

CHAPTER 2

Theory & Method

A vital contribution of the lived religion approach in looking at the beliefs and ritual practices of Chaṭha Pūjā is helping to understand the meaning-making processes at play. This exploration enables researchers to discern how individuals imbibe and reinterpret religious practices, embedding these rituals with personal and communal significance. The narratives and interpretations surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā rituals reveal their symbolic importance, deeply rooted in the cultural and social milieu of the participants. Furthermore, the study also shows the intricate relationship between participation in Chaṭha Pūjā and the formation of personal and collective identities. It sheds light on how individuals align or negotiate their religious convictions with other identity markers such as gender, caste, and socio-economic status. This examination reveals the multifaceted interplay between religious engagement and identity construction, showcasing the dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and identity within religious practices. Feelings of devotion, gratitude, and transcendence highlight the profoundly transformative potential of these rituals, emphasising their role in fostering a profound connection with the divine. In addition, looking through the framework of lived religion facilitates a contextual understanding of Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, integrating them within the broader tapestry of participants' lives, social interactions, and cultural traditions. This nuanced perspective reveals how rituals are practised and lived, highlighting their dynamic incorporation into daily routines and social fabric. It highlights the role of ritual in crafting and reinforcing collective identities and communal lifeworlds. Lastly, exploring agency and resistance within the participants' engagement with Chaṭha Pūjā rituals offers critical insights into the power dynamics. It uncovers how individuals navigate, challenge, and sometimes transform religious

norms and expectations. This aspect of the analysis points to the vibrant processes of religious adaptation, innovation, and dissent, reflecting the community's dynamic and evolving nature of religious practices. In this chapter, the lived religion approach, which significantly shapes the direction and constitution of this dissertation, is introduced and discussed, alongside a reflection on the methodology that underpins the study. Developed to explore how individuals engage with their faith in their daily lives, the lived religion framework offers a unique lens through which to understand religious practices. Despite its benefits, this theoretical framework has limitations, presenting several analytical challenges that will be addressed in this discussion. This chapter will also explore some ethical dilemmas encountered throughout the research undertaking.

2.1 Early Definitions and Perspectives on Religion

The study of religion within anthropology has produced various definitions and interpretations, each reflecting the theoretical orientations of different scholars. One of the earliest and most influential definitions came from Edward Burnett Tylor, who described religion as 'belief in spiritual beings (1871, p. 383).' Tylor, who held the first Professorship in Anthropology at the University of Oxford, viewed religion as an attempt to rationalise the physical world, stemming from a primitive belief in the animate nature of natural phenomena, a concept he termed 'animism' (Tylor, 1871, p. 326). According to Tylor, traces of these early beliefs and practices persisted in contemporary religions through what he called 'survivals'. Robin Horton expanded on Tylor's intellectualist perspective by interpreting African religions as attempts to explain the world, similar to scientific practice but based on incomplete or incorrect information (Horton, 1993). Meanwhile, Bronislaw Malinowski, recognised for his foundational fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, emphasised the psychological functions of religion. He argued that religion

emerged as a response to emotional stress when technical knowledge was insufficient, serving as a form of catharsis and a way to impose order on an unpredictable universe (Malinowski, 1948).

A different approach was offered by Émile Durkheim, who emphasised the social functions of religion. In 'The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life', Durkheim (1915) argued that religion reflects and reinforces society's collective values and norms. He defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, the things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices that unite into one moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim, 1915). He viewed religion as a cohesive social force that embodies society's highest goals and ideals, functioning to maintain social order (Durkheim, 1915). Although a contemporary of Weber, Durkheim approached the study of religion from a different starting point; his analysis of totemic religion among Australian Aborigines led him to believe religion plays a crucial role in uniting society. Unlike Weber, who adopted a substantive perspective, Durkheim focused on the functional aspects of religion, examining its social role. He questioned how religion would adapt as traditional social structures rapidly changed and traditional religious patterns came under strain. Faced with such changes in early 20th-century France, Durkheim argued that religious aspects of society should evolve in tandem with other social changes. This adaptation would ensure that symbols of solidarity appropriate to emerging social orders, such as the nascent industrial society, would develop. Thus, new forms of society necessitate new forms of religion. According to Durkheim, religion will always exist because it fulfills an essential function, but its specific nature will vary across different contexts to align with the prevailing social order. He distinguished between the sacred—things set apart—and the profane—everything else. While defining religion substantively, Durkheim noted that the sacred has a unique functional quality: it unites the collective through shared beliefs and practices

centred on the sacred object. For Durkheim, the sociological significance of group actions surpassed the importance of the object of worship itself. Durkheim's differentiation of the social from the psychological ensures that the group is not merely seen as a collection of individuals, a perspective that Weber's sociology ultimately adopts. However, Durkheim's emphasis on society as a reality *sui generis* carries the risk of another type of reductionism. If taken to its logical conclusion, Durkheim's perspective reduces religion to merely a symbolic expression of social experience. This conclusion disturbed many of Durkheim's contemporaries and remains problematic in his theory. Thus, Durkheim's emphasis on the social aspects of religion has both advantages and drawbacks. This interpretation troubled many of Durkheim's contemporaries and remains a contentious issue. Clifford Geertz built on Durkheim's symbolic functionalism, combining it with Max Weber's concern for meaning. Geertz defined religion as a system of symbols that creates powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. These symbols are imbued with an aura of factuality, making the resultant moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1973). However, Talal Asad criticised Geertz's emphasis on symbols, arguing that it was too abstract and detached from the social, historical, and political contexts that give symbols their meaning; he contended that defining religion universally is impossible because its elements and relationships are historically specific and shaped by discursive processes (Asad, 1993). Gavin Flood acknowledged the challenges in defining religion but argued that scholars could construct definitions tailored to their research purposes. Flood described religions as 'value-laden narratives and behaviours' that bind people to their objectives, to each other, and non-empirical claims and beings (Flood, 1999, p. 47). He emphasised that religion is more about identity and tradition than abstract truth claims or structures (Flood, 1999). Mary Douglas, particularly in

‘Purity and Danger’ and ‘Natural Symbols,’ explored the relationship between social form and religious expression. Her systematic approach linked social structure and group pressures to societal cosmologies, suggesting that social patterns justify and reinforce religious practices (Douglas, 1966; 1970).

While many anthropological approaches to religion remain agnostic or atheistic, focusing on the beliefs and practices of others without claiming their objective veracity, some scholars adopt a more explicitly anti-religious stance in the name of science. James Lett, for instance, rejected the phenomenological approach that brackets out questions of belief. He argued that religious claims should be subjected to anthropological evaluation, asserting that all religious beliefs are either non-falsifiable or falsified and that scholars have a duty to proclaim this fact (Lett, 1997). This materialist view, although common, poses interpretive challenges for ethnographers who engage with the religions they study, requiring a careful balance between objective analysis and respect for the subjects' perspectives.

2.2 Twentieth-Century Shifts and the Resurgence of Religious Vitality

Early sociologists such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman laid foundational frameworks for understanding the role of religion in society. Weber’s (1958; 1968) seminal works delved into religious systems’ social psychology and ethos, highlighting how religious beliefs shape individuals’ behaviours and societal norms. Similarly, Durkheim’s focus on social solidarity emphasises the importance of collective rituals in maintaining social cohesion, where he elaborates on lived experiences of ritual participation; he calls it ‘collective effervescence’. Gilman’s (2003) exploration of gender and religion provided insights into how lived religious experiences are influenced by societal roles and expectations. The lived religion

of women, she argued, was built on experiences of birth and growth, while the lived religion of men was built on experiences of struggle, conflict, and death. These early theorists paved the way for a deeper understanding of the interplay between religion, culture, and social structure, setting the stage for later inquiries into lived religion. Despite the contributions of early sociologists, the twentieth century witnessed a decline in scholarly interest in lived religion. Secularisation theories gained prominence, positing that religion would inevitably decline in modern scientific societies. Consequently, sociologists often overlooked the lived experiences of religious practitioners, viewing religion as a relic of a pre-modern era. Quantitative surveys emerged as the primary method for measuring religious adherence, reducing complex religious phenomena to simplistic indicators such as church attendance or belief in specific doctrines. This shift led to a neglect of the rich tapestry of religious life, obscuring the nuanced ways individuals engage with their beliefs daily.

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of religious vitality on a global scale, challenging prevailing secularisation narratives (Ammerman, 2021). The counterculture movement of the 1960s brought a wave of new religious expressions, emphasising personal religiosity and alternative forms of worship. Simultaneously, Islamic revolutions and the rise of the American Christian Right highlighted the enduring influence of religion in shaping political and social landscapes. These developments shattered the notion of religion's inevitable decline, prompting scholars to reevaluate their assumptions and engage more deeply with the lived realities of religious practitioners. The increasingly interconnected nature of the world introduced new populations and religious traditions into scholarly discourse, prompting a reexamination of existing theories and methodologies. A diverse array of scholarly investigations spanning various academic domains has delineated innovative religious practices

unfolding in both novel and traditional settings. Despite this rich tapestry of research, scholars analysing lived religion have encountered persistent blind spots. These scholars have often constrained their inquiries by juxtaposing their work against the examination of established beliefs and doctrines, organisational structures, and leadership dynamics. Such an emphasis on traditions and institutions has indeed yielded fresh insights. However, it has concurrently fostered a drift in religious research toward an individualistic paradigm. This perspective portrays individuals as operating autonomously or within newly conceived group frameworks. It accentuates notions of choice, personal agency, and the amalgamation of religious concepts and rituals tailored to individual preferences. While this emphasis aligns with the democratic and neoliberal ethos prevalent among many scholars of lived religion, it disregards the diverse cultural and legal milieus within which religious practices unfold. Therefore, the study of lived religion must remain vigilant against its inherent cultural biases.

2.3 Understanding Lived Religion: A Multidimensional Approach

The study of religion has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades, with scholars increasingly focusing on the lived experiences of lay individuals in religious rituals. This shift in focus towards the lived experiences of individuals in everyday life has emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding the dynamic and multifaceted nature of religious expression. This section explores the concept of lived religion, its origins, theoretical underpinnings, and its implications for understanding religious phenomena in contemporary society. Over the past few decades, scholars of religion have become increasingly aware of the profound influence of the intellectual heritage of the Reformations, colonialism, and Enlightenment on conventional academic theorisations of religion (e.g., Asad, 1993; McCutcheon, 2003; Stringer, 2008). They

have argued that prevailing research paradigms often rely on concepts perpetuating a narrow and biased understanding of religion. Efforts to deconstruct and transcend this baggage have led to new avenues of research across various disciplines; one proposed solution has been to adopt an inductive approach to prioritise the interpretations of research subjects regarding their practices, beliefs, and experiences over normative, or rather a priori definitions of religion. This approach stresses discussions of lived religion (McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2010; Ammerman, 2016) and vernacular religion (Primiano, 1995; Bowman & Valk, 2014). While closely related, lived and vernacular religions originate from different disciplinary backgrounds. Lived religion, drawing mainly from sociology and history of religion, emphasises the dynamic and ambivalent nature of religion rooted in the material and social realities of individuals' lives. It acknowledges the complex relations between lived religious expression and institutional religious traditions, recognising that individual religiosity can develop in various ways. A central characteristic of the study of religion-as-lived is a keen awareness of the substantial divergence between the religious needs and interests of different groups. This divergence often intersects with power dynamics, nonreligious concerns, and motivations guiding people's actions. Individuals from various social positions may have varying access to religious and secular power and material and symbolic resources. They may employ religion in diverse ways, using tactics and strategies for different ends. On the other hand, vernacular religion, rooted in folklore studies, focuses on discerning local, communal, and contextual manifestations of religion, particularly those developing outside the centres of ecclesiastical authority.

Theorists of lived religion frequently critique the term 'popular religion' due to its normative assumptions about religion (Hall, 1997, pp. viii-ix; McGuire, 2008, pp. 45–46; Orsi, 2010, pp. xxxii–xxxvii). This term and its counterpart, 'folk religion,' have faced increasing

criticism in recent years, including in folklore studies. Folklorist Leonard Norman Primiano introduced the concept of vernacular religion as an alternative to popular religion, aiming to dismantle two-tiered models reliant on divisions such as 'official' versus 'unofficial,' 'high' versus 'low,' or 'authentic' versus 'corrupt' forms of religion (Primiano, 1995). Primiano's concept of vernacular religion closely aligns with standard interpretations of lived religion, defining it as 'religion as it is lived' by individuals (Primiano, 1995, p. 44). However, Primiano's emphasis differs somewhat from the conventional view of lived religion, particularly among sociologists, as he consistently underscores the vernacular nature of even institutional and organised religion (Primiano, 1995, pp. 45–46; 2012, p. 384). He argues that since religion inherently involves interpretation, an individual's religion cannot help but be vernacular (Primiano, 1995, p. 44). In addition to lived and vernacular religion, everyday religion has gained traction in contemporary religious scholarship. Scholars like Ammerman prefer to use this term to denote their object of study. However, other theoretical articulations of everyday religion exist, some drawing upon theories of the everyday in ways that differ from Ammerman's approach. For example, anthropologists like Samuli Schielke & Liza Debevec (2012) propose an approach that views religious life as inseparable from life in general, starting from everyday practices; they emphasise the significance of actual lived experiences and their existential meaning for individuals. Drawing from Michel de Certeau's theorisations of everyday life and Michael Jackson's phenomenological anthropology, anthropologists Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec emphasise examining actual lived experiences and their existential significance for the individuals involved (Schielke & Debevec, 2012, pp. 210). Sociologist Linda Woodhead (2013) applies de Certeau's (1984) understanding of the dynamics between strategies and tactics to develop a framework for studying everyday lived religion; she focuses on power relations,

reflected in the skewed, partial, and variable articulation of social experience in culture and academia. While Schielke and Debevec (2012) interpret everyday religion as a modality of action, Woodhead sees the concept's potential in changing scholarly perspectives from dominant to the dominated (Woodhead, 2013, pp. 9–16).

Lived religion, therefore, has emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the religious expression of ordinary people. It transcends traditional approaches, primarily focusing on official texts and doctrines by delving deeper into ordinary people's religious practices and beliefs. This approach acknowledges that religion permeates all aspects of life, not just formal religious settings, and emphasises the importance of studying what individuals do rather than solely relying on what they say. The significance of studying lived religious experiences has garnered increasing attention since the mid-1990s. Over the last twenty years, the notion of lived religion has expanded beyond discussions among scholars primarily based in the United States and focused on North American religious practices (Ammerman, 2007; Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2010), becoming common academic parlance across various countries and continents. The exploration of lived religion has burgeoned into a significant area of research within the sociology of religion and religious studies. Its application extends to diverse subjects, including examinations of ancient Mediterranean religious practices (Raja & Rüpke, 2015), studies of religion-driven social activism in contemporary Latin America (Rubin et al., 2014), investigations into everyday Islam in twenty-first-century Europe (Dessing et al., 2013), and analyses of expressions of queer religiosity across early, medieval, and modern Christian contexts (Talvacchia et al., 2015). Scholars across various disciplines have been drawn to this approach due to its potential to transcend the perceived limitations of traditional Western interpretations of religion. By delving

into the lived experiences of individuals within religious contexts, researchers can glean nuanced insights that challenge and enrich our understanding of beliefs and practices. Unlike conventional studies that often prioritise doctrinal analysis or institutional structures, an ethnographic focus on lived experiences allows for a more holistic exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of religion. Through this lens, researchers can capture the interplay between belief systems, cultural practices, and individual identities, thereby shedding light on how people engage with and derive meaning from their religious beliefs.

Consequently, such investigations contribute to the academic discourse on religion and foster greater appreciation and respect for the richness and diversity of religious traditions worldwide. The origin of this focus on lived religion can be traced back to a pivotal conference held at Harvard University in 1994, spearheaded by historian David Hall. This gathering marked a turning point in religious studies, prompting scholars to shift their attention towards the religious activities of everyday individuals rather than solely examining the ideas of elites (Ammerman, 2016). The concept of lived religion was first introduced to Anglophone academic audiences through the collection 'Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice,' edited by historian David Hall (1997; also referenced in Ammerman, 2021, p. 05). In his introduction, Hall (1997, p. vii) explains that the term originated as a direct translation of the French sociological term '*la religion vécue*.' However, since its adoption in English, it has evolved independently from the French tradition. David Hall notes, 'We know next-to-nothing about religion as practised and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of laymen and women' (1997). Hall (1997) describes lived religion as 'a way of doing American religious history' that incorporates perspectives previously underutilised within the scholarly field, aiming to advance academic understanding of ordinary people's everyday religious practices and beliefs.

A decade later, another influential anthology, 'Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives,' was edited by Ammerman (2007). This collection includes an article by sociologist Meredith B. McGuire, who has emerged as one of the foremost advocates of lived religion. Later, Meredith McGuire (2008) gave 'lived religion' a voice in sociology with her book of the same name by proposing a shift in sociological inquiries towards centring on individuals' experiences. In 'Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life,' McGuire's (2008, p. 4) aim is to prompt sociologists of religion, 'to rethink fundamental conceptualisations of what we study and how we study it.' She contends that individuals' lived experiences of religion often diverge significantly from religious institutions' prescribed doctrines and practices. The significance of the term 'lived religion' lies in its ability to differentiate between the actual experiences of religious individuals and the prescribed doctrines and practices of institutionalised religion (McGuire, 2008, p. 12). While this distinction may seem oversimplified and risks downplaying institution-oriented religious activities, McGuire's concern is not with institutional religion per se but the traditional bias of sociological theories and methods towards 'religion-as-prescribed'. She emphasises that academic definitions of religion are socially constructed and advocates for a historical analysis of their foundations (McGuire, 2008, pp. 22-24). Her study highlights the so-called long Reformation period (approximately 1300–1700) as pivotal in shaping the assumptions that have dominated Western scholarly understandings of religion to the present day. McGuire (2007, p. 187; 2008, pp. 13–15; 2016, p. 160) considers the embodied nature of lived religion as a significant characteristic. She argues that historical debates about definitional boundaries have led to a devaluation of religious practice in general and embodied practices in particular, fostering a dichotomous understanding of the religious and

material, mind and body. McGuire (2016) draws on tools provided by phenomenologically oriented philosophers and social theorists to account for the material body as the basis of people's religious expression and experience. She explicitly links the concept of lived religion to philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenology of the body—the notion of the 'lived body' as the medium through which people interact with the divine world. This connection enables scholars to recognise how religious practice and experience are intertwined with human embodiment (McGuire, 2008, p. 216).

The historian of religion and anthropologist Robert Orsi (2003, p. 174) describes the lived religion approach as 'both a way of studying religion and a critique of the discipline of religious studies,' an approach that is founded on a developing historical sensibility of how our academic discourses and theoretical apparatus have shaped and continue to shape our understanding of religious phenomena. Robert Orsi also identifies phenomenological implications in the concept of lived religion; in his interpretation, the lived religion approach encompasses religion as intertwined with the 'life-world' of existentialist philosophy and phenomenological anthropology (Orsi, 1997, p. 11, 20; 2010, p. 4). For Orsi, the study of lived religion embodies a fundamental empiricist approach, influenced by anthropologist Michael Jackson, which views religion as an ongoing and dynamic process of interaction with everyday reality:

'The interpretive challenge of the study of lived religion is to develop the practice of disciplined attention to people's signs and practices as they describe, understand, and use them, in the circumstances of their experiences, and to the structures and conditions within which these signs and practices emerge.' (Orsi, 2003, p. 172)

Building on this foundation, Orsi describes religion as a network of relationships between people and ‘special beings,’ characterised by inherent ambivalence, ambiguity, and power structures (Orsi, 2003, pp. 172–173; 2005, pp. 2–4). Orsi views religion as an ongoing ‘cultural work,’ a perspective that also encompasses religious scholarship (Orsi, 2005, pp. 183–192; 2010; 2012, p.3–6). His argument ‘entails a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and of what it means to be religious . . . Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of daily life’ (1997, p. 7). He highlights academia’s power in defining certain practices, beliefs, and experiences as authentic and essential to religion or particular religious traditions while denigrating others, for example, the historical processes that have led to the marginalisation of Roman Catholicism in the study of religion (Orsi, 2005; 2016). Orsi calls us to rethink religion as a type of cultural work ‘concerned with what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them’ (2003, p. 172). Religious practices thus have meaning only as they relate to how people live. For him, religion is approached in its place within a more broadly conceived and described lifeworld, the domain of everyday existence, practical activity, and shared understandings, with all its crises, surprises, satisfactions, frustrations, joys, desires, hopes, fears, and limitations (Orsi, 2003, p. xiv). However, Orsi stresses the importance of cultivating awareness of the broader social and political agendas that have shaped the discipline of religious studies (Orsi, 2003, pp. 170–172). He believes the study of lived religion must engage with the discipline's history critically; it can help disentangle scholars from normative agendas and prompt them to confront the implications of the discipline's history for contemporary scholarship (Orsi, 2003, p. 174).

Compared to Orsi and McGuire, Nancy Ammerman's understanding of the lived religion approach is less radical. In her works on lived religion, Ammerman draws attention to the everyday experiences of individual lives and the importance of understanding the social worlds where religious ideas and practices exist. Traditional ways of measuring religion, such as religious adherence and church affiliation, miss the many religious practices outside of institutions, leaving much of everyday religion unanalysed (Ammerman, 2007). Unlike Orsi (1997, p. 7), Ammerman conceives of the study of lived religion in more pragmatic terms and is not inclined to a 'fundamental rethinking of what religion is' (2007, p. 4; 2013, pp. 2–3). Instead, she sees it as a means to understand religion, particularly the religion of 'the American mainstream,' in the modern world. She develops her ideas about everyday religion—a term she primarily employs but considers interchangeable with lived religion—as a contribution and corrective to sociological theorisations of secularisation, pluralisation, institutional differentiation, and the religion–spirituality divide (Ammerman, 2010; 2014, pp. 191–196). Ammerman acknowledges the historical baggage of sociological definitions and categories concerning religion and proposes to expand them instead (Ammerman, 2013, pp. 4–5). Consequently, she does not frame her work as a critical discussion of the ethics and politics of the academic study of religion but simply as a search for better definitions and categories. According to Ammerman, the concept of lived religion refers to integrating religion into people's everyday lives (2014, p. 190). This perspective privileges the everyday experiences of non-religious experts or specialists and social contexts that are not institutionally religious (Ammerman, 2007, p. 5; 2013, pp. 4–5). Ammerman contrasts the study of everyday religion with the longstanding tradition in the sociology of religion, which often assumes that religion primarily occurs within specific social arenas, such as religious institutions or the home (2007,

pp. 228–229; 2013, pp. 293–299). However, she cautions against an exclusive focus on non-professionals and non-institutional settings, as it can reinforce the binary between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ religion, which may limit the broader agenda of the lived religion approach (Ammerman, 2016, pp. 86–88). In her research, informed by narrative analysis and symbolic interactionism, Ammerman highlights the role of narratives and conversations in shaping the deployment of religious resources, identities, and realities in everyday life (2007, pp. 226–227; 2013, pp. 7–9, pp. 300–301; 2014, pp. 196–198).

2.4 Theoretical Foundations of Lived Religion

An examination of the ideas by McGuire, Orsi, and Ammerman—arguably the three most prominent and frequently cited scholars associated with the study of lived religion—reveals that the lived religion approach does not adhere to a specific, fixed theory or method. Instead, it denotes a broad research trend that has gained prominence as scholars and sociologists of religion have increasingly questioned previously unquestioned theoretical and methodological assumptions within their disciplines. These assumptions include the construction of normative categorisations, a reliance on survey-based methods and large-scale generalisations, and a predominant focus on texts, institutions, and official spokespersons (e.g., Bender et al., 2011; 2012). As articulated by McGuire, Orsi, Ammerman, and others, the lived religion approach advocates for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of religious phenomena by centering on individuals' lived experiences, everyday practices, and the diverse contexts in which religion manifests itself. The above section of programmatic scholarly statements regarding lived religion and related approaches highlights several significant theoretical foundations, including theories of the everyday, phenomenological anthropology, embodiment theory, theories of practice, and

feminist theory. Theories of everyday life, akin to theories of practice, emphasise the pivotal role of human activity in shaping the social world (Ortner, 1984, pp. 144–149). Scholars like Hall (1997, p. xi), Neitz (2011, pp. 47–49), Orsi (2003) and Bender (2012) stress the importance of practice in understanding lived religion at the intersection of structure and agency. Bender applies Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory to emphasise capturing lived religion as it manifests in everyday interactions across social contexts (Bender, 2003, pp. 6–8).

Whether examining individuals, social settings, or societies, adopting a lived religion approach directs attention to people's actions—their practices. These actions embody structured, creative, habitual, and emergent ways of assessing situations and responding based on shared practical knowledge. Commencing with ordinary people's religious practices entails examining the consistent patterns evident in people's actions and understanding these patterns within the framework of cognitive models and the interconnected social contexts that give them significance and enable action. Before delving into the complexities of defining what constitutes 'religious', it is beneficial to start by examining the broader concept of human action and daily life. One approach to understanding human behaviour is through the lens of 'practices,' a concept explored by sociologists such as Theodore Schatzki (2001) and Andreas Reckwitz (2002). Schatzki defines practices as 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding' (2001, p. 11). Reckwitz offers a slightly broader definition, describing a practice as a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things, and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion, and motivational knowledge (2002, p. 249). A practice is not necessarily formalised into a ritual—although it might be—but is an array of activities. It is a

cluster of socially recognisable actions that allow others to know how to respond. Practices rely on a shared practical understanding ingrained in our behaviour and responses. Habitual tendencies and cultural norms shape this intuitive and learned understanding. We extend a hand in greeting without conscious thought until we encounter a situation where cultural or contextual factors alter our behaviour, such as during a pandemic. Therefore, studying religion involves observing these patterns of activity wherever they occur. One of the forerunners in practice theory was the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990), who was mainly concerned with how practices perpetuate structures of inequality and difference. He observed that our everyday practices reflect and reinforce our societal positioning and status relative to others. Simple acts like greeting each other and sharing space embody our social standing and relationships with others. Bourdieu's examination of religion, primarily within the context of French Catholicism and colonialism, emphasised how practices could assert dominance over others, relegating some individuals to positions of inferiority while elevating others to places of honour. However, interpreting religion through the lens of practice extends beyond merely recognising power differentials. While Bourdieu emphasised the role of structural and cultural influences, status, and power dynamics in shaping practices, this perspective may be too narrow. It is essential to broaden Bourdieu's framework to encompass a more comprehensive understanding of how practices operate. To understand the religious and social dynamics of Chaṭha Pūjā, it is essential to employ the concepts of *habitus* and *field* as developed by Pierre Bourdieu. These theoretical constructs help explain how individuals and groups navigate their social worlds and how practices, such as religious rituals, are shaped by and contribute to these processes. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences within their social and cultural environment. It is not

merely a set of conscious practices but a subconscious way of perceiving and reacting to the world that shapes one's behavior and thought processes. The *habitus* is produced through the interaction of past experiences and social structures, resulting in a set of internalized norms and practices that guide an individual's actions (Bourdieu, 1977). In the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, the *habitus* of participants is shaped by their cultural upbringing and communal practices associated with this deeply rooted festival. For example, women, who are often the primary performers of the rituals, embody the *habitus* of devotion, discipline, and meticulousness that the pūjā demands. The inherited knowledge about the preparation of offerings, fasting practices, and the sequence of rituals reflects a *habitus* that has been passed down through generations. This accumulated experience influences how participants approach the festival, not as a mere obligation but as a natural extension of their religious and social selves. The concept of *field* in Bourdieu's theory refers to a structured space of social positions and power dynamics where agents (individuals and groups) compete for resources and influence. Each field, whether it is economic, political, or religious, has its own rules, norms, and forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The *religious field* is the space where individuals and groups engage in practices that confer religious capital and negotiate their standing within the religious community. In the case of Chaṭha Pūjā, the *field* is the social and religious space in which the festival unfolds. This field is characterized by roles, relationships, and power structures that define the interactions among participants. The *parvatin*, or the woman who leads the ritual, occupies a significant position within this field. Her accumulated religious capital, derived from years of practicing the *pūjā* and mastering its complexities, grants her respect and influence. The field of Chaṭha Pūjā also includes participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds, who may possess different levels of religious and social capital. The structure of the field determines

the distribution of religious capital and the dynamics of power. Those with higher religious capital, such as elder women known for their deep knowledge and adherence to ritual practices, wield significant influence and are often sought after for guidance and blessings. This positioning within the field enhances their social capital, illustrating how the religious field interacts with other social fields, such as those of kinship and community organization.

The interaction between *habitus* and *field* is key to understanding the practice of Chaṭha Pūjā. Participants bring their *habitus*—the internalized cultural and religious practices—into the *field* of the *pūjā*, where they engage in a collective display of devotion. For example, the *parvaitin*'s role embodies the intersection of personal *habitus* (her devotion, learned practices, and ritual expertise) with her positioning within the religious *field*. This interplay enables her to accumulate and demonstrate religious capital, which in turn reinforces her *habitus* through recognition and respect. The collective practice of Chaṭha Pūjā also reinforces the shared *habitus* of the community. The rituals are performed in public spaces, such as riverbanks, where participants collectively sing devotional songs, offer *arghya* (prayers with offerings), and uphold strict fasting regimens. This shared religious practice perpetuates a communal *habitus*, embedding the values of reverence, sacrifice, and connection to nature within the collective consciousness of the community. Practices are deeply ingrained habitual dispositions shaped by cultural knowledge and skills within distinct social fields that dictate expected behaviours. While Bourdieu focused on how desires for status preservation or dominance manifest within social fields, exploring religious practice will encompass broader inquiries while acknowledging these underlying dynamics.

Another French sociologist, Michel de Certeau, posited that there are ‘formalities of practice’ that ‘traverse the frontiers dividing time, place, and type of action. . . . Although they

remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances, these transverse tactics do not obey the law of the place' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29). Studying lived religion means analysing those boundary-crossing tactics and the possibilities—and constraints—offered by each set of circumstances (Ammerman, 2021). Specific sources of power and differentiation are omnipresent, and religious practices frequently play a role in perpetuating these hierarchies. Gender, race, sexuality, and social class are examples of power structures that transcend boundaries, and contemporary scholarship emphasises the intersectionality of these categories. In other words, each aspect of one's identity reinforces and intersects with others, shaping individuals' experiences within societal frameworks. The lived religious practice operates within the framework defined by structures of power and difference, as Bourdieu astutely noted, manifested in our actions. Therefore, studying lived religion necessitates carefully examining these dynamics and their manifestation in habitual behaviours. However, our analysis would be inadequate without acknowledging the agency and creativity individuals can exert in any given situation. Despite the influence of habits and instincts, there are instances where individuals challenge or intentionally subvert expectations. De Certeau (1984, p. xiv) proposes that we explore avenues of action that offer tactics to 'manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only to evade them.' At times, improvisation becomes necessary out of circumstance. Swidler (1986, p. 18) offers valuable insights into identifying places where creativity and new practices emerge. She suggests that habitual patterns dominate during 'settled' periods and locations where routines are established. Conversely, when situations become 'unsettled'—such as relocation, natural disasters, or pandemics—individuals must exert more effort to develop and explain new patterns. Patterns of socially constructed action or practices can range from habitual to surprising, influenced by circumstances or characterised by creativity

and subversion. When examining religion within everyday actions, we encounter both the structured nature of habitual patterns and the agency of individuals. Religious practice is neither solely structured by habit and domination nor purely creative but rather a combination of both, evolving and varying across contexts.

Describing religious action as meaningful does not necessarily imply alignment with a coherent life structure, doctrinal belief system, or personal values. Instead, it acknowledges that all actions necessitate practical meaning to function effectively. While some individuals may operate within a comprehensive internal religious meaning system, many other religious meanings are inherent in shared actions conveyed through signals to observers. Observing people engage in religious activities, even when seemingly fragmentary or unrelated to other aspects of their lives, remains essential to studying lived religion. Therefore, examining lived religion as practice highlights how individuals, events, and institutions derive their religious identities through action. While some practices may involve professing beliefs or asserting religious affiliations—factors typically prioritised in surveys—a practice-focused approach sets these considerations aside. Instead, it explores how people utilise practices to signal their connection to a religious tradition and narrate their lives in religious terms devoid of predetermined answers. Individuals are shaped by the accumulated patterns of their social practices, an ongoing process subject to change. Identifying reasons behind an individual's assertion of a particular religious identity warrants attention to the associated practices of identity-claiming. Moreover, understanding how individuals articulate their identities and the role of religion in their lives constitutes lived religious practices in themselves. Similarly, questions arise regarding the prevalence of religious practices in various life contexts or societies without assuming inherent religiosity or secularity. Assessing the pervasiveness of religious practices across different

settings, whether households versus workplaces or immigrant versus native-born communities, necessitates an awareness of religious practices wherever they occur rather than categorising actions based on predetermined distinctions.

Anthropologists have long documented religion in everyday life, but early divisions between anthropology and other social sciences hindered a holistic understanding of religious practice. The quest for concepts and methods suitable for analysing the religion of marginalised groups has also led scholars to adopt strategies akin to those used in studying gendered religion. Among the contributors to studying Lived Religion in the West were sociologist Nancy Ammerman and historian Robert Orsi, who have become closely associated with the approach over time. There have been other pioneers among historians, like, Marie Griffith (1997; 2004), with her attention to women's bodies; Colleen McDannell (1995), who successfully launched historians on the study of the materiality of religious practice among ordinary people; and Laurie Maffly-Kipp and her colleagues (2006), who made sure that even American Protestants are remembered for their unique ritual practices. Lily Kong (2001) and other geographers have drawn attention to the spatial dimensions of religious practice, in Kong's case, in Asian cities. In anthropology, the work of Birgit Meyer (2004) exemplifies explorations of contemporary lived practice in Africa. By breaking down these disciplinary barriers, scholars have rediscovered the importance of religious practice as an integral part of social life.

The study of lived religion also represents a rebellion against traditional theological and sociological frameworks prioritising abstract ideas and universal theories. Instead, it acknowledges how individuals engage with religion, emphasising the need to contextualise religious practices within specific cultural and social contexts. The study of lived religion, thus, draws from various theoretical sources, with discussions in the work of founding scholars and

articles in this special issue highlighting additional currents of thought, such as ritual studies, material theory, and new animism. Scholars like McGuire and Orsi have examined lived religion through a gender-sensitive lens (McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 1997). Several feminist scholars also advocate shifting focus from doctrine, texts, and authorities to the activities and interpretations of ordinary believers and lay specialists (Gross, 2012, pp. 44–47; King, 1995, pp. 19–24; Neitz, 2004, pp. 398–399). Although receiving relatively less attention in lived religion scholarship, these theoretical frameworks support the lived religion approach (Woodhead, 2013). For example, Sullivan, in her work, ‘Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty’ (2012), uses the lived religion approach to illuminate how people practice religion in their daily lives; she focuses on how religion becomes a resource for mothers grappling with poverty. She conceptualises religious resources as two types: institutional and cultural/personal. The institutional religious resources are resources associated with a faith-based organisation. In addition to the institutional resources, religion also provides cultural resources—the beliefs, views, and symbols that people draw on to structure their experience of the world. Religious beliefs provide a lens through which to interpret the world and a way to make meaning of life’s experiences (Koenig & Larson, 2001; Pargament, 1997). Because religion—in its institutional and personal forms—has been shown to provide resources in many different situations, it seems highly likely to serve as a resource to people with limited resources.

The present study also indicates that individuals draw strongly on personal religious beliefs and practices and less frequently on institutional religion in confronting challenges such as navigating work and welfare, raising their children, and trying to make meaning out of complex or unpredictable situations. Religion, of course, cannot and should not be reduced to a resource, as Sullivan (2012) remarks, and this work does not intend to argue so. Our respondents

who engaged in religious practices were involved in these practices because they believed in a divine being they wished to worship and to whom they wanted to grow closer. Their belief was essential to them because it was a mere resource and formed a central part of who they were and how they constructed and viewed the world. The religious beliefs and rituals related to the festival, for instance *manautī* (a vow or wish fulfilled), shows that religious scape was seen as a resource for these *parvaitins* to get what they wanted; but not only that, they also encompassed the lived experiences of their culture, family traditions and identity.

Methodology: Exploring Chaṭha Pūjā in the Field

The lived religion approach has spearheaded a strand of ethnographically rooted scholarship that negotiates between several formidable pillars of research shaping the landscape of religious studies and the sociology of religion. One such pillar can be identified as the extensive corpus of work constituting the history of religion. Although this categorisation may oversimplify the richness of this body of work, it serves to contrast it with the lived religion approach, highlighting that religious studies have predominantly been influenced by scholars who primarily rely on religious texts as their primary sources. In the quest to establish coherence within the ‘study of religion,’ founding scholars endeavoured to devise *sui generis* definitions of religion. A notable feature of religious studies has been a phenomenological emphasis on uncovering concepts such as ‘the sacred’ or ‘the numinous’ across various traditions and historical periods, as exemplified in the works of Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and Mircea Eliade (Allen, 2005; Kippenberg, 2002). However, the notion of a universal, *sui generis* definition of religion has increasingly met criticism. Many scholars argue that religion defies reliable definitions

across cultures and historical epochs; furthermore, such attempts often result in a fixation on belief, scripture, and notions of a universally sacred (Asad, 2002; McCutcheon, 1995; Smith, 1998). As a pragmatic alternative to sidestepping the definitional question entirely, this critique has spawned a body of work that adopts a discursive approach to examining how the category of religion is constructed in different socio-cultural contexts and historical periods (e.g., Taira, 2013; Wijzen & Von Stuckrad, 2016).

Another formidable bastion, particularly prominent within the Western approach to the sociology of religion, comprises the array of theories centring on the evolution of religion in modernity, encompassing diverse iterations of the secularisation thesis. The lived religion approach eschews macro-level inquiries and attempts to theorise the future of religion in modernity by concentrating on how religion is practised. Rather than presuming an inherent clash between religion and modernity, it investigates how religion is encountered, executed and experienced—how it manifests—in various settings: public and private, formal and informal, sacred, secular, or religiously ‘neutral’ (see Ammerman, 2013; Bender, 2003). In response to the definitional quandary, the lived religion approach advocates for discarding preconceived notions of religion as a starting point for analysis in favour of spotlighting individuals' activities and interpretations. This approach also helps sidestep the Protestant bias often entrenched in traditional academic definitions of religion (see McGuire, 2008, pp. 20–24; Orsi, 2010). McGuire (2007, p. 187; 2008, pp. 13–15; 2016, p. 160) underscores the embodied nature of lived religion as a particularly important characteristic. She argues that historical debates about definitional boundaries have led to a devaluation of religious practice in general and embodied practices in particular, fostering a dichotomous understanding of the religious and material, mind and body. McGuire (2016) draws on tools provided by phenomenologically oriented

philosophers and social theorists to account for the material body as the basis of people's religious expression and experience. She explicitly links the concept of lived religion to philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenology of the body—the notion of the 'lived body' as the medium through which people interact with the world. This connection enables scholars to recognise how religious practice and experience are intertwined with human embodiment (McGuire, 2008, p. 216).

Robert Orsi also identifies phenomenological implications in lived religion approach as intertwined with the 'life-world' of existentialist philosophy and phenomenological anthropology (Orsi, 1997, p. 20; 2010, pp. lii–liii). For Orsi, the study of lived religion primarily embodies an empiricist approach, influenced by anthropologist Michael Jackson (1996; 1998), which views religion as an ongoing and dynamic process of interaction with everyday reality (Orsi, 2003, p. 172). Building on this foundation, Orsi describes religion as a network of relationships between people and 'special beings,' characterised by inherent ambivalence, ambiguity, and power structures (Orsi, 2003, pp. 172–173; 2005, pp. 2–4). Orsi views religion as an ongoing 'cultural work', a perspective that also encompasses religious scholarship (Orsi, 2005, pp. 183–192; 2010, pp. xxxii–xxxvii; 2012, pp. 3–6). He highlights academia's power in defining certain practices, beliefs, and experiences as authentic and essential to religion or particular religious traditions while denigrating others. He is mainly concerned with the historical processes that have led to the marginalisation of Roman Catholicism in the study of religion (Orsi, 2005; 2016). However, Orsi stresses the importance of cultivating awareness of the broader social and political agendas that have shaped the discipline of religious studies (Orsi, 2003, pp. 170–172). He believes the study of lived religion must critically engage with the discipline's history. He argues that the study of lived religion can help disentangle scholars from normative agendas and prompt them to

confront the implications of the discipline's history for contemporary scholarship (Orsi, 2003, p. 174). While discursive approaches frequently grapple with questions about what qualifies as religion and who determines this, the study of lived religion de-emphasizes this issue to develop research methodologies primarily employing ethnographic and historiographic techniques to illustrate how commonly perceived religious phenomena are moulded through countless daily practices, routines, and social dynamics. However, despite the proliferation of applications of the lived religion concept in recent years, it is often employed broadly to delineate a particular research focus and framework. When theoretical frameworks and concepts are utilised, they typically originate from other disciplines such as history, anthropology, cultural sociology, and gender studies.

This section outlines the methodological framework and processes that underpin the present study, highlighting how the combination of phenomenology and thematic analysis within an exploratory-cum-descriptive research design has enabled us to address the research objectives effectively. The researcher begins with an overview of the phenomenological approach and thematic analysis, discussing their significance and application in social science research. Phenomenology, emphasising lived experiences, provides a deep, empathetic understanding of participants' perspectives. Thematic analysis, on the other hand, offers a structured approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The researcher then delves into how these methodologies were applied in the research. The phenomenological approach guided the initial interactions and data collection, allowing the researcher to capture rich, detailed accounts of religious lives of the participants. The thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically organise and interpret this data, facilitating the identification of key themes that address the research objectives. The descriptive-cum-exploratory research design helped explore

the lived and shared experiences of individuals who observe the Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. This design has been chosen to provide a comprehensive and detailed description of the rituals while also exploring the underlying meanings and interpretations participants attach to their experiences. The descriptive component aims to document the observable aspects of the rituals, while the exploratory component seeks to uncover deeper insights into participants' perceptions and emotions.

2.5 The Paradigm of the Current Research — Constructivist and Interpretivist

In the research on the lived experiences of worshippers in Chaṭha Pūjā, the researcher has adopted an integrated paradigmatic approach that synthesises constructivism and interpretivism. This dual framework is instrumental in comprehensively exploring the subjective realities and cultural contexts that shape worshippers' interpretations of Chaṭha Pūjā rituals.

Rooted in works like Berger and Luckmann's 'The Social Construction of Reality' (1967) and Lincoln and Guba's 'Naturalistic Inquiry' (1985), constructivism posits that individuals actively seek to understand their world through subjective meanings that are shaped by social interactions and historical contexts (Mannheim, 1936; Lincoln et al., 2011; Mertens, 2010; Crotty, 1998). Constructivism offers a foundational lens through which the researcher understands how worshippers actively construct meaning from their engagements in Chaṭha Pūjā. This paradigm emphasises that individuals interpret their religious experiences based on their personal beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and social interactions. By focusing on how worshippers attribute significance to Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, symbols, and practices, the researcher aims to uncover how

these rituals contribute to religious identity and cultural belonging. Constructivism also underscores the dynamic nature of human experiences, recognising the fluidity and plurality of interpretations within socio-cultural contexts. Complementing constructivism, interpretivism enriches our research by foregrounding the importance of context and subjective meanings in religious practices. Unlike positivist approaches that prioritise objective truths, interpretivism acknowledges worshippers' nuanced perspectives and lived experiences. This paradigmatic stance allows us to explore how worshippers perceive and interpret their engagements with Chaṭha Pūjā rituals, emphasising their emotional responses, personal reflections, and cultural affiliations.

Ethically, our integrated paradigm strongly emphasises respecting participants' voices and cultural contexts throughout the research process. The researcher has upheld principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity to ensure that the findings authentically represent the perspectives of worshippers. By engaging with worshippers as active participants in knowledge construction, the study aims to contribute nuanced insights into the cultural significance and social dynamics surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā.

Phenomenology in Qualitative Research

Among the various methodological theories in qualitative research, phenomenology is one of the most widely utilised. Its roots can be traced back to early 20th-century European philosophy, particularly through the contributions of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1970) and French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962/1996, and later in 2012), form the foundation of phenomenological thought.

Husserl (1970) primarily focused on human consciousness as a lens for understanding social reality. He was particularly interested in how individuals think about their experiences, emphasising the nature of consciousness as inherently intentional—directed toward phenomena. According to Husserl, comprehending the workings of consciousness is key to understanding how individuals construct their perceptions of social life (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 19). Alfred Schutz, a colleague of Husserl, played a pivotal role in bringing phenomenology into American sociology. Schutz was particularly intrigued by how people process their everyday experiences and sought to develop methodologies for scientific research that would enable a sympathetic understanding of the conscious experiences of daily life (Daly, 2007, p. 94). Schutz's contributions were instrumental in integrating phenomenology into social research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 19). The term 'phenomenon' originates from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, meaning 'to show itself' or 'to appear' (Carpenter & Suto, 2008, p. 64). Phenomenology, according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), functions on two levels: as a philosophy and as a research methodology. Philosophically, it has been explored by thinkers such as Husserl, Schutz, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty. Methodologically, it aims to understand the lived experiences of individuals, as seen in the works of Giorgi (2009), van Manen (1988), and Moustakas (1994). Phenomenology is particularly popular in the social and health sciences, including sociology, psychology, education, nursing, and health sciences (Willis, 2007; Padgett, 2016; Creswell, 2012). Phenomenology seeks to generate knowledge about how individuals experience various phenomena (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). It examines individuals' lived experiences concerning specific concepts or phenomena (Daly, 2007; Creswell, 2012). The primary goal of phenomenological research is to understand and describe participants' experiences of their everyday world from their perspective (Daly, 2007; see also

Willis, 2007; Carpenter & Suto, 2008; Padgett, 2008; Giorgi, 2009). Phenomenologists explore questions such as how individuals experience phenomena. This exploration requires first-hand lived experiences rather than second-hand accounts (Patton, 2002, p. 104). To investigate specific aspects of lived reality, researchers must bracket their preconceptions, suspending any prejudgments to see the reality as the participant perceives it (Daly, 2007; Carpenter & Suto, 2008). Phenomenological studies often employ in-depth interviews to generate detailed descriptions of participants' realities (Daly, 2007; see also Patton, 2002; Willis, 2007). However, phenomenologists also utilise various qualitative methods, including observation, life history, narrative, and examining written records such as diaries, journals, art, poetry, and music (Daly, 2007; Creswell, 2012).

In the present study, phenomenology serves as the foundational methodological framework to explore the lived experiences of worshippers in Chaṭha Pūjā. Phenomenology, deeply rooted in philosophical inquiry and adapted for social sciences, offers a robust approach to understanding and describing the subjective experiences of individuals; it directs the researcher to focus on the essence of lived experiences as they are consciously perceived and interpreted by participants. This perspective directs our study towards understanding Chaṭha Pūjā as a set of rituals and symbolic systems embedded within the lifeworld of worshippers. Within this framework, symbolic systems such as rituals and beliefs are seen as integral components of how worshippers make sense of their world and their place within it. These symbolic expressions cannot be divorced from the everyday experiences, interactions, and social dynamics that constitute the lifeworld of the worshippers. For worshippers engaged in Chaṭha Pūjā, rituals are not abstract concepts but lived practices that shape their perceptions, actions, and interactions. By exploring these symbolic systems within the lifeworld of worshippers, the study aims to

uncover the deeper meanings and significances attributed to Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. This approach enables us to understand how these rituals resonate with worshippers' experiences, beliefs, and cultural identities, illuminating the intimate connections between symbolic expression and cultural reality. Our methodological approach involves conducting in-depth qualitative interviews as a primary means of data collection. These interviews are meticulously designed to elicit detailed descriptions of worshippers' experiences, perceptions, emotions, and reflections about their participation in Chaṭha Pūjā. Through open-ended questions and prompts, the researcher attempts to grasp the subjective realities of the worshippers to emerge naturally during the dialogue. Phenomenology also guides the analysis, emphasising a descriptive and interpretative approach. The researcher focuses on narratively exploring and interpreting the essence of worshippers' experiences within the context of Chaṭha Pūjā. This involves carefully examining participants' intentional acts, consciousness, and lived worlds, aiming to uncover the deeper meanings and structures embedded in their ritual practices. Moreover, this phenomenological inquiry is contextual and embedded within the socio-cultural settings where Chaṭha Pūjā rituals are performed. Through field immersion and reflective engagement with worshippers, the researcher seeks to capture the holistic context and cultural significance of these rituals. This immersive approach helps acknowledge and appreciate the nuances of religious practices and understand how worshippers perceive and derive meaning from their participation in Chaṭha Pūjā. The present work is centred on understanding how meanings are constructed and lived realities are experienced by worshippers in Chaṭha Pūjā. This approach directs the focus away from formal religious doctrines or theological constructs and instead explores how beliefs become meaningful in worshippers' practical, everyday lives. Phenomenology emphasises the 'meaning as it is lived,' which involves investigating how worshippers perceive and act upon

their religious beliefs within their socio-cultural contexts. Central to the worship experience in Chaṭha Pūjā is the inherent desire for fulfilment in the divine. This desire shapes how worshippers interpret and engage with rituals, symbols, and religious practices, illustrating how meanings become intertwined with their lived realities. The emphasis on ‘meaning as it is lived’ represents a departure from studying formal religious texts or prescribed systems of meaning found in theological doctrines. Rather than focusing on what religion should be according to formal teachings, our research examines how worshippers interpret and apply these teachings in their daily lives. This perspective rehabilitates the perspectives of ‘lay’ believers, emphasising their role in shaping religious meanings and practices through their lived experiences.

The phenomenological approach employs ‘bracketing’ to navigate the complexities of religious beliefs and experiences. Bracketing allows researchers to temporarily set aside their preconceptions and beliefs about religious truths while fully engaging with and understanding the perspectives of worshippers. This methodological approach enables us to gain an ‘insider’s view’ without imposing external judgments or interpretations on the religious experiences of worshippers in Chaṭha Pūjā. Therefore, by focusing on ‘meaning as it is lived,’ the work aims to uncover the subjective realities and cultural contexts that shape worshippers’ engagements with the divine, offering insights into the complexities of religious experiences beyond formal theological frameworks. The researcher deliberately sets aside preconceived notions and theoretical biases; this helped the researcher approach the narratives and experiences of Chaṭha Pūjā worshippers with openness and neutrality, aiming to grasp the lived realities without imposing external interpretations. By suspending the assumptions, the work aims to uncover the underlying meanings, structures, and patterns inherent in the worshippers’ engagement with Chaṭha Pūjā rituals.

Ethical considerations are paramount throughout the research process. The researcher prioritised respect for participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivities; informed consent was obtained from all participants, and measures have been taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality when reporting their experiences. These ethical principles underpin the researcher's commitment to conducting respectful and meaningful research that contributes valuable insights into the lived experiences and cultural dynamics of Chaṭha Pūjā worshippers. Thus, phenomenology as methodological framework for the present study helps delve deeply into the subjective dimensions of religious practice and ritual engagement within Hindu traditions. By employing phenomenological principles, the work offers a nuanced understanding of how worshippers experience and interpret Chaṭha Pūjā, thereby contributing to the broader scholarship on religious studies and phenomenological inquiry.

2.6 Method of Data Collection

In this study of Chaṭha Pūjā, the researcher employed a comprehensive approach to data collection, utilising both primary and secondary sources to capture the richness and depth of the ritual practices and cultural significance associated with the worship. The methodology involved qualitative in-depth interviews, textual investigation, and ethnographic fieldwork. The research included in-depth interviews with worshippers, and their family members, and community workers involved in Chaṭha Pūjā. These interviews were semi-structured to explore various aspects, such as the significance of rituals, the role of specific deities like Śaṣṭhī Devī and Devasenā, and the evolution of practices over time. Through open-ended questions, the researcher gathered personal narratives and insights that illuminated the lived experiences and

beliefs associated with the ritual. Supplementing the primary data, the researcher engaged in textual studies of English translations of texts such as the *Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa*. These ancient texts provided invaluable historical and mythological perspectives on worshipping Śaṣṭhī Devī, Devasenā, and related deities, tracing their mentions and significance across different epochs. This approach helped contextualise contemporary practices within broader religious narratives and traditions.

The fieldwork spanned across multiple phases and involved immersive ethnographic methods in 2021, 2022, and 2023. We spent extensive periods of time—up to 30 days—in ethnographic stays within different sites where Chaṭha Pūjā was practised. This immersive approach enabled the researcher to observe rituals firsthand, participate in community activities, and build rapport with participants. It also facilitated a deep understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which the rituals were embedded, including community dynamics and the interplay of tradition and modernity. Recognising the diversity within Chaṭha Pūjā practices, the researcher conducted fieldwork across multiple sites. This geographical diversity allowed the researcher to capture regional variations in rituals, customs, and beliefs associated with the worship. This phased approach to fieldwork ensured that the researcher could explore temporal changes and seasonal variations in ritual practices, enriching the analysis with insights from different contexts. In conclusion, the data collection strategy combined qualitative interviews, textual analysis, and ethnographic immersion to explore Chaṭha Pūjā comprehensively. By integrating multiple sources and methods, the researcher aimed to present a holistic understanding of the ritual's cultural significance, evolution over time, and contemporary relevance within Hindu religious practices.

Both primary and secondary sources were used for the present work. For collecting primary data on the lived experiences of worshippers in Chaṭha Pūjā, the researcher employed qualitative research methods, specifically focusing on conducting in-depth interviews with participants. Qualitative interviews were chosen as they allow for a nuanced exploration of individuals' perspectives, uncovering the meanings embedded in their experiences and beliefs. To refine the research instruments and approach, the researcher conducted a pilot study in 2021. These preliminary investigations helped test interview protocols, assess feasibility, and identify potential challenges in accessing and engaging with the community. The insights gained from the pilot study informed adjustments to the methods before full-scale fieldwork. Books, articles, and other textual material were also used for secondary data.

As defined by Kvale (1996), qualitative research interviews aim to understand the world from the subjects' viewpoints and uncover their lived experiences beyond scientific explanations. This method was particularly suitable for our study as it enabled us to delve into the personal narratives, emotions, and motivations of worshippers engaged in Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. Following the principles outlined by Patton (2002) and Bryman (2012), the researcher approached the interviews with flexibility and openness. Her role alternated between being 'miners,' seeking to unearth deeply held beliefs and experiences, and 'travellers,' engaging in dialogue to explore various dimensions of the research landscape. This approach allowed her to reconstruct stories qualitatively and interpret the findings through the perspectives shared by the participants. In conducting the interviews, the researcher primarily utilised semi-structured interviewing techniques. This method provided a balance of structure and flexibility. While she used an interview guide to ensure coverage of key topics such as ritual practices, personal beliefs, and community dynamics related to Chaṭha Pūjā, the researcher also allowed for organic exploration

based on participants' responses and insights. This interactive approach facilitated the generation of new knowledge and deeper insights into the cultural significance of the rituals. The data collection process involved multiple phases to capture a comprehensive understanding. Initially, the pilot study was conducted to refine interview protocols and ensure their appropriateness within the cultural context of Chaṭha Pūjā. Subsequently, the researcher engaged in extensive fieldwork across various sites where the ritual was practised, immersing herself in the community for periods of observation and interaction. This ethnographic approach provided rich contextual insights into how Chaṭha Pūjā rituals are enacted and understood within different socio-cultural settings.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted to establish rapport and gain in-depth insights into personal narratives and experiences. This method allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives, as it facilitated immediate clarification of responses and observation of non-verbal cues. These interviews provided rich, detailed data that complemented the broader cultural and social themes explored in the semi-structured interviews. Participant observation involved immersing in the communities and actively participating in their daily lives and Chaṭha Pūjā celebrations. This approach enabled the researcher to observe rituals, interactions, and the cultural environment firsthand. Detailed field notes were maintained to document observations and reflections, providing valuable context to the interview data and highlighting the lived experience of the participants. Ethnographic methods provided a holistic understanding of their cultural practices through field immersion. This involved long-term engagement with the participants, building trust, and collecting rich, descriptive data on their way of life. Ethnography allowed the researcher to contextualise the practices of Chaṭha Pūjā within the broader socio-cultural framework of the communities, offering a comprehensive

perspective on their traditions and social dynamics. The combination of face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic methods provided a comprehensive approach to understanding the cultural practices associated with Chaṭha Pūjā and the production of ritual materials. This multi-method strategy ensured a robust and nuanced collection of qualitative data, enriching our analysis and findings.

Immersive ethnographic fieldwork formed the core of the research methodology for the present work, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of worshippers during Chaṭha Pūjā. This approach went beyond mere observation, involving active participation in the rituals and daily lives of the communities under study. By embedding herself within the social and cultural fabric of the participants, the researcher was able to capture nuanced insights into how the festival is experienced, interpreted, and enacted across different contexts. A key aspect of the ethnographic method was participant observation, which allowed her to witness the ritual practices firsthand and engage with the community in a more organic manner. This method provided a direct experience of the socio-religious atmosphere surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā. Over the course of multiple field visits, the researcher participated in various stages of the rituals, including *arghya*, the preparation of ritual items, and the observance of fasting. In this way, the researcher has documented the external elements of the festival and also gained an internal understanding of its emotional and religious resonance among the participants. Throughout this period of immersive engagement, the researcher observed the roles of key actors in the ritual process—such as women (*parvaitins*) who lead the worship, elders who guide the proceedings, and younger participants learning the traditions. The collective participation in the rituals, whether at *ghāṭs* (riverbanks) or homes, allowed the researcher to observe the intergenerational transmission of religious knowledge and the dynamic interactions within families and

communities. Her presence as participants in these rituals gave her a closer look at the subtle practices and cultural expressions that are often missed in detached observations, such as how devotees express their emotions during prayers or how specific gestures are used to invoke blessings. The immersive fieldwork was conducted across multiple sites to capture the diversity of practices and experiences surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā. These locations included urban and rural settings in Bihar and regions in neighboring states such as Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, where the festival holds similar significance. By engaging with different socio-cultural settings, the researcher could observe how local environments, economic conditions, and social hierarchies influenced the performance of the rituals. For instance, in Patna and Varanasi, where Chaṭha Pūjā is observed on a large scale with communal participation at riverbanks, the rituals take on a grander, more public form. In contrast, in smaller towns such as Munger and Sahibganj, the festival remains more intimate, often celebrated within smaller community groups or family units. This variation provided important insights into how the festival is shaped by geographic and social factors, and how local ecologies—especially the proximity to rivers and natural resources—affect the ritual's enactment. Cultural sensitivity was key to the success of the fieldwork. The researcher was mindful of local customs, avoiding any behaviour that could be perceived as disrespectful, especially during sacred moments. This included adhering to dress codes, observing fasting alongside the worshippers, and participating in the communal preparation of *prasāda* (offerings). By aligning with the community's values, the researcher was able to gain deeper access to participants' thoughts and experiences without disrupting the natural flow of the rituals.

Furthermore, reflexivity played a crucial role in our fieldwork. As insiders to the culture, the researcher had to constantly reflect on how our own background, beliefs, and assumptions

could shape the data collection process. While her shared cultural identity as Biharis helped build rapport, the researcher was cautious not to let her familiarity with the practices cloud her objective understanding of participants' lived experiences. Through reflexive field notes and journaling, the researcher was able to maintain a balance between our insider knowledge and outsider analytical perspective, ensuring that the data collected reflected the true voices of the participants rather than our preconceptions. During the fieldwork, the researcher paid close attention to the material and symbolic aspects of the rituals, including the use of offerings (such as fruits, vegetables, and sacred water), the construction of temporary altars, and the specific prayers and mantras recited. In addition to participant observation, ethnographic interviews and informal conversations with a range of individuals were also conducted; this ranged from elderly women observing the festival for decades to younger participants learning the rituals. These conversations provided valuable insights into the personal meanings of the festival for different generations, highlighting the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and the evolving nature of the worship. The semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed for a fluid dialogue, where participants could share their ritual practices and reflections on broader themes such as environmental stewardship, community solidarity, and familial duty.

2.7 Tool For Data Collection

In the present study, the researcher utilised a multi-faceted qualitative research approach to gather comprehensive data on the cultural practices surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā and the associated caste-specific production of ritual materials. The primary tools for data collection included a semi-structured interview protocol/ schedule, she as an observer, mobile phones, and a Zoom audio recorder.

The researcher designed two distinct interview protocols to capture a wide range of perspectives. One protocol targeted the worshippers and those who have experienced Chaṭha Pūjā in their homes, while the other focused on caste-specific groups involved in producing ritual materials. The interview schedule for worshippers and Chaṭha Pūjā witnesses comprised open-ended questions related to personal and cultural details, enabling us to delve deeply into the participants' lived experiences and religious practices. Specific questions about Chaṭha Pūjā included experiences and memories of the festival, its significance in personal and community life, descriptions of rituals and offerings, and roles and responsibilities during the celebration. The second interview protocol targeted specific groups integral to the production of ritual materials for Chaṭha Pūjā- the makers of winnowers, women who make traditional stoves and barbers. The questions focused on craftsmanship and production processes, the cultural and historical significance of the crafts, and the challenges faced in preserving these traditions. The researcher also examined the socio-economic aspects, such as the economic impact of producing ritual materials, the role of caste in sustaining these traditional crafts, and the changes and adaptations in their craft over time.

1. Interview Protocol for Worshippers and Witnesses of Chaṭha Pūjā

To initiate the interview, the researcher gathered essential personal information such as the respondents' names, ages, genders, castes, religions, regions or states of origin, present addresses, emails, mobile numbers, marital statuses, numbers of children, and family members. This basic information helped understand the backgrounds and connections of the respondents to

Chaṭha Pūjā. The researcher asked the respondents for how many years they had been observing Chaṭha Pūjā to understand their experiences and continuity in performing the rituals. Next, the researcher also inquired about the meaning of Chaṭha Pūjā or *parva uthānā* to grasp the festival's significance. The researcher also explored if any of their family members had celebrated Chaṭha Pūjā in the past, providing a historical perspective. It was essential to discuss what inspired them to fast for Chaṭha Pūjā every year, revealing their motivations and ritual or cultural influences. The researcher delved into the preparations for Chaṭha Pūjā by asking the respondents to share the specific steps they took each year. This included understanding the logistics, special arrangements, and unique traditions they followed. Discussing their preparations for the current annual Chaṭha Pūjā helped capture any recent changes or challenges. The researcher also asked about the number of days the festival was observed and their personal fasting duration to understand the extent of their commitment. Clarifying what 'Chaṭhi Māī' meant to them provided insight into their cultural perspective. The researcher, thus, explored the cultural and mythological aspects by asking respondents who Chaṭhi Māī was and if they had any stories associated with her. Understanding the relationship between Sūrya and Chaṭhi Māī helped elucidate the festival's religious significance. The researcher also examined whether the goddess worshipped during Chaṭha Pūjā was similar to the one celebrated on the sixth day after a newborn's birth, highlighting any differences or similarities between the two.

The researcher discussed the importance of various ritual practices, such as '*sūpa uthānā*,' and the situations under which these practices were performed. She examined the requirements for taking the sieve from someone and the significance of the winnowers and baskets used in the offerings. This included the materials used for the offerings, where they were procured and the importance of obtaining them from specific castes. The researcher also asked

about the preparation of food offerings, the ingredients used, and the family members' contributions to these preparations. The researcher inquired about how respondents prepared and maintained the ritual space for Chaṭha Pūjā, including the importance of cleanliness and purification. This included how the space was kept clean, the role of family members in preparing the ritual space, and how the purity of the space was maintained throughout the festival. The researcher also discussed the use of the space for the rest of the year and how it was restored to regular use after the festival. Thus, the community aspect of Chaṭha Pūjā was asked by asking about the support and help respondents received from neighbours and how they contributed to the festival preparations. The preparations at the *ghāṭs* and roads, the responsibilities involved, and any difficulties faced on the way to the *ghāṭ* were also recorded. This included contributions from the community and how respondents personally contributed to these arrangements. The researcher also asked respondents to reflect on their personal experiences with fasting for Chaṭha Pūjā, including any *manautī* (conditional vow) they had made and how they were reciprocated, consequences of fulfilling a vow and what would happen if they could not, their experiences of helping others fulfill their vows and the importance of such acts. Finally, the researcher examined changes in the celebration of Chaṭha Pūjā over the years by asking respondents about shifts in worship practices, preparations of *ghāṭs*, and the overall celebration of the festival. She discussed the reasons behind these changes and gathered their observations on the festival's evolution. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' experiences and practices related to Chaṭha Pūjā, capturing both the personal and cultural dimensions of this significant festival.

2. Interview Protocol for Caste-specific Groups

The interview protocols for caste-specific groups involved in producing ritual materials for Chaṭha Pūjā were meticulously designed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the significance of these castes in society, their interactions with other castes, and the evolution of their functional roles over time. These protocols targeted three distinct groups: *Nāun* (barbers), *Kumhār* (potters), and the *Dom* community that makes bamboo *sūplā/sūpa* (winnowers).

For the *Nāun* (barbers), the researcher designed a protocol that focused on the significance of the instruments and objects they used during Chaṭha Pūjā. She inquired about the identification and symbolic importance of these instruments, delving into the stories and traditions associated with them and how their purity was upheld. The protocol also explored the regulations that governed the purity of their work, any restrictions on their participation, and whether these instruments were passed down through generations. Additionally, the researcher examined the dependence of various castes on the *Nāun* during Chaṭha Pūjā, detailing the activities they performed, the importance of these duties, and the compensation they received. The study also investigated the everyday interactions of the *Nāun* with other castes, emphasizing their participation in other events, the dynamics of their relationships, and how these connections were sustained across generations. Lastly, the protocol assessed changes in the functional utility of their services over time, noting shifts in the profession, the involvement of younger generations, and their treatment outside of festive periods.

For the *Kumhār* (potters), the researcher designed a protocol to understand their significance within Hindu society and the continuity of their profession across generations. She inquired about the duration of their engagement in pottery, changes they had observed over the years, and the evolution of their interactions with other caste communities. The protocol

analyzed the importance of their services in society, including the identification and symbolic meaning of the instruments they created, as well as the stories and traditions tied to these instruments and how their purity was maintained. The researcher also explored the regulations governing the purity of their work, any restrictions on their participation, and whether the instruments were passed down through generations. Additionally, she examined the everyday interactions of the *Kumhār* with other castes, focusing on their relationships, sales, interactions outside of festivals, and the involvement of their family members in the craft.

The protocol for *Dom* community, especially the Mallicks, the ones who are making bamboo baskets and winnowers sought to understand the importance of their services in society and during Chaṭha Pūjā. The researcher asked about their primary activities, the societal importance of these roles, and perceptions regarding the purity or impurity of their work. The protocol also explored the occasions they were invited to participate, their daily interactions with other castes, and how they were compensated for their services. Additionally, the researcher investigated the significance of bamboo baskets and winnowers in Chaṭha Pūjā, including the preparation process, the symbolic meanings of these objects, and their use on other occasions, how the purity of these objects was maintained and any related stories. Lastly, the protocol explored changes in the importance of their services over the years, including changes in sales practices, market dynamics, and cultural narratives such as folk songs.

These protocols aimed to delve into the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of caste-specific roles in Chaṭha Pūjā and broader societal interactions. By examining these aspects, the study highlights the functional unity and changing dynamics of these castes within both traditional and contemporary contexts. This comprehensive approach ensured a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the worshippers and cultural significance. The

interviews with the participants varied in duration, ranging from fifteen minutes for those who were hesitant or faced difficulties in responding to ninety minutes for those who thoroughly addressed each question. Subsequently, the most comprehensive interviews were chosen for analysis through material sampling. All the interviews were tape-recorded with consent. Except for those who could not read, all the participants were requested to read an information sheet and sign a consent form. The contents of the information sheet and consent form were explained to the participants who could not read. The participants were interviewed at different places, such as residences, open spaces and *ghāṭs*, based on their convenience. Background noise in the case of interviews conducted in open spaces and roadside posed difficulties and took longer to transcribe.

Sampling

Flick (2015) delineates a framework for understanding the sampling choices, categorising them based on research phases. In qualitative research, the selection of samples is predominantly through non-probability sampling. Lune & Berg (2017) explain that this approach allows researchers to select samples that they believe can provide a comprehensive view of the larger group the sample represents. This method diverges significantly from probability sampling by prioritising the depth and richness of the data collected over statistical representativeness. Various non-probability sampling techniques have been recognised as valuable for qualitative inquiry. Notably, Yin (2011, pp. 88-89) and Lune & Berg (2017) highlight purposive, snowball, random, and convenience sampling as key methodologies. Convenience sampling is also referred to as accidental or availability sampling because it relies on samples that are easily accessible (Lune & Berg, 2017). Yin (2011, p. 88) argues that convenience sampling is not normally

preferred since the most accessible data sources may not be the most information-rich. Selecting such samples will likely produce an unwanted degree of bias and incompleteness.

Patton (2002, p. 237) argues that snowball sampling 'is an approach for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases.' The process involves asking a single informant who possesses the required characteristics about other possible informants, which results in the snowball getting bigger and bigger as new informants are accumulated (Patton, 2002; Gray et al., 2015). When a few names are repeatedly recommended as valuable, they become especially important. Snowball sampling proves helpful when no other means of locating participants of interest (Morgan, 2011). This method especially proves helpful in locating hidden populations such as illegal drug users, members of secret societies, highly specialised interest groups and so on (Morgan, 2011; Gray et al., 2015). Gray et al. (2015) argue that 'purposive sampling is a general term for judgmental sampling in which the researcher purposely selects certain groups or individuals for their relevance to the issue being studied.' Lune & Berg (2017) also argue that purposive sampling is sometimes called judgemental sampling. Similarly, Yin (2011, p. 88) argues that the sample in qualitative research that is likely to be deliberately chosen is known as purposive sampling. According to Bryman (2012, p. 416), purposive sampling is needed to select units such as people, organisations, departments and so on, with reference to the research questions. According to Yin (2011, p. 88), purposive sampling aims to select specific study units, which will result in the most relevant and sufficient data for the topic of study. Similarly, Merriam (2009) argues that purposive sampling helps choose a sample that can provide maximum information.

In the context of the present work, the data collection procedures were meticulously planned to capture the essence of participants' perspectives and cultural practices surrounding

this ritualistic event. The study began by purposefully selecting participants actively involved in Chaṭha Pūjā rituals. This approach ensured that the research would delve deeply into the personal and communal dimensions of their experiences. Sites were chosen based on their significance as locations where Chaṭha Pūjā ceremonies were traditionally performed, emphasising the cultural and geographical contexts integral to the ritual. This research mainly used purposive sampling since the aim was to identify information-rich participants. Selecting the information-rich participants helped us deeply understand the topics of focus. In addition, snowball sampling helped gain access to certain participants who were well-known in the community and frequently recommended by some of the participants. The pilot visit was conducted before the actual field visit to get acquainted with the festival, get a preliminary understanding of the field, and identify the challenges of conducting research there. Participants who obtained recommendations via snowball sampling were directly approached through walk-ins and phone calls.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Sample Selection:

The criteria should ensure participants have relevant and significant experiences to share.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Participants must be active participants in Chaṭha Pūjā rituals.
- Participants should have witnessed or participated in Chaṭha Pūjā.
- Participants must be willing and able to articulate their experiences and perceptions.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals who have never participated in Chaṭha Pūjā.

- Individuals whose participation in Chaṭha Pūjā is purely observational or professional (e.g., researchers or journalists without personal engagement).

These insights into sampling methods underscore the importance of a strategic and thoughtful approach to selecting samples in qualitative research tailored to the specific requirements and objectives of the study at hand.

For data collection across multiple locations including Varanasi, Patna, Sahibganj, and Munger, the researcher conducted interviews with a total of 75 individuals initially. These participants were selected based on their ability to provide insightful perspectives on the ritual practices and cultural significance in these diverse regions. After carefully considering interview duration, sound quality, and the depth of interaction, the researcher has identified the best 60 interviews for detailed analysis. This selection process ensured that the sample represented various communities and perspectives, encompassing devotees, participants, Nagar Nigam workers, and artisans. Each interviewee contributed valuable insights that enriched our understanding of how the festival is celebrated and understood across different regions, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.8 Sites for Data Collection

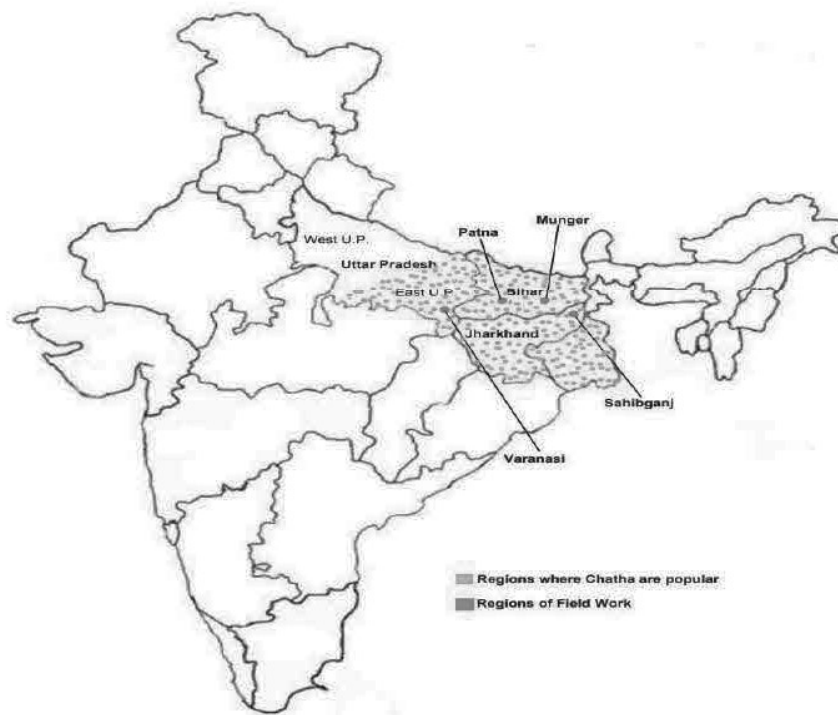


Figure 1: Map Showing the Regions of Fieldwork.

The selected research sites for conducting interviews were Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, Patna and Munger in Bihar, and Sahibganj in Jharkhand (Fig. 1). These locations were chosen due to the popularity of the festival and the presence of the Gaṅgā, attracting people from nearby areas. During the initial presentation of the research proposal to the committee members and experts, suggestions were made to investigate further the use and production of ritual materials and conduct an in-depth study of home rituals in the festivals. The researcher also received recommendations to explore places known for myths and other narratives related to the festival, leading us to explore Munger and plan visits to Sita Charan Mandir. However, multiple visits

were required due to the area's susceptibility to flooding. Data collection began with these suggestions in mind. However, difficulties arose in finding participants willing to participate in interviews during the rituals in the *ghāṭs*. Many of the women whom the researcher approached were soft-spoken and timid, hesitant to engage in lengthy conversations while performing their activities, fearing mistakes. Consequently, very few women agreed to participate in the interviews in the *ghāṭs* and were also reluctant to interact with us in their domestic space. Additionally, many mistakenly perceived us as media personnel. These women mainly hailed from rural areas and were uneasy about sharing their stories in their local dialects. Nevertheless, by conversing in their preferred dialect, mainly Bhojpuri, the researcher was able to establish rapport.

Conducting fieldwork across multiple sites—Varanasi, Patna, Munger, and Sahibganj—proved crucial in developing a nuanced understanding of the Chaṭha Pūjā rituals and practices. Each location presented unique insights, revealing both continuity and variation in the observance of the festival. Varanasi offered a more urbanized setting, where the traditional practices of Chaṭha Pūjā have intertwined with modern, urban lifestyles, and schemes like Swaccha Bhārat. Here, the rituals maintained a strong sense of devotional fervor, but the interactions between religious and public spaces reflected the city's vibrant, pluralistic culture. This provided a lens to observe how the Pūjā adapts in a multicultural urban center, balancing between ancient traditions and modernity. Patna, as the capital of Bihar and the heartland of Chaṭha Pūjā, displayed the ritual in its most classical and widespread form. The city's riverbanks became central spaces for the Pūjā, where the devotional practices were deeply connected to the Gaṅgā river. Patna allowed for a close examination of the historical persistence of the ritual and its symbolic resonance with the Sun God and water. Munger, a smaller city with a more rural

influence, emphasized the agricultural roots of Chaṭha Pūjā. Here, the rituals retained a deep connection to agrarian cycles and skin ailments, with many devotees invoking the Sun God for fertility, skin diseases, and Chaṭhī Māt as Sītā Mahārānī. Sahibganj, located in Jharkhand and relatively removed from the heartlands of the festival, provided insight into how Chaṭha Pūjā is practiced in more remote and tribal regions. The rituals here exhibited both adaptations to local customs and innovations, blending the mainstream practices of the festival with local cultural elements. It was also significant in the sense that ritual materials, like bamboo winnowers were transported to places like Varanasi and Patna. In contemporary times, especially with urban migration and the spread of the festival beyond its traditional boundaries, the observance of Chaṭha Pūjā has seen significant changes. While the essence of the ritual remains intact—devotion to the Sun God and immersion in water—new practices have emerged, including the use of artificial ponds in cities lacking natural water bodies and the involvement of a wider cross-section of society, including non-Bihari communities. The multi-sited fieldwork enabled an understanding of how this ritual, though unified in its devotion to the Sun God, displays remarkable diversity in its regional adaptations. It also revealed how urbanization, migration, and environmental concerns have influenced the practice of Chaṭha Pūjā, both in preserving its traditional essence and encouraging new forms of observance.

Varanasi

The selection of Varanasi as one of the sites for our study on Chaṭha Pūjā was driven by several compelling factors. The foremost among these was Varanasi's profound historical and religious significance, particularly in the context of Hindu traditions. Our pilot study in Varanasi and later our extensive fieldwork was strategically planned to coincide with the challenging yet

unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. The pandemic context underscored the significance of the work as the researcher observed how traditional practices adapted to ensure the continuity of cultural and religious observances. This city, revered for its sacred *ghāṭs* along the Ganges River, offers a profound insight into the ritual practices that define Hinduism, making it an ideal setting for our exploration. The Ganges River, central to our study, is integral to the religious fabric of Varanasi. The religious beliefs surrounding the Ganges underpin many of the rituals and festivities centered around the river, including Chaṭha Pūjā, where the *ghāṭs* of Varanasi witness an extraordinary convergence of devotion, as worshippers perform rituals dedicated to the Sun God, seeking blessings for the health, prosperity, and wellbeing of their families. Moreover, Varanasi's geographical and cultural proximity to Bihar, where Chaṭha Pūjā has its origins and enjoys widespread observance, enriched this study. This cultural affinity allowed the researcher to delve deeper into the shared and distinct elements of the rituals and festivities across different regions. Through the data gathered from interviews and participatory observation, this work benefitted from an immersive understanding of the intricate preparations for the festival. These preparations, ranging from the elaborate cleaning and decorating of the *ghāṭs* to the construction of temporary structures for offerings, highlighted the profound devotion and meticulous attention the local community invests in the festival.

Patna

The decision to include Patna as a key site in our study of Chaṭha Pūjā was strategically motivated by its role as the capital of Bihar, where this festival is deeply ingrained as a revered *lokparva* or people's festival. Bihar's identification with Chaṭha Pūjā as a *lokparva* underscores the festival's importance as a significant cultural and religious event. This intrinsic link between

the festival and the people of Bihar made Patna an indispensable site for our work. By situating our study in the heart of where these traditions pulse strongest, we aimed to capture the essence of Chaṭha Pūjā in its most authentic and compelling form. Patna holds a distinctive place in the observance of Chaṭha Pūjā, embodying the cultural heart where the ancient traditions of this worship are fervently alive. This city along the banks of the Gaṅgā, draws many worshippers who make vows to visit these sacred spaces, fulfilling their ritual commitments and seeking blessings during the festival. Furthermore, this work aims to delve into how in Patna, as the capital of Bihar, Chaṭha Pūjā possesses a dual identity—it is both a deeply personal experience for individual devotees and a significant public event, drawing attention to the cultural richness of Bihar. The festival’s widespread observance in Patna, coupled with the city’s historical and cultural backdrop, made it a critical site for understanding Chaṭha Pūjā’s role as a *lok’parva*.

Munger

Munger, situated in Bihar, India, served as a crucial field site for our research due to its rich cultural heritage, religious importance, and unique socio-environmental dynamics. The region was closely linked to the Gaṅgā, which significantly shaped the geographical landscape and profoundly influenced the religious and daily lives of its inhabitants. The fieldwork centred on the Sita Charan Mandir in Jaffarnagar Panchayat, a vital site that embodied local religious devotion while reflecting broader themes of tradition, change, and resilience in the face of environmental challenges. The cultural and historical context of Munger added depth to our research. Known for its historical significance dating back to ancient India, the presence of the Sita Charan Mandir positioned it as a focal point for worship and community engagement. This temple acted as a repository for local traditions and narratives, providing valuable insights into

the beliefs and practices of the residents. This investigation aimed to understand how these traditions evolved over time, particularly as they navigated the influences of modernisation and shifting societal dynamics. The socio-environmental landscape of Munger was characterised by its proximity to the Gaṅgā, which played a critical role in shaping the the livelihoods and cultural practices of the worshippers. The river served as a vital resource for agriculture and daily commuting and a site for religious rituals and community gatherings. However, the region faced significant challenges, particularly from seasonal floods that impacted agricultural productivity and community stability. Understanding this environmental context was essential for exploring the interplay between natural forces and cultural resilience, making it a compelling focus for our research.

This methodological approach to exploring the intricacies of Munger involved qualitative research techniques, particularly participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The researcher immersed herself in the local community through participant observation, actively participating in rituals, daily activities, and interactions at the Sita Charan Mandir and its surrounding areas. This immersive method provided her with firsthand insights into the cultural practices and social interactions that shaped the lives of the residents. Additionally, conducting semi-structured interviews with local inhabitants enabled her to capture personal narratives and reflections on the significance of the temple, their relationship with the river, and the evolving dynamics within their families and community. By combining these methods, the researcher aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the residents navigated their cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary challenges. Community engagement was a central element of her fieldwork in Munger, as building rapport with the residents facilitated deeper conversations about their beliefs, experiences, and aspirations, enriching the research with varied

perspectives. The communal spirit observed among the locals, during boat journeys across the Gaṅgā and conversations at the temple, underscored the interconnectedness of their lives. This engagement not only served as a means of data collection but also fostered a sense of shared exploration of cultural narratives. Thus, Munger, with its rich cultural fabric and dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, emerged as a unique and valuable field site for her research.

Sahibganj

Including Sahibganj in our work on Chaṭha Pūjā offered a distinctive perspective, primarily due to its historical and geographical uniqueness. Once part of Bihar, Sahibganj marks the boundary between Bihar and Jharkhand and is notably the sole region in Jharkhand through which the Gaṅgā flows. This singular geographical feature underlines its importance in the cultural landscape surrounding the Gaṅgā and its associated rituals, making it a compelling site to extend our study beyond the traditional heartlands of Chaṭha Pūjā. The selection of Sahibganj was further motivated by our objective to conduct an in-depth examination of the Chaṭha Pūjā rituals within the domestic space. Recognising the need for a conducive environment for such detailed observation, which necessitates a degree of intimacy and trust not easily found in public spaces, Sahibganj presented an opportunity. Its cultural ties to the rituals of Chaṭha Pūjā and the necessity to find a community or family willing to allow the probing required for the study positioned Sahibganj as an ideal site. The willingness of local practitioners in Sahibganj to permit in-depth exploration of their private observances provided us with a unique vantage point to understand the nuances of the festival that might not be visible in more public or widespread settings.

Moreover, the fieldwork in Varanasi and Patna revealed an intriguing link between the rituals of Chaṭha Pūjā and the material culture of Sahibganj. Discoveries that many materials, such as winnowers, which are integral to the ritual practices, originate from Sahibganj underscored the interconnectedness of regional practices and the importance of Sahibganj in the broader ritual economy of Chaṭha Pūjā. This connection illuminated the festival's cultural and economic dimensions, highlighting the flow of ritual items and their significance across different regions.

2.9 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a process that requires sequential steps to be followed, from the specific to the general and involves multiple levels of analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative data analysis in this study was informed by the methodologies outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018, pp. 250-272) and Yin (2011, p. 177), emphasising the iterative and non-linear nature of analysing qualitative data. The analytical process adopted for this work is rooted in the belief that data management, reading, and reflective writing occur simultaneously and continuously throughout the study, similar to Creswell's spiral analytical process. This approach facilitates a deep immersion into the data, allowing for comprehensive understanding and interpretation.

The first step involved meticulously organising the collected data into systematically labelled folders. Respondent interviews were assigned identifiers such as R1, R2, R3, and so forth, ensuring a coherent structure for data management. Once the data was organised, the researcher proceeded to immerse in the entirety of the collected information. This initial engagement aimed to develop a holistic understanding of the data, allowing the researcher to

discern overarching themes and the general tone conveyed by participants. It was an opportunity for reflective engagement, where initial impressions and insights were recorded, often in the margins of transcripts or separate reflective notes. Following the transcription of these interviews as the second step, a thorough review cycle was initiated, where each transcript was read multiple times to glean intricate details and initial interpretations.

In line with Creswell's emphasis on coding as the core of qualitative data analysis, the subsequent phase involved meticulous coding of the interview transcriptions as our third step. Coding entails systematically identifying and labelling segments of text or images that relate to specific themes or categories. Initial codes were generated directly from the interviews, capturing their terminology and expressions. As advocated by Rossman & Rallis (2012), codes are typically derived from the actual language used by participants, referred to as *in vivo* terms. The recurring themes and patterns were identified by segmenting the data into meaningful categories. Codes were derived directly from the participants' language (*in vivo* terms), ensuring that the analysis remained closely grounded in their perspectives. These initial codes derived inductively were then refined and grouped into broader deductive categories through continuous engagement with the data. This iterative process of code development and categorisation is reminiscent of Creswell's description of the qualitative analysis process as an evolving spiral, where the researcher cycles through phases of data immersion, coding, and thematisation. This process helped structure the data for further analysis and interpretation.

Fourth, the categories emerging from this rigorous coding process were synthesised into overarching themes. This synthesis was conducted manually to retain the nuanced interconnections between codes, categories, and the resulting themes. The thematic framework was subsequently employed as a foundation for describing and discussing the findings as the

final step. This step encapsulated thematic insights and integrated selected participant records, enhancing the depth and relatability of the presented outcomes. Following coding, the next step was generating descriptive accounts and thematic analysis. Finally, the study's findings were articulated through a detailed description, complemented by selected interview excerpts, pictures, and other minor/major observations from our field notes, where appropriate. Here, the coded data was utilised to construct detailed descriptions of settings, people, or events observed during the study. Concurrently, several key themes or categories—typically five to seven—were identified as major findings. These themes, supported by direct quotations and diverse evidence, were integrated into broader descriptive frameworks like phenomenology to form the foundational elements of qualitative study outcomes and, hence, the chapters of the present work. Beyond identifying the themes during the coding process, the researcher intended to go further with themes to build additional layers of complex analysis. The researcher has interconnected the themes to create a comprehensive description of the subject matter, with each chapter dedicated to discussing the broader themes that have been identified. Representing these descriptions and themes effectively constitutes the next step. This presentation aims to convey the nuanced complexities and insights derived from the qualitative data in alignment with Creswell's and Yin's prescribed methodologies for qualitative analysis. Thus, the thesis chapters were crafted keeping in mind the depth and complexity of the findings are conveyed appropriately. This involves systematically presenting events, elaborating on themes with sub themes and illustrative quotations, or integrating multiple perspectives into a cohesive narrative. Visual aids such as figures have also been employed to enhance the clarity and comprehensiveness of the presentation of the findings. By delineating these steps and illustrating their application in the

research, the researcher aimed to contribute to the methodological discourse in qualitative research while advancing the understanding of Chaṭha Pūjā within its cultural context.

Interpretation

Interpreting qualitative research findings encompasses several key procedures: synthesising the overall discoveries, juxtaposing them with existing literature, offering personal insights, and delineating both study limitations and avenues for future research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a central question guiding interpretation is ‘What were the lessons learned?’ This inquiry encapsulates the researcher's personal understanding, shaped by their cultural background, personal history, and experiences. In the present work, synthesising the overall findings involved distilling the essence of Chaṭha Pūjā rituals and practices as perceived and experienced by participants. This synthesis was informed by comparing the findings with existing literature on cultural traditions and religious practices in similar contexts. By doing so, the researcher aimed to validate our interpretations against established knowledge while identifying new insights and questions arising directly from the data—a reflective process advocated by transformative qualitative approaches. The researcher adopted the lived religion approach to interpret the findings, proposing potential action agendas for cultural preservation and community engagement based on the narrative outcomes. This approach enabled a deeper engagement with theoretical frameworks pertinent to cultural studies, ritual studies, and religious anthropology, thereby enriching the scholarly contribution of the research. Moreover, when discussing limitations, the researcher acknowledged methodological constraints, including sample size limitations and recruitment challenges. By transparently identifying these limitations, she aimed to enhance the rigour and reliability of the study while offering valuable

insights for future researchers. Looking ahead, the work suggested potential directions for future investigations to delve deeper into the socio-cultural dynamics of Chaṭha Pūjā, address methodological shortcomings, and explore new avenues for practical applications or policy implications.

2.10 Positionality

As a female Hindu researcher from Bihar, the positionality of the researcher in studying the lived experiences of worshippers during Chaṭha Pūjā is layered and nuanced. Drawing from Merriam et al. (2001), positionality involves recognising our position in relation to ‘the other’ and understanding how aspects like education, class, gender, and ethnicity shape both our insider/outsider status and the data collection process. Her positionality in the research process is deeply influenced by linguistic, cultural, and regional background, which has been both an advantage and a challenge in navigating the religious and social milieu of Chaṭha Pūjā. As a native speaker of Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Hindi—the languages widely spoken by the worshippers she interacted with—the linguistic identity granted her privileged access to the cultural and ritualistic nuances of Chaṭha Pūjā. This fluency allowed her to engage with participants on a deeper level, understanding not only the literal meanings of their words but also the emotional, symbolic, and cultural resonances embedded in local terminologies, folk songs, and prayers. Furthermore, the researcher’s regional identity as a Bihari provided an intimate familiarity with the social practices surrounding the festival, enabling her to grasp the cultural significance of various rituals and customs that might have been less accessible to an outsider. Growing up in a region where Chaṭha Pūjā is a cornerstone of religious life, the researcher was able to establish a natural rapport with the respondents, fostering an environment of trust and

mutual understanding during interviews and observations. However, this insider status also required careful navigation. While this shared identity with the community offered advantages, it also presented the challenge of maintaining critical distance. As someone who has grown up within the same cultural and religious context, the researcher had to be mindful of not letting familiarity obscure my analytical lens. The academic training positioned her as an outsider to some extent, so as to critically reflect on practices and beliefs that might have once taken for granted. This duality—of being both an insider and outsider—proved beneficial, as it enabled the researcher to approach the rituals with empathy while maintaining the necessary scholarly distance. Moreover, the researcher's positionality shaped her interactions with participants and interpretation of data. As a Bihari woman conducting fieldwork among fellow Biharis, respondents were often willing to share deeply personal and emotional aspects of their experiences, knowing that the researcher shared her cultural background. However, this shared identity also meant that respondents sometimes assumed she was already familiar with certain customs or rituals, requiring her to ask clarifying questions to ensure a thorough understanding from emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives. This balancing act of negotiating insider knowledge while maintaining an academic distance enriched this ethnographic work, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of Chaṭha Pūjā rituals.

Given the researcher's background, she identified with the 'external-insider' typology proposed by Banks (1998). Although an insider may better understand the community, biased representation is always possible. On the other hand, an outsider may need more understanding of the community and, hence, may gain better clarity because they will probe further into issues that the insider may assume they are well-versed with (Couture et al., 2012). While the researcher belongs to the broader Hindu culture and deeply understands the religious significance

of Chaṭha Pūjā, she also approached the research from an academic and somewhat external perspective. This dual identity allowed her to immerse in the community and gain trust yet maintain the objectivity necessary for rigorous academic research. The researcher's familiarity with Hindu rituals and customs gave her an insider's perspective on many aspects of Chaṭha Pūjā. This cultural alignment facilitated a natural rapport with the participants, who often appreciated this genuine interest in documenting and understanding their practices and beliefs. However, the role as a researcher required her to continually negotiate her position, striving to balance empathy and critical analysis. In her interactions with the respondents, the researcher was acutely aware of the power dynamics inherent in the roles. As a researcher, she held a certain authority, but this was often mitigated by her gender and status as outsiders to the specific sub-caste groups she was studying. During interviews, participants occasionally highlighted the researcher's identity as female researchers, drawing comparisons between their experiences and those of women within their communities. This comparison underscored the patriarchal norms present in both our society and theirs, reminding us of the shared struggles and societal expectations faced by women. Power dynamics were evident in various aspects of the research process. While some participants readily engaged with the researcher, others were more cautious, perceiving her through the lens of their own experiences with authority figures or outsiders. The challenge of representation was another critical aspect of the researcher's positionality. The researcher was constantly mindful of the potential for misrepresentation or misinterpretation, especially when conducting interviews in languages other than our native tongues. Ensuring that participants' voices were accurately and authentically represented required meticulous attention to detail and a commitment to fidelity in translation and interpretation. Thus, her positionality as a female Hindu researcher involved a continuous negotiation of insider and outsider identities.

The cultural background and gender influenced the interactions and the data collection process, while power dynamics shaped the nature of our engagements with participants. By acknowledging these complexities and striving to represent the voices and experiences of the worshippers faithfully, the researcher aimed to contribute a nuanced and respectful understanding of Chaṭha Pūjā within the broader framework of Hindu cultural practices. Lastly, her positionality raised critical ethical considerations. As an insider, the researcher was cautious of the potential for her own biases to influence data interpretation. To address this, the researcher consistently reflected on her role in the research process, considering how her background might shape the responses she received and the conclusions she drew. This reflexive approach helped mitigate the risks of bias, ensuring that the analysis remained objective and grounded in the lived experiences of the worshippers rather than the researcher's perspectives.

2.11 Validity and Reliability of the Work

Validity

Validation of findings is crucial throughout the process, particularly in outlining procedures in research proposals or studies to ensure the accuracy and credibility of findings. Unlike quantitative research, validity in qualitative research does not focus on stability or generalizability but on verifying accuracy through specific procedures (Gibbs, 2007). Researchers need to convey the steps they will take in their studies to check for the accuracy and credibility of their findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research emphasises validity as the accuracy of findings from the perspectives of researchers, participants, or readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Terms like trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility commonly

address validity in qualitative literature (Creswell & Miller, 2000), highlighting its significance (Lincoln et al., 2011).

In this work, the researcher employed several methodological strategies to strengthen the validity of the study findings, as outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018). A fundamental approach was triangulation, which involved systematically examining evidence from multiple sources, including interviews, participant observations, and cultural artefacts. By integrating data from these varied perspectives, the researcher aimed to construct cohesive themes that resonated across different sources, thereby enhancing the robustness and credibility of the interpretations. This triangulation validated the consistency of the findings and ensured they were firmly grounded in the rich tapestry of participant experiences and cultural contexts associated with Chaṭha Pūjā. Member checking has also been integral to the validation process. Rather than solely relying on our interpretations, the researcher actively sought feedback from participants by presenting them with summaries of the findings, including major themes and cultural descriptions. Through follow-up interviews and discussions, participants had the opportunity to validate the accuracy and relevance of her interpretations based on their lived experiences. This iterative process reinforced the validity of the findings and fostered a collaborative approach that honoured the voices and perspectives of those directly involved in the cultural practice of Chaṭha Pūjā.

A cornerstone of the methodology has been using rich, thick descriptions to vividly portray the cultural nuances and lived experiences associated with Chaṭha Pūjā. By meticulously detailing the settings, rituals, and participant interactions, the researcher aimed to transport readers into the heart of the cultural milieu and evoke a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. This narrative richness enriched the interpretations and added layers of authenticity

and depth to our findings, contributing significantly to their validity. Furthermore, reflexivity played a pivotal role in the research process. The researcher maintained a critical awareness of her own biases, background, and positionality as a Hindu female studying Chaṭha Pūjā. By openly acknowledging these influences and their potential impact on her interpretations, she aimed to mitigate bias and enhance the credibility of the findings. This reflexive approach underscored her commitment to ethical research practices and ensured that her interpretations were rooted in an honest and self-aware engagement with the cultural complexities of Chaṭha Pūjā.

These methodological choices were intended to produce credible findings and to honour the diversity of perspectives and experiences inherent in this culturally significant practice. By adhering to these principles, the researcher aimed to present a nuanced and authentic portrayal that captures the essence of Chaṭha Pūjā and contributes meaningfully to the scholarly discourse on cultural practices and traditions. Rich, descriptive narratives were utilized to convey findings, immerse readers in the setting, and provide a comprehensive understanding through detailed descriptions and varied perspectives. Additionally, reflexivity was integrated into the research process, acknowledging how interpretations were influenced by the researcher's background, including gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origins. This self-awareness enhanced transparency and bolstered the credibility of the study's findings.

Reliability

Qualitative reliability refers to the consistency of research approaches across different researchers and projects (Gibbs, 2007). Ensuring reliability in this work on Chaṭha Pūjā involves maintaining comprehensive documentation of all procedures, including data collection and

analysis methods, to facilitate replication by other researchers. Consistent coding practices have been applied to ensure uniformity in identifying themes and patterns across data sets. Regular peer or mentor consultations verified the consistency and reliability of data interpretation and analysis methods. The transcripts were checked thoroughly to eliminate errors, code drifts and inaccuracies introduced during transcription (Gibbs, 2007). This attention to detail was crucial in maintaining the integrity of the data, ensuring that the interpretations were based on accurate representations of participant responses and observations.

To mitigate the risk of code drift, the researcher consistently compared data with established codes and documented coding decisions through detailed memos. This practice allowed her to track the evolution of codes and interpretations throughout the analysis process, ensuring that coding remained consistent and aligned with research objectives. Regular meetings with the supervisor and peers were organized to discuss and cross-check coding decisions. These documented sessions facilitated collaborative interpretation and consensus-building, enhancing the reliability of the findings through collective validation of analytical insights. Additionally, rich, thick descriptions were integrated into the findings to provide a vivid portrayal of the cultural context and experiences related to Chaṭha Pūjā. This narrative depth enriched the interpretations and added credibility by immersing readers in the cultural setting, thereby enhancing the study's validity and reliability. By employing these strategies, the researcher aimed to ensure the validity and reliability of the research, making the findings accurate, credible, and consistent across various contexts and interpretations. These practices not only reinforced the credibility of the findings but also contributed to a nuanced understanding of the cultural practices and traditions associated with this significant festival.

2.12 Ethical Considerations

In the research, obtaining informed consent was essential to uphold ethical standards. Recognizing the diverse nature of the population studied, consent forms were provided in both English and Hindi to accommodate linguistic preferences and ensure accessibility for all participants. To address varying literacy levels, participants were given the option to sign the consent forms or provide a thumb impression, ensuring inclusivity. Understanding the cultural context, in some cases, consent forms were reviewed by male household members before being signed. The researcher also presented her identification cards to maintain transparency and build trust with respondents. This measure was crucial in reassuring participants of the researcher's authenticity and integrity throughout the study.

One of the primary ethical obligations was ensuring informed consent from all participants. Chaṭha Pūjā is a public religious festival involving private, familial, and individual practices. It was important to clearly communicate the objectives and scope of the work to the participants, ensuring they understood how the data would be used and stored. This process involved providing detailed explanations of the work in languages familiar to the participants—Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Hindi—ensuring that they had no language barriers to comprehension. Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, making it clear that they could withdraw from the study without any consequences. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, and we reassured them that their responses would be treated with confidentiality and respect. This approach ensured that all participants fully understood the purpose of the research, what was expected of them, and how their information would be used, respecting the ethical considerations of informed consent. (Byrne, 2001; Darlington & Scott, 2002; Nijwan et al., 2013). In addition to obtaining written consent for interviews, the researcher

also sought explicit consent for recording videos and taking photos. This ensured that participants were fully informed about the extent of their involvement and comfortable with the methods of data collection. This meticulous attention to informed consent aligns with the ethical guidelines involving humans as respondents. It enhances the quality and credibility of the findings by ensuring that participation is voluntary and informed.

Chaṭha Pūjā holds immense religious significance for the worshippers, and it was essential to approach the participants and their practices with a high cultural sensitivity. As an observer and occasional participants in rituals, the researcher ensured that her presence did not disrupt the sacred ceremonies or the worshippers' personal experiences. Understanding the importance of rituals such as *arghya* (offering to the setting and rising sun) and the role of fasting in the celebration required careful observation without intrusion. By adopting a position of humility and respect, the researcher gained trust and ensured that no religious protocols or customs were violated, thereby safeguarding the participants' worship practices. Given the personal nature of some discussions, particularly those related to emotional and familial experiences during the festival, confidentiality was a key ethical concern. Many participants shared stories about their families, hopes, and the significance that Chaṭha Pūjā held for them. To protect their identities, the researcher anonymised all data responses, ensuring no identifying information was included in the final output. This was particularly important when dealing with sensitive topics such as prayers for children's birth or *manautī* (a vow or wish fulfilled). Participants were informed about the steps taken to safeguard their personal data, and the researcher ensured that any shared information would be used solely for the research and not disclosed beyond the scope of the project.

The researcher's positionality as both an insider and outsider presented ethical challenges that required careful consideration. While her identity as a Bihari woman with a shared cultural background facilitated trust and access, she remained cautious not to assume too much familiarity with the participants' experiences. Throughout the study, the researcher maintained reflexivity, continuously questioning how her insider status might influence interactions and interpretations. As an academic researcher, she also acknowledged the inherent power dynamics, as participants might have perceived her as an authority figure or expert. To address this, she worked to minimize hierarchical relationships by fostering an open and collaborative approach, emphasizing that the participants' experiences and voices were central to the study. Throughout the research, the researcher encountered moments where participants' narratives were deeply tied to emotional or psychological experiences. For instance, some respondents described Chaṭha Pūjā as a time of intense ritual connection, often recounting personal loss, health crises, or prayers for the well-being of their families. These stories were approached with empathy and care, ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences without feeling pressured to delve into emotionally difficult topics. The researcher remained vigilant about the participants' emotional states and offered to pause or discontinue interviews when necessary, always prioritizing their well-being over the objectives of the study.

An essential ethical consideration in ethnographic research is reflexivity—the awareness of how the researcher's background, beliefs, and identity can influence the research process. Being both an insider to Bihari culture and an academic outsider, the researcher had to remain continuously reflective on how personal biases might affect data interpretation. While sharing a cultural connection with the participants, it was crucial not to assume familiarity with certain rituals or let personal reverence for the festival cloud academic objectivity. Regular

self-reflection, including writing field notes and memos, was employed to track how positionality might influence interactions and analysis. This practice helped mitigate unconscious biases and ensured a more balanced and objective interpretation of the data.

Another significant ethical consideration in ethnographic research, particularly within religious and cultural contexts, is ensuring that the work benefits the community. Ethnography can sometimes be extractive, with researchers gaining insights without giving back to the communities they study. To address this, the researcher emphasized reciprocity—ensuring that the research would not only contribute to academic discourse but also offer value to the community. The aim was for the work to be accessible, serving as a resource for further community reflection on the environmental and cultural significance of Chaṭha Pūjā. By committing to informed consent, confidentiality, cultural respect, and reflexivity, the researcher ensured that the work was ethically sound and academically rigorous. Balancing insider knowledge with the need for objective analysis allowed for a portrayal that honored the lived experiences of worshippers while contributing valuable insights into the eco-narratives embedded in Chaṭha Pūjā. This approach fostered a mutual relationship with the community, ensuring that the research process was both meaningful and responsible.

2.13 Researcher's Experience in the Field

This section includes insights gained from engaging with participants, challenges encountered during data collection, and the overall impact of the fieldwork on the research process. By sharing these experiences, the researcher aims to provide a transparent account of the research endeavour and the practical application of the chosen methodologies.

The fieldwork focused on observing Chaṭha rituals at both ritual sites and domestic settings, offering profound insights into the participants' devotion and meticulous practices. This period provided unique challenges that significantly shaped the research approach and understanding. Employing participant observation proved invaluable, as it facilitated immersion within the community and meaningful engagement with participants. This approach emphasised direct involvement, allowing for a deeper comprehension of the intricate symbolism and the multiple layers of meaning embedded in each ritual act. The researcher's ability to witness and document these practices firsthand enriched the study and highlighted the cultural and ecological significance of Chaṭha Pūjā. However, this immersive methodology also presented unique challenges. One significant hurdle was gaining trust and access. Participants were initially wary of our presence in both public and private settings. There was a palpable concern about the possible intrusion of their sacred space and the potential misinterpretation or inappropriate portrayal of their cherished practices. Building trust requires time, patience, genuine respect and sensitivity towards their customs and concerns. Moreover, as outsiders, navigating the complexity of the ritual practices without disrupting the sanctity of the observances was a constant balancing act. The intimate nature of the Chaṭha rituals, coupled with the communal aspect of the preparations and offerings, meant that any perceived insensitivity could sever the fragile threads of trust, woven with the community.

Additionally, the firsthand experience of the ritual's rigorous demands, including the fasts and the elaborate preparation of offerings, highlighted the physical and emotional investment of the participants. This immersion brought about a profound appreciation of the rituals' significance and the extent of devotion among its practitioners, enriching the researcher's insights and challenging her endurance and adaptability in the field. This approach also

highlighted the importance of interpreting the observed practices through the lens of the cultural and ritual frameworks of the participants rather than the researcher's own preconceptions. This necessitated a constant reflexive practice, where the researcher critically examined her biases and assumptions, aiming to present the ritual and its people's perspectives authentically and respectfully.

Conducting fieldwork in ritual sites, such as *ghāṭs* in Varanasi, Patna, and Sahibganj, offered profound insights into cultural and religious practices, embodying the essence of tradition and culture seen through the prism of local life and communal activities. Varanasi's rich historical and religious significance is a perfect backdrop for exploring the complex interplay of culture, religion, and community life. It allows researchers to immerse themselves in the lived experiences of those who partake in these rituals. Embarking on such fieldwork necessitates a nuanced understanding of the local customs and a sensitive approach towards engagement with the community. In Varanasi, for instance, the *Ghāṭs* pulse with life as they host myriad rituals from the crack of dawn to the veil of the night—all emanating a profound sense of religiosity and continuity. Observing rituals like the Gaṅgā *āratī* or the solemn cremation ceremonies offers a lens through which the cyclical concept of life and death in Hinduism is viewed, providing invaluable context to the beliefs and practices that permeate Indian culture. Similarly, in Sahibganj, the intertwining of geographical elegance and ritual practice creates a unique scenario for researchers. The landscape, marked by the flow of the Ganges and the presence of historical sites, sets the stage for observing practices like *Bihulā Viṣaharī Pūjā*, *Āṃvalā Ekādaśī*. The performance of these rituals, their timing, and the accompanying beliefs offer a deep dive into the regional interpretations of broader Hindu practices. Also, the stay in the respondent's house was marked by hospitality, warmth, and a wealth of knowledge.

Conducting fieldwork in these areas also presents practical challenges, such as navigating the dense crowds during festival times, the sensibilities around photography and note-taking near sacred sites, and the unpredictable nature of engaging with a diverse set of participants. Researchers need to tread carefully, balancing respect for the subjects of their study with the thoroughness of their investigation. This often means developing trust with locals and participants, which can unlock deeper stories and richer insights. Moreover, the dynamic interaction with the place and the people reshapes the researchers' perspectives, enriching their understanding and often challenging their preconceptions. These sites, throbbing with communal and individual energy, create a vivid tableau for observing how contemporary social issues intersect with age-old traditions. Issues such as the impact of tourism, environmental concerns, and the role of caste can surface in these settings, offering a holistic view of the societal fabric. Throughout the researcher's journey from Sahibganj, Jharkhand, to the flooded areas of Munger, Bihar, the unexpected obstacles and shifts in plans highlighted the resilience required to navigate the intricacies of travel and work in diverse cultural settings. Her interactions with the devotees and locals provided an immersive learning experience about the rituals and their deep-rooted implications on health, religiosity, and communal beliefs. The participation and observations during this auspicious period offered a unique lens through which the confluence of tradition, faith, and social dynamics could be examined. As she navigated through the bustling scenes and engaged with the local populace, the journey illuminated the challenges and practical considerations involved in fieldwork. The concerns raised by the locals regarding the lack of attention from governmental entities and the socio-economic impacts of geographical and environmental conditions on agricultural practices provided critical insights into the broader context influencing the community's way of life. This exploratory journey facilitated a deeper

understanding of specific rituals and cultural practices and allowed reflections on the broader implications of the research within these communities. By immersing herself in the local customs and engaging directly with the people, she gained valuable perspectives that enriched the research process. The experiences shared here emphasize the dynamic interplay between tradition, culture, and socio-economic realities in shaping communal practices and beliefs.

The researcher encountered unexpected media intervention during their visit to the Sita Charan temple. This convergence of academic research and media coverage created a complex dynamic. The researcher faced challenges when she was initially mistaken for journalists by the media teams, leading to tensions over access to information and space. The situation became more complicated as the media personnel, potentially viewing the researcher as rival, attempted to restrict her movements and interactions at the event, asserting control over the narrative. Despite these obstacles, immersing oneself in the field provided valuable insights. Influenced by media encouragement, the influx of participants transformed the temple into a lively site of cultural and religious activity. This shift offered a unique perspective on the adaptability of cultural practices and the performative nature of communal activities under external influences. The researcher observed the orchestrated nature of the event, with media personnel driving activities and rituals, highlighting the intersection between performative religious practices and media influence. This orchestrated involvement, from the opening of temple gates to the spontaneous participation of villagers, underscored the media's role in reshaping cultural narratives and practices. Through these experiences, the researcher gained a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, negotiations of agency within cultural landscapes, and the impact of external forces on local practices and norms. This reflection aims to provide a transparent account of the fieldwork process, emphasising the practical challenges and insights

gained from navigating the intersection of academic research and media coverage in a shared space. In conclusion, studying the Chaṭha rituals through extensive and immersive fieldwork, participant observations, interviews, and open-ended conversations and interactions allowed the researcher to capture the depth and richness of this cultural and religious practice, offering a detailed perspective beyond surface-level observations. While the method brought the researcher closer to understanding the profound ritual and communal connections fostered through the Chaṭha ritual, it also presented challenges that tested our adaptability, sensitivity, and interpretive skills as researchers. These experiences have underscored the value of an ethnographic approach in exploring complex cultural practices, highlighting its potential to uncover deep-seated meanings and connections within communities. The fieldwork in the selected sites has profoundly impacted her understanding of the subject matter, enabling the researcher to appreciate the complexity and diversity of cultural practices and their significance within the communities studied. This experience has undoubtedly contributed to the depth and breadth of the present work, offering a comprehensive view of the practical application of methodologies in capturing the essence of cultural and ritual observances in contemporary society.