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**IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON *CHHATH PUJA*
AS A NON NATIVE FESTIVAL IN DIBRUGARH TOWN,
ASSAM: A PRACTITIONER'S ANALYSIS**

Abstract

Religion is a universal category of culture. Festival is an important part of religion. Festival is a day or period of celebration, typically for religious reasons. *Chhath puja* is an important festival and its performances are associated with various myths, beliefs and rituals. The *Chhath Puja* is celebrated in Dibrugarh town as a non native festival. The paper will try to study the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on *Chhath Puja*. It will also highlight the performances with special reference to its persistence, change, popularity from the practitioner's view point. The interpretation and analysis will be done from anthropological perspective. The data needed for this study were collected through participant's observation along with interviews at individual and at group level in two spells during 2019 and 2020 from the Dibrugarh town of Assam. However, the help of secondary sources like books, newspaper, journal etc are also taken.

Keywords: *Chhath Puja*, Non native, Persistence, Change, Popularity, Practitioner.

Introduction

Religion is a universal category of culture. Religion has exercised the most profound influence over man's thoughts since time immemorial. All societies possess beliefs that can be grouped under the term religion. According to Tylor (1874), religion is "a belief in spiritual beings" (Jha 1994:151). C. Geertz (1966), defined it as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with an aura of facility that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (ibid). There was a long and continuous debate among different school of thoughts regarding the insider and outsider visions of a religion study. The

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academic study of religion has developed into a cross- disciplinary field that has been enriched by the contribution of a great diversity of scholars such as anthropologists, economists, historians, philosophers, psychologists and sociologists. Thus religion can be observed under many perspectives and under many disciplines (Goncalves 2015: 2).

The paper deals with the study of festival among the non native migrant population. “Migrant” and “migration” are two central concepts in the research on religion and migration. The International Organization for Migration provides a rather general but widely used definition of migration, describing migration as “ a definite physical move from one location to another” and adding that “[f] or international migration the locations involved are clearly two distinct countries” (Frederiks and Nagy 2016:10). An often quoted definition of the term “migrant” is the 1998 United Nations definition which stipulates that a long term international migrant is “a person who has moved to a country other than his/her country of usual residence for at least a year, so that the country of destination effectively becomes the new country of residence” (ibid).

Festival is an important component of religious performances. Festival is a day or period of celebration, typically for religious reasons. *Chhath Puja* is an important festival and its performances are associated with various myths, beliefs and rituals.

Every religion has certain myth or belief and there is always some sort of rituals against it. Thus belief is a mental phenomenon and ritual is the action. This study will try to encompass all this concept of religious performances in its study.

Chhath Puja is an ancient Hindu Vedic festival of ‘Sun God’ celebrated in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is also celebrated in other parts of India by the migrant population. Nowadays, it has become popular both nationally and internationally. Many communities celebrate it irrespective of caste, creed and religion.

Objective of Study

Chhath Puja is a festival of Sun God. The main objective of this paper is to study the impact of covid-19 pandemic on *Chhath Puja*. This paper will study its origin, beliefs and practices and highlight its persistence, change and its popularity in Dibrugarh town of Assam as non native festival and then it will relate with the present pandemic situation. The interpretation of the analysis is done from anthropological perspective where the detail discussion on its origin, beliefs and practices becomes important to relate with some of the anthropological theory of religion. It will also try to correlate with some studies related to religion, migration and identity.

Methodology

The study is based on the observation of performance of *Chhath Puja* in Dibrugarh town from the practitioner's view point. The data needed for this study were collected through participant's observation along with interviews at individual and at group level in two spells during 2019 and 2020 from the Dibrugarh town of Assam. However, the help of secondary sources like books, newspaper, journal etc are also taken.

Assam is one of the eight states of North East India. It covers an area of 78,523 sq. Km. The state is bounded on the North by Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan, on the south by Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Manipur, on the east by Nagaland and parts of Arunachal Pradesh and on the west by West Bengal and Bangladesh. It is connected with the rest of India by road, railway and air as well as by water through Bangladesh. The state comprises of mainly two river valleys; the Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley. (Kaniampandy 2003: 41)

The present investigation was carried out in Dibrugarh town of Dibrugarh district. The district is situated on the southern bank and upper reaches of the Brahmaputra which lies in the North-eastern corner of Assam. A large number of tea plantations are located in Dibrugarh district (Kaniampandy 2003:42). It is comprised of large number of ethnic communities like Sonowal kacharis, Mishings, Deoris etc along with Assamese communities. Large number of migrant populations like Marwaris, Biharis, Jains, Punjabis etc are also found.

Myth and Beliefs of Origin of *Chhath Puja*

Belief is the cognitive aspect of religion. It attempts to explain the nature and origin of sacred things and implicitly assumes that they exist (Davis 2007:533). Regarding the myths and origin, information's were collected from both primary and secondary sources. According to one of the informant named Laxmi Narayan Pandey, one of the experienced priests of Dibrugarh town, in *Chhath Puja* Sun God (male deity) is worshipped on *Shashthi* (the sixth day of a Lunar fortnight phase) *Shashthi* being feminine and *Shashthi* can also be called as *Chhath* or *Chhathi* hence practitioners and believers call it *Chhathi Maiya's parv* or *Chhath Puja*. He states that it was first performed by Lord *Rama* and *Sita* when they returned from their fourteen years of exile. On their return people celebrated Diwali and after its sixth day *i.e Kartik Shukla Shashthi* *Rama* and *Sita* kept fast and offered their prayer to the Sun God on the bank of *Saryu* river. He said this festival was also performed by *Kunti*, *Karna* and *Draupati* of Mahabharata. He said that in *Chhath Puja* the last ray of the setting Sun and first ray of the rising Sun is worshipped. There is a reason behind it. The Sun God is worshipped along with his wives *Usha* and *Pratyusha*, the Vedic Goddess of Dawn and Dusk respectively.

To get more insight certain information were collected from some secondary sources also. According to Hindustan Times dated 1st November, 2019, '*Chhath Puja* is an age-old Hindu festival which is dedicated to Lord Surya (Sun God) and *Chhathi Maiya*, who is known to be the sister of Lord Surya. It's the only festival that is dedicated to Lord Surya, who is supposed to be the source of all powers. The God of light, life force and energy is worshipped in order to promote well-being, development and for the prosperity of human race. Devotees express their gratitude towards Lord Surya and perform important rituals over for a span of four days. People who observe the fast during this festival are called *Vrati*. There are several legends that explain in detail the origin of *Chhath Puja*. It is believed that in ancient times, *Draupadi* and the *Pandavas* of Hastinapur used to celebrate *Chhath* in order to solve their issues and gain their lost kingdom again. A few mantras from the Rig veda texts are chanted by worshippers while offering prayers to the Sun. According to another legend, *Chhath Puja* was first performed by *Karna*, who is considered to be an offspring of Lord Surya and *Kunti*. He ruled over the *Anga Desh* which is the modern day Bhagalpur in Bihar, during the age of Mahabharata. As per a legend, *Chhath Puja* is being performed from the Early Vedic Period. The legend has it that the sages of that era used to perform the *puja* by exposing themselves to direct sunlight to gain energy from the rays of the Sun and did not consume any eatables'.

Thus, from the mythology discussed above, it is found that its origin is linked with great Indian epic like Ramayana and Mahabharata etc.

Rituals and their Performances

There are two types of *Chhath Puja* namely *Chaitra Chhath* (*Chhath* celebrated in the month of April) and *Kartik Chhath* (*Chhath* celebrated in the month of November). In Dibrugarh, *Kartik Chhath* is more popular and also the focussed area of study. This festival is celebrated with it's highly faith worthy belief system. This is celebrated to gain divine blessings for procreation and prosperity. In this festival both male and female can undergo fasting but basically it is performed by married women. It is believed that the people who observe fast have to follow strict rules and regulations. The performance of ritual is divided into four days. The four day rituals are *Nahaye and Khaye*, *Kharna*, *Pehla Arghya*, *Doosra Arghya* and *Paaran*.

In the month of *kartik* (November) on the 6th day after Diwali, the *Chhath puja* is performed. In the rituals, cleaning plays a very important role. From the initiation of Diwali onward, the cleaning drive takes place in each and every household. People become totally vegetarian barring onion, garlic etc. Cleaning every nook and corner of the house becomes a compulsory ritual. Many of the people do fresh paintings in their houses etc. This *puja* is spread over four days from initiation till completion. The first day starts with '*Nahaye and Khaye*' (bathing and eating rituals) where the worshippers first take holy

dip in water in the early morning and pray to God to undergo *Chatth Vrata*, so that they can complete the fast successfully without any hurdle. During that particular day, they eat only vegetarian food as discussed earlier. Having the curry of bottle gourd (*lauki*) is compulsory. This day is for proper planning and preparation.

The next day's ritual is called as "*Kharna*". In this particular day after taking bath, the worshippers keep fast for the whole day. In the evening after sunset, they cook some special dishes like *kheer*, (a rice pudding prepared in milk with jaggery), *puri* (a small, round piece of bread made of wheat flour, deep fried) as offerings to *Chhati Maiya*. After praying and offerings, these food items are taken by worshippers in the form of *Prasad* (a devotional offering made to God). All the members of the family, relatives and friends share this *Prasad*. On this particular day, most of the women apply *mehendi* (the art or practice of applying temporary henna tattoos on palms) on their hands which are considered very auspicious for married women. Now, the fast starts devoid of even a single drop of water.

The third day is the day of *Pehla Arghya* (First offering to Lord Sun with water, milk and all the fruits and vegetables) where worshippers are busy with the preparations of rituals to be performed in the evening. Most of the women get up very early, bathe and start their preparation. In this *puja*, for the purpose of offering, seasonal fruits and vegetables are used. The most important and popular offering is *Thekwa* (dry sweet made from wheat flour, ghee and jaggery). All the fruits and vegetables are washed and kept aside. After that, the preparation of *Thekwa* starts. One important point has to be noted that in some places the preparation of *Thekwa* starts very early. It starts with washing the whole grained wheat followed by drying and then making flour either at home or at any grinding mill. While doing all these activities, a great care is undertaken with regard to its purity. At the time of drying no animal or bird should come and defile it. Before crushing the grains, the grinding machinery is cleaned properly. The *Thekwa* was earlier prepared in mud hearth. Nowadays, a great transformation is seen like this sweet is prepared from readymade flour and it is cooked in the gas stove. This is followed by arrangements of fruits and vegetables and all other offerings in a *soop* (a basket made of bamboo). Before arrangement the basket is coloured with red colour with certain designs. After all the arrangements the women take bath and wear new sari with no black colour in it. After that, one of the male members of the family carries the *soop* on his head and visit the nearby source of water like river, ponds, lake etc. *Ghats* (a stair or passage leading down to a river) are cleaned where the *puja* is performed. In the *Ghat vedis* (a round shaped mud base) are prepared where they keep the *soop*. In the evening along with all the offerings, they offer *Arghya* at the time of sunset. Before that, they light an earthen lamp in the *soop*. When it is little dark, the worshippers move to their respective households. One thing which has to be taken care of is that

one earthen lamp should be lit whole night. This earthen lamp is again taken to the same *ghat* from home in the freshly arranged *soop* for the rituals to be performed at dawn. Devotees devote themselves in the worship of *Chhathi Maiya* and sing songs, praising and glorifying the kindness of the goddess. After some rest people get up very early like 2 am onwards and take bath and proceed to their respective *Ghats*. The morning is the crucial part of the ritual and the day to break their fast.

Doosra Araghya is offered to the rising Sun, the festival comes to an end. Before going home, the married women apply *sindoor* (vermilion) on each other's forehead and hair parting. It is the time of merry making and fun. The *vratis* beg *Prasad* from each other. It is followed by *Paran* (breaking of fast) where worshippers break their fast by taking jaggery and ginger and other *prasads* along with water. Then the *Prasad* is distributed. They bow their head and happily return home. There is an important part of this festival, that is the begging of *Prasads* by the devotees. They beg the *Prasad* from five *Vratis* at least. It is usually done by people who had earlier wished something in the name of *Chhathi Maiya*. They vow to beg *Prasad* if their wishes are fulfilled.

One important ritual which is performed by all new *Vratis* is the ritual of *Kosibharai*. Whenever a married lady starts to initiate *Chhath Vrath* for the first time, they have to perform this *Kosibharai* ritual. This is performed after returning from the *Ghat* in the evening i.e. after *Pehla Araghya*. Minimum five married ladies are required to perform these rituals.

In these ritual seven sugarcanes, one earthen pot, *Prasads* and earthen lamps are required. Sugarcanes are tied together with a *Gamocha* (cotton towel) to form a kind of Pavilion. The earthen pot called as *koshi* is kept in the middle of Pavilion. The earthen lamps are lit, and offerings like *thekwa* and other seasonal fruits, dry fruits etc. are offered there. This ritual is performed by five married ladies. In the next morning the same rituals are performed in the *Ghat* accordingly. This ritual is also performed when a child is born or marriage is performed or some long time wishes got fulfilled.

In a family once this festival is initiated, it is their compulsory duty to perform it every year and to pass it to the posterity. There is one more ritual when a mother-in-law hand over this fasting tradition to her daughter-in-law then it is called *Soop Dena*. Here, the mother-in-law transfers her *Soop* in the hand of her daughter-in-law in the *Ghat* which means that from then onwards this tradition will be followed by her daughter-in-law.

Persistence, Change and Popularity

The festival is celebrated with most of the beliefs and rituals discussed above in Dibrugarh town too. The structure of the festival remains the same. It is generally found that non native performance of any religion in the process

of migration face a double challenge. First, the migrated people need to adapt to the new environment due to the different socio-cultural and legal settings of the place, and at the same time they have to maintain their faithful native ritual practices also. The migrant people normally get assimilated within the social environment of the non native region. They mostly try to adopt the new culture and also sustain their original one.

In this paper two types of migrant populations are discussed; the first one, who have become the permanent settlers. They have assimilation with the non natives' way of life in language, culture, food habits, dress patterns, festivals etc. Many generations have settled here and now they have become an important part of the Assamese society. They observe the native festivals of the land like *Magh Bihu*, *Bohag Bihu* and *Kati Bihu*. They visit the *Namghars* to attend prayer services and participate in *Prasad* offerings in the native manner of the Land. But simultaneously, they perform their original ritual practices, and *Chhath puja* is one among them.

The other group of migrants are temporarily settlers. Basically, this paper deals with the permanent population migrated from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to Assam who are called as *Asomiya Bihari* (Assamese Bihari).

When we talk about persistence and change, it is found from the opinion of people that *Chhath* is celebrated in Dibrugarh town with great importance among the concerned communities. The forms of belief and rituals more or less remain the same with a little change like, observance of *kharna* is compulsory in *Chhath* but here many of the working as well as non-working ladies are not performing it due to paucity of time, health issues etc.

One thing which is visualized from the people's opinion is that the degree of enthusiasm in celebrating this festival in Dibrugarh differs from Bihar. It is one of the main festivals of Bihar but in Dibrugarh, its status gets changed from a main festival to one of the festivals of the Biharis celebrated by just a folk of people. Therefore, same festival, same community at different places leads to different levels of importance. They said that it is inevitable and same thing will happen to migrant population settled in Bihar also. Earlier problems were observed among the working population especially Government employees when no holiday was declared during *Chhath puja*. But after pursuance and various memorandums from the members of the *Chhath Puja* committees, the government at times decide to declare half holiday, a restricted holiday of one day for the concerned communities or a holiday while preparing the holiday list of the ensuing year. It seems this particular 'holiday' is at the discrepancy of the government in power. But a holiday for this festival is a welcome move towards its persistence. There is a mixed feeling among the non-practitioners regarding this holiday.

If there is persistence and less change then definitely there will be some popularity also. There are several reasons for popularity. Deep rooted

belief and faith that 'Sun God' is the essence of life on earth, prayer is being offered to both the rising Sun and setting Sun. Performance of rituals with great sincerity, observation of this festival among the community without fail is another important factor. Apart from this day by day increase in population shows increase of community performing this festival. Declaration of a holiday for this festival by the government cannot be denied. The role of media in showing the narratives related to this festival is also important.

It is found that music also plays a magical role; the folk songs of *Chatth puja* are enchanting. *Chatth Puja* songs in the voice of Sharda Sinha, Kalpana Patowary etc soothe the senses spiritually of the mass. It has been observed that these songs are mostly played in the markets and households during the festival.

Here, in Dibrugarh some people from the communities like Assamese, Marwaris, Bengalis, Nepalese and even some Muslims have started keeping fast and observing this festival following the rituals. Many of them, even if they don't keep the fast but offer fruits and light earthen lamps in the *Ghats*. During data collection, one Marwari family was found who has been performing *Chhath* since the last four years. They had a very tough time and someone advised them to observe this festival. They performed the puja with firm faith and the difficulties eased for them. They have been regular practitioners since then. Another family had no child even after eight years of marriage. The couple kept this fast involving prostration march and dipping in water. They are blessed to have children in their life. A gentleman Mr. Bhaskar Saikia from Dibrugarh readies a *Ghat* in Chandmari area at his own initiative and expenses (as much as required) for the devotees visiting that *Ghat* since several years. Likewise there are many other who perform this festival and some others who offer fruits and sweets as *Prasad* as a part of homage to Lord Sun and *Chhathi Maiya*.

The popularity of *Thekwa* as an icon of *Chhath Puja Prasad* cannot be denied among the other communities. The worshippers prepare large quantity of *Thekwas* for distribution as *Prasad*.

Chhath Puja in the present Covid-19 pandemic situation

As we all know that the year 2020 had a pandemic situation due to the spread of Covid-19 virus. Complete lockdown was announced for several months. When the situation came slightly under control, then normal life began with certain norms to be followed strictly. Restrictions were imposed on large gatherings. *Chhath puja's* central belief is related to the place of observation of rituals i.e the bank of a river, pond, lake etc. But in the present scenario of pandemic situation, it was directed by the administration to perform this festival in their respective household or in their neighbourhood with very small numbers in order to avoid large gatherings and to maintain social distancing.

This time the *puja* was celebrated with many innovative practices. People created temporary water tanks, dig small ponds in the courtyards, used large bowls to store water for performing the rituals. It was also found that people enjoyed doing the decoration and all the initiatives for celebration of *chhath puja* on their own. One thing which is learnt is that situation brings changes and sometimes these changes get assimilated in such a way that it becomes a part and parcel of that culture. After conversation with the practitioners it was found that observance of rituals at home or in the neighbourhood was not a bad experience. Many of them liked it as it saved them from many hardships. They need to walk long distance to reach the place of worship but during the pandemic they need not, rather they were not allowed. They prayed whole heartedly wherever they were, missing their friends, relatives and other devotees.

Interpretation

Anthropological studies on 'Religion' have been mainly concerned with the origin and evolution of religion in earlier phase. Later on the emphasis was changed to its functional interpretation. In this regard, the study can be correlated with the functional perspective which originated from Emile Durkheim's work on religion. It states that religion provides social control and cohesion in the society. In performing *Chhath puja*, following strict rules and enforcing religious based morals and norms is an important aspect of social control. The shared rituals, beliefs and sharing of *Prasad* provide social cohesion or unity among the group.

As *Chhath Puja* is associated with the worship of Sun God, we can relate it with nature myth school, a German school and mostly concerned with Indo-European religions. According to this theory, the Gods of antiquity and Gods anywhere at all times were no more than personified natural phenomenon: the Sun, Moon, stars etc. Intangible things like sun and the sky gave man the idea of infinite and also served as symbols for it (Hasnain and Misra 2003: 282).

According to M. Frederiks, migration affects and transforms the beliefs, practices, and community formation of people who migrate. But migration also affects "non-migrants" and the worlds they live in. In some regions of the world, migration has profoundly changed the religious landscapes. Migration has at times brought religions to destination countries that were not only marginally present in the context before the event of migration (Frederiks and Nagy 2016: 22). This festival has also affected both migrant and native populations of Dibrugarh town. The migrant population observes *Chhath Puja* as a matter of faith and beliefs inherited from their source of origin and also sometimes as their identity marker whereas a new festival with its own belief system slowly changes the religious scenario of the natives land.

This festival also has economic importance. A huge fair is organized at the day of *Chhath Puja* where many food stalls, toy stalls and entertainment zone for children etc are installed. These are usually done by non practitioners. Therefore, it shows involvement of other community indirectly with *Chhath puja*.

All religion faces the question of scientific base associated with it. The festival is closely linked with water and Sun God and the *Vrati* stand in a water body even up to the neck for a pretty long time and can be related to hydro-medicinal therapy though yet to prove scientifically.

The whole study can be summarized with the following points: i) *Chhath puja*, as a non native festival, is persisting in Dibrugarh town with little changes in its ritual performances ii) Gradually it is gaining its popularity iii) From the present pandemic situation it can be inferred that time and situation can bring alteration in the pattern of performing the rituals which may lead to the development of many innovative practices. Last but not the least, *Chhath Puja* as a non native festival in Dibrugarh has gained importance and brought many people (natives and non natives) irrespective of caste, creed and religion under one umbrella.

Notes

1. *Bihu*: It is an important festival of Assam. It is a set of three important Assamese festivals in the Indian state of Assam. The *Magh Bihu* is a harvest festival observed in January. *Bohag Bihu* is sowing festival in the month of April. It is also called as *Rongali Bihu* and people enjoy with music and dancing. *Kati Bihu* is observed in October and is associated with worship for crop protection.
2. *Namghar*: It is a prayer house in Assam for communal worship. It also serves the purpose for holding religious meetings and discussions.

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