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Chhath Mahāparva: A socio-historical study of folk continuity and cultural civilization in North India

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Abstract
Chhath Mahāparva is not just a festival; it is a living symbol of India's folk civilization and its deep emotional connection with nature, folk language and community life. Rooted in the fertile cultural belt of Magadh, Mithila and the Terai region, this tradition reflects the gratitude of ordinary people towards the forces of nature like Sun, Water and Earth that sustain existence. Unlike the elaborate priest led rituals of the Vedic tradition, Chhath is simple, direct and inclusive. It belongs to the people who live close to the soil and the river, to women who bear the weight of faith through silence, fasting with devotion. Every element of the festival as its language, songs, rituals, prasad elements etc. speaks of a civilization that finds divinity in nature and dignity in restraint. The words chhaṭh, ṭhekua, kharnā and arghya come from the Prakrit and Bhojpuri tongues not Sanskrit showing how spirituality survives most authentically in the language of the people. The four-day sequence of Nahay-Khay, Kharnā, Sandhyā Arghya, and Uṣā Arghya forms a journey of purification and moral renewal turning the everyday into the sacred. The act of offering water to the setting and rising sun is both a prayer and a promise a gesture of balance, gratitude and hope. Women, at the center of this festival, represent strength, purity, compassion leading rituals that affirm both equality and ecological awareness. This study views Chhath Mahāparva as a lived folk tradition that preserves ancient moral-environmental wisdom through everyday practices rather than scriptures. Using a socio-historical and linguistic approach supported by field observation, the research explores how Chhath continues to connect individuals, families and the natural world in one moral rhythm. It shows that Chhath is not a ritual of the past but a living heritage that keeps alive the spirit of harmony, humility and collective humanity in North Indian civilization.

Keywords: Chhath Mahāparva, folk civilization, ecological ethics, gender spirituality, linguistic continuity, cultural resilience, Indian Sociology

Introduction

Chhath Mahāparva holds a special place in the moral and cultural imagination of eastern India. Over time it has grown into one of the most unifying ecologically rooted festivals of the subcontinent which Celebrated with deep devotion across Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and the Terai belt of Nepal and now among Indians living abroad Chhath transcends geography to express a continuous civilizational spirit blending the ethics of agrarian life with modern social values. Each year, countless devotees gather along water bodies facing the horizon to offer arghya to the setting and rising sun, a gesture of gratitude for life, sustenance and light. What distinguishes Chhath is its simplicity and shared devotion as it requires no priest, no temple but faith and collective discipline. Women lead the observance but the entire community participates, turning personal vows into a shared moral and ecological act. Yet despite its grandeur, Chhath remains underexplored in academic discourse often mentioned merely as a 'folk solar ritual.' What is missing is a sociological understanding that places Chhath within the larger story of Indian civilization where faith merges with nature, gender roles gain sacred expression and language becomes a vessel of collective memory. The need for a socio-historical approach arises from this absence of analytical depth. Most ritual studies in India have privileged textual or Brahmanical frameworks thereby overlooking the autonomous moral world of lokāyana the people's traditions that sustain everyday religiosity outside formal theology. Chhath, as a festival without an officiating priest or canonical scripture challenges these boundaries by rooting sacredness in lived experience. It simultaneously operates as a ritual of devotion (bhakti), an ecological dialogue, an ethical performance through which individuals enact self-purification, restraint and gratitude toward the natural world. These practices do not conform to the sacred-profane dichotomy that Durkheim (1915/1995) [6] described; rather they merge both realms into a shared moral order that reaffirms social solidarity. Here, the sacred does not descend from divine command but emerges from collective emotions, embodied gestures, disciplined participation etc. that bind individuals through belonging. Standing in still waters at dawn or dusk, silently watching the Sun's reflection shimmer across the flowing surface, the devotee becomes part of a living cosmology- a union of body, nature and spirit. This embodied devotion echoes what Weber (1922/1963) [19] termed 'inner-worldly asceticism,' where spiritual elevation arises not from renunciation but from disciplined engagement with worldly life. From a civilizational standpoint, Chhath Mahāparva articulates a dialogue between tradition and modernity, ritual and rationality, myth and morality. Clifford Geertz's (1973) [9] notion of religion as 'a system of symbols that act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in people' is deeply relevant here. The symbolic vocabulary of Chhath like the hand-shaped ṭhekua, the bamboo ḍālās filled with fruits, the flickering lamps along the water's edge communicates moral and emotional meanings that transcend verbal theology. Each gesture within Chhath embodies a cosmology in which ethical life and natural order are inseparable. The offering of water to the Sun signifies not mere worship but reciprocity- the acknowledgment that human existence thrives only through

harmonious coexistence with elemental forces. This ecological symbolism reflects a sophisticated moral consciousness embedded in India's folk traditions which sociology must interpret as a source of social philosophy rather than superstition. Equally significant is Chhath's democratization of spirituality. The festival dismantles hierarchies of caste-class- gender creating a moral community united by discipline and devotion. For four days, social divisions between rich and poor, urban-rural, dissolve at the ghāts where all stand as equals before nature's immensity. Women often excluded from formal religious hierarchies emerge here as spiritual anchors, performing vrata (vows) that embody physical endurance, emotional strength with moral purity. Through fasting, silence and service they transform domestic space into a site of cosmic dialogue. This dynamic resonates with Durkheim's (1915/1995) [6] view of religion as a reaffirmation of collective values which here expressed through equality, purity, and harmony within emotionally charged rituals. In this sense Chhath represents a form of civil religion where shared moral values assume sacred form. The social function of this unity is profound as it renews community ties at a moment when modernization, migration and individualism have weakened traditional solidarities. Chhath's linguistic and musical forms further reinforce its identity as a people's religion. Its ritual lexicon chhaṭh, kharnā, ṭhekua, arghya emerges not from Sanskrit but from the living tongues of the region, particularly Prakrit and Bhojpuri, marking a linguistic assertion of folk identity. Rajendra Prasad Singh (2023) observes that this non-Sanskritic vocabulary embodies a pre-Vedic cultural consciousness that values accessibility over hierarchy. In the Bhojpuri verse, "*अरघ देहल छठी मइया, सुरुज देवता हँसी-हँसी आइलें*" (aragh dehal chhaṭhī maiyā, suruj devatā haṃsi-haṃsi āilen "When offerings are made to Mother Chhathi, the Sun-God arrives smiling"), ritual solemnity yields to affection and reciprocity. Such vernacular expressions illustrate what Geertz (1973) [9] called 'local knowledge' a mode of meaning-making grounded in lived experience rather than abstract doctrine. Here, language becomes more than a medium of communication; it turns into a vessel of cultural memory carrying ethical and emotional values across generations and reaffirming the living bond between community, nature and the sacred. This study, therefore, seeks to address two interrelated questions. The first asks how Chhath conveys a continuity between ancient folk ethics and modern civilization; the second explores how language, landscape and lived religion together shape its identity. The first question deals with historical depth like how agrarian virtues of restraint and gratitude gradually evolved into collective rituals of moral discipline. The second turns to the socio-cultural form how the physical world of rivers, sunlight, cultivated fields together with the linguistic world of songs, prayers and idioms creates a sacred ecology of belonging. Through these inquiries, Chhath appears not as a static ritual preserved by habit but as a living moral institution that links history and environment with social organization in a single rhythm of continuity and change. Methodologically, this study adopts a multi-dimensional approach that combines historical sociology, linguistic and iconographic analysis and ethnographic observation. Historical sociology helps trace the journey of Chhath from a localized rural observance to a recognized civilizational heritage placing it within broader currents of social transformation. Linguistic and iconographic studies uncover the semiotic structures through which ritual artifacts such as the 'manauti-stūpa' or the eight-spoked 'arghya' encode layers of symbolic meaning and transmit them across generations. Ethnographic observation, especially of women's participation and community organization reveals the emotional labor, ethical discipline, ecological sensitivity embodied in practice. Together, these perspectives allow a comprehensive reading of Chhath as both a moral economy and a symbolic enactment of Indian civilization. Ultimately, Chhath Mahāparva must be understood not as an isolated ritual but as a living social text, an enactment through which ordinary people translate moral ideals into daily life. It stands at the intersection of religion and reason, devotion and environment, personal vow and collective identity. By bringing classical sociological theories into dialogue with indigenous categories of experience, this study attempts to restore Chhath to its rightful place within the sociology of Indian civilization, as a festival where the sacred is born of simplicity, where faith takes the form of ecological ethics and where folk life continues to carry forward the timeless prayer of the ancient verse "*सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः*" (sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ, sarve santu nirāmayāḥ "May all be happy, may all be free from illness"). It is a benediction not only for human wellbeing but for the harmony of the entire cosmos too.

Historical and Geographical Context

The historical and geographical canvas of Chhath Mahāparva is inseparable from the fertile plains and river valleys of North India where human civilization first learned to live in dialogue with nature through rituals of gratitude, purification and renewal. Its heart lies in the vast corridor stretching from Nepal's Terai plains to the Magadh-Mithila region of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh- an expanse celebrated for both agrarian abundance and spiritual vitality. Ancient texts often described this region as the 'land of rivers and learning,' a cradle of Indian civilization that fostered diverse religious traditions, evolving languages and enduring folk practices (Thapar, 2002) [17]. In this landscape nature itself became a sacred manuscript as rivers spoke as teachers, sunlight symbolized consciousness, the soil embodied sustenance. Within such a milieu, Chhath did not emerge as an institutionalized cult but as a seasonal act of reverence toward the elements that ensure collective survival. It belonged to the people like farmers, artisans and women whose daily struggle for sustenance cultivated a worldview anchored in balance and reciprocity. The agrarian economy of the middle Gangetic plains, dependent on the rhythmic harmony of sun, monsoon and soil, naturally gave rise to rituals centered on fertility, harvest, water. The observance of Chhath after the Kārtika harvest when rivers rest in clarity and the air turns translucent, mirrors an ancient ecological awareness and a civilizational rhythm of renewal rooted in this very landscape (Saraswati, 1984) [13]. The cultural geography of Chhath aligns remarkably with the sacred topography of early Indian civilization. The Terai plains of Nepal regarded as the festival's cradle also mark the birthplace of the Buddha at Lumbini; Magadh, where the Ganga meets the Son, witnessed his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya; and the broader region encompassing Vaishali and Sarnath became luminous centers of ethical renewal and civic religion.

These were not exclusively Buddhist territories but vibrant cultural ecologies where multiple faiths converged around the sanctity of rivers, trees and sunlight. This geographical overlap suggests that the ritual imagination behind Chhath arose not from sectarian doctrine but from a shared ecological and moral consciousness. The Sun (Sūrya), water (jala) and earth (pṛithvī) the three elements central to Chhath are equally dominant in the iconography and philosophy of early Indian cosmology. Archaeological findings from Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali etc. reveal terracotta votive mounds, stūpas and folk shrines dedicated to fertility, light and protection indicating that offerings to natural forces predate the Vedic textual tradition and reflect an older agrarian cosmology (Willis, 2009) [20]. Many of these artifacts discovered near riverbanks affirm that devotion in ancient Bihar was both spatially and emotionally embedded in ecology, a continuity that Chhath still embodies. The festival's enduring association with rivers such as the Ganga, Gandak and Kosi further attests to its ecological origins. Rising from the Himalayas and flowing through Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh these rivers have long nourished agrarian life. Within local cosmology they are not inert waterways but living presences mothers and moral witnesses linking human action with cosmic consequence. The act of standing waist-deep in their waters at sunrise or sunset becomes a gesture of surrender and acknowledgment transforming the riverbank into a threshold between the material and the spiritual a moment that Victor Turner might call a 'liminal space of communitas.' The arghya or water offering embodies this relationship perfectly as to return a handful of water to the river is both ecological reciprocity and spiritual humility. As a Bhojpuri folk song beautifully proclaims, "*गंगा नदिया निर्मल जल, छठी मइया के आधार हवे" (gaṅgā nadiyā nirmal jal, chhaṭhī maiyā ke ādhār have* "The pure waters of the Ganga are the support of Mother Chhathi"). Such oral traditions preserve an indigenous ecological wisdom where the environment is not merely observed but moralized, reminding us that the ethical imagination of Indian civilization has always flowed with its rivers. Historically, Chhath appears to have grown out of local agricultural rituals that marked the shifting solar seasons and the cycles of cultivation. Anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin and later B. Saraswati (1984) [13] observed that early agrarian communities across India evolved ritual systems not out of fear but from gratitude as acts meant to preserve fertility, ensure rainfall and maintain harmony with the land. These traditions reflected the ancient principle of ṛta, the moral and cosmic order sustained through disciplined conduct and ecological balance. While the Vedic tradition codified ṛta in hymns to Agni and Indra the folk cultures of eastern India translated it into lived practice through direct engagement with nature giving rise to festivals like Chhath. This divergence explains why Chhath finds no mention in the early Vedic corpus including the Ṛgveda where solar worship remained largely masculine, sacrificial and hierarchical rather than participatory or feminine. Its absence is not marginal but meaningful as it reveals Chhath as an autonomous civilizational stream within India's religious mosaic, one that grew outside the orbit of priestly institutions. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence further illuminates this independence. Excavations at Nalanda, Vaishali and Kurkihar have uncovered miniature clay stūpas and solar discs often kept in household shrines. These artifacts dating from the Śuṅga and Gupta periods combine folk art with ethical symbolism, much like the manauti-stūpa constructed on riverbanks during Chhath (Snodgrass, 1985).

Fig 1: Manauti-stūpa constructed on riverbanks during Chhath

The recurring motif of the eight-spoked wheel later formalized as the Buddhist Dharmachakra, suggests that the moral symbolism of light and cyclical renewal was already embedded in regional ritual forms. The use of natural materials clay, bamboo, leaves etc. underscores a conscious ecological aesthetic that valued simplicity, impermanence and renewal over opulence. The historical continuity of Chhath becomes more visible when viewed through the lens of folk civilization. The Mithila region known for its matrilineal customs and artistic vitality has long celebrated the sacred feminine through seasonal rituals. Within this milieu, Chhathī Maiyā, the maternal deity of the festival emerged as the embodiment of nature's nurturing power. The gendered structure of Chhath where women lead and men assist reflects ancient agrarian ideals of balance and cooperation. Over centuries, as organized religions absorbed folk elements Chhath retained its authenticity precisely because it remained outside the domain of priestly mediation. It endured the transformations of empires and eras from Mauryan to Mughal to modern because its essence was inseparable from everyday life, woven into the recurring cycles of sunrise, harvest and hope. Furthermore, the absence of Chhath from the textual canon stands in striking contrast to its deep presence in oral and material culture. The folk songs, proverbs, wall paintings of rural Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh constitute a living archive of devotion preserving the linguistic and emotional continuity of the festival across centuries. Many of these expressions still employ Prakrit-derived words that appear in early Pāla-period inscriptions revealing a remarkable linguistic resilience against the forces of Sanskritization. This continuity reflects not only the endurance of local speech but also the persistence of subaltern modes of spirituality. Rajendra Prasad Singh (2023) aptly describes this phenomenon as a 'people's cosmology,' one sustained through memory, performance and daily practice rather than

through scriptural authority. Such a perspective resonates with modern sociological interpretations that understand Indian civilization not as a uniform religious order but as a mosaic of interrelated moral worlds, each rooted in its environment and social experience.

Linguistic Foundations and Folk Vernacularity

The linguistic fabric of Chhath Mahāparva offers one of the most compelling testimonies to its folk and civilizational autonomy. Unlike most ritual vocabularies of the Indian subcontinent that draw heavily upon Sanskritic liturgical traditions, Chhath's lexicon emerges from the earthiness of Prakrit, Pāli and the regional dialects of Magahi, Bhojpuri, Maithili and Awadhi. The very word chhaṭh meaning 'sixth' is not derived from the classical Sanskrit ṣaṣṭhī but from a Prakrit phonetic simplification that entered the oral traditions of eastern India (Singh, 2023). Its soft rhythmic sound carries the cadence of people's language rather than the austerity of priestly grammar signifying that this festival belongs not to the temple but to the ghāt, the riverbank and the household courtyard. The words that compose the festival's ritual vocabulary kharnā (the ritual meal of rice and jaggery shared before fasting), ṭhekua (a handmade offering of wheat flour and ghee), ḍālā (the bamboo basket used for offerings), manauti (the vow made in hope or gratitude), and shir-sapta (the small earthen mound or stūpa built on the riverbank) are linguistic fossils of eastern India's agrarian and folk worlds. Rajendra Prasad Singh (2023) observes that these terms lack direct Sanskrit equivalents; they survive as oral continuities of the Prakrit vernaculars that flourished in the post-Vedic era marking a shift in linguistic power from elitist exclusivity to cultural democratization. The linguistic life of Chhath thus serves as an archive of social history. Each term embodies a centuries-long negotiation between scriptural language and everyday speech. Kharnā, for instance, traces to the Magahi root khānā (to eat) with a participial inflection that conveys sanctified nourishment signifying not indulgence but moral moderation and bodily purity. Similarly, ṭhekua, derived from thoknā (to press or mold by hand), transforms manual labor into a sacred gesture. The handmade ṭhekua, shaped without machinery and often pressed with a leaf or āghar mold becomes a moral metaphor for unmediated human creativity.

Fig 2: The handmade ṭhekua, shaped by pressed with a leaf or āghar mold

The word manauti denoting a voluntary vow appears in folk Buddhism and Jainism as well where it implies ethical self-restraint rather than transactional prayer. The term shir-sapta, common in parts of Champaran and north Bihar presents a fascinating philological evolution. Singh (2023) traces it to śrī-stūpa where śrī (denoting auspiciousness or the Buddha's footprint, śrīpāda) gradually softened into shir in local pronunciation and stūpa transformed into sapta through phonetic inversion. This vernacular evolution in which sacred symbols adapt to the sounds of everyday life exemplifies what Labov (1972) [10] describes as 'folk phonology' language evolving through social intimacy rather than elite orthodoxy. The implications of this linguistic field extend beyond etymology to questions of cultural ownership and identity. In India, language has never been a neutral medium; it has functioned historically as a marker of power, caste and access to the sacred. Sanskrit, revered as the devabhāṣā was guarded by priestly elites and excluded much of the populace from scriptural literacy while Prakrit and later Apabhraṃśa became the expressive tongues of women, peasants and mendicants. The vocabulary of Chhath rooted in these vernaculars stands as a subtle act of resistance against the Sanskritic monopoly of sacred expression. It embodies 'cultural inversion' a process through which marginalized groups reclaim moral and symbolic agency by asserting their own expressive forms. The ritual language of Chhath, the Bhojpuri sohar (songs of joy), and the Magahi invocations to Chhathī Maiyā together compose a people's theology one spoken not in the language of the gods but in the rhythm of daily life.

Bhojpuri Folk Verse

"Kharna ke dinva me bhail upwās, nirmal mann me basal aas."

(On the day of Kharnā, the fast begins; within the pure heart resides hope.)

This verse, often sung during the evening meal before fasting captures with disarming simplicity the ethical core of Chhath: purification achieved not through ritual recitation but through inner discipline. The purity invoked here is both moral and linguistic speech cleansed of ornamentation, faith articulated in the intimacy of the mother tongue. Clifford Geertz's (1973) [9] interpretive anthropology helps clarify this idea as the language of ritual is never merely a medium of communication but a structure of meaning, a performance through which reality itself is constituted. In this sense Bhojpuri-Magahi-Maithili do not simply express devotion, they create its world. Through these vernaculars, the devotee locates the divine within the familiar transforming everyday speech into a vehicle of transcendence and dissolving the boundaries between sacred and secular expression. The persistence of Prakrit and its descendants in the linguistic landscape of Chhath reveals a deeper sociological truth about the civilizational continuity of eastern India. This region historically a cradle of Buddhist and Jain thought preserved egalitarian moralities through vernacular expression long after Sanskrit had become the idiom of hierarchy. Texts like the Dhammapada composed in Pāli and the Āgamas of Jainism written in Ardhamāgadhī embody the same spirit of accessibility that later found expression in Chhath songs and prayers. The linguistic simplicity of these texts as brief sentences, earthy imagery and unadorned diction parallels the tonal character of Chhath invocations. In this sense, the language of Chhath

continues what Romila Thapar (2002) [17] describes as 'vernacular ethics,' a civilizational tradition in which moral and spiritual insights are transmitted through oral performance, gesture and song rather than through scholastic exposition. Rajendra Prasad Singh's (2023) linguistic interpretation thus extends beyond philology into sociology. When he asserts that "no Sanskrit equivalents exist" for the vocabulary of Chhath, he is pointing to the autonomy of folk religiosity a self-sufficient moral world that does not depend on Brahmanical validation. This autonomy exemplifies what Bourdieu (1991) [4] called a 'linguistic field of power,' wherein the very choice of language becomes an act of resistance and identity. Through their ritual speech, the people of eastern India sustained a parallel sacred order- a moral vernacular grounded in equality and mutuality. Such linguistic democratization stands as a living record of social ethics where the medium itself becomes the message of inclusivity. The endurance of these linguistic forms across centuries testifies to the resilience of eastern Indian civilization. Despite waves of political upheaval, migration, cultural homogenization, the linguistic essence of Chhath has remained remarkably intact. In villages across Bihar, one still hears elders explaining ritual phrases through local metaphors "ḍālā se sab arpan hota hai, mann se sab milta hai" ("Through the basket everything is offered, through the heart everything is received"). The saying erases the line between material and spiritual offering showing how everyday speech sustains moral cosmologies. The sound of Bhojpuri and Maithili with their soft consonants and rhythmic cadences infuses ritual command with warmth and intimacy. Language here functions as both performance and affection as it organizes life without domination. This continuity reflects what A. K. Ramanujan (1991) [12] called the 'context-sensitive pluralism' of Indian oral cultures where multiple linguistic registers co-exist without rivalry reinforcing rather than replacing one another. The coexistence of Prakrit-based ritual vocabulary with later Sanskritic invocations such as Om Sūryāya Namah illustrates the dialogic structure of Indian religiosity. Even when Sanskrit enters the Chhath liturgy, it is softened by the melody and cadence of local speech domesticated into the soundscape of the people. This naturalization of high language within the folk rhythm transforms hierarchy into harmony rendering the linguistic world of Chhath a microcosm of India's composite civilization.

Ritual Structure and Symbolic Semiotics

The ritual structure of Chhath Mahāparva unfolds through a finely ordered sequence of four interlinked stages Nahay-Khay, Kharnā, Sandhyā Arghya and Uṣā Arghya each representing a step in the devotee's moral and symbolic journey from purification to gratitude, renunciation and ultimately renewal. The rhythm of these four days echoes both the agricultural cycle of sowing and reaping and the human cycle of effort and regeneration. The first day, Nahay-Khay (to bathe and eat) begins with ritual cleansing, the devotee immerses in sacred waters most often the Ganga, Gandak or Kosi and prepares a simple meal of rice, pumpkin and pulses cooked on a clay stove with water drawn from the same river. This meal, partaken only after bathing is not an act of consumption but of consecration a declaration of bodily and moral readiness before undertaking the fast. As Saraswati (1984) [13] noted in his study of the sacred complex of Gaya, purification in Indian folk rituals does not imply the separation of the sacred from the profane but rather the sanctification of everyday acts. In this sense Nahay-Khay marks the convergence of the domestic and the cosmic: the household kitchen becomes a sacred altar and the act of eating transforms into an ethical offering. What appears as a humble meal of seasonal produce thus signifies the devotee's alignment with the rhythm of nature and the moral order of the universe a gesture of equilibrium between body, environment and spirit. The second day, Kharnā marks the formal commencement of fasting and self-discipline. The term itself derived from the Magahi khānā (to eat) with an honorific inflection signifies sanctified nourishment rather than ordinary consumption. On this day, devotees prepare kheer a modest rice pudding sweetened with jaggery and roṭī made from coarse flour. The simplicity of these foods unrefined and elemental, embodies moral restraint and purity. Before the long fast begins, the meal is shared among family members, neighbors and sometimes even passersby transforming sustenance into social communion. This prasād-bhojan dissolves distinctions of status and hierarchy reaffirming the egalitarian spirit of the ritual. There is no priestly mediation here; the act of sharing itself becomes sacramental. Weber's (1963) [19] concept of 'inner-worldly asceticism' illuminates the essence of Kharnā as renunciation practiced not through withdrawal from society but through disciplined engagement within it. The devotee's fasting occurs in the midst of ordinary life among household duties, kinship ties and communal rhythms demonstrating that spiritual elevation is achieved through moral discipline woven into daily existence. In this way Chhath transforms asceticism from an elite pursuit into a shared ethical practice, open to all regardless of caste, class or gender. This democratization of self-restraint remains one of the festival's most enduring and distinctive moral contributions. The third day, Sandhyā Arghya the evening oblation to the setting Sun unfolds at the riverbank that liminal threshold where earth, water and light meet in quiet communion. As dusk descends, thousands gather along the ghāts carrying bamboo baskets (ḍālā) filled with fruits, sugarcane, lamps and ṭhekua the handmade offering of wheat and ghee that functions simultaneously as sustenance and symbol.

Fig 3: Dālā (bamboo baskets) filled with fruits, sugarcane, lamps and ṭhekua

The atmosphere is suffused with an extraordinary stillness no mantras are recited, no priest officiates. The silence itself becomes the prayer. In that collective quiet, the riverbank transforms into a moral landscape where human beings confront their dependence upon the cosmic order. Durkheim's (1995) [6] insight into the sacred as the product of collective effervescence finds an evocative echo here,

though in reverse the Sandhyā Arghya generates an effervescence of silence rather than sound. Each devotee stands waist-deep in water holding a vessel upward toward the descending Sun offering gratitude for the day's light and the continuity of life. The setting Sun embodies humility, completion and the serene acceptance of impermanence while its reflection on the river's surface mirrors the union of divine and human consciousness. In this suspended moment between day and night, Chhath transforms twilight into theology a lived metaphor for balance, surrender and renewal. The fourth day, Uṣā Arghya the offering to the rising Sun marks both the culmination of the ritual and the symbolic rebirth of the devotee. Before dawn, participants gather once more at the riverbank, their lamps flickering through the mist as the distant echo of conch shells signals awakening.

Fig 4: Arghya

When the first rays of the Sun break the horizon, devotees lift their vessels of water in reverence offering gratitude not for what has ended but for what begins anew. The dialectic between Sandhyā (evening) and Uṣā (dawn) encapsulates the universal rhythm of death and renewal, exhaustion and rejuvenation. This temporal symmetry deeply embedded in agrarian consciousness represents what Geertz (1973) [9] described as a 'metaphor of moral order' the correspondence between cosmic and ethical cycles. The devotee having relinquished food, speech and rest returns to the ordinary world not as one who has escaped it but as one who has been transformed by disciplined participation in its rhythm. Each stage of Chhath Mahāparva employs a sophisticated material semiotics where ritual objects act not as idols but as symbolic carriers of moral and ecological meaning. Among these, the manauti-stūpa a small clay mound built at the riverbank is one of the festival's most ancient and evocative symbols. Derived from manauti (a vow or promise) it functions simultaneously as mnemonic and monument, a tactile record of gratitude and devotion. Singh (2023) notes that the manauti-stūpa structurally corresponds to votive stūpas unearthed at archaeological sites like Vaishali and Nalanda indicating a long historical continuity between ancient Buddhist or agrarian votive practices and Chhath's contemporary ritual forms. The devotee molds the mound with bare hands adorning it with flowers and earthen lamps, thereby materializing faith through touch. This tactile religiosity distinguishes Chhath from textualized ritual systems as the sacred here is not recited but crafted. Another central artifact is the ṭhekua, the handmade offering prepared during Kharnā and presented during Arghya. Linguistically derived from thoknā to press the ṭhekua embodies the creative imprint of labor and devotion. Traditionally pressed with pīpal leaves, floral designs or wheel-like molds (āghar) these offerings resemble ancient terracotta seals and Dharmachakra motifs found in Magadh and Gaya (Willis, 2009) [20]. As Snodgrass (1985) observes in his study of stūpa symbolism, such circular patterns represent the cakra the moral wheel of life and renewal. The rhythmic edges and balanced geometry of the ṭhekua reflect the folk artist's unconscious absorption of cosmic order the turning of time, the balance of opposites, the cycle of season and self. The act of pressing these shapes into dough transforms food into semiotic art; each ṭhekua becomes a microcosm of the moral universe a tangible symbol of faith shaped through human hands. The śir-sapta (or śrī-stūpa) extends this lineage of symbolism. Commonly seen in northern Bihar and the Terai, this earthen mound constructed beside the manauti-stūpa is regarded as an embodiment of Śrī: prosperity, grace and sacred vitality. Singh (2023) traces its linguistic evolution from śrī-stūpa demonstrating how sacred architecture was domesticated into vernacular ritual. The adaptation of monumental religious symbols into household clay mounds signifies what anthropologists term the 'miniaturization of the sacred' a process through which cosmic ideas are rendered accessible to ordinary lives (Eck, 2012) [7]. The śir-sapta thus exemplifies the democratization of sacred space as the cosmic axis (axis mundi) reduced to a humble earthen cone resting in the courtyard of the poor. The material culture of Chhath its bamboo baskets (ḍālā), clay lamps (dīyā), sugarcane stalks, coconuts and earthen pots collectively forms a visual language of sustainability. The festival's aesthetic is governed by aparigraha (non-possession) and śuddhi (purity). Every material used is biodegradable, locally sourced and recyclable aligning seamlessly with contemporary ecological ethics. Environmental anthropologist Madhav Gadgil (1993) [8] notes that traditional Indian rituals often encode ecological rationality within symbolic forms serving as cultural mechanisms for environmental conservation. In this light, the ḍālā is more than a vessel it is a metaphor for containment without possession, an object that carries offerings yet ultimately returns to the earth. Similarly, the lighting of lamps (dīp-dān) along the riverbank symbolizes both illumination of consciousness and acceptance of impermanence. These gestures turn ecology into theology establishing what Radhakamal Mukerjee (1951) called 'the moral fellowship of man and nature.' Equally profound is the ritual silence observed during Sandhyā and Uṣā Arghya.

In contrast to the sonorous recitations of Vedic or Purāṇic liturgies, Chhath enforces mauna a vow of silence. This quietude is not emptiness but an ethical discipline echoing

the Buddhist and Jain practice of mindful speech. It transforms the collective moment into meditation where the flowing water itself becomes the mantra. As Geertz (1973) [9] might interpret this silence is a 'thick symbol' a layered expression of humility, sincerity and ecological listening. The devotee does not speak to the divine; they listen to the world. This inversion of ritual expectation where communication gives way to contemplation turns Chhath into an ecological meditation reminding humanity of its modest yet harmonious role within nature's order. Taken together, the ritual semiotics of Chhath Mahāparva articulate a profound integration of material culture, moral philosophy and symbolic imagination. The four-day cycle narrates a journey of purification, restraint, gratitude and renewal while its objects embody tactile metaphors of labor, memory and ecological reciprocity. Every element whether the humble clay mound or the hand-pressed ṭhekua testifies to a living civilization where the sacred is not distant but immanent, present in the grain of wheat, the softness of clay and the quiet shimmer of water. Chhath thus stands as a performative theology of balance between humanity and nature, asceticism and joy, silence and song revealing that in the simplest gestures of rural ritual lies the moral genius of an ancient civilization continually reborn with each dawn.

Gender and Spiritual Agency

Among the most profound dimensions of Chhath Mahāparva lies its quiet yet revolutionary assertion of women's spiritual agency, an assertion that redefines the gendered structure of religious practice in the Indian subcontinent. In a society historically shaped by patriarchal hierarchies where ritual and theological authority have long been mediated through male priests, purohits and yajñikas, Chhath stands as a living counter-tradition as a reversal of ritual power in which women become the moral and spiritual centers of sacred performance. This authority is not incidental but constitutive. It is women who undertake the vrata (vow), maintain the fast, perform the offerings, lead the devotional songs and mediate the family's relationship with the cosmic and ecological order. Men, though active participants, assume supportive roles like preparing materials, organizing the ghāt and assisting the vratinīs while the festival's spiritual axis remains decisively female. This structural inversion contrasts sharply with the Vedic yajña tradition where ritual power and recitation were reserved for men, and women though invoked symbolically were largely excluded from priestly mediation (Thapar, 2002) [17]. Chhath thus emerges as a sociological document of feminine autonomy within the sacred, representing what Max Weber (1963) [19] might call a 're-ethicization of the household,' where domestic space becomes a site of spiritual authority rather than subservience. At the heart of this transformation is the embodied discipline of the vratinī-the woman who performs the fast. For four days, she renounces food, water and speech maintaining a poise of moral clarity that transcends ritual formalism. Her mauna (silence), upavāsa (fasting) and tapas (endurance) constitute an inner asceticism parallel to the renunciatory ideals of early Buddhism and Jainism where liberation was sought through the moral purification of daily life. Yet, unlike monastic asceticism, the vratinī's renunciation does not withdraw from the world but it deepens engagement with it. She remains rooted in domestic and ecological life performing her vows within the rhythms of kinship and environment. As Durkheim (1995) [6] observed asceticism in communal contexts does not express isolation but dramatizes shared moral values; through her visible discipline, the community witnesses its own ethical continuity. The vratinī becomes a living axis connecting family, nature and cosmos her fast symbolizing a suspension of personal desire in favor of collective wellbeing. This feminine asceticism reinterprets motherhood as a spiritual archetype. The figure of Chhathī Maiyā, the maternal deity to whom vows are offered embodies fertility, moral guardianship, endurance. In folk belief, she grants health, children, prosperity yet her blessings are conditional upon purity, humility and service. She represents what Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2010) [2] termed the 'ethic of care' transposed into the sacred a moral labor enacted through self-restraint and empathy. Motherhood here transcends biology to become an ethical metaphor as the mother nourishes creation through compassion not possession. This spirit finds lyrical articulation in sohar songs "Maiya more charan me jal dharāi, suruj devta ānchal bharāi" ("At the feet of Mother, water is offered, and the Sun fills her lap with light"). The offering of water becomes a dialogue between the feminine and the cosmic masculine a gesture of complementarity not subordination. From a broader civilizational perspective this feminine spiritual authority resonates with ancient archetypes such as Mahāmāyā, the Buddha's biological mother who embodies selfless creation; Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī, his foster mother and the first woman ordained into the Sangha representing moral perseverance; and the goddess Tārā, venerated in both Buddhist and Hindu traditions as the personification of compassion and wisdom (Snodgrass, 1985). These figures are moral symbols rather than sectarian deities, representing the creative and redemptive principle of the feminine in civilization. Rajendra Prasad Singh (2023) notes a linguistic parallel between Chhathī Maiyā and Mahāmāyā as the shared prefix Mahā ('great') embodies a civilizational grammar in which greatness (mahattva) is linguistically feminized, echoing Buddhist terms such as Mahākaruṇā, Mahāprajñā, and Mahānirvāṇa. In Chhath, this grammar of moral magnitude continues through daily acts led by women who transform ordinary ritual into extraordinary ethical statement. Sociologically, Chhath's feminine leadership functions as an ethical pedagogy of gender equality. While the Vedic system reinforced ritual hierarchies (adhikāra as male privilege), Chhath democratizes access to the sacred by grounding spiritual legitimacy in discipline rather than lineage. The qualification to perform Chhath is not inherited status but moral intention. As Veena Das (1988) [5] and Patricia Uberoi (1993) [18] observe domestic rituals often serve as counter-publics where women articulate moral agency through embodied action rather than discourse. In Chhath, women's labor fetching water, preparing offerings, fasting in silence becomes both devotional and political, asserting women's position as custodians of moral and ecological ethics. The vratinī thus emerges as the ethical exemplar of balance, embodying what Clifford Geertz (1973) [9] called ethos the tone and moral texture of a culture rendered sacred. Her silence is not submission but strength; her fast not deprivation but declaration. The collective nature of the festival amplifies this agency. Chhath transforms the courtyard and riverbank into spaces of feminine solidarity where women gather in intergenerational circles of cooperation young girls assisting elders, mothers

guiding daughters and men standing reverently at the margins. The ghāt becomes a moral stage of equality what Durkheim (1995) [6] would recognize as 'collective effervescence.' Within this communal choreography, Bourdieu's (1991) [4] concept of a 'counter-habitus' finds living expression a social space governed by humility, care, reciprocity rather than domination. The ecological dimension of this gendered spirituality is equally profound. Women's embodied relationship with the river, soil and Sun transforms nature from a passive backdrop into a participant in moral life. The act of standing waist-deep in cold water at dawn physically demanding yet serene expresses a deep symbiosis between the human body and the natural world. As Vandana Shiva (1989) [14] has argued in her ecofeminist framework, such practices preserve the ancient recognition that women and the Earth share a common rhythm of creation, regeneration and care. The ecological ethics of Chhath sustained through women's ritual labor, thus articulate a feminine cosmology where spirituality and sustainability are one and the same. Ultimately Chhath Mahāparva must be understood as a civilizational statement on gender and ethics rather than merely a festival of fertility or thanksgiving. It dramatizes moral equality not through doctrine but through lived inversion women as mediators of cosmic harmony, men as facilitators of their vow. In this inversion lies the quiet revolution of Chhath as a redefinition of the sacred that privileges humility over hierarchy and participation over power. By venerating the feminine as both devotee and deity, Chhath affirms a principle that transcends religion itself that moral strength, compassion, endurance constitute the true foundations of spiritual greatness. In this sense, Chhath is not simply a regional festival of eastern India but a universal parable of gendered ethics and ecological consciousness echoing the ancient Atharva Veda prayer "Mātā bhūmiḥ putro'ham pṛithivyāḥ" "The Earth is my mother, and I am her child" (Atharva Veda 12.1.12) a verse that captures the enduring feminine spirit of reverence and responsibility sustaining both life and civilization.

Ecological and Ethical Dimensions

At its deepest philosophical level, Chhath Mahāparva may be understood as a living embodiment of ecological dharma a moral covenant between human beings and the natural world that binds the sacred with the sustainable. Rooted in the elemental triad of Sun, Water, and Earth, the festival articulates a civilizational expression of gratitude toward nature's regenerative forces translating ecological awareness into embodied practice. The Sun (Sūrya), within the cosmology of Chhath is not merely a celestial entity but the visible form of prāṇa the vital energy that sustains all life. Water (jala) becomes the medium of purification and continuity while Earth (pṛithvī) signifies fertility and moral grounding. The act of offering arghya to the setting and rising Sun thus becomes a symbolic performance of equilibrium humans acknowledging their dependence upon the cyclical harmony of natural forces. The Vedic invocation, "Ādityāya ca somāya maṅgalāya budhāya ca" (Atharva Veda 13.3), pays homage to the planetary order affirming that human welfare is inseparable from cosmic balance. In this worldview Chhath functions as a 'ritual ecology,' where devotion, discipline and environmental mindfulness merge into a single moral gesture (Gadgil & Guha, 1993) [8]. The ecological dimension of Chhath begins with its timing. Celebrated on Kārtika śukla ṣaṣṭhī six days after the new moon following the harvest, it coincides precisely with the Sun's southern transition marking the end of the monsoon and the onset of winter. This astronomical precision reveals the folk-scientific intelligence embedded in the festival. Its alignment with solar and lunar cycles reflects an empirical understanding of climate, sunlight and agricultural rhythm. In agrarian societies, such observance guided irrigation, sowing, and seasonal migration. As Radhakamal Mukerjee (1951) observed, ancient Indian festivals were 'cosmic diaries,' recording environmental transitions through symbolic acts. The twin offerings of Sandhyā Arghya (evening) and Uṣā Arghya (dawn) correspond to the two liminal thresholds of the solar day moments when the interplay of light and shadow evokes cosmic humility and moral reflection. By ritualizing these transitions, Chhath transforms natural recurrence into ethical pedagogy, teaching reverence for rhythm, restraint, renewal. Chhath's ecological ethics manifest through its disciplines of cleanliness, fasting and non-violence. Preparations begin days in advance as homes and riverbanks are scrubbed and adorned by the community often without state intervention. This collective act of safāī-sevā is at once practical and symbolic as it restores the sanctity of public space while reaffirming the moral principle that environmental purity mirrors inner purity. The vow of fasting (upavāsa) further reinforces this ethic of restraint. Abstinence from food and water is not mere endurance but an ecological statement a renunciation of excess and a recognition of the planet's finite generosity. As Weber (1963) [19] interpreted, such practices constitute a form of 'inner-worldly asceticism,' wherein self-control within ordinary life contributes to a wider moral economy. The vegetarian simplicity of Chhath offerings like fruits, grains and water etc. embodies ahiṃsā (non-violence) as environmental ethics minimizing harm and fostering compassion. This principle parallels the Buddhist karuṇā (compassion) and the Jain aparigraha (non-possession) underscoring a shared civilizational awareness that connects personal virtue to planetary wellbeing. The festival's material culture reinforces this ecological rationality. Bamboo baskets (ḍālā), clay lamps (dīyā), earthen pots, and leaf plates are all biodegradable, locally sourced and recyclable. Nothing used in the ritual leaves a toxic residue. The aesthetics of Chhath are thus defined by aparigraha (non-possessiveness) and śuddhi (purity) the flickering lamp returns to the river, offerings dissolve and the ḍālā decomposes back into the soil. This ritual minimalism, far from being austere, expresses what Vandana Shiva (1989) [14] calls 'Earth Democracy" a moral ecology grounded in reciprocity rather than extraction. The silence of the ghāt broken only by the rustle of water and the faint call of birds at dawn replaces the noise of mechanical worship. It reorients human consciousness from ownership to participation, from consumption to contemplation. In this sense, Chhath preserves a civilizational ethos that views the sacred not as supernatural but as ecological a reverence born from interdependence. The communal dimension of the festival amplifies its ecological significance by embedding environmental care within collective morality. The preparation of ghāts, gathering of materials, organization of offerings engage entire neighborhoods men, women, children alike in shared labor. Caste, class and gender boundaries dissolve in the cooperative rhythm of devotion. As Durkheim (1995) [6] described, such moments of

'collective effervescence' renew social solidarity; in Chhath, they also renew ecological solidarity. Standing together in silence before the rising Sun participants experience not only spiritual awe but an awareness of belonging to a larger organic whole what Mukerjee (1951) termed 'the moral fellowship of man and nature.' This collective consciousness functions as an antidote to modern ecological alienation reminding us that sustainability is not a technocratic program but a participatory ethic. Within the wider Hindu cosmology, Chhath occupies a distinctive position as an ecological ritual rather than a sacrificial one. The Sūrya-stotras of the Vedic and Purāṇic corpus such as the Āditya Hridayam of the Rāmāyaṇa praise the Sun as the healer and witness of all life: "Ādityaḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ prāṇa āyur jyotiḥ patiḥ" ("The Sun is the life, breath, and light of all beings"). Yet these hymns remain textual invocations; Chhath translates their essence into lived experience. The Ṣaṣṭhī Devī of the Skanda Purāṇa protector of fertility and guardian of children becomes in folk consciousness Chhathī Maiyā, the maternal deity who unites morality, fertility and ecology. Thus, Chhath bridges cosmic myth and domestic morality transforming scriptural metaphor into embodied ritual. The Bhojpuri verse "Suruj devta ānchal bharāi, chhathi maiya hāth uthāi" ("The Sun fills the Mother's lap with light as she raises her hand in blessing") distills this synthesis into song an image of reciprocity between nature and humanity. Cleanliness, minimalism and sustainability the hallmarks of Chhath are not modern environmental additions but inherited wisdom. As B. Saraswati (1984) [13] observed in his study of eastern Indian sacred practices, such rituals encode ecological ethics within symbolic performance, ensuring their transmission across generations. The insistence on personal hygiene, the prohibition of synthetic materials and the reverence for sunlight and water together constitute an indigenous environmental code far older than contemporary ecological discourse. In Chhath, the moral and the environmental are inseparable because purity is ethical and ethics is ecological. The fasting body, the clean riverbank, the biodegradable offering all belong to the same sacred economy of restraint and renewal. In this light, Chhath Mahāparva may be read as a civilizational reminder of what modern societies have largely forgotten that sustainability is not a policy but a practice, a lived expression of humility and gratitude. The Sun and river are not resources to exploit but relatives to revere; fasting is not deprivation but participation in the planet's rhythm; silence is not absence but attentive listening to the Earth. Through its synthesis of astronomy, agriculture, and morality, Chhath articulates an Indian vision of ṛta cosmic order sustained through human discipline. It invites us to rediscover the ethical foundation of ecological consciousness reverence for balance, gratitude for interdependence and restraint as a form of worship. In every lamp floating upon the river, in every hand lifted toward the dawn, Chhath reaffirms an ancient truth that divinity is not above us but around us, radiant in the light, water and soil that sustain all life.

Socio-Historical Transformation and Cultural Civilization

The journey of Chhath Mahāparva from a localized agrarian observance along the Ganga and Gandak plains to a nationally celebrated and globally recognized heritage event represents one of the most remarkable cases of socio-historical transformation in Indian civilization. What began as a seasonal thanksgiving ritual among the farming communities of Mithila, Magadh and the Terai has evolved into a cultural institution that unites millions across caste, class, region and diaspora. In this transformation, Chhath encapsulates the civilizational genius of India as its ability to absorb, adapt, elevate local practices into universal moral expressions. Historically, the festival thrived in regions where water, sunlight, agriculture structured the rhythms of life. Early references to solar and fertility rituals appear in Magadhan folklore and Buddhist chronicles from the Gangetic basin where votive offerings were made to the Sun and river deities after harvests (Saraswati, 1984; Singh, 2023) [13]. Yet, unlike Vedic rituals confined to Brahmanical precincts, Chhath unfolded at the ghāt and in the household courtyard rendering it inherently inclusive and accessible. Its spread beyond Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh into Jharkhand, Bengal, Delhi and among diasporic communities in Mauritius, Fiji, and New York testifies not merely to migration but to its moral universality the ability of a regional ritual to embody global values of discipline, gratitude and ecological reverence. This expansion also illustrates the twin processes of Sanskritization and localization theorized by M. N. Srinivas (1952) [16]. As urban and elite groups adopted Chhath in metropolitan centers like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, they introduced Sanskritic elements like recitations of Sūrya-stotra, chants of Om Sūryāya Namah, and the use of temple courtyards yet the festival retained its folk essence. Rather than being absorbed into orthodoxy, Chhath subtly transformed orthodoxy itself by reasserting the values of simplicity, restraint, equality etc. within urban religiosity. In sociological terms this represents a 'reverse Sanskritization,' a cultural flow moving upward from folk to elite embodying what Milton Singer (1972) described as 'cultural performance systems' that transmit civilizational values through participatory repetition. Simultaneously, localization continued as the festival adapted to new terrains and communities as in diaspora settings, rivers became swimming pools or artificial ponds; in cities, rooftops transformed into makeshift ghāts; yet the essence the offerings to the Sun, fasting, collective purification remained intact. This adaptability exemplifies what A. K. Ramanujan (1991) [12] termed 'context-sensitive pluralism,' the capacity of Indian rituals to preserve inner spirit while transforming outward form. Chhath's sociological uniqueness lies in its radical democratization of spirituality. It is perhaps the only major Hindu festival where caste distinctions dissolve completely where Dalits, Brahmins, traders and laborers stand shoulder to shoulder in the same water facing the same Sun. Unlike temple-centered rituals dependent on priestly mediation, Chhath requires no officiant; the vratinī herself becomes both devotee and priest embodying moral autonomy. Offerings are made collectively and every participant is simultaneously giver and receiver. This structure challenges Max Weber's (1963) [19] notion of religious hierarchy by replacing the institutional with the ethical, the ritualistic with the personal. It represents what André Béteille (1991) [3] described as a 'moral community of equals,' in which ethical participation overrides social stratification. Gender inclusivity deepens this democratization. Women lead the ritual not as symbolic figures but as moral authorities. Their fasting, silence, and endurance form the spiritual core of the festival while men, through supportive participation learn

cooperation and humility. Chhath thus becomes a pedagogy of equality a lived rehearsal of the constitutional ideals of justice, equality, fraternity long before they were codified in law. Equally striking is the festival's civic and ecological discipline which elevates it from private devotion to a model of collective environmental ethics. In both rural and urban settings preparation for Chhath involves community mobilization for cleaning riverbanks, constructing bamboo platforms, regulating waste and maintaining order and silence during the ceremony. This civic order arises without coercion or centralized control emerging instead from moral self-regulation. In cities such as Patna, Varanasi and Delhi, municipal authorities now collaborate with citizens' groups to ensure river cleanliness and waste management demonstrating how traditional ecological ethics have entered modern governance frameworks. As Mukerjee (1951) noted, Indian rituals often translate cooperation into moral habit; Chhath extends this habit to environmental responsibility. The insistence on purity like clean water, biodegradable offerings, modest consumption etc. embeds sustainability within moral practice. Even in diasporic contexts, participants replicate these ethics through creative adaptation rather than abandonment. Chhath thus functions as both ritual and pedagogy a blueprint for ecological citizenship. The festival's modern revival has also been shaped by media globalization. Television, cinema and digital platforms have carried the luminous imagery of dīyās on riverbanks and saffron-clad women in prayer to millions transforming what was once an intimate rural observance into a national and transnational symbol of heritage. Yet this visibility has not diluted its authenticity. As Appadurai (1996) [1] explains through the idea of 'global ethnoscapes,' cultural performances sustain authenticity precisely by generating new forms of emotional belonging among dispersed communities. Migrant workers in Mumbai or families in London who gather in parks to perform Chhath are not merely preserving nostalgia; they are reconstructing moral rootedness in unfamiliar landscapes. The festival thus bridges homeland and diaspora, tradition and modernity through what Clifford Geertz (1973) [9] called 'thick symbols' gestures that condense complex moral worlds into simple acts like offering water, lighting lamps or standing in silence before the dawn. This urban revival has reframed Chhath within the larger discourse of regional and national identity. Once dismissed as a rural or 'subaltern' observance, it is now celebrated across linguistic and social boundaries. Government recognition, public holidays and grand celebrations in cities like Delhi and Noida have elevated Chhath to the status of a pan-Indian heritage. The National Mission for Clean Ganga (2021) even integrated Chhath into its awareness campaigns aligning faith with environmental stewardship. This convergence between policy and tradition reveals how folk ethics can inform civilizational governance a rare synthesis of spirituality and sustainability. The festival's representation in cinema and popular culture most famously through the song "Kaanch hi baans ke bahangiya" has further enshrined it as a symbol of purity, endurance and familial devotion. Yet beneath these transformations, Chhath retains its timeless civilizational message like the unity of moral order, social equality, ecological reverence etc. It continues to serve as what Ashis Nandy (1998) [11] called 'a repository of civilizational conscience,' linking ancient moral codes with modern sensibilities. The devotion expressed through fasting, the ecological ethic manifested in cleanliness, and the collective joy of participation together create a continuum that connects individual to cosmos and past to present. Whether performed on the banks of the Ganga or the Hudson, Chhath reaffirms the Indian vision of ṛta the moral rhythm of existence. It demonstrates that civilization endures not through monuments or texts but through rituals that translate ethical memory into everyday action. In this light, Chhath Mahāparva stands not merely as a festival of faith but as a civilizational metaphor a bridge between agrarian wisdom and global ecological consciousness, reminding humanity that progress lies not in mastering nature but in living gratefully within its embrace.

Conclusion

Chhath Mahāparva stands today as one of the most eloquent symbols of India's civilizational depth- a living synthesis of faith, ecology and equality that continues to evolve without losing its moral core. It is more than a festival; it is a continuum of cultural memory carrying within it the ethical grammar of coexistence, the emotional intelligence of gratitude and the collective rhythm of nature and humanity in harmony. From its humble agrarian origins along the fertile banks of the Ganga to its contemporary global celebration among diasporic communities, Chhath has retained a spiritual integrity unmatched in its simplicity. It weaves together the moral triad of śraddhā (devotion), saṃyam (restraint), sahabhāgita (collective participation) transforming ordinary gestures into civilizational metaphors. In every arghya offered to the setting or rising Sun unfolds an enactment of ṛta the cosmic principle that sustains life through balance and reciprocity. This perhaps explains its enduring relevance as Chhath is bound not to any single doctrine, text or sect but to an ethical worldview in which the sacred is diffused through the elements like water, sunlight, earth and human compassion. It is simultaneously a social act, an ecological vow, and a moral discipline. The socio-historical trajectory of Chhath demonstrates how folk traditions when rooted in ethical consciousness, transcend geography and religion alike. From the standpoint of civilizational sociology, Chhath embodies what Durkheim (1995) [6] called the sacred reconstitution of society a moment when individuals merge into a moral collective that reaffirms the meaning of life. Yet, unlike the collective effervescence of grand state rituals, Chhath achieves this renewal through austerity and silence. The absence of priests, scriptures or intermediaries democratizes the sacred, making it accessible to all. This universality grounded in humility and participation situates Chhath as a living expression of India's spiritual democracy a tradition where faith is self-directed not hierarchically imposed. As Singh (2023) observes its linguistic and ritual independence from Sanskritic hegemony confirms its folk sovereignty and pre-Vedic roots. The words of Chhath like kharnā, ṭhekua, manauti, ḍālā and the hand-fashioned objects that embody them testify to the creative agency of ordinary people who shaped sacred meaning from everyday life. The persistence of these vernacular idioms across centuries affirms what Thapar (2002) [17] and Ramanujan (1991) [12] emphasized that the continuity of Indian civilization lies not in rigid orthodoxy but in its ability to adapt, pluralize and recreate meaning through lived experience rather than elite canon. At its moral center, Chhath offers an ecological vision startlingly contemporary. Long before the modern vocabulary of sustainability emerged, devotees of Chhath

practiced restraint, non-violence, gratitude toward the environment. The fasting body and biodegradable offerings express what Vandana Shiva (1989) [14] calls an 'ecology of care,' where reverence for nature is not preached but performed through physical discipline and emotional empathy. The cleaning of riverbanks, insistence on pure water and collective maintenance of sacred spaces make Chhath an indigenous model of sustainable ethics. It transforms ecology into theology reminding us that environmental preservation is not a technical enterprise but a moral relationship. This moral ecology extends naturally to gender. Women's central participation in Chhath is not a vestige of tradition but a reflection of civilizational insight an acknowledgment that feminine endurance anchors both social and ecological balance. Through fasting, silence and service, women embody what Beauvoir (2010) [2] described as the 'ethic of care,' here reinterpreted as spiritual strength rather than domestic obligation. Chhath's transformation from a regional observance to a national and diasporic phenomenon represents a rare case of cultural democratization achieved without loss of authenticity. While Sanskritization and globalization have touched its outer form, its inner spirit simplicity, humility, and collective grace etc. remains unaltered. As Appadurai (1996) [1] noted, cultural flows that become global often retain their vitality by preserving emotional belonging. In Mauritius, Trinidad or London, Chhath continues to recreate its sacred geography the water, the lamp, the rising Sun even when the river is a pool and the sky unfamiliar. This ability to adapt without surrendering essence exemplifies what Ashis Nandy (1998) [11] terms 'civilizational resilience' the capacity of ethical traditions to endure modern disruptions by transforming them into moral opportunity. As a subject of scholarship, Chhath opens fertile interdisciplinary avenues. Linguistic archaeology could trace the evolution of its Prakrit-based vocabulary and illuminate its links to early Buddhist and agrarian lexicons enriching our understanding of subaltern religiosity. Gender ethnography could explore women's ritual labor, embodiment and emotional discipline as forms of moral power. Comparative eco-religious studies might situate Chhath within the global repertoire of solar and water rituals from Japan's Misogi purifications to the Andean Inti Raymi revealing a shared human impulse toward gratitude and renewal. Such inquiries would not only deepen the sociology of religion but also expand contemporary environmental ethics, demonstrating that sustainability is as much a spiritual as a scientific project. As Mukerjee (1951) reminded us, civilizations endure when their rituals embody moral logic when ethical ideals are translated into collective habits of life. Chhath, in this sense is not a relic of antiquity but a manual for the future. In a rapidly urbanizing and ecologically anxious world its culture of restraint stands as a counterpoint to consumerism; its silence contrasts the spectacle of noise; its simplicity challenges the vanity of excess. Each element the bamboo basket, the fasting body, the clean riverbank serves as a metaphor for sustainable existence. As the world grapples with climate anxiety and spiritual fatigue, Chhath offers what Weber (1963) [19] might call an 'ethic of responsibility,' reminding us that the sacred is not a promise of heaven but a practice of harmony on Earth. Its endurance across millennia testifies that civilization persists not through conquest or accumulation but through care the care of rivers, of sunlight, of one another. Ultimately, Chhath Mahāparva survives as a timeless testimony to folk resilience, feminine strength, and the ecological conscience of Indian civilization. It teaches that faith need not divide that spirituality need not dominate and that civilization endures only when humanity learns to live gratefully within the cycles of nature. In the rising glow of the Sun over the Ganga, one perceives not merely a ritual but the reflection of an ancient truth: that light is not to be possessed but shared; that the Earth is not a resource but a relative; and that the highest religion is humility before the life that sustains us all.

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