

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the vast weave of human culture, religion is a fundamental and pervasive force, shaping the beliefs, behaviours, and identities of individuals and communities across cultures. Rooted in traditions and evolving through practice and interpretation, religious observances offer a window into the interplay between beliefs and everyday life. Among the myriad expressions of religious observances, Chaṭha Pūjā emerges as a vibrant testament to the enduring power of ritual and tradition in North India and occurs at specific times of the year. This work shall mainly focus on the Kārtika Chaṭha due to its relative popularity. Chaṭha Pūjā is observed as a popular religious festival, celebrated in Bihar, Jharkhand, many areas of Uttar Pradesh, and some parts of Nepal. It centres around the worship of the Sun God, Sūrya and Chaṭhī Māī, or Chaṭhī Māīyā. Spanning four days of fervent worship and communal celebration, this ritual tradition encompasses a comprehensive set of rituals, songs, and customs, each imbued with layers of religious significance and cultural meaning. At its core, Chaṭha Pūjā represents a zone of exchange between the worshipper and the worshipped. As devotees gather by riverbanks and water bodies to offer prayers and offerings to the rising and setting sun, they express gratitude for life-sustaining forces and reaffirm their interconnectedness with the divine and each other. Worshippers seek to purify their minds and bodies through fasting, purification rituals, commitment, and devotion, invoking divine blessings for prosperity, health, and well-being. Chaṭha Pūjā holds a deeper resonance within the socio-cultural landscape of North India, serving as a focal point for community bonding, cultural pride, and collective identity. For many worshippers, the festival represents more than just a religious observance; it is sustained as a

tradition passed down through generations, a symbol of regional heritage and identity, and cultural resilience in the wake of modernisation and change.

Against this backdrop, this study explores and describes Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, aiming to shed light on the religious beliefs and practices within the cultural fabric of the region. The meaning and significance of Chaṭha Pūjā require considering the nuances of the lived beliefs, practices, and experiences of its practitioners. By emphasising the voices and experiences of worshippers, this research demonstrates that the richness of the festivities is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, and social, factors, which can only be revealed through an immersive approach. The researcher has also reflected upon and engaged with some of the central debates in anthropological theory- purity/pollution, theories of the gift (exchange between the deity and the laity), material religion, and embodiment, by foregrounding the voices and experiences of those participating in Chaṭha Pūjā. Through multiple field visits, including participant observation and qualitative interviewing, the researcher sought to delve into the lived experiences of devotees as they navigate the habitus of beliefs, practices and festivities of Chaṭha Pūjā. The worshippers navigate the scape of religion, thus exercising agency within the structure; they replicate the structure through practices like *manautī*, *daṇḍavat* and other body techniques. Central to this work is examining how the beliefs, practices, and festivities of Chaṭha Pūjā offer insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the religious experience of the worshippers in the region. Through the exploration of rituals, narratives, and the lived experiences of devotees, this study aims to shed light on the intricate ways in which religious observance intertwines with the social and cultural facets of life. The objective is to enhance the understanding of the relationship between beliefs and the subtleties of everyday life, underscoring how religious or ritual practices profoundly shape and enrich the tapestry of everyday life of people. Also, this study contributes

to broader conversations about the nature and significance of lived religious experiences in contemporary society. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of those participating in Chaṭha Pūjā, the study aims to go beyond simplistic narratives about religion and rituals, highlighting the enduring relevance of traditional practices in shaping individual lives and community dynamics. Thus, the aim is not only to document the rituals and practices associated with Chaṭha Pūjā comprehensively but also to engage in a dialogue about the profound meanings and implications of religious experiences in the lives of the worshippers. By bridging the gap between academic scholarship available at the festival, the researcher hopes to offer new insights into religious beliefs and practices, enriching our understanding of how religious beliefs permeate various aspects of everyday life. The aspects of everyday life include family obligations, gender roles, health, personal goals, and financial prosperity. Devotees often take *manautī* (vows) during Chaṭha Pūjā for a range of personal and familial concerns, including the desire for children, career success, recovery from illness, or the maintenance of good health and prosperity. These vows and the corresponding rituals reflect how religious beliefs shape everyday aspirations. Through fasting, offerings, and prayers, individuals seek divine intervention to address critical life challenges, reinforcing the connection between religious practice and the practical aspects of daily life.

Kārtika Chaṭha: Known by several names, including Kārtika Śukla Ṣaṣṭhī, Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī Pūjā, and Ḍālā Chaṭha, the festival centres around worship of the Sun god and Chaṭhī Māī, or Chaṭhī Māīyā in the Kārtika Māsa (the month of Kārtika).¹ The month holds significant religious

¹ Kārtika Māsa holds significant cultural importance within Hinduism as one of the most sacred months in the Hindu calendar and typically coincides with October or November in the Gregorian calendar. Devotees engage in a daily ritualistic immersion in the sacred waters of the Gaṅgā during the early hours, known as Gaṅgā Snāna, believing it contributes to revitalising physical well-being and facilitating the absolution of sins. Kārtika Mās also referred to as Dāmodar Mās, is considered the most suitable time for such rigorous practices. Devotees believe that the sun and moon's beams during this period benefit the mental and physical well-being of the propitiatory individual. The sixth

importance within Hinduism as one of the most sacred months in the Hindu calendar. Devotees engage in the practice of ritual bath or immersion in the sacred waters of the Gaṅgā during the early hours every day during the month, known as Gaṅgā *snāna*, believing it contributes to revitalising the physical well-being of the worshipper and facilitating the absolution of her/his sins. Kārtika Māsa, also referred to as Dāmodar Māsa². The sixth day, or the Ṣaṣṭhī *tithī*, is perhaps deified and referred to as the goddess's, Chaṭhī Māī. Kārtika Chaṭha/Ḍālā Chaṭha stands out for its regional significance, particularly in the North Indian context where Chaṭhī Māī, despite her absence in canonical texts, enjoys a steadfast tradition of worship. Worship of Chaṭhī Māī is often sought for the fulfilment of personal desires, such as fertility, health, prosperity, and shielding from life's unpredictability, manifesting her dual nature of benevolence for devotion and malevolence towards neglect. Devotees engage in a fast from dawn to dusk on the pivotal day, Ṣaṣṭhī, which is the sixth day of the waxing phase of the moon in the Kārtika month. Although the climax of the celebration occurs on Ṣaṣṭhī, participants begin their ritual preparations and offerings days prior to it. The rituals are performed over a span of four days. The fourth day, known as Caturthī, is marked by the *nahāe-khāe* ritual (a day for bathing and eating), leading up to a solemn fast on the fifth day, Pañcamī, capped with a unique meal after

day, or *tithī*, is deified and referred to as the goddess's name, Chaṭhī Māī, leading to the interpretation of Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī as Chaṭhī.

²Kārtika Māsa, also known as Dāmodar Māsa, derives its name from the term Dāmodar, which translates to “one who is tied with ropes” (from Sanskrit *dāma*, meaning ‘rope,’ and *udara*, meaning ‘belly’). This month is significant as it commemorates the playful childhood pastimes of Lord Kṛṣṇa, particularly the episode known as the Dāmodar *līlā*, which is celebrated on the festival of Divālī. During Kārtika Māsa, a pivotal event unfolded when Yaśodā's desire to bind Kṛṣṇa as a means of punishment led to a profound realization of the nature of divine love. Despite her best efforts, she found it impossible to bind him with physical ropes. Instead, Kṛṣṇa chose to allow himself to be bound, signifying that it is the love and devotion of his devotees that truly bind the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The episode culminates in the liberation of Nalakūbera and Maṇigrīva, sons of Kubera, who were cursed to become trees, thus reinforcing the transformative power of divine mercy and the lessons embedded in these *līlās*. As one of our respondents aptly noted, ‘There is no other month like Kārtika month, and no pilgrimage like the Gaṅgā,’ emphasizing the significance of Kārtika Snāna and *dīp dāna* (giving away of earthen lamps) in the Hindu religious calendar.

the sun sets, dedicated to Chaṭhī Māī. The strict fast continues over two days, involving total abstention from food and water. On the sixth day or Ṣaṣṭhī, worshippers present their evening offerings, *sanjhiyā arghya*, to the Sun God from the holy waters of the Gaṅgā, using a bamboo winnower known as *sūpa/sūplā*, filled with *prasāda* (food offerings to God) that includes *ṭhekuā* (fried sweet cookies), sweets, coconuts, and assorted seasonal fruits. The subsequent morning, they return to the Gaṅgā for the dawn offering, *bihaniyā arghya*, after which they conclude their fast at home.

Preparations for the Chaṭha Pūjā begin days in advance, with participants rigorously cleaning their homes and surroundings. They abstain from consuming non-vegetarian food and practice purity, reflecting how the festival impacts daily practices and dietary habits. Observers of Chaṭha Pūjā undergo a strict fast for about 36 hours, where they do not consume anything, not even water (known as *nirjalā vrata*). This practice exemplifies how religious rituals can demand significant personal sacrifices and discipline beyond mere acts of worship into a display of endurance and commitment. Throughout the festival, devotees prepare food offerings and the emphasis on homemade items represents the connection between religious worship and domestic life, blending the sacred with the everyday. The rituals involve standing in water, typically a river or pond, and offering *arghya* to the setting and rising Sun. Chaṭha Pūjā is uniquely egalitarian, involving participants from all castes, social standings, and genders, highlighting the collective dimension of ‘lived religion’ where social boundaries are transcended in communal worship. During the festival, devotees sing folk songs that pass on the tradition’s history and values from generation to generation. These oral traditions keep the community connected to its past and each other, emphasizing the role of narrative in lived religious experiences. Craftsmen and artisans create various items, including bamboo baskets and earthen stoves, especially for the

festival, thereby linking religious observance with local craft and economy. This illustrates how the practices of lived religion contribute to and sustain local artisanal traditions and economic activities. Chaṭha Pūjā draws people from different geographies, transcending their immediate local traditions and uniting them towards a common religious pursuit. This broadens the understanding of lived religion as it moves across boundaries and creates a harmonious religious and cultural amalgamation. With the migration of Bihari communities to different parts of India and the world, Chaṭha Pūjā is now celebrated in diverse socio-cultural settings, adapting to new settings while retaining its core principles (Singh, 2010). This exemplifies how lived religion adapts to modernity and globalisation, reflecting resilience and flexibility in religious practices. Particularly for women, who are often the central figures in the rituals, Chaṭha Pūjā serves as a platform for empowerment and expression of religious identity, thus accumulation of religious capital. The primary worshipper, or *parvaitin* is mostly, but not necessarily women, is respected and leverages her influence to strengthen social networks across castes, classes and gender to resources or mobilise community support for various causes. The prominent role *parvaitins* play reinforces gender inclusivity within the religious context, showcasing lived religion as a domain where traditional gender roles can be reaffirmed or renegotiated. Through these various dimensions, Chaṭha Pūjā exemplifies the richness of lived religion as an active and embodied experience that extends beyond the confines of ritual and into the domains of community, environment, economy, health, and culture.

Other Variants of Chaṭha Vrat: Similarities and Differences

According to the Hindu calendar, the festival of Chaṭha falls twice a year: Caitra Chaṭha, observed during the Caitramās of the Vikram Saṃvat, and Kārtika Chaṭha, conducted on the

sixth day of the Kārtika Māsa. However, Lolārka Chaṭha and Lalahī Chaṭha are only popular in Varanasi. This work focuses mainly on Kārtika Chaṭha.

Caitī Chaṭha: The festival is celebrated in the Bihar and Purvanchal regions, dedicated to ensuring the well-being of children and the prosperity of families during the Caitra Māsa³ (March-April), known as Caitī Chaṭha. The festival engages devotees in performing rituals and delivering prayers to the Sun God, Sūrya, and the river Yamunā. These practices are undertaken to secure health, happiness, and prosperity. Sūrya, the Sun God, and Badī Chaṭhī Māī (the elderly goddess) are venerated for their vital life-sustaining energy and are believed to be able to heal diseases and enhance longevity, health, and prosperity. Additionally, the festival honours Badī Chaṭhī Māī for her protective and nurturing essence. Observations from the field visits indicate that owing to the festival falling in a summer month, it involves more of a *kaṣṭī*⁴, leading to fewer participants; so they also call the Chaṭhī Māī worshipped in the festival as Badī Chaṭhī Māī.⁵

³ Caitra Māsa is the first month of the Hindu lunisolar calendar, corresponding to March-April in the Gregorian calendar. It marks the onset of spring in the Indian subcontinent and is significant in various cultural, religious, and agricultural contexts. In many Hindu traditions, Caitra Māsa is associated with auspicious beginnings, as it is often considered the start of the new year in various parts of India. The month is also important for celebrating Caitra Navarātri, a nine-day festival dedicated to the goddess Durgā, culminating in Rāma Navamī. In agricultural terms, Caitra Māsa signals the end of the harvest season in some areas and is often marked by rituals and festivities that express gratitude and seek blessings for future prosperity.

⁴ *Kaṣṭī* is a regional term that describes the challenges faced by *parvaitins* during ritual performances. Within the context of the festival, *kaṣṭī* encompasses various dimensions of both psychological and physical states, including the necessary ritual knowledge, prolonged periods of *vrata* (fasting), *arajiyā* (standing in water for extended durations), and *hāth uthānā/sūpa uthānā* (raising their hands with offerings) in reverence to the rising and setting sun. It also involves making offerings while completing a specified number of rotations and taking holy dips in the water during the process. Additionally, *kaṣṭī* includes practices such as *daṇḍavat* (prostration), strict adherence to cleanliness and ritual purity, maintaining vigilance to ensure the proper execution of each ritual, and the potential repercussions of any errors that may occur during these rituals.

⁵ Badī Chaṭhī Māī, as the respondents explained was considered as sometimes the mother, or mother-in-law, and even elder sister of the Chaṭhī Māī worshipped on Kārtika Chaṭha. Since, she is considered to be elderly, she is also perceived as more demanding and malevolent than the Chaṭhī Māī worshipped on Kārtika Chaṭha. As she is venerated in the Caitra Māsa (March-April), which falls in summer, and makes fasting and other tasks more exhaustive for the worshippers, and thus difficult to please the Goddess.

The festival is marked by a series of rigorous rituals and profound devotion for four days. It begins with *nahāe-khāe*, a day that initiates the festival through the ritual of a holy bath in the Yamuna River or other sanctified water bodies, symbolising a purification process. Post-bath, devotees prepare and consume a simple vegetarian meal, a practice emphasising purity and discipline, setting a solemn tone for the subsequent days of devotion and austerity. The following day, *kharanā* sees devotees observing a strict fast from dawn to dusk, abstaining from food and water. In the evening, after prayers and rituals, they break their fast with a special meal of *khīr* (rice pudding) made with *gur* (jaggery), *pūrīs* (fried bread), and bananas, prepared on new clay stoves to symbolise purity and tradition. This meal marks the beginning of a 36-hour long fast, observed with intense devotion. On the third day, *sanjhiyā arghya*, devotees prepare offerings for the evening prayers. They assemble at the riverbanks by sunset to offer prasād to the setting sun. They involve items like *theḱuā*, a traditional sweet, coconut, and seasonal fruits, all placed in a *sūpa* (bamboo winnower). Standing in knee-deep water and facing the sun, devotees offer prayers, songs, and hymns, a ritual that symbolises their gratitude and reverence for the Sun's life-giving energy. The festival concludes on the fourth day with *bihaniyā arghya*, where devotees return to the riverbanks before sunrise to dedicate their prayers to the rising Sun, symbolising new beginnings and seeking divine blessings. Following the offerings, devotees break their fast and engage in a communal feast, marking the festival's conclusion.

Upholding certain rules is crucial for the sanctity and success of Caitī Chaṭṭha. A sort of obsession with *sāf-safāī* marked all field observations and interactions with the respondents. It is considered to be essential to avoid touching any vessel or *pūjā* materials with unclean hands, as

this is believed to violate or defile the fast's sanctity, rendering the worship and fasting fruitless.⁶ All the materials used in the rituals must be clean and pure. When offering flowers and fruits, it's vital to ensure they are fresh and intact since animals or birds may have damaged them and, thus, are considered impure and unsuitable for the festival. Throughout the festival, only pure vegetarian food (devoid of onion, garlic, and regular salt) is consumed, reflecting the principles of purity and discipline, thereby enhancing the ritual experience of the festival. Observers of the fast are encouraged to sleep on the ground on an *āsana* (mat), avoiding beds to symbolise purity, austerity, self-discipline and avoidance of comfort. Furthermore, it is advisable to avoid using previously used utensils for cooking or offering the *prasāda*; using new or specially cleaned utensils is critical for maintaining purity, which is essential for rituals.

Lolārḱ Chaṭṭha: Lolārḱ Kuṇḍa, nestled near the confluence of the rivers Assī and the Gaṅgā rivers in Varanasi, is a site of profound ritual significance for Hindus. Lolārḱ Kuṇḍa is distinct for its ancient architecture, featuring steep steps on three sides leading down to the pool, separated from the main well by a tall and narrow arch. This arch indicates the direction of the rising Sun over the Ganges. It is particularly renowned for its annual ritual of holy bathing during Lolārḱa Ṣaṣṭhī, the sixth day of the *śukla pakṣa* in the Bhādrapada month, and it holds significance for its rituals associated with Sun worship and fertility blessings. This event, stretching over 16 days, draws in thousands of devotees, notably childless couples seeking the blessings of fertility. The name itself means ‘the pond of the trembling Sun,’ highlighting its

⁶In the context of Chaṭṭha Pūjā, 'unclean' refers to the state of ritual impurity that can be caused by contact with certain substances, actions, or individuals deemed polluting according to cultural and religious beliefs. This concept of impurity extends to physical cleanliness, moral conduct, and adherence to specific ritual protocols, like wearing unstitched clothes, using earthen stoves to prepare offerings, mango twigs instead of toothbrush and toothpaste. Also, touching leather, consuming certain foods (meat, garlic, onion, and spices used earlier), or failing to observe prescribed fasting practices can render a person 'unclean,' thus unfit to participate in the sacred rituals of the *pūjā*. The significance of purity in Chaṭṭha Pūjā lies in maintaining the sanctity of both the devotee and the setting, that is the domestic space, ensuring that the offering to the Sun God and Chaṭṭhī Māi is accepted without obstruction.

deep connection with solar worship, emphasising the belief in the Sun's power to purify and cure skin ailments, including diseases as dreadful as leprosy, according to the local legends.

The rituals practised here are a blend of devotion and tradition. Couples take a vow with fruit in hand and take five holy dips in the water of the *kuṇḍa*— four with the fruit and one after immersing it. This act is accompanied by a commitment to abstain from consuming the fruit used in the ritual, signifying their earnest wish for a child. The solemn vow ends with leaving behind their wet garments at the *kuṇḍa*, a symbolic act of leaving old woes and ailments in the water. After changing into new clothes, without glancing back at the discarded ones, the couples leave the *kuṇḍa*, carrying flowers and *dūrvā* (*Cynodon dactylon*, a type of grass considered sacred in Hindu rituals and often used in worship ceremonies) received from the *paṇḍit* (temple's priest) as blessings. These are kept in their homes until childbirth. Following the birth of a child, it is customary for the family to return to the Lolārk Kuṇḍa to leave the holy flowers and grass received earlier and reciprocate the granted wish. This time, they symbolically immerse only the child's legs in the water and leave behind the clothes worn by the child, completing the cycle of making a vow to have a child and reciprocating the fulfilled vow. The fruit left behind during the initial ritual is believed to manifest as the child, symbolising the fulfilment of their wish. It is believed that the *amśa*, i.e., the part (of the released fruit), returns as the *vaṁśa* (offspring) of the couple and the family. Making *manautī* (vows) extends to other ritual acts, including performing a *muṇḍana* (traditional hair offering of the child) for blessings of health and prosperity. Adjacent to the temple, fruit sellers provide specific fruits like *batuā/bhuā* (ash gourd), which couples release into the water of the *kuṇḍa* as offerings, each symbolising health and vitality for the hoped-for child. People mainly come on Sundays or Tuesdays. This fruit is offered so that the baby is healthy (fleshy). *Kadamba* (Indian *bael*, burflower) and custard apple are also offered.

People also leave seven needles in the *kuṇḍa* to have offspring with stronger bones, while *bael* and other fruits are offered to get the child healthy body organs.

The Sun, revered in many cultures for its life-giving properties, holds a special place in the rituals practised at Lolārk Kuṇḍa. Here, the Sun god, Sūrya and his association with healing, fertility, and well-being are central. According to an old story, it is said that water can cure skin diseases as the *kuṇḍa* has the blessings of Sūrya, who is the *pradhāna* (principal) deity. It is believed that worshipping Sūrya can fulfill all the *abhāva* (all that is lacking) in one's life. The historical significance of Lolārka kuṇḍa is marked by legends and the patronage of kings, including the tale of a king from Cooch Behar who was cured of a skin ailment from the water of the *kuṇḍa*, inspiring him to construct the temple and further sanctify the site. The water is also believed to be powerful in treating *carma roga* (skin diseases) and *kuṣṭha* (leprosy). Further, as the narrative tells, the Śiva Liṅga installed there is said to have been established by the Sun God when a wheel of his chariot fell in the east direction of this very place, adding to the religious significance of the *kuṇḍa*.

Lalahī Chaṭha: The Lalahī Chaṭha/Hala Śaṣṭhī *vrata*, observed on the sixth day of the *kṛṣṇa pakṣa* (dark fortnight) in the month of Bhādrapada, holds significant cultural and religious importance in rural India. It is primarily dedicated to Lord Balarāma and is believed to safeguard the well-being and prosperity of children, particularly sons. This ritual exemplifies the cultural practice where individuals, particularly women, engage in prescribed religious acts to invoke blessings and protection for their offspring. The story that the researcher came across about the festival tells that a pregnant *gwālina* (milkmaid) who went into labour and gave birth to a child under a banyan tree where Hala Śaṣṭhī *vrata* was being observed that day. After a short break,

she left her child there and went ahead to sell the milk and curd, falsely claiming it was solely buffalo milk, thus deceiving the villagers as it might get spoiled. This act led to the breaking of the *vrata* observed by others. Due to this sin, a farmer's plough accidentally pricked her child under the banyan tree. Upon her return and seeing her child's condition, the milkmaid realised her mistake. She immediately confessed her deceit to the villagers and told them of the consequences of her actions. Impressed by her honesty, the village women forgave her and blessed her. Returning to the field near the Banyan tree, she found her son safe and playing joyfully. From then on, this *vrata* (Lalahī Chaṭha) gained popularity as a means of seeking forgiveness and ensuring the well-being of children, especially sons.

Such narratives provide symbolic interpretations of cause and effect, reinforcing the perceived efficacy of rituals in managing uncertainties and maintaining social order. Gender roles play a pivotal role in the narrative, with the narrative involving a pregnant woman as the protagonist and relating the safety of the newborn child with the mother's actions, thus making her liable for the newborn's safety. The narrative is placed within the framework of the *vrata* reminds of the association of *vratas* with primarily women, and making these observances necessary for women to follow for ensuring health and wellbeing of their children (in other contexts, also husbands) (Pintchman, 2005; 2007; McGee, 1996; Pearson, 1983; 1996). Her journey from deception to redemption reflects broader anthropological themes of moral agency, social responsibility, and negotiating gendered norms within traditional societies. The story underscores the interplay between individual actions and collective responses, highlighting how rituals shape and reinforce cultural norms while adapting to evolving socio-economic landscapes. Such narratives enrich our understanding of cultural continuity, adaptation, and the complex interplay between belief systems and societal dynamics within diverse cultural contexts.

Thus, we can see that Chaṭha *vrata* rituals encompass a rich tapestry of cultural practices and religious beliefs across its different variants, such as Ḍālā Chaṭha, Caitī Chaṭha, Lalahī Chaṭha, and Lolārḱ Chaṭha. These rituals are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Hindu communities, each carrying unique significance and reflecting diverse regional traditions and beliefs. Among all the variants of the Chaṭha *vrata*, the common thread is the veneration of the solar deity, Sūrya, the Sun God. This central focus underscores the importance of the Sun's life-giving properties and its symbolic role in sustaining agricultural prosperity and human life. Also, these festivities share basic ritual practices despite their regional variations. Ḍālā Chaṭha, for instance, begins with the devotees taking a purificatory bath followed by fasting and offering prayers to Sūrya and Chaṭhī Maīyā. Similarly, Caitī Chaṭha observed during the Caitra month involves rigorous rituals, including fasting, bathing in sacred rivers like the Yamunā, and preparing specific offerings to Sūrya. These rituals highlight purity, discipline, and the belief in the Sun's transformative powers, which can bring prosperity and cleanse any impurities. In contrast, the Lalahī Chaṭha narrativises repentance and maternal devotion and duty. It stresses the role of the mother (and her actions) in safeguarding children, and for any immoral action by the mother, prescribes forgiveness through sincere observance. Similarly, Lolārḱ Chaṭha observed at the Lolārḱ Kuṇḍa of Varanasi emphasises such aspects as seeking fertility blessings and healing. Devotees perform rituals involving immersion in the sacred waters of the *kuṇḍa* to seek blessings for fertility and health, symbolising purification and renewal.

1.1 Understanding Lived Religious Practices of the Festival

The existing literature, however, has often approached Ḍālā Chaṭha from a distance, focusing primarily on the festival itself rather than delving deeply into the lived religious beliefs and practices associated with the festivities (Jha, 2009; Badikilaya, 2019; Singh et al., 2016; Pandey et al., 2019; Bratton, 2020). Rana P. B. Singh (2010) emphasises that the festival is not merely a religious celebration but a manifestation of deep-seated faith with roots tracing back to the Vedic period (ca. 1500-1000 BCE). Singh argues that the festival should be recognised as an intangible cultural heritage (ICH) according to UNESCO guidelines, highlighting its role in maintaining cultural continuity and identity. This heritage is transmitted through generations, continually recreated in response to the environment, and promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. The festival, deeply rooted in Vedic traditions, has gained wider acceptance and acclaim across North India in contemporary times, supported by media and advertising (Singh, 2010). The festival's practices, such as sun worship and water offerings, are believed to have been adopted by the Brahmanical tradition over time (Pathak & Humes, 1993). The integration of the folk tradition of Chaṭha with the textual recognition of the child-protecting goddess Śaṣṭhī demonstrates the harmonious blending of different cultural elements (Singh, 2000). The spread of Chaṭha Pūjā beyond Bihar to metropolitan cities was driven by the migration of Bihari people (Singh, 2010). This phenomenon is further amplified by films, ads and the involvement of politicians seeking to leverage the festival's emotional appeal.

Historically and culturally, each Chaṭha *vrata* ritual variant reflects unique regional Hinduism traditions and beliefs. Ḍālā Chaṭha, which this work shall solely focus on (we have used it synonymously with Chaṭha, Chaṭha Pūjā), is rooted in agrarian societies, reflects a reverence for agricultural cycles and integrates agricultural practices with religious observance. Caitī Chaṭha, on the other hand, emphasises the Sun's healing powers and its association with

longevity and prosperity. Lalhī Chaṭha, stemming from local narratives of maternal devotion and repentance, highlights community support and the belief in rituals' protective powers. Meanwhile, Lolārk Chaṭha, celebrated at an ancient site like Lolārk Kuṇḍa, combines architectural significance with solar worship traditions, attracting devotees seeking fertility and health benefits. Symbolically, these rituals represent more than religious observances; they embody cultural identities, community solidarity, and personal religiosity. They symbolise gratitude, purification, renewal, and protection, influencing daily practices and fostering connections between individuals, communities, and cosmic forces. The comparative analysis of these rituals provides insights into how religious beliefs and practices shape cultural expressions, reinforce social bonds, and enrich ritual experiences across diverse Hindu communities.

Chaṭha Pūjā is a significant illustration of lived religion, deeply embedded within the ordinary lives of the worshippers and cultural milieu of the region. However, while conducting the field visits, the researcher repeatedly questioned herself about what an analysis of the lived religious experiences of contemporary lay worshippers could contribute to the broader field of religious studies. Today, we can answer this question. We can now infer that it is dependent on countless careful and layered understandings that seek to unfold how the world looks when seen through the eyes of particular people immersed in the circumstances of their daily lives. The inquiry into the religious festival of worshippers celebrating Chaṭha Pūjā constitutes one such snapshot. The analysis also articulates the nature of small-scale, day-to-day religious practice. The researcher intends to approach the worshippers' lived religious experiences from a practice-oriented perspective. This means that religion is a conglomeration of meaningful activities, such as world-making practices and self-making (see Morgan, 1998, pp. 3–4). Individuals always engage with various discourses and structures when practising religion,

producing negotiations and accommodations. At the same time, these discourses and structures come to influence his or her understanding of the world. Practice-oriented inquiries make this reciprocal dynamic evident. In doing so, they open up a view of the relationship between religious action and the regulating conditions that give rise to it (see Bender, 2012, pp. 274–282; Orsi, 2010, pp. xxxvii–xlii).

The concept of ‘lived religion’ emphasises that religion is not just a set of beliefs and rituals confined to sacred spaces or specific times of the day or week. Instead, it encompasses the entire human experience spectrum, permeating life's mundane and extraordinary moments. It delves into how individuals interpret, express, and embody their beliefs within the context of their everyday activities, relationships, and decision-making processes. Furthermore, ‘lived religion’ extends beyond individual practices to encompass communal and social dynamics. It acknowledges the significance of religious communities and the impact of collective religious expressions on societal structures and norms. By focusing on the lived experiences of diverse individuals within religious communities, this perspective provides a profound understanding of the interplay between religious beliefs, cultural customs, and social realities. This approach sheds light on the multifaceted nature of religious identity and addresses the dynamic nature of religious traditions in response to contemporary challenges and opportunities. Thus, when considering how religious practices, festivals, or deities are studied, it's essential to recognise that relying solely on official texts and doctrines may not completely help understand how religion is practised in daily life. This is particularly evident in the context of such variants of religious practices around Chāṭha. Classical Hindu texts extensively discuss Sun worship and mention deities like Śaṣṭhī Devī and Devasenā, and they highlight the significance of Kārtika *māsa*. For instance, the Ṛgveda, one of the oldest Hindu scriptures, contains hymns dedicated to

Sūrya, the Sun god, extolling his virtues and significance in the pantheon of Hindu deities. Śaṣṭhī Devī is revered as the protector of children and is often invoked in rituals related to childbirth and child welfare. Devasenā is acknowledged as the wife of Kārttikeya, the god of war, and is associated with martial and protective aspects. Kārtika *māsa*, the month dedicated to various religious observances, is mentioned in texts such as the Purāṇa and the Mahābhārata, emphasising its importance for festivals and rituals. However, these texts do not mention Chaṭhī Māī or provide details about the rituals associated with her worship, despite her significant role in the regional practices of specific Hindu communities. This includes rituals to invoke her blessings, preparing ritual meals, folk songs sung in her honour, her iconography, characteristics attributed to her, or any ritual stories associated with her worship.

This absence in the classical texts raises essential questions about the everyday religious practices of ordinary people. What do these people do, and how do they incorporate these practices into their daily lives? This is where the study of lived religion becomes invaluable. It sheds light on the practical application of religious beliefs and the rituals and practices that are only sometimes documented in official texts. The study of lived religion has generated a wealth of new knowledge, challenging old assumptions about the nature of religion and opening up new avenues for research. This approach has been particularly enlightening for understanding the religious experiences of marginalised groups, including women, children, the impoverished, and people of colour (Ammerman, 2021, p. 6). For instance, the rituals of Chaṭha Pūjā, which revolve around the worship of Chaṭhī Māī, include specific practices and folk traditions that have been passed down through generations but are not captured in classical texts. These rituals involve elaborate ceremonies to invoke her blessings, preparing ritual meals, singing folk songs, absent iconography, and unique characteristics attributed to her. Despite the significant role of

Chāṭhī Māī in the lives of many worshippers, her worship practices are primarily sustained through oral traditions and local customs rather than in the canonical Hindu scriptures. Moreover, studying lived religion allows for a better understanding of how religion intersects with the social, cultural, and personal dimensions of life. While it may not provide a comprehensive understanding of religious traditions by itself, it is essential to acknowledge that only some approaches can capture the entirety of a religion's complexity. Rather than contradicting the study of official texts and doctrines, the study of lived religion complements it. Researchers can gain a more holistic view of religion by examining how religious beliefs are interpreted and practised in everyday life. This approach enriches our understanding by highlighting the dynamism and adaptability of religions in different contexts, which official texts alone might not fully capture. Both methods are essential for gaining a complete understanding of religious traditions. Contrary to the viewpoint that religion should be exclusively analysed through its official texts and doctrines, it is vital to acknowledge that this method may restrict our comprehension of how religion is experienced and practised by its adherents in daily life.

While official texts and doctrines are undoubtedly crucial for understanding the foundational beliefs and teachings of any religion, they do not always reflect the nuanced and diverse ways individuals and communities live out these beliefs. The rituals and practices associated with Chāṭhī Māī, for example, show how religion intersects with the social, cultural, and personal dimensions of life are critical to a complete understanding. In response to potential criticisms that studying lived religion may not provide a comprehensive understanding of religious traditions, it is essential to acknowledge that no single approach can capture the entirety of the complexity of a religious tradition. The study of lived religion complements, rather than contradicts, the study of official texts and doctrines. Researchers can gain a more holistic view of

religion by examining how religious beliefs in Ḍālā Chaṭha are interpreted and practised in the everyday lives of believers. This approach does not diminish the importance of official religious texts; instead, it enriches our understanding by adding a vital dimension to the study of religious traditions. It highlights the dynamism and adaptability of religions in different social and cultural contexts, which official texts alone might not fully capture.

1.2 Chaṭha Pūjā: Beyond Conventional Religious Constraints

Defining Chaṭha Pūjā solely within the confines of traditional religious frameworks overlooks the richness and complexity of the lived experiences of its worshippers. The festival, deeply entrenched in the cultural landscape of North India, transcends mere religious observance to become a vibrant expression of lived religion—a dynamic interplay between beliefs, practices, and everyday life. Therefore, the challenge of defining Chaṭha Pūjā lies not only in its religious dimensions but also in its profound implications for the lived experiences of its participants. At the heart of this problem of definition is the tension between prescribed religious doctrines and the diverse ways worshippers engage with and interpret their faith in practice. Other studies have tried using the lived religion approach to see the religious activities of various religious groups (Reimer-Kirkham, 2009; Hinnells, 2010; Williams, 2010; Devine & Deneulin, 2011; Jeremiah, 2012; Kaul & Adhikary, 2014; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2015; Kumar, 2017; Nyhagen, 2017; Kuhlin, 2022; Enstedt et al., 2024; Suneson, 2022). However, the researcher uses the approach to see beyond the traditional definitions of Chaṭha Pūjā, which recognises that religious experience extends far beyond these formalities. For the worshippers, Chaṭha Pūjā is not merely a set of rites and rituals performed at designated times; it is a lived reality that shapes their beliefs, identities, and interactions on a daily basis.

The lived experiences of worshippers reveal that Chaṭha Pūjā encompasses a broad spectrum of practices and meanings that defy rigid categorisation. For some, it is an encounter with the divine, marked by fasting, prayer, and devotion rituals. For others, it is a cultural celebration that strengthens community bonds and affirms regional identity. Still, for others, it is a practical expression of ecological consciousness, emphasising harmony with nature and reverence for the environment. Moreover, the diversity of worshippers' experiences reflects the festival's adaptability and inclusivity, accommodating various interpretations and expressions of beliefs. While some may adhere closely to traditional religious norms, others may reinterpret or innovate practices to suit their individual beliefs and circumstances. This diversity challenges narrow definitions of Chaṭha Pūjā that seek to impose uniformity and overlook the fluidity and dynamism inherent in lived religious experience. In light of these complexities, attempting to define Chaṭha Pūjā solely within the confines of traditional religious frameworks risks oversimplification and homogenisation. A more holistic approach that acknowledges the diversity of worshippers' experiences and the multiplicity of meanings associated with the festival is essential for understanding its significance in lived religion. By embracing this complexity, the researcher hereby explores the rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and festivities that constitute Chaṭha Pūjā, thus underscoring its profound implications for the lives of its participants.

1.3 Aim of Study and Research Questions

This doctoral thesis aims to comprehensively investigate participants' lived experiences in Chaṭha Pūjā through a phenomenological approach (which has been discussed in the later chapter). By delving into the subjective worldviews, perceptions, and interpretations of Chaṭha

Pūjā rituals, this study seeks to uncover how religious beliefs and practices intersect with individuals' lifeworlds in North India. Through an in-depth exploration of these lived experiences, the study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the role of religion in shaping personal identity, social relationships, and cultural dynamics within the region.

Research Questions

1. How do participants in Chaṭha Pūjā perceive and interpret the rituals and practices associated with the festival within their everyday lives?
2. What meanings and significance do participants attribute to their engagement with Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, and how do these rituals intersect with their personal and collective identities?
3. How do participants navigate and negotiate the complexities of religious belief, tradition, and modernity in participating in Chaṭha Pūjā rituals?
4. What ritual experiences emerge from participants' engagement with Chaṭha Pūjā, and how do these experiences shape their perceptions of self, community, and the divine?

Through these research questions, this work aims to comprehensively understand the lived religious experiences of Chaṭha Pūjā participants and their implications for individual and communal lifeworlds in North India. The study seeks to uncover the underlying meanings,

motivations, and dynamics that shape religious engagement and practice within the region by employing interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Objectives of the Study

Examining the lived experiences of Chaṭha Pūjā participants offers profound insights into how religious beliefs and practices intersect with the lifeworlds of the worshippers. This approach provides a rich understanding of how Chaṭha Pūjā rituals permeate various aspects of participants' lives by delving into their subjective experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attribute to these rituals. Researchers can uncover the intricate processes through which individuals derive meaning from their religious practices, illuminate how participation shapes their sense of self and collective identities, explore emotional and ritual dimensions, contextualise rituals within everyday life, and uncover agency and resistance in religious engagement.

1. To explore the beliefs and ritual practices of Chaṭha Pūjā participants, uncovering their meanings, perceptions, and interpretations
2. To examine the intergenerational transmission of Chaṭha Pūjā traditions and its impact on cultural continuity
3. To study the factors and strategies that aid in the sustenance and efficacy of Chaṭha Pūjā ritual practices, based primarily on oral narratives

Through these objectives, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived religious experiences of Chaṭha Pūjā participants and their implications for individual and

communal lifeworlds in North India. Delving into the subjective realms of experience, perception, and meaning offers a profound understanding of Chaṭha Pūjā's role in shaping participants' lifeworlds.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into five sections, each focusing on distinct dimensions of Chaṭha Pūjā as a lived religious experience. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a theoretical framework for understanding lived religion and introduce the conceptual underpinnings of the study.

Chapter 3 records the varied oral narratives and stories surrounding Chaṭhī Māī, which do not find a mention in the normative texts. These narratives showcase the blending of religious beliefs with regional traditions in the imagination of her worshippers. The chapter delves into the narratives that depict the goddess as a healer, protector, and feminine energy tied to the Sun. Our fieldwork in Varanasi, Patna, Munger, and Sahibganj reveals diverse origin stories, showcasing the cultural mosaic of regions venerating her. The chapter comprehensively examines the evolutionary trajectory of Chaṭhī Māī's worship, emphasising the synthesis of mythological elements and local folklore. Three key facets—the manifestation of feminine energy, the significance of the title 'Māī,' and the complementary relationship between male and female principles—are explored to provide a nuanced understanding of the goddess's multifaceted identity in North India. The chapter contributes insights into the diverse cultural landscape shaped by the worship of Chaṭhī Māī, emphasising their crucial role in sustaining a living tradition. The absence of normative texts enhances grassroots adaptability, allowing for localised interpretations in the popular imagination of the goddess. Associations with the Sun god, Sūrya and the continuity of divine male-female dynamics provide varied entry points for believers,

enabling emotional connections and familial devotion. The duality of malevolence and benevolence adds complexity, making worship dynamic and responsive to challenges. Linking Chaṭhī Māi to Bihar's regional identity integrates the tradition into daily life, promoting a sense of belonging. The evolving narratives contribute to the deity's adaptability, relevance, and popularity, with potential for further research exploring how folk religions sustain by adapting to societal changes and the impact of evolving narratives on community dynamics.

Chapter 4 and 5 mainly focus on the beliefs and preparatory ritual practices of Chaṭha Pūjā. Chapter 4 is mainly about the materiality of Chaṭha Pūjā, as it provides a rich context for examining the intricate relationships between belief, materiality, and religious experience. The festival involves a series of rituals incorporating symbolic material elements such as water, milk, and *prasāda* of fruits and sweets. These materials are central to worshippers' expression of beliefs and devotion rather than merely being accessories to the ritual. This study of the lived religious experiences of worshippers during Chaṭha Pūjā draws inspiration from the approach that views belief not just as an abstract concept but as something practised, lived, and intertwined with material objects and practices. By examining belief, as scholars studying the material aspects of religion conceive it, as something practised or lived and often expressed through material objects, this chapter delves into how these objects come into being and gain significance through material practices and bodily adornment. Focusing on the material dimensions of Chaṭha Pūjā, this study aims to demonstrate how objects and substances central to the ritual actively participate in religious practice rather than mere backdrops. The study of Chaṭha Pūjā will reveal how material culture sustains and enriches religious life, allowing devotees to experience and express their faith in deeply embodied ways. The communal aspect of Chaṭha Pūjā will also be considered, examining how shared material practices during the festival foster a sense of

community and collective identity among the worshippers. The preparation of the *prasāda*, *arajiyā* (standing in the river water), and the communal meals are instances where material practices and social interactions intertwine, creating a complex tapestry of religious experience beyond individual belief. By focusing on the ritual materials and their role in the festival, insights can be gained into how materiality actively shapes the experiences and meanings of faith. This approach, resonating with the understanding of belief as something lived through material practices, offers a rich avenue for exploring the nuances of religious experience during Chaṭha Pūjā and the broader implications for studying lived religion. Questions about agency, identity, embodiment, and practice reshape how religion scholars understand how religion manifests in the world. This creates endless opportunities for material culture scholars to contribute to the conversation. This chapter will address similar questions by studying the nuances of the significance of ritual materials and means in the festival. The material objects and substances used in Chaṭha Pūjā are not simply inert items but are imbued with religious significance and are essential to the enactment of belief. Water, for instance, is not just a physical substance but a purifying agent, a symbol of life and renewal, and a conduit for divine blessings. Likewise, the milk and other offerings serve as tangible expressions of devotion and piety, connecting worshippers to the divine through sensory and symbolic means. The sensory experiences associated with these materials—such as the feel of water during ablution, the taste of *prasāda*, and the sight of the decorated ritual space—are integral to the devotees’ religious experience. These experiences are deeply embodied, engaging the worshippers’ senses and emotions in ways abstract beliefs alone cannot. Through the ritual use of these materials, devotees express their faith and experience it in a visceral, tangible manner.

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

Chapter 6 and 7 form another section, which shows how the worshippers encounter the deities and what relation they tend to forge during ritual practices. Chapter 6 explores the concept of deity embodiment, focusing on the *parvaitin* during Chaṭha Pūjā, a festival where primary worshippers are believed to embody Chaṭhī Māī. Deity embodiment is a profound religious experience where individuals feel a sense of unity with a deity, significantly shaping their sense of purpose and religious understanding. Not all individuals experience this, nor is it a

mandatory practice, and such experiences must be critically examined for personal and cultural influences. In Chaṭha Pūjā, the *parvaitin* are seen as direct channels for Chaṭhī Māī, transcending the human-divine boundary through ritual practices, thus carrying significant authority in the ritual space. It is argued that rituals should be recognised as thoughtful practices by physical bodies, emphasising the lived, embodied nature of religious experiences. By focusing on embodiment, the chapter highlights how physicality shapes and is shaped by religious beliefs and practices, challenging abstract approaches to studying religion. The *parvaitin*'s activities during Chaṭha Pūjā, such as fasting, prostration, and offering rituals, involve all senses and underscore the embodiment of religious practice. The *parvaitin* are perceived as embodying the deity, with their actions and utterances holding divine significance. Observations and interviews reveal that *parvaitin* experience a profound sense of divine presence, with their physical actions reflecting and reinforcing this embodiment. The chapter explores how these rituals and embodied practices create a sense of divine presence, transforming the worshippers' experiences and blurring the line between the divine and the mundane. This focus on embodiment provides a deeper understanding of religious experiences, highlighting the importance of physical actions in shaping and expressing faith. By examining the embodied nature of religious practices, the chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of religious experiences and the diverse ways individuals engage with their faith.

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

during the festival. Failure to fulfill these obligations can invoke the deity's wrath, underscoring the severe nature of these vows. The practice of *manautī* reflects a transactional relationship between the divine and the devotee, highlighting the intricate dynamics of ritual exchange and reciprocity. Central to the Chaṭha festival is the ritual of *parva uṭhānā*, marking the initiation of annual worship. This ritual involves meticulous preparations and communal gatherings, reflecting the collective spirit of the festival. Another significant ritual is the *koṣī bharanā* (a ritual in the festival where decorated earthen elephants with lit oil lamps are offered under a canopy of sugarcane, symbolising prosperity and divine blessings), *daṇḍavat* (wherein devotees prostrate and roll on the ground), represents an intense form of penance and devotion, highlighting the physical and ritual rigour of the festival. These rituals are crucial in reinforcing social structures and community bonds, reaffirming cultural identity and collective memory, and ensuring the transmission of these practices to future generations. The interactive aspect of rituals reflects the deity's accessibility and instrumental role in fulfilling worldly desires, reinforcing the worshipper's faith and devotion. The chapter delves into the details of *manautī* and related rituals, revealing the profound connections between ritual actions and the maintenance of religious and social bonds. By examining these practices, the study contributes to broader discussions on the nature of ritual practices and their social functions within specific religious communities.

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