



## Research Article

# Chañhī Māī in Popular Imagination: Exploring Narratives, Worship, and Rituals in North India

Akanksha Yadav<sup>1\*</sup> & Vinita Chandra<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Humanistic Studies, IIT (BHU), Varanasi. \*Corresponding author.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Humanistic Studies, IIT (BHU), Varanasi.

## Abstract

This paper explores the varied narratives surrounding Chañhī Māī, which do not find a mention in the normative texts. These narratives showcase the blending of religious beliefs with regional traditions in the imagination of her worshippers. Focusing on Kārtika Chañha specifically, the study delves into the narratives that depict the Goddess as a healer, protector, and feminine energy tied to the Sun. Our fieldwork in Varanasi, Patna, Munger, and Sahibganj reveals diverse origin stories, showcasing the cultural mosaic of regions venerating her. The research comprehensively examines the evolutionary trajectory of Chañhī Māī's worship, emphasizing the synthesis of mythological elements and local folklore. Three key facets—the manifestation of feminine energy, the significance of the title "Māī," and the complementary relationship between male and female principles—are explored to provide a nuanced understanding of the Goddess's multifaceted identity in North India. The absence of normative texts enhances grassroots adaptability, allowing for localized interpretations in the popular imagination of the Goddess. Associations with the Sun god Surya and the continuity of divine male-female dynamics provide varied entry points for believers, enabling emotional connections and familial devotion. The duality of malevolence and benevolence adds complexity, making worship dynamic and responsive to challenges. Linking Chañhī Māī to Bihar's regional identity integrates the tradition into daily life, promoting a sense of belonging. The evolving narratives contribute to the deity's adaptability, relevance, and popularity, with potential for further research exploring folk religions' adaptation to societal changes and the impact of evolving narratives on community dynamics.

**Keywords:** *Chañhī Māī, rituals, folk traditions, Chañha Pūjā, malevolence, benevolence*

**GOALS** [Climate Action, Life on Land](#)

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical Consideration:** Informed consent was obtained from all the participants of the study.

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research.

**Article History:** Received: 31 December 2023. Revised: 31 March 2024. Accepted: 31 March 2024. First published: 10 April 2024

**Copyright:** © 2024 by the *author/s*.

**License:** License Aesthetix Media Services, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Published by:** Aesthetix Media Services, India

**Citation:** Yadav, A. & Chandra, V. (2024). Chañhī Māī in Popular Imagination: Exploring Narratives, Worship, and Rituals in North India. *Rupkatha Journal* 16:2. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n2.02g>

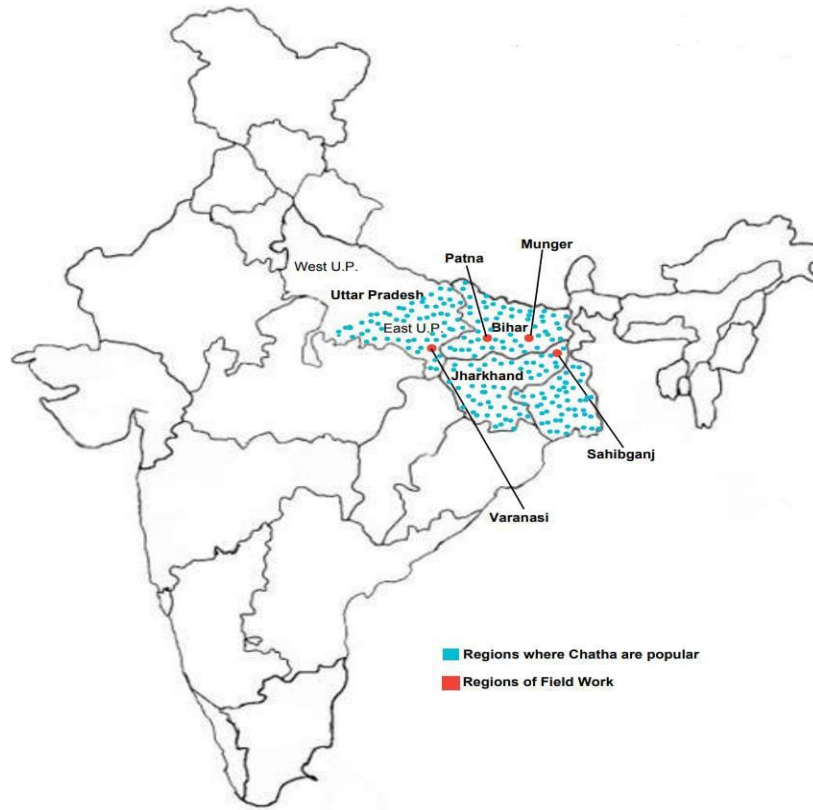


Figure 1: Map Showing the Regions of Fieldwork.

## Introduction

The worship of Chaṭhī Māī, a revered deity in Hinduism, unfolds a diverse and intricate narrative rich in worship, rituals, and folk traditions. Widely venerated in the Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of Uttar Pradesh, as well as within the Bhojpuri-speaking community, Chaṭhī Māī, also known as Chaṭhī Māīyā, occupies a special place in the religious and cultural ethos of the region (Jha, 2009). According to the Hindu calendar, the festival of Chaṭha falls twice a year: Caitra Chaṭha, observed during the Caitramās of Vikram Saṃvat, and Kārtika Chaṭha, conducted on the sixth day of the Kārtika mās<sup>1</sup>. In this work, we mainly focus on the narratives of Chaṭhī Māī, worshipped in Kārtika Chaṭha due to its relative popularity. As the festival is witnessing a spread in terms of the number of worshippers involved, organization and celebration, it becomes seminal to see how certain beliefs and practices play an essential role in the existence and survival of similar folk traditions. Narratives surrounding her origins seamlessly blend mythological elements with local folklore, creating a vibrant cultural mosaic that showcases the amalgamation of religious beliefs and regional traditions. Some narratives depict her as a healer and protector of children, while others present her as a feminine energy of the Sun or tied by kin relations. Folk traditions associated with Chaṭhī Māī encompass devotional songs, Chaṭha gīt, celebrating the

<sup>1</sup> Kārtika Mās holds significant cultural importance within Hinduism as one of the most sacred months in the Hindu calendar. Devotees engage in a daily ritualistic immersion in the sacred waters of the Gaṅgā during the early hours, known as Gaṅgā Snāna, believing it contributes to revitalising physical well-being and facilitating the absolution of sins. Kārtika Mās also referred to as Dāmodar Mās, is considered the most suitable time for such rigorous practices. Devotees believe that the sun and moon's beams during this period benefit the mental and physical well-being of the propitiatory individual. The sixth day, or *tithī*, is deified and referred to as the goddess's name, Chaṭhī Māī, leading to the interpretation of Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī as Chaṭhī.

Goddess and recounting her divine power. In our fieldwork in Varanasi, Patna, Munger, and Sahibganj, we encountered diverse narratives surrounding the origin of Chaṭhī Māī, providing profound insight into the cultural and religious tapestry of the regions where she is venerated. We conducted three rounds of fieldwork in 2021, 2022, and 2023. Our data was collected through an ethnographic approach with participant observation and interactions with the worshippers. We also conducted interviews through semi-structured interviews with the primary worshippers and others. These interviews were then transcribed, translated and coded. Thus, we discuss the major themes we encountered in our data analysis (See Figure 1). The worship, rituals, and folk traditions associated with Chaṭhī Māī reflect the deep-seated reverence and devotion of the people, contributing to a vibrant and enduring fabric of religious and cultural heritage.

While much literature on Chaṭha and similar folk festivals has primarily focused on understanding the festival from a distance, without sufficient attention to the narratives associated with the Goddess (Badikilaya, 2019; Singh et al., 2016; Pandey et al., 2019; Bratton, 2020), this paper aims to comprehensively explore the mythological narratives and stories linked to the origin of Chaṭhī Māī. Our inquiry extends to the evolutionary trajectory of Chaṭhī Māī's worship, focusing on the synthesis of mythological elements and local folklore and discerning the cultural implications of this synthesis on the involved communities. Through this study, we seek to unveil the variations in the worship and traditions linked to Chaṭhī Māī, shedding light on how these differences contribute to the overall diversity of how her worshippers imagine her. Our work sheds light on the varied narratives of Chaṭhī Māī and its influence on gender dynamics within religious and societal roles. Thus, we also comprehend the extent of the worshippers' beliefs in the healing and protective qualities of Chaṭhī Māī to provide valuable insights into how these beliefs and imaginations permeate their daily lives. We thus explore three key aspects of the imagination of the Goddess's identity in North India, namely, the belief in the manifestation of feminine energy in the religious beliefs and practices of her worshippers, the significance attributed to her common title, "Māī," and the emphasis placed by the worshippers on the complementary relationship between male and female principles in their devotion to Chaṭhī Māī. These insights, derived from popular narratives and stories about the Chaṭhī Māī and her powers, contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted aspects of the popular Goddess in North India. Certainly, here's the revised version:

The work, thus, comprehensively explores the mythological narratives and stories associated with Chaṭhī Māī, a revered deity in Hinduism, filling a gap in existing scholarship that often overlooks the narratives linked to the Goddess. It extends its inquiry to the evolutionary trajectory of Chaṭhī Māī's worship, emphasizing the synthesis of mythological elements and local folklore, which sheds light on the cultural implications of this synthesis on the involved communities. Through the analysis of worship, rituals, and folk traditions associated with Chaṭhī Māī, the work highlights the deep-seated reverence and devotion of the people towards the deity, while also exploring the influence of her worship on gender dynamics within religious and societal roles, providing valuable insights into the multifaceted aspects of the popular Goddess in North India.

### **Worshipping Chaṭhī Māī in Dālā Chaṭha**

The festival is also called Kārtika Śukla Ṣaṣṭhī, Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī Pūjā, Chaṭhī, or Dālā Chaṭha. On the primary day (Ṣaṣṭhī), the devotees fast from sunrise to sunset and make offerings to the Sun god. Though the main festivity is on Ṣaṣṭhī or the sixth day of the śukla pakṣa of Kārtika month, the devotees who observe the fast undergo a rigorous ritual of cleansing and making offerings for four days. On the Caturthī (fourth) day, a ritual called *nahāe khāe* (bathe and eat) is observed. The fifth day, or Pañcamī before the Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī Pūjā, is also called *kharnā*. The devotees fast the entire day and eat their only meal after sunset. This meal is first offered to Chaṭhī Māī at sunset. The

devotee must strictly observe fasting for two days, abstaining from food and water. On the Pūjā's sixth day, or the Ṣaṣṭhī, the devotees stand in the Gaṅgā and offer the Sun God the *sanjhiyā arghya* (evening offering). They offer bamboo winnowers, also called *sūpa*, which is filled with *prasāda* items such as *thekuā* (sweet cookies), coconuts, and other seasonal fruits in their whole forms. The following day, devotees return to the Gaṅgā at sunrise and offer the *bihaniyā arghya* (dawn offering). Having finished the prayers and the offering of oblations, they return to their homes and break their fast.

The rituals encompass a rich tapestry of symbolism, each thread intricately woven to convey profound meanings within the cultural fabric. Fasting from sunrise to sunset exemplifies discipline and purification, while offerings to the Sun god symbolize reverence for life-giving forces. The multi-day cleansing ritual signifies ritual preparation, aligning devotees, especially the *parvaitin*, with the divine. Symbolic actions on specific days, like *nahāe khāe* and *kharnā*, further deepen the devotee's journey towards the main festival. Offerings of fruits and other items carry symbolic weight, seeking blessings for abundance and well-being. Rituals conducted in the sacred space of the riverbank, or *ghāt* connect worshippers with the deities and underscore the significance of water in Hindu rituals. The creation of sacred spaces and the awakening of the Goddess, Chaṭhī Māi, through offerings and songs, demonstrate communal devotion and reverence. Ultimately, the festival's personalized focus on mundane pursuits underscores its pragmatic significance, offering devotees solace and support in navigating life's uncertainties through the benevolence of the deity.

A noteworthy observation is that the devotees mark reserved spaces in the *ghāt*. They make a pile of mud gathered from the riverside within the marked boundary, smear it with cow dung and call it *bedī*. The *bedī* is awakened by the female worshippers on the day of *kharnā*. The ladies sit in groups and make offerings of fruits, mango leaves, flowers, and *aeypan*, and then sing folk songs in their local dialect, mostly Maithli and Bhojpuri. These ritual practices are directed to awaken the Goddess, Chaṭhī Māi, who will be revisited in the next two days. On the last two days of the *arghya*, that is, *sanjhiyā aragh* and *bihānī aragh*, the *bedī* is again decorated with vermilion, *aeypan*, and garlands of flowers, and the *sūpa* filled with *prasāda* items are placed on it before the worshipper goes down in the river to offer prayers. Rooted in ancient traditions and deeply woven into the region's social fabric, the veneration of Chaṭhī Māi exemplifies the significant elements of a folk festival (Bhattacharya, 2008). In popular folk Hinduism, varied notions of gods and goddesses occur, and they are generally seen as regional deities.

Contrary to the plethora of 'great' gods in the pan-Indian Brahmanical tradition, the regional deities are very close and intimately associated with the devotees. Sometimes, their propitiation may be popular in certain regions, villages or groups. Dālā Chaṭha is one such regional festival prominent in North Indian states. The propitiated Goddess, Chaṭhī Māi, hardly finds a mention in the normative texts but sustains as a living tradition. The elaborate ritual performance is executed without any ritual specialist or formal structure of rites and is conducive to attaining mundane pursuits and checking the unpredictabilities of everyday life. Chaṭhī Māi is often worshipped for specific and personal ends like fertility (mainly for the birth of a male child), good harvest, illness, employment and a prosperous livelihood. Thus, she is benevolent in granting *manauti*<sup>2</sup> (vows) to the worshippers and malevolent in case of neglect or lack of attention to the minutest details of worship and associated rituals.

<sup>2</sup> *Manauti* is the conditional vow that we observed during the festival.

## Unravelling Narratives: Chaṭhī Māī, Ṣaṣṭhī Devī, and the Complex Interplay of Local and Pan-Indian Worship

In Varanasi, a narrative has surfaced among young respondents, drawing parallels between Chaṭhī Māī and Ṣaṣṭhī Devī, primarily picked up from print and social media. The focal point of such narratives is the Kārtika Śukla Ṣaṣṭhī festival, often interpreted as an homage to Ṣaṣṭhī Devī. However, a striking disparity exists, as elderly women do not identify Chaṭhī Māī with Ṣaṣṭhī Devī. Their veneration 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.

The crux of the matter lies in diverging interpretations, with the elderly women emphasizing "Ṣaṣṭhī" as the sixth day for venerating Chaṭhī Māī and the Sun God. Chaṭhī Māī, absent in normative texts, stands apart from Ṣaṣṭhī Devī and related deities, and calling Chaṭhī Māī to be Ṣaṣṭhī Devī is only a recent trend. Media narratives<sup>1</sup> often depict Chaṭha Pūjā as similar to Ṣaṣṭhī Devī, introducing a discord between region-specific belief systems and mainstream representations. This dichotomy underscores the challenge of preserving religious traditions amid evolving cultural contexts, accentuating the need to delineate distinctions between Chaṭhī Māī and Ṣaṣṭhī Devī to contextualize the former's origin within the broader narrative.

Ṣaṣṭhī, a Hindu goddess is worshipped on the sixth day of the lunar month and the sixth day after a child's birth as a protector of children and vegetation (Wilkins, 1900; White, 2003; McDaniel, 2012; Stutley, 2019). According to a Puranic text, Ṣaṣṭhī is believed to be the worthiest of worship among the mother goddesses (Bhattacharji, 1995; Srinivasan, 1997). Some texts identified her with Pārvaṭī – the mother of Skanda, she is also called *Skandamātā* ("Skanda's mother"), who is celebrated on the fifth day of the nine-day-long festivities of *Navarātri* (Stutley, 2019). Other texts like Brahma Vaivarta Purāna and the Devi Bhagavata Purāna describe Ṣaṣṭhī as the daughter of the creator-god Brahma, associated with Mūla Prakṛti, and also Devasenā, sometimes as the divine army (*senā*) personified as a goddess, or, one of the wives of Skanda the war-god (Mani, 1975). She is also revered as a goddess who revived a stillborn child and blessed King Priyavarta (Bhattacharji, 1995). Some texts mention Ṣaṣṭhī as Revatī– one of the eighteen malevolent spirit-followers, collectively called *Skanda graha* (Dimmock, 1962; Tiwari, 1971). Wilkins (1900) categorizes Ṣaṣṭhī as a minor deity and stresses the significance of her role in the lives of married women, emphasizing her association with fertility, childbirth, and the protection of children. Some scholars challenge her classification as a folk goddess, noting her worship by Hindus across rural and urban areas since the Kushan era (White, 2003). Thus, Ṣaṣṭhī emerges as a great goddess through the amalgamation of several characteristics and roles attributed to her in ancient texts. The depiction of Ṣaṣṭhī as a guardian of the universe and a benevolent figure concerned with the welfare of children underscores her overarching significance. Described as a Dhyānamantra—a young woman dispensing blessings and assurance—she embodies divine qualities and radiates glory (Bhattacharji, 1995). The association of Ṣaṣṭhī with Kārtikeya, one of the prominent deities in Hinduism, enhances her stature. Originally worshipped as the six Kṛttikās who nurtured Kārtikeya, later texts elevated her status by identifying her as Kārtikeya's wife. This evolution in her portrayal aligns her with key figures in Hindu mythology, contributing to her recognition as a great goddess (Bhattacharji, 1995). The worship of Ṣaṣṭhī in twelve distinct forms and diverse roles displays her adaptability, versatility, and multifarious character (Sengupta, 2010). In addition, the distinction between Ṣaṣṭhī and Hāritī emphasizes the defensive characteristics of Ṣaṣṭhī (Bhattacharji, 1995). The Goddess Hāritī is an ancient Buddhist deity associated with childbirth. She holds a significant place in religious and cultural contexts, particularly in regions such as Gandhāra and Mathura from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE. Her legend portrays her as a child-eating demoness who underwent conversion by the Buddha (Strong, 1994 p. 36). However, this depiction may reflect a transition wherein revered nature spirits like Hāritī and her consort Pāñcika were integrated into subordinate roles within Buddhist and Brahmanical pantheons. Hāritī's cult

received regular offerings in Buddhist monasteries, becoming closely intertwined with Buddhism and monasticism as they spread across South and Southeast Asia. Presently, remnants of her worship persist throughout South and Southeast Asia (Slusser, 1982: I, 329; Anderson, 1988: 78). However, Hārītī's legendary origins as a child-eating demoness reveal her complex nature. She is closely associated with Śītālā, the Hindu Goddess of smallpox, embodying a duality of being both feared for causing disease and revered as a protector who can spare children. As Strong (1994: 36) writes, Hārītī was probably the object of an ambivalent attitude on the part of her worshippers, like other smallpox goddesses of India. She was feared as the bringer of the disease and harrier of children and also worshipped as the one who could spare and, in this sense, give life to those same children.

Hārītī's principal Hindu counterpart as patroness of childbirth and small children, Ṣaṣṭhī (Haque, 1992, pp. 263–7; and cf. Samuel, 1997: 3), have had a similar background (Gadon, 1997, p. 296), as does Śītālā, and the contemporary Bengali snake goddess Manasā, again both an inflicter of snake bites and protector of children (Haque, 1992, pp. 286–95; Gadon, 1997; Samuel, 1997: 3, 11). This duality is not unique to Hārītī, as other female deities in Indian religious traditions are depicted as half-demons and half-guardians, capable of inflicting harm yet also invoked for protection. This evolution of Ṣaṣṭhī from a malevolent entity to a deity revered for benevolence reflects a transformative narrative, adding depth to her character. This trajectory, her continued worship, and her adaptability in various narratives contribute to her status as a great goddess in the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses.

However, the interpretation of Chaṭhī Māī as a manifestation of Ṣaṣṭhī requires careful examination. Chaṭhī Māī, associated with fertility and progeny, can be considered a "little goddess" popular within specific regional and agricultural contexts. Even though both goddesses are related to childbirth, Chaṭhī Māī's devotion during Chaṭha Pūjā focuses largely on fertility and local customs, distinguishing her from the more universally acknowledged and multifaceted Ṣaṣṭhī Devī. Chaṭhī Māī, in the tapestry of Hindu folklore, has the characteristics of a "little goddess" in the context of regional and localized worship, standing in contrary to the grandeur associated with Ṣaṣṭhī Devī as a great goddess. Chaṭhī Māī's popularity is rooted in agrarian societies, emphasizing fertility and progeny, unlike the pan-Indian recognition and diverse roles of Ṣaṣṭhī. The trajectory of the evolution of Ṣaṣṭhī Devī stands in contrast to Chaṭhī Māī, whose role seems more anchored in the agricultural and fertility contexts, not undergoing a similar evolution to encompass broader benevolent aspects. Also, Ṣaṣṭhī Devī's worship is popular in the Hindu calendar, with specific ritual practices performed monthly and post-childbirth. However, the aniconic nature of Chaṭhī Māī, perceived as dwelling in nature and not sculpted into human statues or images, adds to her identity as a "little goddess," accessible through easily obtainable ritual materials.

### **Chaṭhī Māī and Sun God: The Continuity between Divine Male and Divine Female**

The Sun, symbolizing power, glory, illumination, life force, and vitality, is often associated with a feminine source of life on Earth across various cultures. While many traditions view the Sun as masculine, certain cultures, such as Teutonic, Japanese, Oceanic, Maori, Cherokee, Arunta tribe of Australia, and ancient Indian folklore, attribute feminine qualities to the Sun, portraying it as a force and deity of feminine nature (Singh, 2009). The prevalence of Sun goddesses globally suggests a common theme of feminine force, power, and deity. In Vedic hymns, the Sun is often called Surya and Savitri. The usage of these names varies, with instances of exclusive use and interchangeability, and they are treated as distinct entities. The general understanding is that Savitri is associated with the Sun in its invisible state, while Surya is used when worshippers refer to the Sun in its visible form (Wilkins, 1900). In the Vedic tradition of ancient India, hymns dedicated to Surya, the Sun god, and Savitur, a feminine solar deity, highlight the blending of masculine and

feminine elements. The famous Gayatri mantra exemplifies this perspective, acknowledging the feminine creative force. Chaṭha Pūjā, a festival dedicated to the Sun goddess, is deeply rooted in ancient animistic traditions of India (Singh, 2009). The celebration reflects ancient roots that have persisted despite subsequent cultural assimilation and mythological interpretations.

The narratives registered by respondents spotlight a distinctive perspective within the worship of Chaṭhī Māī and Surya. According to these accounts, the divine mother and Sun god are not perceived as conflicting entities but as complementary forces. Despite the conventional association of the Sun with masculine symbolism in religious traditions, the Chaṭhī Māī worship provides a unique interpretation. The rituals and practices surrounding Chaṭhī Māī and Surya highlight the fundamental interdependence of opposing and harmonious forces, aligning with a universal theme found across diverse cultures. The anthropological nuances of the festival, devoted to the mother goddess, bring forth rituals that explicitly celebrate the feminine principle. Contrarily, worshipping the Sun God Surya introduces a counterpoint connected to masculine attributes such as fire, power, and celestial authority. However, the narratives suggest that, according to respondents, these forces are not in opposition but rather intricately intertwined harmoniously. The shared iconography, similar depictions, and visual parallelism between Surya and the Goddess signify a profound unity—the divine masculine and feminine working as complementary forces within the worship of Chaṭhī Māī.

Another intriguing facet of Chaṭha Pūjā lies in the narrative suggesting as the dual worship of Uṣā and Pratyūṣa, the two wives of Surya. Uṣās (the Dawn) is called his wife, though in another passage, he is said to be produced by the Dawn (Wilkins, 1900). Within the context of Chaṭhī Māī, this narrative introduces a unique ritualistic element where Uṣā and Pratyūṣa are honoured in conjunction with or perceived as manifestations of Chaṭhī Māī herself. Uṣā, symbolizing the first-morning sun ray, assumes a pivotal role in the culminating rituals, while Pratyūṣa, representing the last sun ray of the day, receives reverence during the evening. Chaṭhī Māī, with her ancient roots linked to Uṣās, connects the two major ritual acts of offering arghya to the rising and setting Sun. This distinctive aspect enriches the understanding of Chaṭhī Māī's worship and distinguishes it from other devotional practices. The dual worship includes a holistic representation of the transformative power of the solar cycle and the cyclical nature of life. Chaṭhī Māī transcends a simple solar worship ceremony, reflecting deep-rooted cultural perspectives on time, seasons, and the interconnectedness of existence. The inclusion of Uṣā and Pratyūṣa in the ritualistic observances offers a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics within the religious context of Chaṭhī Māī. Depicting them as integral to the worship of Chaṭhī Māī mirrors cultural attitudes towards femininity, women's roles, and the intricate interplay between the divine and earthly realms. This aspect adds depth to the anthropological discourse, highlighting the intertwining of religious practices with broader cultural narratives specific to Chaṭhī Māī's worship.

These narratives from respondents provide a nuanced perspective on the worship of Chaṭhī Māī and her relationship with male deities, particularly Surya. Worshipers acknowledge Chaṭhī Māī's immanence and power, recognizing her autonomy and independence of action when pleased or angered. However, rather than perceiving her as superior to or independent of male gods, the narratives highlight the continuity between the male and female principles, encapsulated in the phrase '*sab ek hi hai*' (both are one), or sometimes, relating her to Uṣās. Thus, Chaṭhī Māī does not transcend conventional gender roles or symbolize gender equality; instead, the emphasis of such imagination lies on the harmony inherent in the continuity of the divine male and female. This parallel meaning extends to people's beliefs regarding gender roles and responsibilities in both the divine and human realms. Discussions about a woman's duty to her husband, a sister's duty to her brother, a man's responsibilities to his family, or a mother's care for her children seamlessly transition between the divine and human spheres. The narratives suggest that men and women are not perceived as opposing or conflicting entities but as natural complements in the

intricate fabric of life, biologically and socially. While recognizing contextual inequalities and differences, the local perspective views men and women as essential components that function harmoniously within the domestic space.

In the broader context of the worship of Chathī Māi and Surya, these narratives echo a tapestry of devotion that emphasizes the interdependence of opposing yet harmonious forces. The festival, dedicated to the mother goddess, symbolizes celebrating the feminine principle, showcasing a connection with nurturing and life-giving aspects in contrast to prevailing patriarchal structures. With its masculine attributes, the worship of Surya complements this narrative, depicting visual parallelism that suggests a unity between the divine masculine and feminine in their harmonious dance. These narratives enrich anthropological insights, challenging traditional gender stereotypes and highlighting the continuity between the divine male and female. Similarly, in people's beliefs, discussions about a woman's duty to her husband, a sister's duty to her brother, a man's responsibilities to his family, or a mother's care for her children seamlessly move between the divine and human realms. They do not perceive men and women as opposing each other or having conflicting interests; instead, they view them as being in continuance in the world whose differences cannot be transcended. While recognizing their differences and acknowledging contextual inequalities, they see men and women as natural complements in a domestic space. Only when they complement each other biologically and socially does the domestic space function—a perspective deeply embedded in local thinking.

### **Chathī Means Sixth: Deification of *Tithī***

Scholars have highlighted the unique aspect of deifying specific phenomena or individuals within a community as a characteristic of folk culture. This process is closely tied to the communal mythologization of ritual observance (Banerjee, 2002). The nomenclature of Chathā as a religious practice and Chathī Māi primarily stems from elevating a *tithī* to a divine status. Chathā, or Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī, is observed on the sixth day of Kārtika Mās, a month that typically falls in either October or November in the Gregorian Calendar. The sixth day, or *tithī*, is deified and referred to as the Goddess's name, Chathī Māi, leading to the interpretation of Sūrya Ṣaṣṭhī as Chathī. This Goddess differs significantly from the Ṣaṣṭhī described in classical books such as Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa, Devī Bhāgwat Purāṇa, and Mahābhārata. The deification of *tithī* typically occurs on a local level throughout history, with various cultural traditions emerging to track the occurrence of the Ṣaṣṭhī, representing the sixth *tithī* or lunar day as noted by 'thirteen Ṣaṣṭhīs in 12 months' (Sengupta, 2010).

Acknowledging that individuals rely on these traditional techniques rather than a conventional calendrical system based on tithīs or dates is crucial. Several participants mentioned that the celebration traditionally occurs on the sixth day following Dīpāvalī. Traditional timekeeping practices play a vital role in preserving folk worship as a vibrant and enduring tradition within rural and illiterate communities, in contrast to the conventional procedures employed in religious ceremonies.

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 Dusshera, the twentieth day is Diwalī, and the six days after that is Chathā. 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 Dusshera was celebrated on the tenth day, followed by Dīpāvalī on the twentieth day, and Chathā for six days



after that. Using a numerical counting system for marking festivals like Dusshera and Dīpāvalī reflects a localized cultural practice and the role of oral traditions in transmitting knowledge across generations. The mention of counting on fingers shows the community's reliance on practical methods as an adaptive strategy due to the prevalent illiteracy and the absence of standard calendars. The lack of written calendars and the dependence on oral tradition further highlight the socio-economic and educational landscape of the community, which are functional in imagining the deity. As an essential marker of the little tradition, the worship of Chaṭhī Māī can be characterized as a nonliterate tradition of the "unreflective many" rather than the "reflective few," and hence, can be variously called "primitive" and "unevolved" (Singer, 1972; McDaniel, 2004). It, thus, allows us to consider these religious practices as embedded within broader cultural and historical contexts, shaped by factors such as literacy rates, access to formal education, and technological advancements. It encourages a nuanced understanding of how communities develop unique systems to organize and transmit knowledge, adapting to their specific socio-cultural environments, particularly in traditional settings. This tradition, rooted in oral narratives, interpreters, sacred geography, and cyclical holidays, is embedded within broader cultural and historical contexts shaped by factors such as literacy rates, access to formal education, and technological advancements (McDaniel, 2012). It shows how communities in traditional settings develop unique systems to organize and transmit knowledge, adapting to their specific socio-cultural environments that continue primarily through oral narratives.

### Chaṭhī Māī: the Goddess Symbol of Women

Chaṭha Pūjā has been viewed as a female-centric festival that is also a source of empowerment and motivation for women as they navigate away from the margins and establish their active participation in its organization (Hallen, 2020). We observed that when our respondents address Chaṭhī Māī in worship or when they talk of her, the term they use most frequently is Māī or Māīyā, that is, "Mother." There is little indigenous debate regarding the appropriateness of this usage in the various North Indian cities we covered. Described as Māī, she is not merely a figure to be revered but also cherished as a mother or elderly lady. After all, the worshippers recognize her as present in every aspect of creation. She generates and regenerates all life in her particular manifestation, whatever her specific actions are. She is the one who can bless her worshippers with fertility and an auspicious married life and help them overcome the unpredictabilities that hit their lives. Consequently, she is the Mother. Even when a particular manifestation of Māīyā is sometimes associated with Surya, a male god and progeny, she is considered a nurturing Mother.

In the worship of Chaṭhī Māī, the worshippers embrace reciprocal obligations, acknowledging the granted *manauti*. This exchange reflects a unique kinship and affinity with the Goddess, revealing intriguing relational nuances. After the *bihānī aragh*, devotees present her with offerings like sarees, ornaments, and flowers. During *kharnā*, the Goddess is ritually awakened with folk songs and offerings before a *bedī*<sup>3</sup> adorned with cow dung, Ganga water, vermilion, and *aeypān*<sup>4</sup>. Seated before the *bedī*, a group of women makes offerings of fruits, flowers, and sweets, urging Chaṭhī Māī to partake in the feast. A female devotee explains, "We give her fruits, flowers, and *bakhīr*<sup>5</sup>—all her favourite things. We feed her, offer her *arghya*, eat, and distribute the prasāda to family and neighbours." The solicitous act of feeding the Goddess her favourite foods reflects care infused with a nurturing touch. Once the Goddess is believed to have consumed the offerings, the blessed leftovers are distributed among the worshippers, who savour these sweets to manifest the

<sup>3</sup> *Bedi* is a pile of mud gathered from the Ganges, and mixed with cow dung. The *bedi* is bounded by a temporary boundary, which marks the reserved space for the worshippers belonging to a particular family.

<sup>4</sup> *Aeypan* is a mixture of rice flour, turmeric, and water.

<sup>5</sup> *Bakhīr* is a sweet dish made of rice, milk and jaggery

Goddess's grace. Through these relational acts, a deity traditionally perceived as a fierce guardian and almost feral entity becomes entwined in familial dynamics and affectionate caregiving. As devotees assert sociality and intimacy with the Goddess, some of Chaṭhī Māī's characteristic uncanny autonomy appears to diminish.

Following is an interview excerpt of one of our respondents, Saraswati Devi, aged 57, who was interviewed in Assi Ghat on 9th November 2023.

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

In this interview excerpt, the devotees' perception of Chaṭhī Māī emerges as a cultural and symbolic phenomenon deeply rooted in familial and ritualistic practices and places a relatively new narrative alongside other narratives. The maternal characterization of Chaṭhī Māī reflects a cultural schema where deities are integrated into kinship structures, providing devotees with a relational framework to understand and engage with the divine. The establishment of Chaṭhī Māī's familial connection, particularly as a sister to Sun God Surya, shows how mythological narratives serve as cultural templates, shaping social relationships and reinforcing community identity. Including a curse narrative further contributes to the mythopoeic aspect of the Goddess, showcasing how cultural narratives define natural phenomena and embed moral lessons within the local cosmology. The associated ritual practices associated with Chaṭhī Māī embody a symbolic system where actions serve as expressions of devotion and communal identity. Overall, such imagination of Chaṭhī Māī is embedded in a complex interplay of cultural narratives, social structures, and ritual practices, providing devotees with a holistic framework through which they interpret and engage with the divine.

Furthermore, the devotees' relationship with Chaṭhī Māī reveals a dynamic interplay between the local context and the broader religious landscape. Chaṭhī Māī's role as a maternal deity exemplifies the cultural adaptation of religious symbolism to align with societal values, emphasizing nurturing, protective, and motherly qualities. The narrative of the curse and the perpetual states of Surya Bhagwān and Chandra Bhagwān showcases how mythology explains the natural world and embeds moral lessons within the cultural consciousness. This mythopoeic aspect not only serves as a source of collective identity but also reinforces the moral fabric of the community. The ritual practices associated with Chaṭhī Māī, thus, become a communal endeavour, reinforcing social bonds and creating a shared cultural memory. Indeed, the inherent reproduction capacity is viewed as females' primary characteristic. Thus, an infant or a prepubescent girl, a married mother, and an elderly widow are all considered "mothers" and are addressed as Māīyā or Māī in the local dialects of the region. The utilization of this term also emphasizes their reproductive potential as well as specific instances of motherhood. There is another, perhaps more instrumental, reason for using the term Māīyā for goddesses who are explicitly violent and do not appear to be maternal. This has to do with the perceptions regarding her power to destroy. Thus, these ritual practices to worship Chaṭhī Māī are like cultural guidelines that provide devotees with a set of symbols, narratives, and practices through which they negotiate their relationship with the divine and navigate their place within the broader socio-religious landscape.

When her worshippers recognize her immanence, it is as Māī or Mother. In this maternal aspect, she becomes approachable, and they can come to her without fear, doubt, or hesitation. Hence, the common people, engaged in the routines of daily life, unequivocally perceive Māī in all her forms—both the gentle and the formidable—as Mother. Even though she may be awe-inspiring as a mother, they assert that she can never be fearsome to her children. By addressing her as Māī, her devotees assert their connection with her. They argue that recognizing Chaṭhī Māī as a mother strongly and irresistibly prompts her to recall her maternal and nurturing duties toward her children, compelling her never to turn away from their requests. Therefore, such perceptions highlight the intricate connections between religious beliefs, cultural narratives, and ritual practices within a specific community. The Chaṭhī Māī becomes a focal point through which devotees construct and reinforce their cultural identity, negotiate social relationships, and make sense of the world around them.

### **Chaṭhī Māī as Mother Nature: An Eco-friendly Aspect of the Goddess''**

The veneration of Chaṭhī Māī during the Chaṭha festival assumes a profound dual role, embodying both a nurturing mother figure and a representation of Mother Nature. Several studies posit Chaṭha as an eco-friendly festival (Badikilaya, 2019; Singh et al., 2016; Sood, 2016; Pahariya, 2020; Singh & Behera, 2023). Such traditional festivals play an important role in tropical fruits' conservation and sustainable use (Nath et al., 2016). Deeply rooted in folk culture, the festival sustains the basic concept of worship with the combination of biodiversity conservation, social integrity and local livelihood development (Kumar, 2012). The media coverage reflects a growing interest in showcasing how Chaṭha Pūjā is a compelling example of cultural practices harmonizing with nature, offering readers insights into the festival's eco-conscious ethos.<sup>ii</sup>

This cultural phenomenon provides insights into the intricate relationship between human communities and the environment, illustrating a unique symbiosis. The absence of traditional temples in the festival's rituals, replaced by ceremonies on riverbanks, signifies a deliberate choice of sacred space that symbolizes a direct communion with the natural world. What sets it apart is the conscientious use of natural elements in its rituals. Bamboo products, essential to the ceremonies, are chosen for their biodegradability, reflecting an inherent understanding of environmental sustainability among devotees. The eco-friendly ethos extends beyond materials to the very location of the rituals, emphasizing a harmonious coexistence with nature. Chaṭhī Māī, in this context, transforms from a mere deity into a symbolic representation of Earth, underscoring the interconnectedness of human life with the broader ecosystem. The rituals centred around the worship of the Sun God and the Gaṅgā acknowledge their pivotal role of the Sun in sustaining life and agricultural fertility. This acknowledgement is not merely a religious sentiment but a reflection of the profound dependence of human cultures on the environment. Also, the conscious avoidance of synthetic materials and machinery during the rituals exemplifies a cultural commitment to minimize environmental impact. In a world where many festivals contribute to environmental degradation, the festival to venerate Chaṭhī Māī stands out as a cultural narrative where religiosity seamlessly integrates with ecological stewardship. It is a living example of how a community's religious beliefs can harmonize with environmental consciousness, creating a holistic cultural narrative that fosters a deep respect for Mother Nature.

### **Chaṭhī Māī: A Benevolent and Malevolent Deity**

Devotion to Chaṭhī Māī is not a simple endeavour, as the Goddess demands great penance and unwavering commitment from her worshippers. Far from being a benevolent and easily appeased deity, Chaṭhī Māī is often thought of as a formidable force, requiring arduous rituals and a deep

well of perseverance to gain her favour. The veneration of Chaṭhī Māī entails rigorous acts of devotion, exhausting both the body and spirit of her devotees. In this challenging process, the Goddess is believed to reveal her true nature, which is both potent and demanding. The difficulty in pleasing Chaṭhī Māī is viewed as a test of the devotee's sincerity and dedication, reinforcing the idea that the Goddess's blessings are not easily attained but must be earned through profound acts of reverence and endurance. Thus, venerating Chaṭhī Māī makes Chaṭha pūjā, *kaṣṭi kā parv* (a hard-to-observe festival), owing to the long hours of fasting, penance, and strict adherence to purity and cleanliness.

*Pahile Pahil Ham Kahine, Chaṭhī Māīyā Vrat Tohār*

*Kariha Kshamā Chaṭhī Māīyā, Bhool-Chuk Galati Hamār*

*Sab Ke Balakavā Ke Dihā, Chaṭhī Māīyā Mamatā-Dulār*

*Piyā Ke Sanaihā Banaihā, Māīyā Diha Sukh-Sār*

*Nariyal-Kerava Ghoudavā, Sajal Nadiyā Kinār*

*Suniha Arāj Chaṭhī Māīyā, Badhe Kul-Parivār*

The above folk song predominantly emphasizes the benevolent qualities of Chaṭhī Māī, exploring potential malevolent aspects of the Goddess. One avenue for such interpretation could be rooted in the dual nature of natural elements associated with Chaṭhī Māī, such as waterbodies and the Sun. While these elements sustain life, they also possess destructive potential, leading to interpretations of the Goddess embodying nurturing and potentially malevolent forces in nature. This duality may reflect communities' complex relationship with the natural world. Additionally, narratives that portray Chaṭhī Māī as an enforcer of justice, capable of punitive actions, or one who tests the devotion of her followers through challenges could contribute to a perception of her more demanding or potentially malevolent side. The exploration of sacrificial symbolism or rituals involving severe penance and rigorous maintenance of purity also add complexity to the deity's character. The phrase "*bhūl-chūk galatī hamār*" (forgive our mistakes) suggests a recognition of human fallibility and a plea for forgiveness. This reflects a cultural understanding that individuals may make mistakes, and seeking redemption through worship and rituals is a way to maintain harmony within the community and with the divine. References to family blessings, such as "*piyā ke snehiyā banaiha*" (become the beloved of the husband) and "*godhi ke balakwā ke diha*" (give the child on the lap), highlight the importance of family and fertility. Chaṭhī Māī is invoked for blessings related to family prosperity, emphasizing cultural norms and expectations regarding familial well-being. The mention of "*sājal nadiyā kināra*" (by the banks of the pure river) and "*ghāṭ sajawanī manohar*" (decorating the riverside beautifully) indicates the significance of specific locations and spaces in the worship of Chaṭhī Māī. These spaces become sacred during the rituals, emphasizing the intersection of the natural and the divine, and little carelessness in maintaining the ritual purity in venerating her reportedly annoys the Goddess.

Many of our respondents emphasized the kindness of Chaṭhī Māī when delineating the diverse manifestations, considering them distinct yet not necessarily contradictory. Chaṭhī Māī is depicted as benevolent, possessing a *śakti* or divine power to fulfil the vows of her worshippers. However, this same *śakti* is also evident in her expressions of anger. The question arises: How can a goddess, revered as a mother, embody both aspects? To address the prayers and vows of her worshippers, she must possess both firm and demanding, as well as indulgent and forgiving qualities. This duality is crucial for her devotees cum children to understand the intricacies of the real world. Our interviews distinctly revealed the Goddess's ability to wield her destructive capacity with discernment, distinguishing deliberate actions from indiscriminate ones. Chaṭhī Māī is never indiscriminate in her consequential annoyance; she does not target the innocent. Instead, her

victims are consistently individuals who, through ignorance, disrupt the precision of ritual activities.

Additionally, she seldom exhibits unbridled wrath but expresses her anger with measured control. The act of making a *manauti* can appease her. In essence, Chaṭhī Māyā emerges as a goddess characterized by a unique and nuanced nature.

We recorded the following folk song sung by a group of women while performing Chaṭha Pūjā rituals in Assi Ghāt on 9th November 2022.

ऊ जे छठ मैया सुतालिन अटारिया

जाटा देली छितराए।

तू तो जुग जुग जिया हे सेवकवा!

जाटा लिहा ले बटोरा।

तोहरा बहूवा के भरो रे सिंदूर,

गोदा लल्ला से भरी!

We translated the song as

*She who is the Chath Maiya, sleeping on the terrace,*

*She spread her hair,*

*O servant, may you live long!*

*That you combed my hair*

*Fill the parting of your wife's head with vermilion,*

*May you be blessed with a son*

The devotional song explains that Chaṭhī Māyā is asleep on her balcony, and the servants, that is, the devotees, detangle her hair. Impressed with their devotion, she blesses her devotees with long life and children.

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 nahae-khae day of Chaṭha Pūjā. Earlier, we did not do Chaṭha Pūjā. Then someone said something; I had to work so I did not listen to him, we were coming from home. Think that later I will listen to him 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. 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. The woman next door had asked for some help, so I did that work. And then, the next year, I started doing Chaṭha. Then I had a son, a daughter, and a grandson, and I started celebrating Chaṭha for everyone. Such is the power in Chaṭhī Māī.

This episode articulates a fundamental notion: the impossibility of being or having a “significantly angry mother”. The worshippers believe implicitly that as a mother, Chaṭhī Māī can do no significant harm to her human children. Admittedly, Chaṭhī Māī is unpredictable, yet for the worshippers, she does not represent the unmanageable Goddess. By all accounts, Chaṭhī Māī has some malevolent aspects and is a short-tempered goddess, but her worshippers seek and find reassurance in her by approaching and addressing her as “Māī” and also appeasing her by making vows. In so doing, the worshippers tap into sensibilities that cannot help but be forgiving. However

unhappy and angry she may be, the implicit motherhood in her calms her down and makes her receptive to the laments of her worshippers, akin to children, and thus, makes her respond to their prayers.

Likewise, in our field works too, implicit indications are pointing towards potential malevolent aspects of Chaṭhī Māī. While the central theme revolves around the necessity for precision and strict adherence to rituals during Chaṭha pūjā, subtle elements suggest a sense of caution and apprehension related to the deity's response to mistakes.

For instance, one of our 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 Chhath 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. And but in the end what can we do? We cry out with folded hands, holding our forehead a lot, rubbing our noses a lot; please forgive 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 expression "if a mistake is made, then Chaṭhī Māī shows you immediately" implies a swift and direct reaction, alluding to the possibility of quick divine retribution or strict enforcement of rules, thereby hinting at a potentially stern or punitive aspect of Chaṭhī Māī. Also, the expression, "if something happens during Chaṭha Pūjā., she shows it!" suggests exclusive scrutiny by Chaṭhī Māī during the festival, emphasizing her distinctive role and authority during this ritual period. The cautionary note against everyday practices, such as singing or mentioning the Goddess's name outside of the Chaṭha Pūjā context, adds an element of exclusivity and reverence, possibly stemming from a desire to avoid unintended consequences or displeasure from Chaṭhī Māī in daily life. Also, the reference to specific rituals and prohibitions, like avoiding non-vegetarian food, stresses a sense of reverence and fear associated with the Goddess's potential displeasure. Overall, these nuanced aspects contribute to a multifaceted understanding of Chaṭhī Māī's character within the cultural framework of Chaṭha Pūjā, encompassing both benevolent and potentially malevolent dimensions that shape the devotees' practices and beliefs.

### **Chaṭhī Māī in the *lok'parva* of Bihar**

During our 2023 fieldwork in Jafarnagar Panchayat, Munger (South Bihar), a local saying, "There are two burdens on earth—the ox and the men," emerged as we interacted with the elderly locals. The expression, embedded in local beliefs, finds its roots in the cultural practice of the observance of Chaṭha Pūjā by Sītā Mahārānī- typically the fasting ritual on the sixth day of the month of Kārtika. What makes this narrative intriguing is its connection to Sītā Mahārānī, a human figure from Hindu mythology who is locally perceived as Chaṭhī Māī. This association shows how the adoration of a historical figure like Sita transforms into an identity marker for the people of Bihar.

The narrative unfolds with Sītā Mahārānī's fasting, an act aimed at absolving Lord Rama of the perceived sin of killing Ravana, a Brahmin. The locals view Sītā Mahārānī not merely as a historical character but as Chaṭhī Māī, emphasizing the fusion of human and divine in their cultural practices. She, being a woman, has all the powers to expiate her husband, Rama, of the sins. 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. As the narrative

progresses, parallels between Rāma's actions and their consequences are drawn. Post-Dīpāvalī, upon Rāma's return to Ayodhya, discernible changes occurred in his skin, attributed to the process of expiating the sin associated with Rāvana's demise. Following the victory over Rāvana, Rāma himself suffered from leprosy. Local lore holds that Mudgal Ṛṣi, residing in Mainā Parvat, had the remedy to this ailment. Sītā Mahārānī, revered as Chaṭhī Māī, becomes instrumental in curing Rāma of leprosy, symbolizing the liberation from the perceived sin's aftereffects. And the episode leads to the Sītā Charan Mandir in the said area. This local folklore not only unravels layers of religious narratives but also 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 re-defines the extent of women's religiosity in elaborating how only a wife possess the potential to free her man from the burdens of everyday sins. According to them, Sītā had all the powers to destroy Rāvana with a single gaze, but only the fate did give Rāma a chance to kill Rāvana. In Munger, thus, the local narrative of associating Sītā Mahārānī with Chaṭhī Māī reflects a distinctive way of interpreting cultural and religious beliefs. This interweaving of historical figures with divine significance shapes the community's understanding of morality and identity, showcasing how local narratives revere a human figure as a manifestation of the divine in the context of Chaṭhī Māī.

The folk songs dedicated to Chaṭhī Māīyā too, provide a window into the intricate tapestry of cultural, religious, and social dimensions within Bihar. It becomes apparent that the celebration of Chaṭhī Māī is not merely a religious observance but a cultural marker woven into the fabric of the people's identity of the region.

कबहुँ ना छूटी छठि मइया, हमनी से बरत तोहार

तहरे भरोसा हमनी के, छूटी नाही छठ के त्योहार

गोदिया भराईल छठी मइय्या, बाटे राऊर किरपा अपार

चाहें रहब देसवा बिदेसवा, छठ करब हम हर बार

डूबतो सुरुज के जे पूजे, इहे बाटे हमर बिहार

फलवा दउरवा सजाके, अईनी हम घाट पे तोहार

दिहनी अरघ छठी मईया, करीं हमर आरती स्वीकार

*Never will we miss Chaṭhī Māīyā, to fast in your festival*

*We trust you; we shall not miss the Chaṭha festival*

*Fill my lap, Chaṭhī Māīyā; your grace is immense.*

*Whether in the country or abroad, I will do Chaṭha every time.*

*Whoever worships the setting sun, this is our Bihar.*

*Decorating the fruit basket, I came to your ghāt*

*I am offering you arghya; accept my offerings*

The commitment to worship Chaṭhī Māī, regardless of geographical location, illustrates the resilience of cultural traditions in the face of migration and globalization. The song shows the diasporic community's dedication to preserving and passing down their cultural heritage, maintaining a connection to their roots despite physical distance. Thus, venerating the Goddess on the day is how the region's people perform their identity and, thus, community values.

It further symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, tying together agricultural practices, fertility, and the divine. This symbolism reinforces the interconnectedness of the people with their environment, highlighting how cultural practices often emerge from and reflect the local ecology and way of life. Thus, the folk song paints a vivid picture of how Chaṭhī Māyā and the Chaṭha festival serve as conduits for expressing and reinforcing cultural identity, transcending religious boundaries to become a deeply ingrained aspect of the socio-cultural landscape of Bihar. It serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of cultural practices, evolving and thriving in response to changing social and geographical contexts.

बन परदेसिया जे गइला शहर तू

बिसरा के लोग आपन गाँव के घर तू

उहे घरवा, उहे गलियां पुकारे

ओ.. छठी मइया रस्ता निहारे

*Becoming a foreigner you went to the city*

*Forgetting people and your village home,*

*The same house calls, the same street calls*

*O.. Chaṭhī Māi looks the way and waits for you.*

The folk song mentions Chaṭhī Māyā as a significant and reassuring presence for individuals amidst migration and urbanization. Becoming a "*paradesiyā*" in the city, the protagonist communicates nostalgia and a disconnect from the rural roots left behind. Chaṭhī Māyā symbolizes a beacon of continuity, with the same house and street invoking a longing for the familiar. The festival's communal aspect is highlighted through familial relationships, showcasing how Chaṭhī Māyā plays a unifying role in the face of physical separation. Hence, these narratives capture the popular perception of Chaṭhī Māyā as more than a religious figure; she becomes a source of cultural continuity and religious grounding for people traversing the shifts brought about by migration and urbanization. The folk song serves as a reflection of unremitting cultural and emotional ties to one's roots, with Chaṭhī Māyā epitomizing the bridge between the past and the present, offering a sense of belongingness amidst the transformations of modern life.

## Conclusion

The various narratives surrounding Chaṭhī Māi play a significant role in sustaining her worship as a living tradition. These narratives contribute to the adaptability and resonance of the tradition within the community, adding to the diverse ways worshippers imagine the Goddess. The absence of normative texts enhances the popular imagination, allowing for diverse localized interpretations and expressions of devotion. Associations with the Sun god Surya and the divine male-female dynamics reflect syncretism, offering worshippers various entry points into the tradition. Depicting Chaṭhī Māi as a mother and nature establishes emotional connections, strengthening a personal and familial devotion that transcends formal religious structures. The duality of malevolence and benevolence adds complexity, making the worship dynamic and responsive to the unpredictabilities and challenges of life. This multifaceted nature allows individuals to seek protection and guidance according to their needs and circumstances. Linking Chaṭhī Māi to the regional identity of Bihar integrates the tradition into the fabric of daily life, promoting a sense of belonging, performance of identity, and shared cultural heritage. This regional connection helps maintain the relevance of the worship within the community and fosters a collective identity.



Thus, the significance of these narratives lies in their role in shaping fluid, adaptive, and profoundly integrated religious practices directed to the Goddess. The multiplicity of themes ensures that the worship of Chaṭhī Māi remains a vibrant cultural and religious tradition reflective of the lived experiences and cultural nuances of the community. The evolving narratives surrounding Chaṭhī Māi play a pivotal role in maintaining her relevance and popularity by fostering adaptability, addressing contemporary issues, and allowing for the personalization of devotion. This dynamic nature nurtures the tradition to resonate across generations and cater to the changing needs of the worshipping community. The inclusivity facilitated through evolving narratives ensures that Chaṭhī Māi's worship remains accessible to a diverse audience, while cultural integration reinforces its significance within the broader social context. Also, the dynamic symbolism associated with Chaṭhī Māi allows the deity to embody various meanings, enriching its versatility in different life situations. Studying these evolving narratives opens avenues for further research, delving into the nuanced ways in which lived religions adapt to societal changes, the impact of evolving narratives on community dynamics, and the role of cultural integration in sustaining the popularity of religious traditions. Further exploration could further examine how individual worshippers interpret and incorporate these evolving narratives into their religious practices.

## References

- Anderson, M.M. (1988). *The Festivals of Nepal*. Calcutta: Rupa and Co.
- Badikilaya, G. (2019). Chhath Puja: A Study in Religious and Cultural Tourism. *Atna Journal of Tourism Studies*, 14(2), 71–76.
- Banerjee, S. (2002). *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal*. Seagull Books.
- Bhattacharji, S. (1995). *Legends of Devi*. Orient Blackswan.
- Bhattacharya, B. (2008). Festivals and Sacred Days. *Festivals In Indian Society (2 Vols. Set)*, p. 159. In *Festivals in Indian Society*, vol. 2, by Usha Sharma
- Bratton, S. P. (2020). *Religion and the environment: An Introduction*. Routledge.
- Dimock Jr., E. C. (1962). The Goddess of Snakes in Medieval Bengali Literature. *History of Religions*, 1(2), 307–321.
- Gadon, E.W. (1997). The Hindu Goddess Shasthi: protector of women and children. In *From the Realm of the Ancestors: An Anthology in Honor of Marija Gimbutas*, edited by J. Marler. Manchester, CT: Knowledge, Ideas and Trends, Inc.
- Hallén, A. (2020). *Female Emancipation or Pativrata?: A Qualitative Study of Women's Leadership in Rituals at Assi Ghat, Varanasi*.
- Jha, C. (2009). *Worship of Sun God (Chhath Puja) Blessings for liberated untouchables* New Delhi: Sulabh International Social Service Organisation.
- Josephson, R. 1985. Swoyambu Historical Pictorial: A Satya Ho Book [summarised by N.B. Bajracharya from a Nepali text by H. Shakya, edited and arranged by R. Josephson]. Kathmandu: Satya Ho.
- Kumar, S. (2012). Role of Folk Media in Nation-building. *Voice of Research*, 1(2), 1–6.
- Mani, V. (1975). *Puranic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary With Special Reference to the Epic and Puranic Literature*. 1975. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 354.
- McDaniel, J. (2004). Offering Flowers. *Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2004)*.
- McDaniel, J. (2012). *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion*. SUNY Press.

- Pahariya, V. K., & Patil, A. S. (2020). Impact of Water Body for Pilgrim Cities in India. *International Journal of Research in Engineering, Science, and Management*, 3(9), 44–47.
- Pandey, A., Singh, A., Singh, S., Kumar, A., Shahi, H., & Kumari, A. (2019). Impact of Chhath Festival on Health-seeking Behaviour of Local Population. *Int J Community Med Public Health*, 6–8.
- Samuel, G. (1997). Women, goddesses and auspiciousness in South Asia. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*, 2(2), 1–23.
- Sengupta, S. (2010). Śaṣṭhī: Between the Forest and the Lying-in-Chamber: The Formation of a Goddess. *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 3(2), 216–237.
- Singer, M. B. (1972). *When a great tradition modernizes: An anthropological approach to Indian civilization*.
- Singh, R. P. (2009). Ethno-geography of the Sun Goddess Festival, 'Chhatha' in Bhojpur Region, From Locality to Universality. *Man in India*, 89(1-2), pp. 103–120.
- Singh, A., Nath, V., Kumar, S., Singh, B. S., & Reddy, B. M. C. (2016). 17 The role of a traditional festival, Chhath Puja, in the conservation and sustainable use of tropical fruits. *Tropical Fruit Tree Diversity*, p. 217.
- Singh, D., & Behera, H. C. (2023). The Water Cult and Conservation in India. *Indigenous and Local Water Knowledge, Values, and Practices* (pp. 307–315). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Slusser, M.S. (1982). *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Strong, J. S. (1994). *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia*. Motilal Banarsidass Publications.
- Sood, S. (2016). *Revisiting Indianness in the Poetry of Arbind Kumar Choudhary, Poetry*, pp. 66–67.
- Srinivasan, Doris M. (1997). "Śaṣṭhī". *Many heads, arms, and eyes: origin, meaning, and form of multiplicity in Indian art*. Brill, pp. 333-5.
- Stutley, M. (2019). *The illustrated dictionary of Hindu iconography*. Routledge.
- Tiwari, J. N. (1971). *Studies in goddess cults in Northern India with special reference to the first seven centuries AD*. The Australian National University (Australia).
- Wilkins, W. J. (1900). *Hindu Mythology, Vedic and Purānic*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink; Bombay: Thacker; London: W. Thacker.
- White, D. G. (2003). *Kiss of the yogini: "Tantric sex" in its South Asian contexts*. University of Chicago Press.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.sahapedia.org/chhath-puja-origin-of-the-festival-and-the-story-of-devasena>  
<https://sojournwithsan.com/2020/11/26/invoking-the-sun-god-for-life-and-sustenance-the-chhath-poojasangeeta-venkatesh/>  
<https://organiser.org/2022/10/28/97341/bharat/chhath-puja-2022-history-significance-rituals/>  
<https://festivler.com/festival/india/chhath-puja-festival/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/chhath-the-most-eco-friendly-festival-environmentalists/articleshow/55266563.cms>;  
[https://web.archive.org/web/20170801122445/https://www.telegraphindia.com/1141028/jsp/bihar/story\\_18972561.jsp](https://web.archive.org/web/20170801122445/https://www.telegraphindia.com/1141028/jsp/bihar/story_18972561.jsp)