

[Cherishing the Sun](#)

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Cherishing the Sun

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

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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 harbinger of
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-Independence

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

Upadhyay 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-circular
r pans

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 in Aurangaba d and 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 I
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

decorations

and the

use of

firecracker
s is much
in
evidence.
It was my
feeling

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

