Cherishing the Sun

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Hindus of Nepal and Northeast India every fall honor the setting and rising Sun with fasts, devotion and celebration during the four-day Chaith festival

DR. HARI BANSH JHA, NEPAL AND GITANJALI CHAK, INDIA

There is hardly any family in any village in the Terai region of Nepal and the adjacent Indian state of Bihar which does not observe the Chaith festival in honor of the setting Sun. Extending over four days, the festival is an occasion to express gratitude to the Sun for bestowing the bounties of life on Earth, and also for fulfilling individual's wishes. The word chaith means "six," as the festival begins on the sixth day (shasthi) of the lunar month of Kartik, October/November, shortly after Deepavali, the Festival of Lights.

In Terai, Chaith is celebrated with great enthusiasm at Janakpur, Birgunj, Rajbiraj and Biratnagar. It is also celebrated in Kathmandu along the banks of the Bagmati and Manahara rivers. But among all these places in Nepal, it is in Janakpur, the capital city of the ancient Mithila State, where Chaith is observed most fervently. In India, especially at Patna, the capital city of Bihar, tens of thousands turn out each year to make offerings along the banks of the Ganga.

Janakpur, located about 400 kilometers southeast of Kathmandu, is the birthplace of Sita, wife of Lord Rama. Dr. Jha reports, "As I hail from the Terai region of Nepal and especially from Janakpur, I have had occasions to see this festival ever since my childhood. The Hindus, irrespective of castes and creeds, celebrate the

Chaith festival. Each family, from brahmins to Doms ("untouchables"), observes this function. As an exception, this festival is not celebrated in my family. I do not know why, but there is a custom here that if something inauspicious happens to a family on a particular festival day, thenceforth the family does not observe that day. Even so, I never missed watching this festival when I lived at Janakpur. Last year, 2001,

after living in Kathmandu for thirty years, I went to Janakpur for the express purpose of attending the festival, for the first time since I left.

"At Janakpur, with its small lakes, Chaith festival is celebrated in the most magnificent way. My wife, Usha, and I agreed to pay homage to

the Sun God in the evening. But we chose different routes to cover these ponds. Since my ancestral house is close to Rukminisar, I first went there. The scene was most delightful. I met many of my neighbors celebrating the festival. Then, I moved to Birrahi. And from there I moved onwards to Argaja and Dhanushsagar. At the

end, I visited Gangasagar where the festival decorations were most colorful. Having reached Gangasagar, I made circumambulation to the pond and prayed to the Sun God for my prosperity."

Dr. Jha asked one devotee, Rupkala, why

she celebrates the Chaith festival. She said she did it for curing the disease of her husband who has paralysis. Another devotee, Sita, said she attended the festival desiring to get a son. A third devotee, Bhagirathi, replied that she worships the Sun God so her sons can pass their

examinations. A fourth, Kalabati, said, "I pray to the Sun God to cure my skin disease."

"At the time I was interviewing the above devotees," Dr. Jha reminisced, "I remembered how I was once made to go

for begging in some families during my childhood before the Chaith. Alms collected by me were offered to Chaith Parmeshwori, the Shakti, or power, of the Sun God. The reason I was made to beg was that my parents prayed to the

Sun God before my birth that they would offer Him the alms collected by me if they had a son. So after I was born as eleventh child of my parents, I was made to fulfill the promise. Likewise, my eldest sister offers blessed food to the Sun God

each year, as she pledged to do so if she had a brother."

Devotees believe that the setting Sun symbolizes the outgoing forces, while the rising Sun

is the harbingerof incoming ones. The festival is quite ancient, with references found to it in the Rig Veda. It is mentioned in the Surya Purana that Anusuya, the wife of Atri, performed the Chaith festival on the sixth day of the lunar calendar in Katrik. The festival possibly figures in the

Mahabharata when Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, was blessed with her first son, Karna, after worshiping the Sun God. The Agni Purana

states that the Pandavas observed Chaith when they returned from their fourteen-year exile. The Ramayana

recounts the festival's observance by Queen Kaushalya, mother of Lord Rama.

In the Chaith

festival, devotees take extra precaution to see that all items used in the worship of the Sun God are pure. Every effort is made to

keep the food, utensils and other objects used in the worship pure and sacred. It is believed that any leniency might invite

misfortune.

Chaith is special for women. Those who wish to make the

offering to the Sun God on the evening of the sixth day of Kartik and morning of the seventh prepare

themselves with rigorous penance. They begin two days earlier by going to the river. lake or well to take a holy

bath. They eat only pure, sattvic, food. The next day, called kharna. the women fast during the day and in the

evening have some rice pudding which has been offered to the Sun God. This sanctified dish is also

distributed among the family members, particularly to those who do not follow this festival. On the

sixth day, the women devotees observe total fast during the day and night. They don't even take

water, let alone fruits or any other item. They engage themselves in preparing naivedyam, food offerings,

for the Sun God comprised of ripe banana, sugarcane, bhuswa (a preparation of rice flour and ghee), and

thakuwa/khajur i (a fried sweet made of wheat flour). Also offered to the Sun God are coconut, radish, ginger

and cereal grains, including gram. Devotees of means prepare lavish offerings, while the poor may even go to

the extent of begging to collect funds to perform the festival in a proper style.

All these items prepared for the Sun God are taken to the riverside or the lake

before sunset on the sixth day on new bamboo trays. The sites where the offerings

are made are cleaned before the family members go to worship. Women sing

devotional songs on this special occasion in praise of the Sun God. Devotees

who make the offerings enter the water in new clothes and then present the

naivedyam to the setting Sun first. After the offerings are made, most families take

all the offerings back to their homes for safekeeping, others stay and guard

them on the river bank or lakeside. Following the final offering to the Sun God in the

morning, the naivedyam is distributed among as many people as possible.

The festival is much the same in Bihar, reports Gitanjali Chak, "The

popular belief is that all the desires of the devotees are fulfilled

during Chaith. There is also a strong belief that any misdeed performed

during Chaith will be severely punished. Thus peace generally prevails

during this time, as even the criminals prefer to abstain from evil doings.

Every year loud devotional music heralds the festival's arrival.

These special songs for the festival are an integral part of the

celebrations and have attracted study by classical scholars of India and

abroad. Even in the pre-Indepen dence era, European linguists and literary

critics praised these songs. The literary works of Sir George Grierson.

William Crooke, Huge Fraiser, Ram Naresh Tripathi and Krishna Deo

Upadyay all refer to Chaith songs."

The first days of observance in Bihar are much the same as in

Nepal, with the second day's fast being broken late evening

after performing worship at home. The offerings, araghya,

typically rice, thekua (deep-fried puffs of wheat flour),

grapefruit, bananas, coconuts and grains of lentils, are

distributed among family and visiting friends and relatives.

These items are contained in small, semi-circula rpans

woven out of bamboo strips, called dalas . The third day of the

festival (that is, the sixth day of Kartik) is spent preparing

the offerings at home during the day. In the evening the devotees move to the bank of the Ganga in large milling

crowds. All streets leading to the holy river are decorated

with colorful festoons and banners."

"Once there," she continues, "the offerings are made

to the setting Sun. At nightfall, the devotees,

along with family and friends, return home where

another colorful celebration is held. Clay elephants

containing earthen lamps and containers full of offerings

are placed under a canopy of sugar cane stalks, after which Agni,

the Fire God, is worshiped. On the final day of the festivities,

devotees move to the riverbank where offerings

are made to the rising Sun this time. As this ritual draws

to a close, there is joyous celebration with merry-maki

ng all around. The devotees then break their fast

and the rich offerings are given out to all the people

around." Though there are a total of seventeen Sun

temples in Bihar, Deo Aurangaba dand Baragaon

near Nalanda are the ones that are most active

during Chaith.

"In Nepal,"

concludes Dr. Jha, "the Chaith festival is important

to maintain social harmony. People from all

walks of life and of all ages flock together to celebrate

this festival. The haves celebrate the festival with great

pomp and show; but it is not so difficult even for the

have-nots to celebrate. During my tour to Janakpur

last year l saw a lot of change in the manner people

celebrated from my childhood. One difference is the

population pressure. Earlier, comparati vely few families

celebrated the festival, and there was no rush on

this occasion. Increased decoration s and the use of

firecracker s is much evidence. It was my feeling

that the people's devotion to the Sun God has increased.