals, the *parvaitin* internalises the symbolism and logic of the rituals to the point where they become

agents capable of enacting structured practices within the ritual context. The embodiment of symbolic contrasts also extends to the way participants choreograph their interactions with each other within the ritual. For example, the researcher observed several participants rushing to the *parvaitin* to wash their clothes, rub them on their bodies, and ask for *prasāda*, even if they may hardly know each other. The devotees also seek blessings of the *parvaitin* by transgressing caste, class, age, and gender boundaries. Individuals transform themselves within the ritual context; they temporarily adopt roles and behaviours that align with the ritual's objectives. It underscores the idea that few participants collectively engage in a meaningful and transformative process, which has an impact beyond the ritual space. The constructed environment in this process simultaneously influences and shapes the bodies and minds of these individuals participating in the ritual. This environment includes physical spaces, objects, symbols, and actions, all carefully designed to convey particular meanings and purposes. In the context of rituals in Chaṭṭha, individuals are exposed to a microculture created by the ritual and adapt to the values and behaviours associated with that microculture. Thus, the circular dynamic in the creation of ritualised bodies is a self-sustaining process where the *parvaitin* becomes increasingly proficient in ritual practices, internalising the ritual's symbolism and contributing to the perpetuation of the ritual within their cultural or social context.



**Figure 1 showing the worshippers washing the *parvaitin*'s clothes and rubbing it on their faces to seek blessings
(The pictures were taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2022)**

6.3 *Kaṣṭī*: Body Techniques of *Parvaitin*

Kaṣṭī is the regional term used to explain the *parvaitin*'s hardships in performing the rituals. In the context of the festival, *kaṣṭī* becomes an umbrella term that has the following dimensions of psychological and physical state- the required ritual knowledge, extended periods of *vrata* (fasting), *arajiyā* (standing in water for extended periods), *hāth uṭhānā/sūpa uṭhānā* (raising their hands with offerings) in salutation to the rising and setting sun, making offerings by completing

a certain number of rotations, and taking holy dips in the water while making the offerings, *daṇḍavat* (prostration), excessive regulation of cleanliness, ritual purity, and its maintenance, the vigilance to ensure the correctness of each ritual performed, and of course, the risk of bearing the consequences of any error occurring in the process. Such exhaustive ritual activities are not solely products of culture; they are also constrained by the *Śakti* (biological aspects) of the *parvaitin*. This shows that *kaṣṭī*, as a significant body technique, is technical, corporeal and involves mindfulness (Crossley, 1995; 2007). They are technical, as only some can physically execute them and the mastery involved in performing them. Identifying with the meanings and gains from *kaṣṭī* gives the *parvaitin* the strength to undertake such bodily exhaustion. Therefore, these physically demanding rituals become prominent body techniques, making Chaṭha a *kaṣṭī kā parva* (a hard-to-observe festival). These bodily actions are learned and embodied over time, enabling the *parvaitin* to engage with the practical aspects of the ritual; mastering these techniques becomes a pre-requisite to endure *kaṣṭī*, and ultimately embody Chaṭhī Māī. Chaṭha provides the space to master and exhibit these body techniques in the most skillful ways; for instance, most experienced respondents were those who had been doing it for a very long time and expressed confidence in the ritual practices and the embodied knowledge. Many elderly women reported that they have been observing Chaṭha rituals for more than two to three decades and that these hardships are undertaken by them effortlessly, yet in the most efficient way.

One of the fundamental techniques employed by the *parvaitin* is the extended period of fasting, a practice that involves physical restraint and self-discipline. Fasting serves as a means of purification and connecting with the divine, heightening the religious and sensory experiences during the festival, thus engaging the body directly (Ryan, 2005; Dietler, 2011). As a technique for obtaining religious experiences, fasting, *arajiyā*, *hāth uthānā/sūpa uthānā* (*parvaitins* raising

their hands with offerings), *daṇḍavat*, and other exhaustive tasks lead to the social construction of the body, making it a locus of control and individual empowerment (Hellman, 2009). These specific movements, gestures, and postures during worship ceremonies and the ritual handling of ritual materials carrying symbolic significance evoke emotional and imaginative intentionality (Crossley, 2004a; 2004b; Berthomé & Houseman, 2010). These techniques require a specific mindset or intentional stance, and it is through the practice of such rituals, which involves both emotional and imaginative engagement, that this mindset is evoked. The *kaṣṭī*, thus, helps the *parvaitin* engage in a transformative experience and enter a state of physical exhaustion that rises above the conventional thought/action divide, sharpening their knowledge and understanding of the sacred.

The following is an excerpt from one of the interviews recorded in November 2022:

You don't need to be tense anyways. You need to be calm! Being tense means that if you feel okay, the festival will be perfect. If I am tense and doing the parva, and if I curse someone in anger, they will be affected, as Chaṭhī Māī is in your head. Moreover, if you are living in that condition, if someone abuses you, then you also have to take care because you are undertaking the festival, that is why! Everyone, old or young, will have to serve you because whether your hands are empty or full, you are worshipping. When you do not take stress, anger will not come automatically.

Thus, we see how rituals are intertwined with our emotional and psychological experiences, and they induce or mitigate specific emotional states to create meaning, structure, and belief in their world (Crossley, 2004a). These rituals, thus, effectively position the *parvaitin* within their imaginative constructs when they feel that transgressing any ritual may cause the ire of the goddess and that the annoyance of the *parvaitin* has the potential to bring severe consequences to others. In the case of Chaṭha, *arajiyā*, and the quietness observed during *kharanā*, for instance,

induces a religious attitude and ecstatic experiences among participants, temporarily reshaping their conscious experience and perception of the world because the conscious experience of the *parvaitin* is transformed through these actions, which is very much a characteristic of religious rituals as Durkheim (1915) observed. Therefore, these bodily rituals shape the experience, influencing their beliefs. By channeling the power of imagination, rituals bestow a particular form of social ‘magic’ that allows the *parvaitin* to establish temporal markers and infuse their lives with meaning (Crossley, 2004a). The significance of these body techniques does not solely lie in their arbitrary placement but also in their ability to tap into and focus emotions and the imaginative capacity, allowing individuals within a social group to momentarily believe that something significant has occurred beyond their immediate reality. The responses of other devotees and spectators towards the *parvaitin* demonstrate how this works through a shared understanding when they say that observing these rituals is hard. However, the effectiveness of rituals also depends on the *parvaitin*’s ability to surrender to the experience.

But why is mastering these body techniques significant? These body techniques accomplish what might otherwise be an impossible feat because they are effective partly due to the collective agreement in our shared views that these techniques shall work. The *parvaitin* effectively brings their deities and other cultural sacred elements into existence, thus making it an embodied knowledge they have attained over time (Hellman, 2009). Through the bodily acts involved in ritual performance, the *parvaitin* engages in imaginative acts where make-believe is taken as genuine worship. They intensely and acutely experience the presence of these entities within themselves, which prevents them from transgressing ritual regulations and, sometimes, helps others eliminate their mistakes during the ritual. This transformation goes beyond mere appearance or gestures; it is deeply rooted in the embodied competence of the *parvaitin*, thus

placing the agent ‘in situation’ by altering their perceptual, emotional, and cognitive structures (Crossley, 2004b).

Additionally, these body techniques in rituals hold subjective and intersubjective validity because, as techniques, they position individuals within the collective imagination of their society, prompting imaginative intentionality towards the world, akin to Merleau-Ponty's (2012) contention that rituals, in general, can be highly personal and subjective experiences. Thus, rhythmic movements and vocalisations, like *arajiyā* and *daṇḍavat*, engage the senses, fostering unity and harmony with the deity. It also emphasises their adaptability and plasticity as the *parvaitin* mindfully adapts and modifies these techniques while preserving the core religious essence. Embodying Chaṭhī Māī's presence is not about rote and repetitive actions; rather, it entails an understanding of the sacred and religious aspects of the rituals. This understanding manifests in their ‘instinctive’ engagement with the rituals, fostering a connection with Chaṭhī Māī during the sacred observance of Chaṭha Pūjā.

The Ritual-cum-Social Body of the *Parvaitin* and the Others

The *parvaitin* embodies the intersection of religious ritual and social interaction within the cultural framework of her tradition. In the realm of religious practice, the body becomes a suitable and vital terrain where the boundaries between nature and culture blur. As Ammerman (2021) articulates, our biological systems are not passive recipients of environmental stimuli; rather, they actively engage with the world around us, filtering sensory inputs through the lens of cultural norms and values. This process of sense-making is inherently social, shaped by interactions with others and informed by the cultural categories we inhabit. This active engagement occurs within the context of social interactions, where individuals collectively

discern (define) and interpret (align) the significance of their sensory experiences (Ammerman, 2021, p. 78). Drawing upon the insights provided by Friedman (2015) and Orsi (2005), we understand that the *parvaitin*'s body serves as a locus where religious practices, social norms, and communal identities converge. This process of defining and aligning happens in both subtle (Friedman, 2015) and overt ways (see Orsi, 2005). Through fasting, austerities, and specific rituals, she engages in acts of devotion that transcend the individual and connect her with her religious community. As noted by Orsi (2005), these practices are not isolated acts but are imbued with communal significance, shaping the *parvaitin's* sense of belonging and identity within her religious tradition.

During this festival, the *parvaitin* undergoes rigorous rituals, including fasting, bathing in rivers, and offering prayers to the setting and rising sun. Through these embodied practices, she not only venerates the Sun God but also reaffirms her connection to nature and community. The ritual body becomes a site where the social construction of religious rituals unfolds. Her actions, gestures, and bodily disciplines are not merely individual but are intertwined with the collective aspirations and values of her religious community. As highlighted by Pryce (2018) in her study of contemplative communities, the *parvaitin's* embodied experiences are manifestly communal, reflecting shared ritual aspirations and practices. Religious practices shape and are shaped by the gendered realities of those who enact them (Graybill & Arthur, 1999; Griffith, 2004; Gerber, 2009; Chaudhry, 2019). The woman's lived religious practice became an embodied expression of the community's gender norms. Paying close attention to such lived religious practices can unveil narratives of agency, empowerment, and self-definition, contrary to assumptions of powerlessness and domination (see Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Mahmood, 2005). Thus, the ritual and social body of the *parvaitin* exemplify the relationship between individual embodiment,

communal rituals, and cultural transmission. The transformation of the female semi-nude body from a sexualised form to a religious, divine form illustrates the profound impact of embodied religious practices. This transformation is achieved through the ritualistic acts, cultural context, and religious significance embedded within the festival. The festival involves rigorous fasting, abstinence from water, and standing in water for prolonged periods to offer prayers to the setting and rising Sun in *piyarī*. The act of immersing in water during the rituals, particularly at dawn and dusk, is a critical component of the ritual. Water symbolises purification and renewal. As women immerse themselves in water, their semi-nude bodies, traditionally adorned with *piyarī*, are transformed from secular, everyday bodies to sacred vessels of religious devotion. This immersed body and the wet body thereafter are not perceived through a sexual lens but rather as an act of cleansing and divine communion.

In many cultures, the wet female body can be perceived sexually, but in the context of the festival, the cultural and religious frameworks recontextualise this imagery. The semi-nude state is not vulnerable to the male gaze but demonstrates a surrender to the elements and the divine. The community collectively focuses on the religious aspects of the ritual, reinforcing the sanctity of the participants' actions. The female body, in this context, becomes a site of divine interaction and strength. The *kaṣṭī*, is symbolic of this transformation. By wearing the *piyarī* and participating in the fast, women demonstrate their dedication and resilience; the *kaṣṭī* combined with the act of fasting and enduring physical hardships, signifies a form of bodily discipline and control, elevating the body from the mundane to the divine. The body, through fasting, becomes a medium of religious expression and divine interaction. This practice shifts the perception of the body from a site of desire to one of divine strength and purity. The transformation is also reinforced by the collective nature of the festival. The community's shared focus on the rituals

and the collective participation in the prayers and offerings create an environment where the female body is revered for its ritual significance. Women's participation in these rituals and their ability to adhere to their rigorous demands often elevate their status within the community. The embodied religious practice becomes a source of agency, allowing women to navigate and sometimes transcend traditional gender roles. While religious practices often reinforce certain social norms and hierarchies, they can also provide spaces for resistance and redefinition. Women participating and leading in the festival embody both the constraints and the empowerment that religious rituals can offer. Their bodies become symbols of endurance, devotion, and divine favour.

6.4 *Parvaitin*, Ritual Body, and Power Dynamics

Incorporating body techniques into ritual practices is pivotal in shaping power dynamics within a given community or social context, as they are intimately intertwined with constructing power hierarchies and marking boundaries, memberships and exclusion (Ammerman, 2021). Turner (2008) emphasises the significance of bodies as *loci* of societal regulation and political contestation. The ways in which bodies are presented, adorned, or disciplined are deeply intertwined with broader social structures and power relations. From dress codes to bodily practices, society imposes norms that shape how individuals perceive and experience their own bodies and those of others. Furthermore, bodies become arenas where identities are constructed, performed, and contested. Societal expectations regarding gender, caste, class, and other categories are inscribed onto bodies, influencing individuals' lived experiences and opportunities. Below is the response of one of our female respondents, aged 56 years, who was interviewed in Varanasi in November 2022:

No, a lot of people don't wear stitched clothes. They do it with just one piyarī. And that is not stitched. It's unstitched fabric. But now, some people have started wearing stitched clothes. People from earlier times didn't wear stitched clothes. See, even my son, who is doing Chaṭha for my manautī, wears stitched clothes. What to do? They feel ashamed of the transparency of the piyarī when it gets wet as we take the holy dip.

In this instance, 'manautī' refers to a vow made by the respondent, which her son fulfilled by performing the Chaṭha Pūjā on her behalf. Typically, such vows are undertaken to seek blessings from Chaṭhī Māī, often in exchange for the fulfilment of prayer or desire. While it is more common for women to embody Chaṭhī Māī during the rituals, there are rare cases, like this one, where a male family member steps in due to the physical or health limitations of the *parvaitin*. This act of the son performing the pūjā is not only a reflection of filial duty but also of the ritual flexibility within the Chaṭha tradition. This flexibility allows for family members, regardless of gender, to embody the role traditionally held by women when necessary. Such instances highlight how religious practices are sometimes also shaped by personal needs, demonstrating a departure from strictly predefined roles. In this way, the act of embodying Chaṭhī Māī's presence becomes an expression of the individual's connection to the sacred rather than merely a ritualistic obligation.

For instance, the researcher observed that older women in the community often critique the younger *parvaitin*, particularly those who deviate from traditional practices—such as not wearing a *piyarī* or using modern methods like gas stoves instead of handmade earthen stoves with mango twigs. These younger, often working and educated women are sometimes seen as less competent by the elderly women, who view their actions as lacking in ritual rigour or authenticity.

Below is the response of one of the female respondents, aged 60 years, who was interviewed in Varanasi in November 2021. She has been doing the annual worship for about 40 years:

Yes, just a little bit; we sprinkle a little bit of Gaṅgājal like this. I bathe in the Gaṅgā every day. These days, I'm not feeling well. Yesterday, I was very unwell. My daughter-in-law said she would cook for nahāe-khāe, but even then, I cooked the meal. Bottle gourd and rice, chickpea dāl for nahāe-khāe. In the evening, bottle gourd isn't that appealing, so we eat potatoes with ghee. I make it by adding rock salt to the ghee. My daughter-in-law, who is a professor, doesn't do Chaṭha. She comes to watch. What will she do!! (laughs). She can't even cook! She is very young and educated.

Here's another excerpt from one of the female respondents, aged 61 years, who was interviewed in Patna, in November 2021:

Many people do the pūjā with just one sari. Some people keep three sets of clothes for the three days—for today, tomorrow, and the morning after. The belief isn't different, but earlier people used to keep just one set. Nowadays, people have more money, they have more saris, so they think about how to decorate and present themselves! Times have changed, and so has the mindset! Earlier, when people had less, they managed with less. Now, people say, 'Look, we did it with just one. But after hearing others, we also started doing it with three saris. Now, if something happens that year, then we become fearful and decide to do it with just one sari.' One year, I even did it with three saris after hearing from others, but all my saris caught fire! The entire sari! The following year, I started doing it with just one again. I got the feeling that maybe I made some mistakes. Look, if you have money, give it to the poor as charity.

This transformative aspect empowers the *parvaitin* and strengthens the authority of those overseeing the rituals, that is, the experienced members of the community, typically elder women who are well-versed in the traditions. These elders possess the authority to assess the correctness of the rituals and to guide the *parvaitin*, ensuring that the rituals are performed in alignment with established customs. While these evaluations are usually informal, they carry significant weight within the community. The *parvaitin* herself also plays a role in self-regulation and mutual observation, where she might critique or learn from other *parvaitins* to maintain the ritual's integrity. However, within the community, individuals may leverage their understanding of these body techniques to resist or negotiate established power dynamics. Subtle challenges to authority

may be mounted through deliberate deviations from prescribed movements or gestures, thus asserting agency within the ritual domain. As *parvaitins* navigate these power dynamics within rituals, they simultaneously learn and reinforce societal norms and hierarchies, thereby perpetuating the existing order within and outside the ritual context.

Women leading participation in such religious rituals has the potential to challenge existing power structures and norms, sparking debates over gender and caste equality, religious authority, and social hierarchies. In some cases, the embodiment of religious devotion by *parvaitin* may be seen as a form of resistance to patriarchal control or religious orthodoxy. Through intricate gestures, movements, postures, or vocalisations, the *paravitin* conveys a profound sense of expertise and command during ritual performances, garnering the recognition and respect of the ritual community. The embodied authority, steeped in the knowledge of body techniques and the ability to take up *kaṣṭī* consolidates their position of power. Mastering these body techniques provides a means of controlling access to rituals and their associated privileges. They may restrict participation or specific roles within rituals exclusively to individuals who have undergone training in these techniques. This exclusivity reinforces existing social hierarchies, as only a select few possess the requisite knowledge and skills to actively engage in these ritual activities. These rituals demand physical presence and active participation, with those proficient in the required body techniques assuming central roles. Their adept execution of these techniques elevates their status and amplifies the prevailing power dynamics within the ritual space. Moreover, body techniques deployed in rituals carry profound symbolic meanings and convey messages to the community. Those who govern and interpret these techniques wield the authority to shape and define the symbolism of these bodily actions, significantly influencing the community's understanding of the ritual's significance. This may manifest in access to ritual

space, postures signifying submission, or gestures indicative of respect, all of which become integral components of the ritual. These bodily expressions underscore and perpetuate prevailing power structures and societal norms.

Furthermore, these rituals involve body techniques believed to effect transformation and empowerment, endowing participants with religious or symbolic power. In the context of *parvaitin* in Chaṭha, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power and embodied religious practice can be elucidated. The *parvaitin*, who embodies Chaṭhī Māī during the festival, holds a central role in the celebration of Chaṭha. The rituals performed by the *parvaitin*, such as taking a holy dip, fasting, offering prayers, and performing ritual ablutions to the Sun, are imbued with symbolic significance and power. Bourdieu's (1991) idea of symbolic power, enacted through ritual, can be observed in the reverence and respect accorded to the *parvaitin* during Chaṭha. Spectators and participants rush to seek her blessings, and bystanders eagerly touch her feet during the *daṇḍavat*, symbolising the recognition of her elevated ritual status. The ritual activities of the *parvaitin*, performed in both public and domestic spaces, serve to reinforce social hierarchies and distinctions, with the *parvaitin* occupying a position of authority and reverence. Also, the embodiment of Chaṭhī Māī within the *parvaitin* exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of how symbolic power sets spatial and bodily boundaries. The *parvaitin's* adherence to ritual regulations, such as observing silence while consuming *prasāda*, signifies the co-existence of the divine and the self within her body. This embodiment of divine power often overrides personal desires and agency, highlighting the transformative impact of religious practices on individual identities and behaviours.

Moreover, the consequences faced by devotees for transgressing ritual regulations underscore the reinforcement of social norms and hierarchies through embodied religious

practices. Devotees believe that displeasing the *parvaitin* or Chaṭhī Māī can result in severe consequences, indicating the perceived authority and power vested in the *parvaitin* during the festival. This transformative aspect empowers individuals and strengthens the authority of those overseeing the rituals. However, within the community, individuals may leverage their understanding of these body techniques to resist or negotiate established power dynamics. Subtle challenges to authority may be mounted through deliberate deviations from prescribed movements or gestures, thus asserting agency within the ritual domain. As *parvaitin* navigates these power dynamics within rituals, they simultaneously learn and reinforce societal norms and hierarchies, thereby perpetuating the existing order within and outside the ritual context.

Conclusion

By exploring the experiences of primary worshippers, the *parvaitin*, the thoughtfulness embedded within ritual practices becomes apparent. By recognising rituals as thoughtful activities, the limitations of mechanistic or instinctual categorisations may be transcended, emphasising the agency, negotiation, and transformative aspects inherent in religious practices. The *parvaitin* crafts a privileged and transformative ritual experience that resonates with myths and narratives by structuring the ritual knowledge, competence, and body techniques. This experience is not confined to the ritual itself; the *parvaitin* imparts the transformed cultural schemes to participants, enabling them to deploy these symbolic strategies in various contexts. The emphasis on ritual knowledge, competence, and body techniques among the *parvaitin* accentuates these rituals' intentional and purposeful nature, challenging dualistic separations and offering fresh insights into the multifaceted ways individuals encounter and manifest the divine presence within specific cultural and ritual contexts. Rather than reducing rituals to predefined

roles or actions, an attempt has been made to highlight the vibrant interplay between beliefs, practices, and physical and experiential dimensions of religious encounters. Additionally, her agency is exhibited by highlighting the *parvaitin*'s pivotal role in initiating and enacting rituals. Rituals are consciously initiated by individuals who possess a profound, albeit often pre-reflective and embodied, understanding of their purposes. Furthermore, for rituals to achieve their desired impact, participants must share this embodied knowledge, having acquired the ritual as a body technique and being inclined to respond to its initiation as a form of order. This, in turn, limits the extent to which rituals can be manipulated through reflective and deliberative rationality. In essence, reflective reasoning often undermines the suspension of disbelief and exposes the culturally contingent nature of rituals. This research encourages a more comprehensive and holistic approach to studying rituals, recognising them as dynamic processes beyond functional roles and offering a deeper appreciation for the profound experiences they facilitate. Thus, *parvaitin*'s embodiment of Chaṭhī Māī illustrates the interplay between cultural symbolism, strategic practice, and the reshaping of both individual and collective perceptions within the realm of ritual, which can be further looked at.