

CHHATT PUJA AND WHY WE KNOW SO LITTLE

Jawhar Sircar

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(English Version)

Year after year, people in Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and major cities wonder what exactly is Chhatt Puja when they witness so many lakhs and lakhs of men and women from Bihar out on the streets, heading towards the river or the sea. They see them push cartloads of bananas and other fruits or carry them on their heads, but few outsiders understand anything more. The main festival is just six days after Diwali, which explains why it goes by the colloquial name for the 'sixth', chhatt, that is also called Surya-shasthi. Interestingly, it was and remains essentially a very vibrant folk festival that has no role for the priest and no need for temples. Since it yielded no grants to priests or to temples, Brahmans usually stayed away from this economically unviable festival. As a consequence, it was not 'mainstreamed' by Brahmans by linking it with some convenient legend taken from the vast repertoire of the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata or Ramayana. It remains a bit of an odd man out: hence outsiders know so little. There is a weak link, however, that not many are aware of and the story goes that Draupadi was advised by the sage, Dhaumya to perform Chhatt puja to Suryadev, to help the Pandavas. There is another legend that Rama and Sita also offered this puja to the sun god during this period of the year when they returned from exile to Ayodhya. Though the vast majority of Rama worshippers does not perform this puja, Rama may will have listened to his wife, like all of us do. Besides, we must remember that Sita's origins were in Janakpur of Mithila, and this Mithila is the epicentre of this worship. The tradition is, however observed in Bihar-Jharkhand and adjoining regions, the Madhesh tract of Nepal, as well as in far off Fiji, West Indies and Mauritius: wherever Biharis went. Nowadays, however, hordes of priests have started occupying vantage points in the water and worshippers have, willy nilly, to shell out some dakshina for compulsory mantras and short courses in sanskritisation. After all, despite tall promises, gainful employment is nowhere in sight.

It is my submission that Chhatt is the first celebration of bright light and the sun, after the blackest night of the year, ie, Kartik amavasya when Indians light billions of lamps to dispel the dark. But Bengalis, who just have to be different, however welcome this amavasya to worship their dark goddess Kali and her

ghoulish companions of the night. Chhatt Puja was originally a women's festival to thank the sun god for all the munificence and the bounty conferred, but it is interesting to note how the menfolk joined later on. They also worship a goddess called Chhatti Maiya, who is equally important and invoked for her boons. She is identified with Usha, the Vedic goddess of dawn though it is well known that those people who brought the Vedas may have taken a thousand years longer to reach Bihar. The unique character of this festival is that it worships both dawn and dusk, the rising sun as well as setting sun. It is actually a four day festival that starts on the fourth lunar day after the dark amavasya of Kartik, namely, Chaturthi, Panchami, Shasthi or Chhatt and finally Saptami. Chhatt Puja is the occasion for the most colourful dresses to come out and there is a lot of folk songs and dancing as well. Even in distant Mauritius, for instance, Chhatt songs and dances are an integral part of the nation's culture that was brought in by labourers from Bihar. As fasting is mandatory, people take anticipatory steps by consuming a lot of freshly reaped rice, puris, bananas, coconuts and grapefruits before beginning their rituals.

The first day is actually popular as Nahay Khay and the holy dip in water body is taken on this day, preferably in the river Ganga. Womenfolk, who observe this festival, take only a single meal on this day and among many this consists of just lau or lauki boiled with rice. They get into the water upto their knees or waist and pray in the direction of the sun. This is followed by an ancient custom for married women to smear each other's forehead with ochre vermilion, right along the line of the nose to the tip. It is likely that the sindoor khela among the married women of Bengal on Vijaya Dashami may have originated from this. After all, our sarbajanin Durga pujas are just a century old. The second day of Chhatt is called Kharna, on which total fasting is observed without a drop of water, from sunrise to the sunset. Devotees have their food only after offering it first to the sun god at sunset. This is a rich repast consisting of 'payasam' or 'kheer' made rice and milk, 'puris,' hard baked wheat flour cakes called thekuas and bananas, which are distributed to one and all. On the third and main Chhatt day, fasting without water is again observed and the evening offerings or sandhya arghya is an elaborate ritual when oblations are made to the setting sun. Bamboo trays are held in its direction containing the much favoured thekuas, coconuts, bananas and other fruits. This is followed by the 'Kosi' ritual in homes when lamps are lit to honour the sun, but are kept under cover of five cane sticks. The fourth day of Chhatt is considered the most auspicious and worshippers gather in large numbers on the banks of rivers with their family and

friends for the final morning ritual of offering 'arghyas' to the rising sun. The fast is then broken with a bite of ginger with sugar, thus marking the end of the rituals. A volcano of joy, feasting and merriment then bursts all over.

What benefits does this puja confer? Many believe in it as a fertility rite for both humans and harvests, while other swear by its curative powers. There is also a theory that ancient yogis and rishis obtained energy directly from the sun's rays by exposing their bodies to the sun, while on fast. When one observes how when other events and pujas damage or destroy the environment with chemical paints and other poisonous substances, that include firecrackers, Chhatt stands out as a really commendable environment-friendly worship that uses only bio degradable items. The fact is that each region of India had the freedom to develop and nurture its own culture over centuries, in harmony with its environment and its requirements. Each celebrated a dozen or more pan-Indian or local festivals, but each finally gravitated to one major festival or event in the whole year that ultimately distinguished that culture from the rest. All said and done, this 'Bihari' festival has retained its unique folk flavour for so many centuries and paid the price by being marginalised by Brahmanism, but it teaches us how beautifully flexible is the real spirit of accommodative, plural Hinduism.