

CHAPTER 3

Chaṭhī Māī in Popular Imagination

The celebration of Chaṭhī Māī during Chaṭha presents a rich, complex tapestry replete with various narratives, ritual beliefs and practices. The deity is venerated across the northern Indian territories of Bihar, Jharkhand, and certain areas of Uttar Pradesh, as well as by the Bhojpuri-speaking populace, earning Chaṭhī Māī, or Chaṭhī Māīyā, a pivotal role in the region's ritual and cultural framework (Jha, 2009). The narratives that describe her origin blend mythological aspects with regional folklore, forming a vivid cultural tapestry that illustrates the fusion of religious convictions and local customs. Some stories portray her as a guardian and healer of infants, while others suggest she embodies the Sun's feminine energy or is linked by familial bonds. The rituals of Chaṭhī Māī worship include the singing of devotional hymns, or Chaṭha gīta, that glorify the Goddess and celebrate her divine attributes. The fieldwork in locations like Varanasi, Patna, Munger, and Sahibganj revealed a variety of origin stories for Chaṭhī Māī, offering deep insights into the cultural and religious landscape of her adherents. Whereas existing literature on Chaṭha and related folk festivals has largely observed these events from afar, not delving deeply into the stories of the deity (Badikilaya, 2019; Singh et al., 2016; Pandey et al., 2019; Bratton, 2020), this chapter intends to thoroughly investigate the mythologies and tales associated with Chaṭhī Māī's origins. The researcher examines the worship practices dedicated to Chaṭhī Māī, emphasizing the integration of mythological motifs with regional folklore, and assessing how this fusion affects the communities involved. Through this analysis, the researcher explores the variances in worship and tradition connected to Chaṭhī Māī, highlighting the diverse perceptions of her believers. Additionally, the work also considers the

worshippers' beliefs in, and perceptions about Chaṭhī Māi as a source of healing and protection, aiming to understand how these beliefs integrate into their everyday lives. The present discussion addresses three principal aspects of Chaṭhī Māi's perception in North India: the manifestation of feminine power in her devotees' religious practices, the importance of her title, 'Māi,' and the focus her worshippers place on the balance between male and female energies in their devotion. The insights gained from the prevalent narratives and stories regarding Chaṭhī Māi and her abilities contribute to a nuanced comprehension of this widely celebrated North Indian Goddess' complex identity.

In the rich and complex fabric of cultural traditions that define and enrich human societies, narratives are potent conduits of tradition, history, and identity. These narratives, woven into the layers of community life, serve as repositories of folklore and myth and as living, breathing elements of a culture's values and beliefs. Ritual practices are not separate but intertwined with narratives, embodying and enacting the lessons and values conveyed through several myths and stories. To grasp the social dimensions underlying a narrative, it's essential to acknowledge that it is collectively shaped by both the narrator and the audience (Ammerman, 2021). Therefore, arguing that religion is solely about storytelling overlooks the depth and breadth of religious practice, a complex web of belief, action, and community life; emotion, embodied practice, and narratives also serve as the typical foci of study (Edgell, 2012). Narratives are powerful tools for shaping identity and community values, but they can also marginalise or silence certain groups within or outside the religious community (John O'Brien, 2017; Ammerman, 2021). The experiential dimension of religion, which includes personal encounters with the divine, emotional responses to religious rituals, and a sense of community and belonging, is central to many people's religious lives. Narratives and doctrines provide a

framework, but the lived experience of beliefs and faith can be profoundly moving and transformative in ways beyond words. Recognising and valuing the experiential aspects of religion is crucial for a fuller understanding of its role in individual lives and communities. This study emphasises the significance of understanding communicative actions within religious contexts, mainly through narrative dynamics. It employs the metaphor of narrative to delve into the shared activity of storytelling within religious communities. The primary emphasis lies on the religious practices of storytelling, encompassing specific stories and shared storytelling methods. Through this exploration, the study aims to illuminate the intricate ways in which people communicate and engage with each other within religious settings, highlighting the central role that narratives play in shaping and sustaining religious traditions. The study of religious practice necessitates a deep dive into communicative actions; this chapter employs the metaphor of narrative to examine the shared activity within religious contexts, encompassing both storytelling traditions and the intricate ways people communicate. Focusing on the worship of Chaṭhī Māī and the Sun God, this chapter explores the multifaceted narratives and folk traditions surrounding the goddess, which often diverge from normative texts. Our field visits in various research sites like Varanasi, Patna, Munger, and Sahibganj unearthed several origin stories and cultural nuances that define the worship of Chaṭhī Māī. The chapter emphasizes three key facets, which help provide a nuanced understanding of the significance of the goddess among the worshippers and underscore the vital role of diverse cultural narratives in sustaining a living tradition. The absence of normative texts fosters grassroots adaptability, allowing for local interpretations that deeply resonate within the popular imagination. Associations with the Sun god Sūrya and the dynamic interplay of malevolent and benevolent attributes further enrich the worship experience, facilitating emotional connections and familial devotion. Moreover, the

integration of Chaṭhī Māī into Bihar's regional identity fosters a sense of belonging and continuity within daily life. The evolving narratives surrounding the deity highlight her adaptability, relevance, and enduring popularity, offering fertile ground for future research on adapting lived religions to societal changes and the dynamics of evolving narratives within communities.

As we delve into the significance of narratives in the context of Chaṭha Pūjā, it becomes evident that these stories are not merely peripheral ornaments to the ritual core but are central to the understanding, perpetuation, and dynamism of the festival itself. By exploring these narratives, we embark on a journey that promises to illuminate the layers of meaning that underpin Chaṭha Pūjā and reveal the broader implications of narrative traditions in the maintenance and evolution of cultural identity. Margaret Somers (1994) posits that narratives are vital for making events comprehensible by linking them to a network of relationships and practices. Within the social realm, all our actions are shaped by our position in social structures (relationships) and the habitual behaviours we have acquired (practices). These actions unfold within a temporal framework, influenced by past experiences and future aspirations. This analysis will delve into the collected narratives about Chaṭhī Māī, as well as the concepts of relationships and constraints, as observed in the actual religious lives of individuals. It is common for both academics and laypeople to view belief as a core aspect of religiosity, seeking understanding in authoritative texts—be it scriptures, sermons, or theoretical discussions. However, as we shift our focus to the narrative aspects of religious life, the significance of beliefs and their interpretations will become increasingly apparent. We are set to discover that individuals craft meanings and navigate their lives through narratives and discussions about beliefs, thereby revealing their identity and sense of belonging. Yet, the beliefs and meanings that

emerge from everyday stories tend to be less grandiose than those attempting to define the essence of life, death, and catastrophe. They seldom form a comprehensive system. Ammerman (2021) points out that focusing on the narrative aspects of religious life highlights the pivotal role of beliefs and interpretations. The everyday religious experiences surpass mere *ad-lib* by individuals with complete autonomy over their lifestyles. Gaining deeper insights into religious practices, irrespective of their settings, enriches our understanding of both the broader societal fabric and the individuals within it. These practices might be routine and spontaneous, showcasing significant creativity. The physical environment shared by communities both facilitates and restricts their actions. The expressive, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of these actions reveal the motives behind people's pursuit of novel experiences and their adherence to established norms. Narratives hold a special place in any communal celebration, recounting stories of previous events and memorable actions by extended family members. Analyzing these narratives in parallel with other family-centric religious practices and stories about familial devotion reveals not only the expectations for proper conduct but also the flexibility in belief systems.

3.1 Celebrating Chaṭhī Māī during Ḍālā Chaṭha

Ḍālā Chaṭha stands out for its regional significance, particularly in the North Indian context where Chaṭhī Māī, despite her absence in canonical texts, enjoys a steadfast tradition of worship. The festival's non-reliance on ritual specialists or a structured rite system is key to its approachability, directly addressing the practical needs of its followers. Worship of Chaṭhī Māī is often sought for personal wishes, such as fertility, health, prosperity, and shielding from unpredictabilities of life, manifesting her dual nature of benevolence for devotion and

malevolence towards neglect. This festival, known by several names including Kārtika Śukla Ṣaṣṭhī, Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī Pūjā, Chaṭhī, and Ḍālā Chaṭha, centres around devotion to the Sun god. Devotees engage in a fast from dawn to dusk on a pivotal day, Ṣaṣṭhī, which is the sixth day of the waxing phase of the moon in the Kārtika month. Although the climax of the celebration occurs on Ṣaṣṭhī, participants begin their ritual preparations and offerings over a span of four days. The fourth day, known as Caturthī, is marked by the *nahāe-khāe* ritual (a day for bathing and eating), leading up to a solemn fast on the fifth day, Pañcamī, capped with a unique meal after the sun sets, dedicated to Chaṭhī Māī. The strict fast continues over two days, involving total abstention from food and water. On the Ṣaṣṭhī, adherents present their evening offerings, *sanjhiyā arghya*, to the Sun God from the holy waters of the Ganges, using a bamboo winnower known as *sūpa*, filled with *prasāda* that includes *thekuā* sweets, coconuts, and assorted seasonal fruits (Figure 1). The subsequent morning sees them returning to the Ganges for the dawn offering, *bihaniyā arghya*, after which they conclude their fast at home.



Figure 1 showing *parvaitin* in Ḍālā Chaṭha
(The picture was taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Sahibganj, 2023)

The ritualistic practices encompass diverse and rich symbolic meanings that are deeply embedded within the cultural ethos. The discipline of fasting from sunrise to sunset embodies both self-purification and disciplined reverence. The series of cleansing rituals leading up to the festival symbolizes an alignment with the divine, especially for the *parvaitin*, or fasting devotees. Prominent rituals like *nahāe-khāe* and *kharnā* signify deeper engagement with the ritual journey amidst the festivities. The offering of fruits and other items are acts of invoking blessings for prosperity and health. Conducting these rituals by the riverbank connects the participants with the divinity, highlighting the sacred role of water in Hindu rituals. Creating sacred spaces and invoking the goddess Chaṭhī Māi through offerings and chants foster a sense of community devotion. The festival ultimately provides an anchor, offering comfort and guidance through life's trials with the deity's assistance. A particular practice involves devotees demarcating special areas on the *ghāṭ* to create a sacred space, termed as *bedī*, prepared with riverside mud and cow dung. During *kharnā*, female devotees activate this space with offerings and folk songs, primarily in Maithili and Bhojpuri, to awaken Chaṭhī Māi, which they called *jagānā*. The culmination of the festival sees the *bedī* adorned with vermillion, *aeypān*, and flower garlands, preparing it for the final offerings to the goddess. This worship, deeply entrenched in regional customs and societal fabric, highlights Chaṭhī Māi's veneration as crucial within the folk festival framework (Bhattacharya, 2008). It underscores the presence of diverse and localized deity worship in folk Hinduism, often differing from pan-Indian Brahmanical traditions.

3.2 Chaṭhī Māi, Ṣaṣṭhī Devī, and Devasenā: Local and Pan-Indian Worship

In Varanasi, the interviews with younger worshippers showed a pattern of their ritual beliefs concerning Chaṭhī Māī was primarily influenced by print and social media, thereby drawing parallels between Chaṭhī Māī and Ṣaṣṭhī Devī. However, the elderly women, who were the primary worshippers do not identify Chaṭhī Māī with Ṣaṣṭhī Devī; their reverence of Chaṭhī Māī on the sixth day in Kārtika stems from oral traditions handed down from generations, portraying her as a motherly figure distinct from Ṣaṣṭhī Devī or other deities like Dūrgā, Kālī. The crux of the matter lies in diverging interpretations, where Chaṭhī Māī, absent in normative texts, stands apart from Ṣaṣṭhī Devī and related deities, and calling Chaṭhī Māī to be Ṣaṣṭhī Devī has only become a recent trend. Media stories often depict Chaṭha Pūjā as similar to Ṣaṣṭhī Devī and Devasenā, introducing a discord between region-specific belief systems and mainstream representations. This dichotomy underlines the challenge of preserving religious traditions amid evolving cultural contexts, accentuating the need to delineate distinctions between Chaṭhī Māī and Ṣaṣṭhī Devī to contextualise the former’s origin within the broader narrative.

Wilkins (1900) categorises Ṣaṣṭhī Devī as a secondary deity with a significant influence on married women, highlighting her connections to fertility, childbirth, and the safeguarding of children. Ṣaṣṭhī Devī is a Hindu goddess honoured on the sixth day following a child’s birth and the sixth day of the lunar month, serving as a protector for children and plant life (Wilkins, 1900; White, 2003; Gadon, 1997; McDaniel, 2004; 2012; Stutley, 2019). Puranic literature regards Ṣaṣṭhī Devī as a supreme maternal deity worthy of deep reverence (Bhattacharji, 1995; Srinivasan, 1997, pp. 333-5). Some interpretations align her with Pārvatī, Skanda’s mother, who celebrated Navarātri’s fifth day as Skandamātā (Stutley, 2019). The Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa and Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa identify Ṣaṣṭhī Devī as Brahmā’s daughter, linked to Mūla Prakṛti and also as Devasenā—either the divine army personified or one of Skanda’s consorts (Mani, 1975).

Furthermore, Śaṣṭhī Devī is venerated for reviving a stillborn child and blessing King Priyavarta (Bhattacharji, 1995), and some sources refer to her as Revatī, one of eighteen malign spirits known as Skandagraha (Dimmock, 1962; Tiwari, 1971). Despite earlier classifications as a folk deity, Śaṣṭhī Devī's worship spans both rural and urban Hindu communities since the Kushan period, indicating her prominent role (White, 2003). Through various attributes and roles from ancient scriptures, Śaṣṭhī Devī emerges as a paramount goddess, her depiction as a universal guardian and benevolent protector of children highlighting her profound importance. Revered as a Dhyānamantra, a young woman bestowing blessings, Śaṣṭhī Devī represents divine qualities and splendour (Bhattacharji, 1995). Her connection with Kārttikeya, a principal Hindu deity, further elevates her status within the pantheon. Initially worshipped as the six Kṛttikās nurturing Kārttikeya, later texts promote her as his consort, affirming her as a formidable goddess (Bhattacharji, 1995). Śaṣṭhī Devī's worship in twelve distinct forms underscores her adaptability and multifaceted nature (Sengupta, 2010). The differentiation between Śaṣṭhī Devī and Hārītī accentuates Śaṣṭhī's protective attributes—Hārītī being a Buddhist deity associated with childbirth, prominent from the first to the fourth century CE, in areas like Gandhāra and Mathura (Josephson, 1985). Her transformation from a child-eating demoness under Buddha's influence to a revered figure mirrors the narratives of deities like Śītalā, known for both causing and protecting against illnesses (Strong, 1994, p. 36; Anderson, 1988, pp. 78; Slusser, 1982, p. 329). This duality, seen in other gods and goddesses, marks a significant narrative shift from malevolence to benevolence, enriching her character. The shared themes of dread and reverence with entities like Śītalā and the contemporary snake goddess Manasā (Samuel, 1997, p. 3; Haque, 1992, pp. 263–7), and the distinct yet comparative devotional practices between Śaṣṭhī and Chaṭhī Māi underscore the depth of their cultural and religious significance. However,

positioning Chaṭhī Māi alongside Śaṣṭhī Devī necessitates careful consideration. While both goddesses relate to childbirth, Chaṭhī Māi's worship during Chaṭha Pūjā predominantly centres on fertility and regional practices, setting her apart from Śaṣṭhī Devī's broader and more varied veneration. The perception of Chaṭhī Māi's as a 'regional goddess' relevant in specific agrarian contexts contrasts with Śaṣṭhī Devī's expansive roles and recognition across Hinduism. Furthermore, Śaṣṭhī Devī is celebrated in the Hindu calendar through specific monthly and postnatal rituals. At the same time, Chaṭhī Māi's aniconic representation, symbolising nature rather than a human form, characterises her as more localised and accessible.

3.3 Harmony in Duality: Exploring the Complementary Divine Forces of Chaṭhī Māi and Sūrya in Cultural Worship

The continuation of divine masculinity and femininity, particularly in the context of the relationship between Chaṭhī Māi and the Sun God, unfolds as a theme that bridges various cultures' perception of the Sun as a symbol of might, enlightenment, life, and energy. Unlike traditions that predominantly categorize the Sun with masculine attributes, several cultures, including Teutonic, Japanese, Oceanic, Maori, Cherokee, and the Arunta tribe of Australia, along with ancient Indian folklore, bestow feminine characteristics upon the Sun, viewing it as a feminine deity or force (Singh, 2009). This global prevalence of Sun goddesses underscores an archetypal feminine potency and divinity. In ancient Vedic hymns, the Sun deity is often referred to through the names Sūrya and Savitṛ, with these names sometimes used specifically and at others interchangeably, suggesting distinct but related aspects of the solar deity (Wilkins, 1900). The practices surrounding the festival of Chaṭha Pūjā reflect this continuity of masculine and

feminine principles, rooting itself in animistic traditions and surviving through layers of cultural and mythological evolutions (Singh, 2009).

In the worship of Chaṭhī Māī and Sūrya, worshippers embrace a vision of divine motherhood and solar deity not as contradictory but as complementary forces. This stands in contrast to more conventional depictions of the Sun in religious contexts. The practices and beliefs surrounding Chaṭhī Māī and Sūrya underscore an essential harmony between traditionally opposing forces, which echoes the universal theme of balanced duality found across different cultures. This anthropological observation emphasises rituals celebrating feminine principles while concurrently honouring Sūrya's masculine aspects, depicting them not in conflict but in a harmonious interplay. Furthermore, the narrative intriguingly incorporates the worship of Uṣā and Pratyūṣā, believed to be Sūrya's consorts, adding a layer to Chaṭhī Māī's worship by potentially viewing these deities as manifestations or associations of Chaṭhī Māī herself (Wilkins, 1900). This introduces a unique element within the ritual practices, where Uṣā, symbolising the dawn's first light, and Pratyūṣā, representing the final light of dusk, are revered, connecting the rituals closely with the transformative essence of the solar cycle. It enriches the worship of Chaṭhī Māī, underscoring the cyclical nature of life and the interconnection of existence through the lens of feminine divinity. The narratives surrounding Chaṭhī Māī worship offer a nuanced view of the interaction with male deities, particularly Sūrya, recognizing a unity that transcends simple categorization of gender roles or symbolism of gender equality. Instead, '*sab ek hī hai*' (all are the same) encapsulates the perceived continuity between divine masculinity and femininity, reflecting societal perspectives on gender roles and relationships. This perspective is not about transcending differences but about complementarity and harmony within the divine and social fabric. Analyzing the worship of Chaṭhī Māī and Sūrya, one can

observe a narrative weaving through devotion that stresses the reliance on opposing yet harmonious forces. It is a celebration of feminine divinity within a cultural context often dominated by patriarchal norms, complemented by the worship of the masculine traits of Sūrya. These beliefs and practices offer rich anthropological insights, challenging entrenched gender notions and highlighting a fluid continuity between divine femininity and masculinity. In societal beliefs about duty and relationships, there is a seamless blending of divine principles with human realms, emphasizing complementarity over conflict or divergence. This deep-rooted local perspective fosters a holistic view of gender roles within the domestic and broader social spheres.

3.4 Chaṭhī Means Sixth: Deification of *Tithī*

According to Banerjee (2002), the elevation of certain phenomena or individuals to a divine status within folk culture is intricately linked to the process of creating communal myths around ritual practices. The concept and terminology of Chaṭha as an annual worship and festivity, and Chaṭhī Māī, derive from the act of sanctifying a particular lunar phase, or *tithī*. The celebration of Chaṭha, also known as Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī, takes place on the sixth tithī of the Kārtika Mās, a period typically observed in October or November according to the Gregorian Calendar. This specific day is sanctified and named after the goddess Chaṭhī Māī, exemplifying how Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī has come to be interpreted as Chaṭhī. This form of the Goddess presents a marked departure from the Ṣaṣṭhī mentioned in classical texts such as the Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa, Devī Bhāgwat Purāṇa, and the Mahābhārata. Throughout history, the sanctification of the *tithī* has predominantly been a local practice, giving rise to various cultural practices aimed at recognizing the occurrence of the Ṣaṣṭhī, which typically involves marking 'thirteen Ṣaṣṭhīs in 12 months', as noted by Sengupta (2010). It is essential to recognize the reliance on these traditional methods over a modern

calendrical system based on *tithīs* or exact dates. It was noted by several study participants that the festivities traditionally take place on the sixth day after Dīpāvalī. Embracing traditional methods of marking time is critical for the continuation and vibrancy of folk worship traditions, especially within rural and non-literate communities. This stands in contrast to the more structured timekeeping methods used in formal religious observances.

The following passage is extracted from one of the interviews during our fieldwork in November 2020:

In my village, they used to say...my father also used to say- the tenth day is Daśaharā, the twentieth day is Divālī, and the six days after that is Chaṭha. They used to count. People used to count on their fingers because they were illiterate, and we did not have calendars back then.

In the interview excerpt, the speaker recalls the guidance of their father, stating that Daśaharā was celebrated on the tenth day, followed by Dīpāvalī on the twentieth day, and Chaṭha for six days after that. Adopting a numerical system for scheduling festivals illustrates the unique cultural conventions and significance of verbally passed down traditions in disseminating knowledge through the ages. The practice of finger counting illustrates the pragmatic reliance on straightforward strategies as a response to widespread illiteracy and the nonexistence of universal calendars. The absence of written timekeeping methods and the reliance on spoken tradition further underscore the socio-economic and educational context of the community, crucial for conceptualizing the deity. Marking the worship of Chathi Mai as a fundamental aspect of lesser-known traditions, it is depicted as a practice of the ‘unreflective majority,’ as opposed to the ‘reflective minority, thus described as ‘primitive’ or ‘undeveloped’ by Singer (1972) and McDaniel (2004). This perspective invites us to view these religious customs within a larger cultural and historical framework, influenced by variables like literacy levels, educational access,

and technological progressions. It fosters a comprehensive understanding of how societies create distinctive methods for organizing and sharing knowledge, tailored to their unique socio-cultural settings, especially in customary environments. This tradition, deeply entrenched in verbal stories, designated interpreters, hallowed topography, and repetitive festivities, is positioned within a wider cultural and historical context determined by aspects like literacy levels, access to education, and technological developments (McDaniel, 2012). It demonstrates how communities in conventional settings formulate specialized systems for knowledge management and transmission, aligning with their particular socio-cultural circumstances primarily through verbal narratives.

3.5 Chaṭhī Māī: the Goddess Symbol of Women

Chaṭha Pūjā is celebrated as a festival that empowers and inspires women, encouraging them to move beyond traditional roles and actively participate in its planning and execution (Hallén, 2020). The researcher noted that when participants in our study spoke about Chaṭhī Māī in worship or conversation, they predominantly referred to her as Māī or Māīyā, signifying ‘Mother.’ Among the diverse communities of North Indian cities that the researcher explored, there was minimal contention over this term's suitability. Seen as Māī, she is esteemed not only as a deity but also as a revered motherly figure. Devotees believe she pervades all aspects of the universe, able to create and recreate life in her various guises, offering blessings of fertility and marital bliss while also providing a shield against uncertainties of life. Thus, she embodies the role of the Mother. Even when depicted in forms related to Sūrya, a male deity, she is revered for her maternal generosity. Within the rituals dedicated to Chaṭhī Māī, a cycle of give-and-take is observed, where devotees fulfill vows in a display of close relationship and affection for the

Goddess, showcasing fascinating aspects of deity-devotee interaction. Following the morning ritual of *bihānī aragh*, gifts such as sarees, jewellery, and flowers are offered. The *kharanā* ritual sees the goddess ritually awakened with folk melodies and offerings positioned on a specially prepared *bedī* that includes cow dung, water from the Gaṅgā, vermilion, and *aeypān*. Women gather before this *bedī*, presenting fruits, flowers, and sweets, inviting Chaṭhī Māi to join their meal. ‘*We offer her a variety of her beloved items like fruits, flowers, and bakhīr. It’s our way of feeding her, offering arghya, and then sharing the prasāda with our families and neighbors,*’ a devotee explained. This act of feeding the goddess illustrates a profound caretaking and nurturing bond. Once it is believed the goddess has partaken of the offerings, the sanctified remnants are shared among devotees, enabling them to experience the goddess’ benevolence. Through such interactions, a deity traditionally seen as a stern protector becomes closely intertwined with familial affection and care. This fosters a sense of closeness and intimacy with the goddess, somewhat reducing her enigmatic independence.

Following is an interview excerpt of one of our respondents aged 57, who was interviewed in Varanasi on November, 2021:

Chaṭhī Māiyā had also observed the fast from her maternal home, so we, too, are observing it from our maternal home. Sūrya was the brother of Chaṭhī Māiyā. They are brothers and sisters. The story behind the Kārtika Chaṭha is that the mother of Chaṭhī Māiyā and Sūrya had punished Sūrya, as he did not bring anything to eat for her. I do not know the name of their mother. As she cursed Sūrya, he burns constantly while rising and setting. And the moon was the Chaṭhī Māiyā, so she was blessed that she would be cold while rising and setting. Thus, we worship in the evening and early morning and offer arghya. Chandramā (Moon) is called Chaṭhī Māiyā. You call her Chandramā or Chaṭhī Māiyā; both are the same.

In this exposition derived from an interview, the way in which followers perceive Chaṭhī Māi is examined as a vibrant cultural and symbolic phenomenon, deeply interwoven into the fabric of

familial and ritualistic traditions, juxtaposing a newer narrative with established ones. The depiction of Chaṭhī Māi as a maternal figure mirrors a cultural framework whereby deities are seamlessly woven into familial structures, thus offering adherents a relational blueprint for comprehending and interacting with the sacred. Chaṭhī Māi's kinship, especially as a sibling to the Sun God, Sūrya, illustrates the way in which mythological stories act as foundational cultural blueprints that influence societal relationships and bolster communal identity. The inclusion of narratives surrounding a curse enhances the mythopoetic dimension of the goddess, illustrating how cultural stories interpret natural occurrences and incorporate ethical teachings into local belief systems. The rituals dedicated to Chaṭhī Māi represent a symbolic mechanism through which acts manifest as tokens of devotion and of a collective sense of belonging. As such, the conceptualization of Chaṭhī Māi is deeply ingrained in a rich tapestry of cultural tales, societal frameworks, and ceremonial customs, offering worshippers a comprehensive scheme by which to decipher and connect with the divine. Moreover, the bond between devotees and Chaṭhī Māi indicates a fluid interchange between the immediate cultural setting and the ritual environment. Chaṭhī Māi serving as a maternal figure underscores how religious symbolism is shaped to reflect core societal values, accentuating attributes of care, protection, and motherliness. The story of the curse and the ongoing states of Sūrya Bhagwān and Candra Bhagwān reveal how myth explains the cosmos and instils moral lessons into the collective psyche. Such mythopoetic elements not only forge a common identity but also underpin the moral structure of the community. Consequently, the rituals surrounding Chaṭhī Māi evolve into a collective activity, fortifying social ties and constructing a communal historical consciousness. Significantly, the innate ability to reproduce is seen as a defining trait of females. Therefore, a newborn or young girl, a wedded mother, and an aged widow are all classified as 'mothers' and referred to as Māiyā

or Māi in the local vernacular. Employing this designation also underscores their potential for reproduction as well as particular instances of motherhood. Additionally, the use of Maaīyā for goddesses who are notably aggressive and seemingly non-maternal relates to the notions concerning their capacity for destruction. Hence, these ceremonial practices for venerating Chaṭhī Māi act as cultural directives, equipping adherents with an array of symbols, stories, and customs through which they mediate their divine connection and orient themselves within the larger socio-religious fabric. When believers acknowledge her immediate presence, she is identified as Māi or Mother. Through this maternal guise, she becomes accessible, allowing them to approach her freely, without reservation, uncertainty, or fear. Consequently, ordinary people, immersed in daily routines, unanimously perceive Māi in all her manifestations—both benign and formidable—as Mother. Despite her potential to inspire awe as a mother, they maintain she could never intimidate her offspring. By addressing her as Māi, her followers underscore their bond with her. They argue that acknowledging Chaṭhī Māi as a mother powerfully and unavoidably impels her to remember her maternal and nurturing responsibilities towards her children, ensuring she never disregards their pleas. Therefore, such viewpoints underscore the intricate interlinkages among religious doctrine, cultural narratives, and ritual acts within a distinct group. Chaṭhī Māi thus becomes a central point around which adherents forge and strengthen their cultural identity, broker social connections, and interpret the environment around them.

The celebration of Chaṭhī Māi during the Chaṭha festival plays a significant dual role, acting as both a nurturing maternal presence and a symbol of Mother Nature herself. Researchers have highlighted Chaṭha as an environmentally friendly festival (Badikilaya, 2019; Singh et al., 2016; Sood, 2016; Pahariya, 2020; Singh & Behera, 2023), emphasizing its role in the

preservation and sustainable utilization of tropical fruits (Singh et al., 2016). Anchored in traditional culture, the festival marries the act of worship with the ideals of biodiversity preservation, cohesion within the community, and the enhancement of local economies (Kumar, 2012). Media narratives increasingly focus on illustrating how the Chaṭha Pūjā exemplifies a balance between cultural traditions and ecological considerations, providing an eco-conscious lens through which the festival is viewed. This social ritual sheds light on the complex connections between human societies and their environments, showcasing a distinct form of partnership. The choice to hold festival rituals by riverbanks instead of in conventional temples stands out as a meaningful selection of sacred venues that highlights a close bond with nature. The festival stands out due to its mindful incorporation of natural elements within its practices. Bamboo, a key material used in these ceremonies for its biodegradable properties, exemplifies the awareness and commitment of the community to environmental sustainability. In this scenario, Chaṭhī Māī transcends her role as a deity to become a symbol of the Earth itself, accentuating the unity between human existence and the vast ecosystem. The ritualistic homage paid to the Sun God and the Gaṅgā emphasizes their critical roles in supporting life and agricultural productivity, reflecting the deep ecological insights embedded within these religious practices. Moreover, the deliberate avoidance of synthetic materials and machines during these rituals signals a strong cultural dedication to reducing environmental harm. At a time when many celebrations are marked by ecological harm, the festival honoring Chaṭhī Māī emerges as a narrative where ritual practices effortlessly merge with environmental care. It represents an active example of how the religious customs of a community can be aligned with ecological awareness to forge a comprehensive cultural story that deeply honors the natural world.

3.6 Chaṭhī Māī: A Benevolent and Malevolent Deity

Worshipping Chaṭhī Māī is far from an easy task; this Goddess requires significant sacrifice and steadfast devotion from those who follow her. Unlike other deities who might be more forgiving and less demanding, Chaṭhī Māī stands as a powerhouse that challenges her devotees with complex rituals and the need for enduring perseverance to win her approval. The practice of venerating Chaṭhī Māī involves intense dedication that drains both physical and mental energy. Through these demanding rituals, it is believed that Chaṭhī Māī reveals her formidable essence, proving to be both powerful and exacting in nature. This challenge of winning her favour is seen as a measure of a devotee's true commitment and faith, underscoring that her blessings are earned through deep respect and persistent efforts. It is this what makes observing Chaṭha Pūjā a difficult worship, known for its challenges due to prolonged fasting, penance, and a strict observance of purity and cleanliness.

While many songs and responses highlight Chaṭhī Māī's benevolence, there is a curiosity towards the potentially harsh aspects of her nature. This could be attributed to the dual characteristics of elements like water and the Sun related to her - elements that are life-giving yet can cause destruction, suggesting the Goddess embodies both nurturing and formidable aspects of nature. This dual nature might mirror the intricate relationship communities have with their environment. Furthermore, tales that showcase Chaṭhī Māī as a deliverer of justice, one who punishes or examines her worshippers' dedication through trials, help in painting a picture of her as a demanding or even fearsome entity. The investigation into rituals that require sacrifice, strict penance, and purity also adds layers to her persona. The utterance '*bhūl-chūk, galatī hamār*' (please forgive our unintended mistakes, errors) in various instances points towards an acceptance of human imperfection and an appeal for mercy, reflecting the societal belief in

atonement through devotion and rituals to keep the peace both within the community and with the divine. Chaṭhī Māī is sought after for blessings that ensure the prosperity of one's family, stressing societal values and aspirations for family welfare. The reference to river banks and 'Ghāṭ' (beautifully adorned river sides) in the rituals signifies the importance of certain places in worshipping Chaṭhī Māī, marking these spots as sacred and emphasizing the blend of natural and divine realms. A slight negligence in the observance of these rituals is said to displease the Goddess. Several interviewees underscored Chaṭhī Māī's compassionate side amidst her various characteristics, viewing them as different but not necessarily contradicting facets. Chaṭhī Māī is viewed as kind-hearted, wielding a divine power, a *śakti*, to fulfill her worshippers' promises. Yet, this same power is apparent in her expressions of displeasure.

This raises a question: How does a Goddess, revered as a mother, manifest both nurturing and destructive sides? With regard to the prayers and vows of her followers, she embodies a spectrum from stern and demanding to lenient and forgiving characteristics. This balance is essential for her devotees, seen as her children, to grasp life's complexities. From our interviews, it was evident that Chaṭhī Māī exercises her fierce side judiciously, differentiating between intentional and accidental offences. She does not indiscriminately express her annoyance but directs it towards those who negligently disturb the ritual's order. Additionally, her anger is controlled and calculated, and making a vow or *manautī* can pacify her. Ultimately, Chaṭhī Māī stands out as a deity with a distinct and complex disposition.

According to one of our respondents-

The hand was twisted. Like someone picked me up and threw me. So, my hands and legs got twisted on the nahāe-khāe day of Chaṭha Pūjā. Earlier, we did not do Chaṭha Pūjā. Then someone asked for some help; I had to work so I did not listen to her, we were coming from home. I thought that later I will listen to her and do the work. She was giving us some work for the pūjā, like carrying something. Like we are poor, so people give us some work to do and to that I did not listen and help. That's when I made a vow to Chaṭhī Māī that we would do Chaṭha.

I immediately got cured and then went and did the work the lady had asked me to do for the pūjā. The woman next door had asked for some help, so I did that work. And then, the next year, I started doing Chaṭha by myself and at my home. Then I had a son, a daughter, and later a grandson, and I started celebrating Chaṭha for everyone. Such is the power in Chaṭhī Māī.

This narrative emphasizes the essential belief that it's impossible to perceive or have a 'deeply angry mother.' Believers hold a firm conviction that as a motherly figure, Chaṭhī Māī could not inflict grave harm upon her human offspring. Although Chaṭhī Māī might be unpredictable, for her devotees, she is not seen as an uncontrollable deity. Despite possessing some harmful traits and being prone to a quick temper, her followers find solace and assurance by earnestly reaching out to her as 'Māī' and by placating her through pledges. This act enables the devotees to engage with compassionate qualities that inherently evoke forgiveness. No matter her levels of displeasure or wrath, her innate motherliness soothes her, making her open to her devotees' grievances, like a mother to her children, thereby responding to their supplications.

Similarly, in the present work, there are subtle hints suggesting the possible wrathful sides of Chaṭhī Māī. The main focus is on the critical need for exactness and diligent observance of rituals during the Chaṭha pūjā, but minor nuances also indicate a sense of wariness and concern regarding the deity's reaction to errors.

For instance, one of the respondents explained:

There should not be any mistake in this... Well, there should not be any mistake in this! But it is okay; it happens that if a mistake is made, then Chaṭhī Māīyā shows it immediately. We have heard that something happens during Chath Pūjā. Anything as if... she shows it! Like there should be no leftovers. Whenever we made a mistake, our grandmother often scolded us. So I mean, by doing wrong, this will happen! That will happen! So, it is believed that there should be no margin of error in the worship of Chaṭhī Māī. But in the end, what can we do? We cry out with folded hands, holding our forehead, rubbing our noses a lot; please forgive us Chaṭhī Māī! The song of Chaṭha also... people say that one should not sing during a normal day. Chaṭhī Māī gets angry! That song is played only during Chaṭha Pūjā. You can't sing after eating non-veg! Don't even mention the name! Don't even mention the name!

The statement, ‘If a mistake is made, Chaṭhī Māī immediately reveals it’, signifies a prompt and clear response, suggesting a likely swift divine correction or the rigorous adherence to norms, thus indicating a possibly strict or punitive side to Chaṭhī Māī. Furthermore, the phrase, ‘If something occurs during Chaṭha Pūjā, she reveals it!’ highlights Chaṭhī Māī’s unique vigilance throughout the festival, underlining her significant role and power in this sacred time. The warning against common practices, like vocalizing or calling upon the Goddess’s name outside of the Chaṭha Pūjā event, introduces an aspect of uniqueness and admiration, perhaps originating from a wish to avert unwanted outcomes or Chaṭhī Māī’s disapproval in everyday occurrences. Moreover, the mention of certain rituals and abstentions, such as the avoidance of meat, emphasizes respect and apprehension of her possible discontent. In sum, these detailed elements offer a comprehensive view of Chaṭhī Māī’s persona within the cultural context of Chaṭha Pūjā, incorporating both her nurturing and potentially threatening facets that influence the devotees’ practices and beliefs.

3.7 There are Two Burdens on Earth—the Ox and the Men!

In the course of the fieldwork spanning 2022 and 2023 in Munger district, Bihar, the researcher encountered two distinct yet intertwined narratives that shed light on local perceptions of Sītā Mahārānī, a figure from Hindu mythology. Initially, our exploration in 2022 centered around Kashta Harani, where the respondents believed that the has been started by Sītā to absolve Rāma of the sin of killing Rāvaṇa. This Ghat, originally named Kushtha Harani, was renowned for its purported healing powers, attributed to water that touched Rāma during his river baths. This belief persists, with locals recommending the properties of water to those suffering from skin ailments. Swollen river conditions thwarted the researcher’s plans to visit a temple on the

opposite side of the river. Nevertheless, our 2023 fieldwork in Jaffarnagar Panchayat provided a fresh narrative. The spectre of floods casts a recurring shadow over the landscape of Jaffarnagar Panchayat, where the Sita Charan temple finds its roots. Annually, the land grapples with the relentless intrusion of water, transforming the terrain into a temporary aquatic expanse. This inundation, a formidable natural challenge, profoundly shapes the lives of the local community, leaving an indelible mark on both the physical and socioeconomic aspects of their existence. Here, Sitā Mahārānī was revered as Chaṭhī Māī, embodying a fusion of human and divine qualities deeply integrated into local customs. Conversations with villagers revealed the significance of rituals like sacred baths during Kārtika, fostering a vibrant cultural atmosphere contrasting with the more medically oriented practices at Kushtha Harani.

Amidst the brief interlude to boating to the other side from Babua Ghat (adjacent to the Kashta Harani), casual conversations with the women making offerings on the staircase provided insights into the vibrant local customs of taking sacred baths throughout the month of Kārtika. The significance of this sacred tradition resonated in the collective spirit, contributing to the bustling atmosphere that enveloped the riverside, unlike Kushtha Harani, where people afflicted with skin problems are the primary visitors. According to the gatekeeper, the last 8 days of Kārtika and the initial 8 days of the following month have greater importance heath-wise and that become an important reason for the crowded Kushtha Harani Ghat. According to the locals, the frequency of daily worship in the Sita Charan had dwindled over time. Once tended to by a caretaker, the temple had seen a decline in regular worship, eventually leading to the caretaker's departure after a few years. In the absence of dedicated maintenance, the ritual ambience of the temple waned. This shift in the temple's vibrancy reflected the evolving dynamics within the community, where changing lifestyles and priorities impacted the consistent observance of

traditional practices. The Sita Charan Temple, once a focal point of daily rituals, now stood as a quiet testament to the ebb and flow of cultural traditions in the village. The geographical context was noteworthy, with the area being frequently inundated, making it uncommon for individuals to establish permanent residences.



Figure 2 showing Sita Charan Mandir in Munger
(The pictures were taken by the researcher during her fieldwork in Patna, 2022)

During our conversations, a particularly intriguing statement surfaced among the locals repeatedly: '*pr̥thvī par do bojh hain - bail aur ādmī*' (There are two burdens on earth - the ox and the men). Initially, the meaning eluded us, prompting us to seek clarification. It was elucidated that this saying was rooted in local beliefs, specifically in the context of Sītā Mahārānī's significant act of fasting for Chaṭha Pūjā. This observance, they explained, aimed to

absolve Lord Rāma of the perceived sin of *Brahma hatyā* (the sin of killing a Brāhmin), offering insight into the cultural interpretations of morality and expiation. The narratives expanded to draw parallels between Rāma's actions and their subsequent consequences. For instance, after the victorious encounter with Rāvaṇa, Rāma himself experienced the affliction of leprosy. The local sages in his court asserted that Mudgal Ṛṣi held the remedy to this ailment. As the storyline unfolded, it was revealed that post-Deepawali, upon Rāma's return to Ayodhya, discernible changes occurred in his skin, attributed to the process of expiating the sin associated with Rāvaṇa's killing. This local folklore not only unveils the complex layers of religious narratives but also provides a unique lens through which the community interprets morality and the consequences of actions within the framework of their cultural beliefs. The narrative of the ox symbolizes the heavy physical burden borne by animals, particularly the ox, which is essential for agricultural work in rural Bihar. The ox represents endurance, toiling endlessly in the fields, a key figure in sustaining agrarian livelihoods. This interpretation links directly to the landscape of Munger, where floods shape the lives of the local population. The ox, then, becomes emblematic of the hard labour required to cultivate the land, endure the natural challenges of the region, and maintain a fragile balance with nature. In contrast, the inclusion of 'men' as the second burden in the saying introduces a moral dimension. Here, men are perceived not just as participants in the labor-intensive agrarian economy but as bearers of the weight of sins. The narrative of Sītā Mahārānī fasting for Chaṭha Pūjā to absolve Rāma of the sin of killing Rāvaṇa exemplifies this perception of men as morally burdened. In this context, men's actions, particularly those tied to violence or transgression, carry moral consequences. The figure of Rāma, revered yet flawed, represents the dual burden of being both a king and a sinner in need of redemption. The saying thus reflects a dual understanding of burden—one physical, borne by animals, and one moral,

carried by men. This local folklore, with its focus on the sin of *Brahma hatyā doṣa* (the killing of a Brāhmin, represented by Rāvaṇa's death), highlights the community's understanding of morality, penance, and redemption. The symbolic burden placed on men aligns with the religious practices surrounding Chaṭha Pūjā, where women, particularly wives, are seen as having the power to relieve their husbands of these burdens. The ritual fasting by Sītā Mahārānī, who is associated with Chaṭhī Māī, reflects how women are perceived as both physically and religiously potent, capable of lightening the burdens of men through religious devotion. In the context of the folk belief recounted during our fieldwork, Sītā Mahārānī fasts for Chaṭha Pūjā to absolve Rāma of the sin of killing Rāvaṇa, an act that, according to the local interpretation, leaves a moral stain that must be washed away. The belief that men carry the weight of their sins, and thus the need for religious rites like Chaṭha Pūjā for purification, speaks to a cultural understanding where men's actions have broader moral implications for the world. The fasting performed during Chaṭha Pūjā, particularly by women like Sītā Mahārānī, is seen as an act of purification not only for oneself but for male family members, such as husbands and sons. This underscores the role of women as moral caretakers, capable of lifting the metaphorical 'burden' from the men in their lives through acts of devotion and ritual. The saying also reflects a broader cultural belief that men, despite their power and agency, are dependent on the ritual labor of women to cleanse their moral transgressions, echoing the idea that men, like oxen, are a burden on the Earth that must be managed through ritual intervention. Through this gendered lens, the narrative of the ox and the men underscores the division of labor, both physical and moral, within the community. While the ox labors in the fields, men bear the weight of their moral burdens, which women help alleviate through rituals such as Chaṭha Pūjā. This division of burdens reflects the larger cultural

dynamics in Munger, where mythological figures like Sītā Maharani play a central role in shaping local perceptions of gender, morality, and the environment.

They also narrated that there are *Zindā Pahār* around the temple, the stones that will grow into a mountain. The temple was initially located on a mountain. These stones are increasing; they were smaller ten years ago. They pointed towards a partially submerged area at a distance, where the researcher could see a big stone raised amidst the large stretches of arid land. The stone, they say, is a mountain called *Mainā Pahār*, which was the abode of the Mudgal Ṛṣi. The stone, they say, will ultimately become a mountain again. The partial area of the temple was submerged in water, and the original footprints of the Sītā Mahārānī, her winnower, the incense sticks, etc, are not accessible now. The locals informed the researcher that the area may be accessible only when some provision to remove the water is made or when the water naturally dries up in January. Other women added that it is not easy to remove the water from underneath, as it is too deep and has large amounts of sediments that need to be removed. Therefore, a sage, Rām Bābā, had constructed the temple. He started by constructing the room of Sītā Mahārānī, and then the site, where the footprints in the east and west directions are, was converted into the *garbhagrha* (sanctum sanctorum) of the temple. However, Sītā Mahārānī prefers staying in the water for half of the year, making herself inaccessible to her devotees. The temple gates remained firmly shut, but an alternative path guided us to the sacred enclave of the temple. Veiled in mystery, Rām Bābā's origins eluded the villagers, yet his pivotal role in shepherding the temple unfolded. Initially, the temple's existence was confined to a modest hut cradling the authentic footprints of Sītā Mahārānī. This space, however, often found itself engulfed by the capricious waters. The temple landscape transformed under his benevolent initiative. Before him, the village harboured only the humble hut, but his arrival marked the genesis of a temple rising

from the ground. His devotions were expansive, stretching beyond the confines of Sita Charan to the lofty realms of *Mainā Pahār*. Yet, he grappled with a pragmatic realisation—the sacred and revered footprints could not be sustained through the relentless floods. Undeterred, he undertook a bold task. A replication of the footprints emerged, elevated to the temple's first floor, ensuring a sanctuary that defied the annual deluge. This act, manifesting ingenuity and reverence, showcased the devotion and environmental challenges. As a field worker immersed in exploring narratives surrounding regional goddesses like Chaṭhī Māī, these vivid accounts unravel the intricate layers of human agency, beliefs, and the relentless pursuit of sustaining sacred traditions against the backdrop of natural forces. In collaboration with the locals, Rām Bābā undertook the initial construction of the temple's ground floor, affectionately named Sītā Gṛha (Sītā's abode) by the villagers. This sacred space was believed to be the dwelling of Sītā and Rāma for a brief period. Subsequently, the construction of the first floor was a later addition, strategically designed to facilitate the worship of Sītā *carāṇa* (Sītā's footprints). However, a curious dictate emerged from the villagers—an unwavering belief that no man could spend the night within the temple premises. The construction of the ground floor holds symbolic significance as it is attributed to the collaborative efforts of Ram Baba and the local populace. The naming of the space as the abode of Sītā and Rāma for a brief period indicates the community's effort to anchor their sacred space in the temporal and spatial context of the divine narrative. Constructing sacred spaces becomes a tangible expression of the community's devotion and participation in mythic traditions. Adjacent to the temple, on the opposite side of the entrance, one can see a mound encircled by pillars adorned with traces of vermilion. It was an alternative entry point to the temple. However, the villagers clarified that this mound was the sacred abode of Baghwā Bābā, the guardian who protected Sītā in ancient times and continued to

watch over the temple grounds. Consequently, the temple was deemed off-limits for any man to reside, a rule that even Rām Bābā adhered to. Despite his honourable intentions and caretaking role, he refrained from sleeping in the temple after sunset. A fascinating narrative unfolded, painting Sītā as the one who harboured an aversion to men. The villagers asserted that Sītā refrained from casting her gaze upon men, displaying an inherent disdain. According to this perspective, Sītā possessed the power to annihilate Rāvaṇa, but due to Rāma's predetermined fate, she assumed a passive and seemingly vulnerable role. It was suggested that had Rāvaṇa met Sītā's gaze, he would have been reduced to ashes, underscoring the complex interplay of destiny and the untapped strength within the goddess' character.

From an anthropological standpoint, the narratives surrounding the construction and regulations of the temple offer intriguing insights into the complex interweaving of cultural beliefs, gender dynamics, and mythological interpretations within the local community. The prohibition on men staying within the temple, even with the well-intentioned presence of Rām Bābā, reveals a gendered dimension in the worship practices. Such prohibitions often emerge from deeply ingrained cultural norms and mythic interpretations. Anthropologically, this phenomenon can be explored in terms of gender roles and the perceived sanctity associated with specific spaces, creating a delineation between the sacred and the profane. The presence of Baghwā Bābā as a guardian figure introduces another layer of mythic protection to the temple premises. This lens allows us to examine the significance of guardian deities in local belief systems and how they contribute to establishing physical and metaphysical boundaries around sacred spaces. The narrative of Sītā's aversion to men adds a psychological and cultural layer to the deity's character. Such beliefs and perceptions shape how devotees interact with the divine, influencing rituals, behaviour, and the construction of social identities. The connection between

Sītā Mahārānī and Chaṭhī Māī becomes a testament to the way local narratives interpret and imbue a human figure, especially a woman, with divine significance. This local folklore shows layers of religious narratives and provides a cultural lens through which the community sees a human figure, Sītā, as Chaṭhī Māī, blurring the lines between myth and history. It further defines and redefines the extent of women's religiosity by elaborating on how only a wife possesses the potential to free her man from the burdens of everyday sins. According to them, Sītā had all the powers to destroy Rāvaṇa with a single gaze, but only fate gave Rāma a chance to kill Rāvaṇa.

Other Narratives: The Sun Temple, Badgaon Ghāṭ and other Stories from Bihar

The Sun Temple and Chaṭha *ghāṭ* of Badgaon hold significant religious and historical importance, deeply woven with myths and traditions from the Dvāpara Yuga. This sacred site is believed to be where the tradition of offering *arghya* to Sūrya (the Sun God) began, evolving into the widespread celebration of Chaṭha, now observed with reverence across India. Anthropologically, the worship of Chaṭhī Māī represents the cultural and ritual heart of the community, illustrating a blend of mythology, religious practices, and ecological awareness. Among the most notable legends is the story of King Śāmba, the grandson of Lord Kṛṣṇa, who was afflicted with leprosy and sought healing through penance and devotion to Sūrya. Following Kṛṣṇa's advice, Śāmba set out to find the Sun's radiant energy (Sūrya Rāśi) and discovered a pit of water in the forest at Badgaon. Upon washing his hands and feet and drinking the water, he was miraculously healed. Śāmba later excavated the pond and built a temple nearby, installing statues of Sūrya, Viṣṇu, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Chaṭhī Māī, and the Navagraha (the nine planetary deities). This legacy endures today as pilgrims from across the country visit Badgaon to pay homage, reflecting the continued ritual significance of Chaṭhī Māī and the sun worship tradition.

The historical and cultural narrative of Badgaon is further enriched by the belief that Lord Kṛṣṇa himself visited this site to offer prayers to Sūrya when he traveled with the Pāṇḍava to Rajgir. This act of devotion reinforced the temple's sacred status. The temple has also been a place of worship for prominent historical figures such as Emperor Jarāsandha and King Ajātaśatru, who performed rituals there with deep devotion. Such accounts contribute to the temple's reputation as one of the 12 prominent Sun temples in India. Thousands of devotees flock to the site during Kārtika māsa and Caiti Chaṭha to perform rituals and offer *arghya*.

The significance of this temple and the tradition of Chaṭha is echoed in the accounts of similar Sun temples. One such temple is located in Bihar Sharif, Nalanda district, approximately 10 kilometers from Badgaon. It is said that the custom of offering *arghya* to the Sun God began at this temple as well, contributing to the broader tapestry of Chaṭha ritual traditions. According to religious scholars, King Śāmba's healing took place near the pond at this temple, where he performed *snāna* (bathing) and *dhyāna* (meditation) to worship Sūrya. This act granted him freedom from his ailment and further established the pond and temple as sites of divine intervention and ritual significance. Despite facing challenges such as the devastating 1934 earthquake, which caused severe damage to the structure, the Sun Temple of Badgaon was restored, preserving its historical and religious importance. The narrative surrounding this site highlights its role as a place where myth, devotion, and cultural practice converge.

The Deo Sun Temple in Bihar, India, stands as a prominent Hindu temple and solar shrine dedicated to Sūrya, the Sun god, particularly revered during Chaṭha Pūjā. Situated in Deo Town, Aurangabad, this temple is distinguished by its orientation facing the west, symbolizing the setting sun, unlike the traditional east-facing temples that honour the rising sun. Renowned for its ritual significance, the Deo Sun Temple is one of the most venerated sites for sun worship and

the observance of Chaṭha Pūjā. The Deo Sun Temple's origins are intertwined with myths and oral traditions. According to legend, the temple was constructed overnight by Lord Viśvakarmā. While a Gupta-era inscription from 642 CE references the practice of sun worship, it does not directly mention the Deo Sun Temple. However, certain inscriptions and local folklore indicate that the temple may have existed as early as the 7th or 8th century CE. The documented history of the temple spans back to the Pāla and Sena periods, highlighted by an inscription from 1437 CE that records King Bhairavendra's dedication of the site (Saran & Pandey, 1992, pp. 46-48). This inscription also lists twelve of Bhairavendra's ancestors and credits local Hindu chieftains with the restoration of the temple following the destruction brought by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion of Bengal. The unique westward orientation has led some scholars to theorize that the temple may have initially been a Buddhist structure, repurposed after Khalji's invasion and later rededicated as a sun temple by King Bhairavendra. The Deo Sun Temple is a focal point for the annual Chaṭha Pūjā celebrations, attracting hundreds of thousands of devotees from Bihar and beyond. Pilgrims gather at the temple to participate in the Chaṭha Melā, perform ritual baths in the sacred Sūrya *Kunda*, and offer *arghya* to the Sun God, reflecting the enduring cultural and religious narratives that surround Chaṭha Pūjā.

What do these narratives do?

The significance of these narratives extends beyond mere documentation of rituals and customs; they play a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity, preserving the symbolic meanings embedded in the rituals, and facilitating the transmission of traditions across generations. Firstly, narratives surrounding the goddess encapsulate the socio-cultural ethos of the communities observing this festival. They offer insights into the historical evolution of the festival, its

mythological origins, and its socio-religious significance. For instance, stories related to the Sun God Sūrya, his wife Uṣā, and the rituals highlight the festival's emphasis on the themes of thanksgiving, penance, and the cyclical nature of life. These narratives contextualise the festival within a larger cultural and religious framework and reinforce the values and beliefs that define the community's identity. Also, the narratives provide a deeper understanding of the symbolic meanings of the rituals performed during the festival. Each ritual, from the holy bath (*nahāe-khāe*) to the offerings (*arghya*) to the rising and setting Sun, is laden with symbolic significance. By engaging with these narratives, one gains insights into how these practices serve as a medium for expressing gratitude, seeking blessings for the family's well-being, and promoting harmony with nature. The stories and myths associated with these rituals elucidate the underlying philosophical and religious dimensions, making the rituals more comprehensible and meaningful to practitioners and observers alike.

Moreover, narratives play an instrumental role in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practices. Through oral traditions, folk songs, and stories associated with Chaṭha Pūjā, the younger generation learns about their heritage, the significance of the rituals they observe, and the values their community upholds. This transmission is not merely about preserving tradition but also about fostering a sense of belonging and identity among the younger members of the community. The narratives ensure that the rituals of Chaṭha Pūjā are not just mechanically performed but are imbued with personal and collective significance. In summary, the study of narratives associated with Chaṭha Pūjā is crucial for understanding this festival's cultural, symbolic, and social dimensions. These narratives provide a rich tapestry of cultural history and mythology and play a vital role in preserving cultural identity, deepening the lived experience of the rituals, and ensuring the continuity of traditions across generations. The

narratives surrounding Chaṭhī Māī and the Chaṭha Pūjā are not merely stories; they are a complex confluence of beliefs, cultural values, and communal identity. These stories passed down through generations, serve as a medium through which individuals negotiate their understanding of the divine, articulate their place within the cosmos, and delineate the boundaries of communal belonging. In observing the Chaṭha Pūjā, one cannot overlook the significance of narrative in shaping the lived religious experiences of the participants. The preparation, the rituals, and the collective gatherings are imbued with stories of Chaṭhī Māī's benevolence and power. These narratives are not static; they are dynamic, adapting to the contemporary needs and concerns of the community while preserving a link to the past. Through storytelling, participants in the Chaṭha Pūjā engage in a form of communicative action that reinforces communal bonds, asserts individual and collective identities, and navigates the complex interplay of tradition and modernity. Moreover, the narratives associated with Chaṭhī Māī and the Chaṭha Pūjā illuminate how religious beliefs and practices are woven into the fabric of daily life. They highlight how the divine is encountered in the extraordinary and the mundane, in the moments of preparation, offering, and reflection that constitute the festival. These stories elucidate the meanings guiding actions, shaping how individuals understand their responsibilities to their families, communities, and the divine. Theological inquiry into the Chaṭha Pūjā and the veneration of Chaṭhī Māī thus entails a dialogical process, one that listens attentively to the stories of the participants and seeks to understand how these narratives articulate a theology of presence, gratitude, and communal responsibility. The study of the Chaṭha Pūjā and the worship of Chaṭhī Māī through the lens of narrative offers profound insights into the lived religion of the people involved. It reveals how narratives serve as a vital medium through which religious beliefs are expressed, experienced, and enacted in the everyday. These narratives do not merely

recount historical events or theological doctrines; they perform crucial work in shaping the religious imagination, guiding moral action, and fostering a sense of belonging and identity within the community. In exploring these narratives, we gain a deeper understanding of how religion is lived, negotiated, and transformed in the lives of individuals and communities, highlighting the rich, multifaceted nature of human religiosity.

Delving into the narratives surrounding Chaṭhī Māī and the Chaṭha Pūjā reveals the richness of this particular religious practice and challenges and expands our understanding of lived religion. These narratives, far from mere recounting of divine attributes or mythological events, are active sites of meaning-making that profoundly shape individuals' and communities' religious and social lives. By examining these narratives through an argumentative lens, we can uncover the layers of belief, identity, and social dynamics that they encapsulate and influence. These narratives associated with Chaṭhī Māī and the Chaṭha Pūjā serve as a powerful vehicle for expressing and negotiating communal identity. They do not simply reflect a pre-existing cultural or religious essence; instead, they actively construct and reconstruct what it means to belong to a community that venerates Chaṭhī Māī. This is particularly evident in how these stories adapt and evolve, incorporating elements that resonate with the contemporary lives of the devotees while still anchoring them in a shared historical and religious heritage. Such narratives challenge the notion of religion as a static, dogmatic set of beliefs, showcasing its dynamic, lived nature instead. Furthermore, the centrality of narrative in the Chaṭha Pūjā illuminates the complex interplay between individual agency and communal tradition. Devotees engage with the stories of Chaṭhī Māī not as passive recipients but as active interpreters and creators of meaning. Through the ritual practices and storytelling that characterise the festival, individuals affirm their place within the community and negotiate the boundaries of their individual faith and practice.

This underscores the argument that lived religion is not merely about conforming to established norms but involves a continual process of personal and communal meaning-making. Moreover, the narratives of Chaṭhī Māi challenge dominant theological frameworks by emphasising the immanence of the divine in everyday life. Unlike religious traditions that locate the sacred in transcendence, the stories and practices of the Chaṭha Pūjā celebrate the presence of Chaṭhī Māi in the natural world and in the daily lives of her devotees. This challenges us to reconsider our understandings of the sacred and the profane, suggesting that the divine can be encountered not in lofty theological abstractions but in the mundane acts of preparation, offering, and communal gathering that the festival entails.

The narratives of Chaṭhī Māi challenge dominant religious frameworks primarily by emphasising the immanence of the divine in everyday life, which contrasts sharply with traditions that focus on the transcendence of the sacred. In many religious traditions, the divine or sacred is often conceptualised as existing apart from the mundane world, accessible only through specific ritual practices or designated holy places. This separation reinforces a dualistic view of the world, dividing it into sacred and profane, ritual and material realms. However, the stories and practices associated with Chaṭhī Māi and the Chaṭha Pūjā vividly celebrate the presence of the divine in the natural world and the daily lives of her devotees. This approach suggests that the sacred is not distant or separate from the world but intimately intertwined with the rhythms of nature and human activity. The divine is encountered not in abstract theological concepts or distant heavens but in the tangible, ordinary acts of preparation, offering, and communal gathering that define the festival. By focusing on the immanence of Chaṭhī Māi, these narratives challenge the idea that the divine is only accessible through transcendence—through escaping or rising above the material world. Instead, they propose a proximity that is grounded in

the physical and social realities of life, affirming that the divine can be experienced in the here and now, in the water, sun, and earth, and in the bonds of community and family. This shift from transcendence to immanence challenges believers to reconsider their understanding of the sacred and the profane, suggesting a more integrated view of rituality that recognises the presence of the divine in all aspects of life. It encourages reevaluating what it means to encounter the divine, proposing that sacred moments can occur in the most ordinary settings, thereby broadening the scope of ritual experience and making it more accessible to everyone. Critically examining these narratives also prompts us to confront the issues of power and marginalisation within religious communities. The stories of Chaṭhī Māī, while fostering a sense of communal belonging, also have the potential to reinforce social hierarchies and exclude those who do not conform to the normative boundaries of the community. Thus, an argumentative engagement with these narratives requires us to ask who is included or excluded by these stories, whose voices are heard, and whose are silenced. It invites us to consider how narratives can empower and marginalise and how they might be reimagined to foster a more inclusive understanding of community.

Conclusion

The diverse stories linked to Chaṭhī Māī play a crucial role in keeping her worship active and thriving. These stories enable the tradition to adapt and resonate with the community, offering a wide range of perspectives for envisioning the Goddess. The lack of a central script opens up space for varied, localized ways of expressing devotion, enriching the worship experience. The connections made between Chaṭhī Māī and the Sun god Sūrya, as well as the interplay of male and female divine elements, show a blend of beliefs, giving followers multiple ways to engage

with the tradition. By portraying Chaṭhī Māī as both a mother figure and a representation of nature, a deep emotional and familial bond is fostered, moving beyond the confines of structured religious practices. The contrasting aspects of kindness and fierceness within her character make the worship adaptable and attuned to the ups and downs of existence, providing a source of protection and direction for diverse personal situations. Associating Chaṭhī Māī with the regional culture of Bihar weaves the tradition into everyday life, enhancing a sense of community, identity expression, and shared history. This local tie sustains the practice's relevance and helps build a unified community identity. Thus, the wealth of these stories is instrumental in forming adaptable, deeply connected religious activities centered around the Goddess. The array of themes available keeps the worship of Chaṭhī Māī a lively cultural and ritual practice, mirroring the community's real-life experiences and cultural subtleties. The ongoing creation and transformation of stories related to Chaṭhī Māī are key in keeping her worship pertinent and popular by promoting flexibility, tackling modern challenges, and enabling personal connections in devotion. This evolving nature ensures the tradition stays meaningful across different generations, addressing the community's shifting needs. The inclusiveness emerging from these evolving stories makes Chaṭhī Māī's worship approachable to a broad spectrum of people, while its integration into the culture underscores its importance within a larger societal context. Moreover, the varied symbolism associated with Chaṭhī Māī equips the deity with the ability to convey a multitude of significances, broadening its application in various aspects of life. Investigating these shifting stories could provide insights into how lived religious practices adjust to changes in society, exploring how these evolving narratives influence community ties, and examining the function of cultural integration in keeping religious practices popular. Future

studies might also look into how individuals interpret and integrate these evolving stories into their own ritual activities.

In conclusion, the stories and traditions of Chaṭhī Māī and the Chaṭha Pūjā open a vast field for investigating the intricate aspects of religious experience in daily life. These narratives invite us to transcend narrow perspectives of beliefs and rituals, encouraging a reflection on how tradition and novelty, communal identity and personal belief, as well as the sacred aspects of everyday existence, intertwine. Through a thoughtful examination of these stories, we can uncover a richer understanding of how individuals negotiate, interpret, and embody religious meanings within their day-to-day activities. This approach not only enlightens us about the multi-layered nature of religion itself but also about the diverse ways in which people navigate their ritual journeys, making sense of their beliefs in the context of an ever-changing world.