

**Multifaceted Dimensions of Chhath Festival: A Case of Terai, Nepal**

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**Abstract**

*Chhath is an antique popular bi-annual Hindu festival devoted to the God of energy - Sun for sustaining life on the earth. The Hindus worship the sun very enthusiastically and pray for the well-being, success, and progress of their family members, friends, and elders. According to Hinduism, Sun worship is related to healing a range of skin diseases. Given this context, a qualitative inquiry was carried out in Kathmandu to explore the multifaceted dimensions that influenced people to celebrate it from time immemorial. Data were collected and interpreted through cultural diffusion theory. The finding shows that this festival has not only economic, socio-cultural but also spiritual, scientific aspects so it has gained much popularity from past to present.*

*Keywords: acculturation, diffusionism, cross-cultural bridge, ecotourism, qualitative inquiry*

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### Context of the Study

Chhath, derived from the Sanskrit word *Sasthi* meaning six, is a culturally and religiously significant Hindu festival celebrated mainly in Nepal's Terai region and parts of India. It honors the Sun for its life-giving energy and healing power, recognized in both traditional Indian medicine and yoga. Rooted in ancient Vedic texts (Singh, 2018), Chhath is observed on the sixth day of Kartik (October–November), following Deepawali. A less popular version, Chaiti Chhath, is celebrated in March–April after Holi, but winter remains the preferred festive season in this region.

Chhath, also called Chhathi Maiya, Mahapary, and Surya Shashti, is a festival devoted to purity, discipline, and worship of the Sun God, though its exact origin is unclear, several myths link it to Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In the *Ramayana*, Chhath is connected to Sita's sun worship, leading to the birth of Luv and Kush, and Rama seeking help from the Sun God (Keshavadass, 1988). It is because, Laxmana (brother of Rama) cut Surpanakha's (sister of Ravana) nose after she attacked Sita. This was followed by Sita's abduction by the king of Lanka, the ten-headed Ravana, and finally the battle in the *Ramayana* between Rama and Ravana took place. Nagar & Nanda (1986). The other myth is that the victories of Rama, in the *Ramayana*, over Lanka and Pandavas over Kauravas, in the *Mahabharata*, were achieved because Draupadi, Kunti (in the *Mahabharata*), and Sita (in the *Ramayana*) worshiped the Sun with fasting. Similarly, in the *Mahabharata*, characters like Draupadi and Kunti also fasted and prayed to the Sun gaining strength and healing powers through Sun worship. Karna, son of Surya and Kunti, became a powerful and generous warrior due to his devotion. For Saran & Pandey (1992) these epics highlight the Sun as a symbol of 'One God' divine power, well-being, longevity of loved ones and unity.

Chhath is historically rooted in India—particularly Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—and parts of southern Nepal, Mauritius, and their diaspora (Jha, 2009). The popularity of this festival lies in devotees' trust that all their desired vows are fulfilled. Much ink has been spilled in trying to promote the issues of religious tolerance and cultural diversity from a constitutional level in Nepal. Its popularity stems from the deep belief that devotees' wishes are fulfilled through its rigorous four-day rituals involving holy bathing, fasting, and offerings like fruits and thekuwa-kasar (Singh, 2018). Unique in worshipping both the rising and setting Sun, the festival symbolizes the cyclical nature of life and death. The Sun's divinity is emphasized in various Puranas and Hindu scriptures, with Balkaran (2020) linking its spiritual importance to South Asian and goddess studies. From an astrological perspective, the Sun represents the center of the solar system, leadership, ego, creativity, the soul, and authority, while Gray (1922) notes its 108 sacred names in the *Mahabharata*. Despite its spiritual depth, there is limited academic research on Chhath. This paper,

therefore, seeks to explore its philosophical, environmental, and socio-cultural dimensions using personal field data, intellectual construction and theoretical insights, highlighting the festival's messages of harmony, well-being, spirituality, and unity amid Nepal's ongoing efforts to promote religious tolerance and cultural diversity.

### **Brief Review of Literature**

Nepal, situated between India and China, is characterized by its diverse topography, including the Himalayas, hills, and Indo-Gangetic plains. Unlike other countries, Nepal doesn't celebrate an independence day as it was never colonized. Its unique identity is reflected in its Nepali calendar, triangular flag, the country with Saturday as a public holiday, and the pagoda architecture introduced by Araniko in the 13th century. Nepal is home to Mount Everest (the world's highest peak), the birthplace of Lord Buddha (light of Asia), the living Goddess *Kumari*, and the Himalayan cold deserts of Manang and Mustang. The country is rich in biodiversity, flora and fauna. It is a multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic country. Although 80% of the population is Hindu, Nepal became a secular Federal Democratic Republic in 2008, ending its monarchy and embracing religious diversity with national holidays for Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim festivals (Letizia, 2011). It was the first step towards secularism that was welcomed by the religious minorities towards the decision of the republican government.

In the Bara district of Nepal, eighty-five rice varieties are preserved in a community seed bank, including Sathia rice and pigeon peas, which are integral to Chhath festival rituals. According to Vernooy et al. (2019), seed fairs organized by the Community Seed Bank Association of Nepal (CSBAN) aim to promote agricultural biodiversity and share the cultural, nutritional, and medicinal significance of local crops. Chhath celebrations along the Koshi River support local economies through ecotourism, handicrafts, and employment (Bhattarai, 2015), while also strengthening family bonds if health, time, and finances permit (Stadler & Jepson, 2018). If the family's requirements and hopes are not met, a conflict might arise; therefore, their capability to attend celebrations gets restricted. Singh (2018) notes that the Sun is worshipped for good harvests and the well-being of elders as winter begins, with symbolic rituals like clay elephant offerings at ponds in Mithila. These ponds serve as vital ecosystems and festival sites for Chhath, Sama-Chakeva, and Makar Sankranti. Hunter & Changtragoon (2016) emphasize the festival's role in preserving cultural heritage, social unity, and sustainable practices. Folk songs and customs highlight values of truth, peace, and biodiversity, while farmers from Bihar grow and sell citrus fruits and leafy vegetables for Chhath to major Indian cities (Singh et al., 2016).

Chhath festival symbolizes both biodiversity conservation and feminism, highlighting a sacred connection among God, nature, and humans (Maharaj, 2016). As a rare

Hindu celebration led predominantly by women, it reflects their spiritual leadership and societal empowerment, challenging traditional power structures (Hallen, 2020; Singh, 2018). While women typically fast, men also participate, and the ritual's continuity may be passed to others during crises like illness or death. However, environmental challenges persist, as devotees in metro cities are often forced to use polluted rivers. During the COVID-19 lockdown, artificial water bodies were created in Nepal to maintain rituals safely. The Ganga River, central to Indian civilization, agro based economy is revered for its sacred water the *Ganga-Jal* nature's cure and ecological importance (Shiva, 2013). Sustainable practices, like rainwater management and community training, are crucial to maintain urban water ecosystems (Bhargava, 2021). This can be a boon for the city area for the fishery, festival, recreation, and research. Additionally, Illiyas et al. (2013) emphasize the need for safety protocols and infrastructure improvements during religious gatherings to prevent accidents or stampedes caused by inadequate planning and medical support.

Similarly, the study by Pandey et al. (2019) revealed a significant drop over 20% in OPD visits across India's five busiest clinics, namely oncology, gastroenterology, nephrology, neurology, and cardiology, recorded more than 20% absolute fall in OPD visits during the *Chhath* festival in 2018 as people prioritized religious devotion over healthcare. Celebrated with enthusiasm in both Nepal and India, Chhath fosters family unity and social integration, with stories, music, fairs, and dances connecting communities (CDC, 2015). Even poor devotees participate by borrowing goods, underscoring the festival's cultural significance. Originally a Hindu ritual, Chhath has expanded beyond religious lines through cultural diffusion, acculturation, enculturation and international migration. While Carroll (1977) explains this shift through Sanskritization, Khanal (2018) argues that factors like economic status and geography now shape privilege more than caste or religion in Nepal, cautioning against potential tensions from the reservation system. The growing inclusivity of Chhath highlights evolving identities, yet its broader socio-cultural, economic, political, and scientific dimensions remain under explored, making this topic valuable for researchers, devotees, and cultural scholars.

### Methodology

This qualitative study adopted a multiple realities approach (Krauss, 2005) using in-depth interviews and observations to explore participants' cultural perspectives on the Chhath festival. Open-ended questions allowed for detailed responses, which were interpreted within the context of each participant's value system. The first author documented behaviors, gestures, and unique expressions at riverbanks, recorded additional remarks post-interviews, and reflected on field experiences for deeper insight. Consistent with Denzin and Lincoln (2011), data collection included interviews, field notes, and participant observations. Notes were first written in a diary, then transcribed and edited daily

(Stake, 2000), categorized, and analyzed in alignment with the research framework to ensure rich, meaningful interpretation.

This study employed convenience sampling, which is effective when time, resources, and staffing are limited, and generalization is not the goal (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassm, 2016). The first author, a long-term resident of Biratnagar and observer of Chhath for eighteen years, and the second author, from the same community, found this method efficient and accessible. In this study, the method was efficient, simple to implement, and convenient to reach the field. Regarding the number of participants, how many are too many? The common concept is 'less is more' because qualitative research is contextually based. Consistent with DeMarrais and Lapan (2003), three informed participants—one male and two females—were selected for in-depth interviews, enabling rich, contextual insights and data saturation. It is because fewer participants interviewed in greater depth can yield data saturation.

To ensure credibility, strategies such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were employed. The first author engaged in ongoing dialogue with devotees, observed their practices, and verified the meanings drawn from their input. Ethical protocols namely participant consent, privacy, and protection from harm were followed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Participants from Tehrathum, Janakpur, and Biratnagar, now living in Kathmandu, included a chemistry lecturer (Bibhusan), a Nepali lecturer (Anita), and a housewife (Binita), whose pseudonyms preserved their anonymity and enhanced research validity. They were duly acknowledged after the task completion.

### ***Chhath Festival for Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism***

*Chhath Puja* is the epitome of the culture of respecting and worshiping nature. India and Nepal are the lands of festivals with cultural, spiritual, and social implications. Majority of tourist come to Nepal for different purposes such as pony trek expedition, mountain flight, paramotoring, zip flying, stand up paddle boarding, rock climbing, mountain biking, hiking, sight seeing, skydiving, bird watching etc but most of tourists visit Nepal with religious faith. Domestic and foreign tourists visit Nepal for romantic getaways, honeymoons, family trips, solo adventures, and trips with friends. In this connection, Binita opined:

Chhath festival inspires people living away from home to return and celebrate with zeal, uniting families and communities beyond barriers. After the rituals, offerings are shared as women break their fast. The festival also boosts the rural economy through high demand for items like bamboo baskets, sugarcane, camphor, sandalwood, honey, vermilion, lamps, incense, dry fruits, vegetables, and traditional clothing.

Conservation of water resources is a good message for the citizens that keeping water safe and free from pollution reduces water-borne diseases. In this connection, Bibhusan opined

Being the economic hub with numerous industries, the capital city of Nepal-Kathmandu demands more resources, consumption, and household emissions. So, rivers are polluted. Sanitation gets a priority from home to the riverbank, its surroundings, and pathways are decorated with banana plant. It combines nature, local economy, harvest, and the spirit to thank nature for its contribution to sustenance and versatility of life.

People express their joy, tragedy, success via folk art, song, dance, celebration, etc. Environmentalists have claimed *Chhath* as the festival of environmental significance. Government of Nepal had given much value to this festival like others festival. In this connection, Anita opined:

Chhath festival holds ecotourism value, promoting environmental awareness and spiritual connection. To boost tourism, the Government of Nepal aired a documentary on Nepal Television and linked it to the Nepal Tourism Board's campaigns like Visit 1998 and the canceled Visit 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic. Such festivals attract visitors interested in spiritual philosophy, social harmony, and biodiversity conservation, encouraging care for nature and environmental sensitivity.

### **Cross-Cultural Bridge of *Chhath* Festival**

There was a Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006 in Nepal; caste issues have been broadly politicized to represent particular castes for promising states based on caste. At present, political parties have two contrasting views. Firstly, blaming all the backwardness of the country to elites who occupied political leadership and positions in civil services. Secondly, caste-based politics will divide the nation and harm the country's security. It eventually benefits the outsiders who are fueling such a divide. In this contest, Bibhusan opined:

Both views hold partial truth, but politics often focuses on dividing people and turning them into vote banks rather than solving real issues. He cited King Prithvi Narayan Shah's vision of unity among diverse castes and noted that bamboo products are used equally by all groups, reflecting cultural harmony. However, some politicians and industrialists exploit the Chhath festival to appeal to Madhesi (Terai dweller) sentiments for votes and cheap labor, highlighting how society has normalized the commodification of human beings.

Due to the role of media, literacy rate and awareness level of people have increased; people celebrate it due to enculturation or acculturation, religious tolerance. This is a vegetarian festival with strict rules and does not involve idolatry, priest chanting. In this context, Binita shared:

I opposes animal sacrifice in festivals and emphasizes the strict purity rules of Chhath, where food must be free from garlic, salt, and onion, and offerings are kept fresh and uncontaminated. Devotees walk barefoot, avoid harming even grass, and rest with blankets to honor nature. Women observe fasting, while men help with preparations. Some perform acts like rolling on sand or prostration as part of their vow fulfillment. She also highlighted that Terai people respectfully celebrate festivals of other religions, reflecting unity beyond political, religious, and cultural divides.

Chhati Maiya is the mother goddess who provides strength and support to the poor. After Maoist conflict from Feb 13, 1996 to Nov 21, 2006 known as the Nepali Civil War, Madhesh movement in 2007 and the People's Revolution II in 2006, there were mass migrations to Kathmandu resulting in a rise in the number of devotees. Celebrating such a festival brings goodwill and intimacy without any show off or lavish expenditure. In this discourse, Anita shared:

I believe everyone has the right to celebrate festivals regardless of caste, ethnicity, or religion, viewing it as a form of enculturation or acculturation. She criticizes Western cultural influence for polluting traditional values and sees Chhath as a simpler, more affordable festival without animal sacrifice or luxury displays. However, she notes downsides like river pollution from discarded items and concerns over immoral behavior, gambling among unsupervised youth during overnight stays at riverbanks.

### **The Popularity of *Chhath*: Quality or Quantity?**

Chhath is popular because it acts as a cross-cultural bridge to connect people, conserve biodiversity, promote ecotourism etc. but most of tourists visit Nepal with pilgrimage in mind. The popularity of *Chhath* lies in its religious myth and use of local indigenous technology. In this connection, Anita said:

I began celebrating Chhath after her wish for a child was fulfilled by Chhathi Maiya. She shared the myth of King Priyabart and Queen Malini, who, with Maharishi Kashyap's help, performed a Yagya (ritual done in front of sacred fire with religious prayer) and were later blessed with a son by goddess Shashti, marking the festival's origin. The use of traditional tools like the Dhiki, Jato, and clay stove helps preserve indigenous technology. Today, Chhath has gained attention among politicians, bureaucrats, devotees, and researchers, each with their own interests.



Though the government lacks exact data, it is said that the number of people celebrating Chhath increases annually, and rivers become crowded during this festival. This festival is for peace and stability, our identification, health benefit, solar power and cultural capital. So, we should preserve it. In this relation, Binita opined:

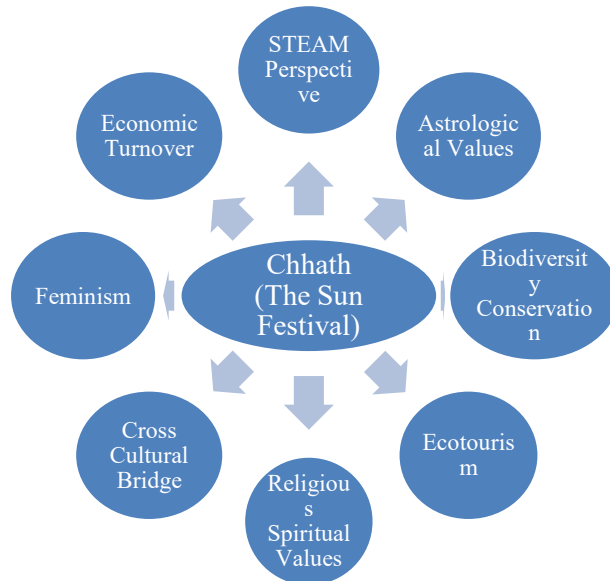
This four-day festival is believed to boost immunity by calming the mind and reducing negative emotions like fear and anger. She read that sunlight aids calcium and vitamin D absorption, especially for women. In Hindu belief, a wife is seen as the source of her husband's strength, just as the Sun's power is linked to his wives, Usha (morning ray) and Pratyusha (evening ray), who always accompany him. Worshiping the Sun symbolizes honoring nature, as life on Earth is impossible without it.

Despite huge crowds of devotees, loss of lives, damage of belongings, etc. are some rare disastrous incident to occur. To prevent such incidents, several good preparation are endorsed by the authority in organizing such religious festivals. It is because *Chhath* festival in Nepal had scientific, yogic, great economic and historic importance. In this connection, Bibhusan opined:

Devotees celebrate Chhath with great enthusiasm as it marks the first grain of the harvest. "Chhath" means "six," and he explained that solar energy enters the body in six steps. Fasting and cleanliness detoxify the body and mind; then, a navel dip in water activates psychic energy mentioned by Freudian Psychology. Solar energy flows through the devotee's tri-glandular complex namely hypothalamus, pineal, and pituitary glands via sensory receptors, leading to their activation. This is followed by spinal polarization, turning the body into a cosmic power station, and finally, the body becomes a channel to transmit and recycle solar energy into the universe.

This festival is popular in terms of both qualitative and quantitative aspect. Therefore, proper scientific management of pilgrims by a three tier government can provide optimistic socioeconomic effect and major source of country income.





### Discussion

Historically, polytheism was prevalent across civilizations, offering emotional and environmental security (Bamunusinghe, 2019). Festivals like Chhath serve as valuable tools for understanding socialization, acculturation, enculturation, and indigenous knowledge systems (Wright & Wakholi, 2015). In Nepal, ongoing movements for regional identity and inclusion (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013) emphasize the importance of cultural recognition. This is because Chhath also connects culture with nature, similar to how major religions value water as sacred (Raju et al., 2017). With growing industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, the Chhath festival has expanded beyond Nepal and India, carried globally by diasporic communities migrating through programs like EDV and PR. These communities bring their language, religion, and traditions with them, promoting religious pluralism and global cultural exchange (Bratton, 2020). Nepal's active participation in international organizations such as the UNO, SAARC, and BIMSTEC further facilitates the global spread of its cultural practices.

While often seen primarily as a socio-cultural event, Chhath also carries spiritual, economic, and political significance. As a woman-led celebration, it intersects with feminist discourse (Stromquist, 2015), reflecting Nepal's milestones in female leadership in 2015–2016. Similarly, the sun symbol on Nepal's flag represents hope, justice, and renewal (Bordeleau, 2014), and more broadly, it signifies light, life, courage, and prosperity. Many nations draw inspiration from their national symbols, such as flags, rather than distant

celestial bodies. Additionally, the festival promotes cultural heritage and religious tourism (Badikilaya, 2019), boosting local economies especially agriculture, where farmers supply essential items like fruits, vegetables, and flowers (Gautam et al., 2009). Programs like One Village One Product (OVOP) support these local industries, reducing dependency on imports and enhancing self-sufficiency.

An economic survey conducted in 2017 revealed that tourism—especially that driven by festivals and cultural practices—contributed 7.8% to Nepal’s GDP and generated 195 billion in foreign currency, marking a significant milestone in national economic development (Aryal, 2005). However, Adhikari (2018) observed that pilgrimage tourism in Janakpur has both positive and negative socio-economic effects, including cultural and environmental degradation. Chhath also fosters environmental awareness through activities like cleaning water bodies, contributing to wetland conservation (Kesari, 2009). At the same time, its spiritual and economic dimensions help preserve agricultural biodiversity. Nevertheless, overpopulation and pollution pose serious threats to sacred rivers like the Ganges, which has long symbolized purity, faith, and identity (Kumar, 2014). For centuries, it has supported the livelihoods of millions along its banks. The study emphasizes the need for more scientific management of tourists during festivals. Nepal’s long-standing image as a land of gods and goddesses has encouraged a renewed appreciation among citizens for their rituals and cultural heritage (Satyal, 2002). In urban centers like Kathmandu, religious pluralism and multicultural harmony are visible through the coexistence of temples, churches, gumbas, and mosques. Festivals from various religious traditions are widely celebrated (Bhatta, 2014), promoting unity in diversity and countering narratives of state fragility.

Nepal's constitution guarantees equal respect for all religions, fostering an environment of cultural inclusion. According to Paudel and Devkota (2018), cross-border festivals significantly boost business activities along the Nepal–India border. Goods offered during rituals are largely sourced from local markets, increasing economic activity. Strengthening business ties while minimizing anti-social behaviors and maintaining peaceful India-Nepal relations is seen as a strategy to address trade imbalances. India remains a major labor market for many Nepalis, while cultural ties with China are limited due to language barriers and restricted border access. Chhath strengthens India-Nepal cross-border relationships through shared cultural, economic, and familial bonds. According to Pathak (2009) both India and Nepal have ancient *Roji* (employment), *Roti* (bread), and *Beti* (marital) relations. The long-standing *Roti-Beti* diplomacy ties representing employment, sustenance, and marriage highlight the deep-rooted people-to-people connections. These relations are reinforced by open borders, shared history, treaties, and common socio-political movements. Jha (2013) stresses the importance of peaceful bilateral relations and the need to avoid blockades.

### **Theoretical Lens**

Karl Marx's well-known claim that "religion is the opium of the people" sparked widespread debate about faith, suggesting that humans create religion for moral and social justification, rather than being shaped by it. While atheists view religion as a product of natural and societal evolution, devoted believers see festivals like Chhath as sacred, practicing strict rituals and fasting. Marxism critiques religion as a source of illusory happiness, yet cultural practices like sun-worship have spread globally through migration, such as via EDV or PR programs. This global movement reflects cultural diffusion, evident in the widespread influence of pagoda architecture, Buddhism, and Western festivals, showing that traditions are no longer limited by geography in the digital age. Berry's (2008) theory outlines four acculturation strategies integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization emphasizing that globalization and intercultural contact can lead to minority cultural loss unless active engagement occurs. Complementing this, Croucher and Kramer (2017) highlight how cultural fusion, driven by acculturation and enculturation, fosters hybrid identities and helps migrants navigate cultural shock. Anthropologists like Julian Steward and Marvin Harris further illuminate these dynamics through cultural ecology and materialism, explaining how environmental and economic systems shape societal behaviors. Together, these perspectives underscore the complex interplay between cultural transmission, adaptation, and identity in a globalized world. Their theories contribute to the ongoing debate between nature and nurture, highlighting the dynamic interplay between environmental forces and cultural practices.

### **Viewing Chhath Festival from a STEAM perspective**

The Chhath Festival, a Hindu sun-worship tradition, integrates STEAM disciplines—science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics—alongside cultural, religious, environmental, and psychological aspects. Scientifically, it honors the sun's role in life-sustaining processes like weather, photosynthesis, and the photoelectric effect. Technology enables global celebration through digital platforms, social media while engineering supports infrastructure, clean water system and environmental sustainability. Artistic elements include folk music, dance, and decorative patterns, creativity, community bonding, cultural expression and mathematics informs ritual timing through astronomy, lunar calendar, integration of math into cultural life and symbolic geometry. Chhath also sparks dialogue on gender equity, tradition vs. modernity, and cultural harmony, promoting resilience, social unity, and a symbolic balance between humans, nature, and the divine. As a culturally rich practice, Chhath enhances religious and eco-tourism while highlighting the tripartite relationship between humans, religious faith (the Sun), and Mother Earth (water). The symbolic meaning of offering of water to the sun during Chhath

emphasizes balance in relationships and nature. It represents calming anger or extinguishing conflict, aligning with the principles of attachment theory.

### Beginning of the End

To sum up, Chhath is a religious and historical festival that honors the Sun for sustaining life on Earth and for fulfilling the specific wishes of devotees. This paper explores the multifaceted dimensions of Chhath—economic, political, socio-cultural, and spiritual—based on a brief introduction to the festival. Globally, its significance has grown with the rise of secularism, multiculturalism, religious pluralism, and international migration of Hindus and their diaspora. In Nepal, the festival's spiritual appeal is further supported by cultural diversity enshrined in the constitution. Concepts like Sanskritization, acculturation through inter-caste and inter-religion marriages, and shifts in social thinking have elevated Chhath from its origins in the Mithila tradition to a national celebration, spreading its popularity from the Terai to the hilly regions. The study reveals that Chhath Puja contributes to the sustainable use of tropical fruits, water resources, and biodiversity conservation, ensuring the persistence of genetic diversity. It acts as a driving force for economic activity, academic research, recreation, and social bonding, offering resources for ecotourism and foreign currency earnings. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, devotees adapted by creating artificial water bodies and adhering to public health protocols. This study focuses on Chhath celebrations in Biratnagar and Kathmandu, but similar research could be extended to other cities like Birgunj, Janakpur, and Rajbiraj using varied theoretical lenses and themes. It is an opportune time for policymakers, cultural enthusiasts, and researchers to assess how such a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary cultural festival can be further promoted and preserved.

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