

Revisiting the Roots: A Socio-cultural Tapestry of Select Maithili Folk Festivals

Swati Kumari

PhD Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages
Central University of South Bihar, Gaya

Abstract

Maithili civilization, based in India's and Nepal's Mithila region, is an effervescent mosaic of rituals, myths, and festivals that symbolize its agrarian philosophy, bond of siblings, and ecology-mindedness. This paper examines three major Maithili folk festivals—*Jud Sital*, *Chaurchan*, and *Sama Chakeva*—from a sociocultural perspective, focusing on their historical development, ritualistic expressions, and significance in the contemporary context. Based on ethnographic memory, cultural theory, and folkloristics, the research delves into how the festivals operate as arenas of collective memory, ecological awareness, and gendered performance. As *Jud Sital* observes the Maithili New Year with thankfulness to Annapurna (the deity of grains), *Chaurchan* reflects the lunar worship similar to *Chhath* but with unique Maithili sensibilities. *Sama Chakeva*, the most lyrical of the three, is a dying festival where sibling love is intertwined with bird symbolism and environmental worship. The argument is that these festivals, while localized, represent universal values of gratitude, family love, and environmental harmony and should therefore be preserved in an age of cultural homogenization.

Introduction

Festivals are not calendrical phenomena but living records of the ethos of a community. As Elschek (2001) maintains, they are "living archives," and tend to be "mnemonic devices" encoding collective memory through ritual repetition. In Maithili, festivals such as *Jud Sital*, *Chaurchan*, and *Sama Chakeva* are intricately rooted in agrarian cycles, lunar phases, and kinship. *Jud Sital*, also known as *Jur Sital*, marks the Maithili New Year and is celebrated on the first day of the month of *Baisakh* (mid-April). Unlike the solar-centric Baisakhi of Punjab or *Poila Boishakh* of Bengal, *Jud Sital* uniquely integrates water rituals to combat the scorching summer heat, as reflected in its name—*Jud* (water) and *Sital* (coolness). *Chaurchan* is observed on the fourth lunar fortnight day (*chaturthi*), worshipping the moon (*Chandra*) and *Ganesha*. *Sama Chakeva*, based on ancient history and cultural traditions, is celebrated in the Hindu month of *Kartik*, particularly from *Kartik Shukla Dwadashi* (12th day of increasing moon) up to *Kartik Purnima*. It is a reminder of mythical sibling love between *Sama* and her brother *Chakeva*, representing sacrifice, love, and family loyalty. In the common myth, *Sama*, daughter of Lord Krishna, was wrongly accused and transformed into a bird, but her brother *Chakeva*'s unrelenting support and attempts finally transformed her back to human form. The festival entails young girls making tiny clay images of birds and retelling the story through songs and rituals along the banks

of rivers. Traditionally, it mirrors Mithila society's agrarian and nature-loving culture, emphasizing an ethos of justice, family cohesion, and feminine strength in its rich oral and oral-aural heritage. Yet, during a time of unprecedented modernization, such folk festivals are under existential threat due to the erosion of oral traditions, urbanization, and ecological degradation.

The present paper takes up a qualitative approach, combining autoethnographic introspection (as a Maithili native who has directly observed these festivals) with academic writing on folkloric conservation (Satprakashananda 1956; Hafstein 2018). The theoretical framework draws on cultural studies, specifically Selberg's (2006) contention that festivals are "celebrations of place," and Prosterman's (1985) contention that folk festivals are not static but rather constantly negotiating tradition and modernity. The paper further undertakes comparative analysis of the three festivals, calling attention to their common themes and specific socio-cultural roles.

Folk Festivals as Living Heritage

Jud Sital's ecological origins are seen in its core rituals, ranging from presenting water to elders and deities, most especially Annapurna, goddess of sustenance. Households make plain but symbolic foods such as dahi-chura (flattened rice with yogurt) and sattu (roasted gram flour), reflecting an agrarian spirit of humility and nourishment. Educators such as Grossman and Wein (1960) posit that such folk festivals encode survival tactics, and in this instance, the focus on water intake and light meals is adaptive wisdom for the tropical environment. One of the most important observances, Paag Pani, is when younger family members pour water at the feet of seniors, indicating respect and soliciting blessings. Traditionally, this ritual was undertaken using water sourced from collective wells or ponds, reinforcing the communal sense of interdependence. Another tradition involves sprinkling water around residences to reduce heat—a pre-modern cooling method that highlights the festival's identification with environmental pragmatism. *Jud Sital* is not just a New Year's celebration but a performative expression of nature's cyclical bounty, especially vital in Mithila's agrarian context, where monsoon failures would result in famine. The ritual of Paag Pani reiterates intergenerational inequalities, establishing the elderly as guardians of wisdom and blessings. Urbanization has, however, undermined some of the communal elements of the celebration, including the transition from collective water sources to privatized pipes, watering down the collectivist spirit of previous celebrations. While the changes have been registered, as Cudny (2014) concludes, the essential symbolism of rejuvenation and thanksgiving remains in contemporary forms of *Jud Sital*.

Unlike *Jud Sital's* hydrocentric practices, *Chaurchan* combines folk animism with Vaishnavism. Tendentiously overshadowed by the pan-Indian *Chhath Puja*, *Chaurchan* stands out with its minimalist, close-knit practices. In contrast to *Chhath's* strict fasting and riverbank watch, *Chaurchan* is a one-day, home-based festival in which women make kheer (rice pudding) and yogurt (dahi), and present arghya to the moon in the shade of a banyan or peepal tree or on their rooftops.

This practice underscores the festival's arboreal and lunar symbolism, which is in harmony with Moe's (1977) hypothesis that folk festivals usually value intimacy over spectacle. The songs performed at *Chaurchan*, like "Chandra ko dhal, Ganesh ko bal...", are extemporaneous folk poetry instead of scripted hymns, representing the improvisatory and participatory aspect of oral traditions (Wilgus 1965). This makes *Chaurchan* a locus of female oral expression, where myths are re-told and communal ties are strengthened. At the same time, though, the simplicity of the festival has also made it susceptible to

abandonment. Without the support of institutions and urbanization, *Chaurchan* finds itself struggling to stay relevant among younger Maithils, who increasingly see it as outdated relative to flashier festivals. Its decline is symptomatic of a wider tendency whereby localized conventions face the threat of erasure by homogenized Hinduism.

Sama Chakeva, a month-long festival based upon the Puranic story of *Sama*, a pious sister who has been wronged by societal distrust, and her brother *Chakeva*, who rescues her, is similarly under threat. Organised mostly by women, the festival entails making clay idols of *Sama-Chakeva* birds that represent the siblings and singing folk songs (geet) that harmonize myth with seasonal themes. The festival ends with Vidai (farewell), where the idols are submerged in rivers, representing the migratory departure of birds. This bird symbolism demonstrates Mithila's profound ecological awareness, specifically the Maithili folklore reverence for the Sarus crane as a family and seasonal indicator (Verma 2023).

Jud Sital, Chaurchan and Sama Chakeva: Folk Festivals as Endangered Cultural Ecosystems

1) *Jud Sital: Urbanization and the Disappearance of Communal Water Rituals*

Jud Sital, a very communal festival in the past, has had its traditional rituals decline because of urbanization and modernization. The greatest loss is the transition away from common water sources—community wells and ponds—to piped water delivered for private use. Previously, the Paag Pani ritual of fetching the water from common sources emphasized social dependence. Now, with the availability of tap water instead of communal wells, the symbolic ceremony of drawing the water communally has diminished, eroding the festival's sense of social solidarity. Furthermore, *Jud Sital's* agrarian spirit, which focuses on thanksgiving to nature's abundance, finds it hard to find a resonance in cities where agriculture no longer controls everyday life.

Although the festival endures, its traditions have lessened in their communal and ecological contexts. Yet, in contrast to *Chaurchan* and *Sama Chakeva*, *Jud Sital* has been able to hold on to its original observances, albeit in a reformed manner, because of the fact that it is celebrated with reference to the Maithili New Year, thereby ensuring its enduring legitimacy.

2) *Chaurchan: Marginalization in the Shadow of Chhath*

Chaurchan's disappearance is largely a result of being eclipsed by *Chhath Puja*, a more established and institutionalized celebration. Whereas *Chhath* has become pan-Indian visible and politically patronized, *Chaurchan* continues to be a localized, low-key celebration with little ritual pomp. What was once its hallmark, simplicity, has now become a disadvantage in a culture increasingly hooked on spectacle and media-orchestrated festivities. Urbanization has also undermined *Chaurchan*, as rituals like worshipping the moon beneath certain trees (peepal or banyan) are hard to transfer to concrete-dominated cities. Moreover, the younger generations, who are detached from lunar calendars and agrarian culture, usually reject *Chaurchan* as anachronistic in relation to festivals such as Diwali or Holi. *Chaurchan* has neither institutional support nor popular involvement, unlike *Jud Sital*, which continues to command calendrical significance, or *Sama Chakeva*, which enjoys considerable narrative appeal.

3) *Sama Chakeva: Ecological and Social Disintegration*

Sama Chakeva's decline is, if anything, the most worrying, for it arises out of several causes—social, environmental, and economic. The festival is rooted in rural female collectivities, in which women and girls come together to sing *Sama-Chakeva* geet (folk songs) and make clay bird idols. But the process of rural-to-urban migration has splintered these collectivities, rendering group singing and idol-making hard to maintain. Additionally, the ecological symbolism of the festival—based on the respect for the migratory birds such as the Sarus crane—has lost its strength because of habitat destruction. Wetlands, which were at the heart of the festival's imagery, have shrunk, while bird populations have dwindled, disconnecting rituals from reality. In contrast to *Jud Sital* and *Chaurchan*, which retain some observances in households, the immersive, community-based nature of *Sama Chakeva* renders it more difficult to maintain in dissected urban environments.

Sama Chakeva is declining as a result of urban migration, which disturbs the village-based women's groups that are critical to its collective singing, as well as environmental degradation that has destroyed bird habitats such as wetlands (Nautiyal & Hayes 2024; Vadley 2023). In contrast to *Raksha Bandhan*, with its corporate sponsorship and media exposure, *Sama Chakeva* has no commercial value, pushing it further to the margins of modern culture (Birkenholtz 2025). However, as Hafstein (2018) holds, intangible heritage can flourish via community recovery. Recent initiatives, including documentaries (*Sama in the Forest*, 2023) and scholarly research (Varma 2023), provide hope for restoration, though grass roots movements—such as school projects and folkloric repositories—continue to be indispensable for its preservation.

Comparative Analysis: *Jud Sital*, *Chaurchan*, and *Sama Chakeva*

All three festivals are firmly based in Maithili agrarian culture, focusing on gratitude to natural powers—water in *Jud Sital*, the moon in *Chaurchan*, and birds in *Sama Chakeva*. They have common themes of Ecology, Kinship, and Cyclical Time. Each festival embeds survival knowledge; *Jud Sital's* cooling ceremonies battle summer heat, *Chaurchan's* worship of the moon tunes into crop cycles, and *Sama Chakeva's* bird imagery demarcates seasonal changes.

Also, they strengthen social ties—*Jud Sital* through intergenerational deference (Paag Pani), *Chaurchan* through feminine rituals, and *Sama Chakeva* through siblingship tales. Even though they share common themes, the festivals also vary in form and susceptibility. *Jud Sital* is most flexible since it is linked with the New Year, making it survive even in changed forms. Its rituals, though reduced, still continue among homes. *Chaurchan* is afflicted with minimalist chic—its lack of pomp less engaging in a culture of spectacle-oriented festivals. In contrast to *Jud Sital*, it has no calendrical anchor other than the lunar chaturthi and thus is more easily forgotten.

Sama Chakeva is the most story-enriched and community-necessitated and thus experiences the steepest decline. In contrast to the other two, it cannot be merely transported to urban areas because of its collective singing and ecological symbolism dependence. Out of the Preservation prospects *Jud Sital*, being the most structurally sound, can continue to develop without completely vanishing. *Chaurchan*, in the absence of revitalization through cultural campaigns or institutional intervention, can further deteriorate. *Sama Chakeva* is threatened most with its very existence—the revival of which hinges not merely on consciousness but on reviving the ecological and social systems that support it. Briefly put, all three festivals represent Maithili heritage, but their destinies differ according to the ability to adapt, institutional support, and community involvement.

Jud Sital is likely to survive, *Chaurchan*'s prospects are doubtful, and *Sama Chakeva*'s survival is at stake—requiring immediate preservation measures for these precious cultural assets.

Conclusion

Jud Sital, *Chaurchan*, and *Sama Chakeva* are not relics but evolving traditions. They invest in Maithili identity—agrarian thanksgiving (*Jud Sital*), lunar cycles (*Chaurchan*), and symbiosis of sibling nature (*Sama Chakeva*). As Prosterman (1985) contends, people's festivals are not fossilized survivals but dynamic traditions. They survive based on acknowledging them not as "folkloric curiosities" but as necessary cultural ecosystems; they survive when academic scholarship and activist movements join to document and revitalize them. This essay concludes on a call to action—to scholars, policymakers, and Maithili communities to collectively reclaim these origins before they disintegrate into the homogenized global cultural milieu. This paper, thus, is both an elegy and a manifesto—a call to revisit these roots before they dissolve into the amorphous "global culture." For in these festivals lies not just Maithili's past, but a universal lesson: that culture, like nature, flourishes when its roots are tended.

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