

Divine Feasts: Food Offerings as Expression of Devotion and Cultural Heritage in the Folk Traditions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

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Abstract

The paper explores the intersectionality of food, cultural identity and religion in post-colonial Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, centering on how sacred offerings in folk deity traditions serve both cultural and devotional aspects of everyday lives. Drawing from ethnographic study, oral traditions, and print-media sources, the study looks into how food functions as a potent instrument for religious belonging. In parts of rural and sub-urban communities, the act of offering food to deities shows a religious gesture that affirms the shared histories of locality, identity, and agrarian ties. This framework investigates the worship of local deities, more precisely Gorakhnath Baba, Tarkulha Devi, Chhathi Maai, Deeh Baba, Kaali Mai, Niksha Baba, Teej and Jitiya. The traditional observances followed by the Khichdi Mela at Gorakhnath Temple, the annual fairs of Tarkulha Devi and Kaali Mai, and the village-specific ritual practices of Deeh Baba illustrate how sacred offerings are deeply embedded in seasonal cycles, agricultural produce, and collective memory. In order to explore how sacred offerings maintain devotional practices, support cultural identity and serve as a medium of intangible cultural heritage in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The interviews with devotees, priests and local historians based on participant observation create the complex perception of the ritual meaning and the evolving patterns of change in time. The study shows that divine offerings are a means of showcasing as a cultural memory, which encompasses levels of ecological knowledge, farming schedules, and socio-religious levels of the order.

Keywords: food offerings, cultural identity, folk deity traditions, cultural memory, intangible heritage

Introduction

Food holds a sacred status in Indian society and it connects the worldly and the spiritual worlds. It has an outstanding role in the folk religious tradition of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the offerings to the local deities have been part of cultural memory since ages. Food offerings in rural and suburban communities are not only a symbolic representation of piety, but are also the manifestation of community identities, the surrounding environment, and the agricultural cycle. Daily rituals and practices, festivals, temple services, and family traditions reveal the centrality of food in Indian religion and society. As noted by various scholars, festival foods, such as *khichdi*, *puri-sabji*, *lapsi*, and *thekua*, can be used as mediums to share stories at a communal level, ritually connect, and pass heritage down generations. Diana L. Eck (2013, 361-362) points out that the variety of Indian festivals, in terms of food serving, highlights not only the religious tendencies of the area but also the complex spiritual and social background of the nation. The anthropological theory of food offers strong support to the theory of Claude Levi-Strauss (1983, 64-65, 89, 94), who believes that cultural meanings are imprinted in the act of cooking and eating, and the theory is well supported by evidence of folk worship in North India, which uses cooking as a language to communicate aspects of kinship and hierarchy. Although the central role of food in Hindu ritual has been acknowledged and academic scholarship has tended to concentrate on pan-Indian rather than on folk-level traditions in less urbanized traditions, including Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. When exploring these contexts, those who do it usually do not capture the integration of oral histories, local media, and participant observation in understanding how food rituals are evolving in reaction to social change. The changes in the economic structures, rapid modernization, and migration of the people to the cities have transformed the communal eating practices. Nevertheless, according to field research, the concept of ritual meal and offering of food still exists in rural regions.

The paper studies the special food offerings made to deities in the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, highlighting the devotional customs that often go unnoticed. It is constructed on a multi-dimensional research based on ethnographic work, interviews with villagers, media studies, and oral traditions. The emphasis is given to major local deities like, Gorakhnath Baba, Tarkulha Devi, Chhathi Maai, Deeh Baba, and Kaali Mai, which are the main subjects of collective worship in villages and small towns. Ritual occasions such as Khichdi Mela at Gorakhnath Temple, the animal sacrifice at Tarkulha Devi Temple and the Chhath festival provide some insight on the relation of food to

the seasonal cycles of the new agricultural harvest and the place of memory. The paper shows the lived meanings of food as a media of ritual, social belonging, and cultural adaptation, through revealing personal accounts. The theoretical framework of the study is based on cultural anthropology, religious studies, and historiography. It interacts with the existing literature on Indian rituals, but broadens its perspective using fieldwork and the contemporary media. The paper uses ethnographic study, oral narratives, interviews, and analysis of print media to get insights into the ways that ritual foodways maintain and transform community identities in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Foods such as *khichdi* are used during rituals, which symbolizes the fertility of the fields. Men and women have distinct roles in the preparation and distribution of food. This paper shows how folk traditions adapt to changing religious environments.

The Symbolic Role of Food in Folk Traditions

Food as Ritual Medium

In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, food offerings have always held great significance during religious gatherings. It is just not the food, but a means of spiritual connection and community bonding. Food serves as a unifier between individuals and communities (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 183). The special food prepared, decorated, and eaten during the festival is a ritual that serves as a way to express gratitude, establish identity, and reinforce distinctions based on caste, gender, and kinship (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 185). The Yadav community members practice the *biradari bhoj* (family feast) which is a ritual that shows the membership and social status in the community. Caste associations are maintained and sustained through food selection and communal eating (Prasad, 2019, 113). However, these communal feasts are also sites of exclusion and hierarchy. Food, as Arjun Appadurai (1981, 494-495) suggests in his theory of “gastro-politics”, is a semiotic indicator of social status and relations of power. Food distribution has a tendency to strengthen the caste lines, a reality critically observed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who noted that food and water were primary tools of social exclusion in the caste system. Although the *mela* (fair) area seems to be a democratic space, there are rigid rules of purity and pollution that govern who prepares the food and who consumes it. Mary Douglas (1966, 126-127) explains this as the defense of social boundaries by ritual purity. Sidney Mintz (1985, 151-154) has observed that consumption patterns are inseparably related to the power structures, including in religious contexts. The offering of ghee or goats reflects such power structures, as only those with economic privilege are able to make these offerings. According

to the village life accounts and folklore, it is also evident that food traditions represent social stratification and economics as it is only those who are able to partake in the offerings and consume sacred food.

However, these rituals can also foster social unity across occupational boundaries. Folk songs often refer to individuals who belong to various occupational groups bringing together materials of Chhath puja, indicating social affiliation as well as unity. The interdependence of various groups in carrying out rituals is illustrated in a popular Chhath song which explicitly names marginalized and pastoral communities, such as the *Dom* and the *Ahīr*, as the essential providers of the *supa* (winnow) and milk respectively. The ritual cannot be completed without their contributions, as sung in the following verses:

Kaha paebo supava?

Kaha ho paibo doodh?

Kaha ho paebo deva ho suraj baba araghiya ke jor?

Domva ghare baans ke supava, ahirwa ghare doodh.

Ganga ghate paibo suruj baba araghiya ke din.

(Where shall I find a winnower?

Where shall I find milk?

Where shall I see the Sun God so whom I can offer *arghya*?

In the *Dom*'s house, you shall find the winnowers.

In the house of *ahīr* (milkman), you shall find milk.

On the riverside of Gaṅgā, you can see the Sun god and offer *arghya*.) (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 187).

The Concept of Prasada

Prasada in the Hindu religion is a complex and central concept that goes beyond the simplistic explanations of ritual food offerings. According to the explanation of Andrea Marion Pinkney, *prasada*, which is a Sanskrit word commonly translated as either the “gracious gift” or the “blessed offering,” is the focus of the contemporary and classical religious life in South Asia, and it can be material, emotional, or conceptual (Pinkney 2013, 734-735). *Prasada* does not simply

represent the food offered to the deity. It is the sacred grace that flows reciprocally between devotee and divine. Hindu devotional rite starts with the *darshan*, a mutual look between deity and devotee, and is followed by offerings made by the devotee. Such offerings are called *naivedaya* and can include offerings as simple as flowers or vegetarian food. Once tasted or received by the deity, this offering is transvalued into *bhoga*, the divine enjoyment, and then given back to the worshippers as *prasada*, the divine gift with divine blessing (Pinkney 2013, 736-737). Priests frequently mediate this cycle of exchange in the offerings at temple sanctuaries which highlights the complexity and stratification of modern rituals (Pinkney 2013, 737-739).

The ethnographic study conducted by Pinkney in various sectarian environments Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Shakta, indicates that there are common values and practices pertaining to *prasada*. As an instance, Vaishnava traditions, which are vegetarian in nature, focus on ritual purity and limits to access to the sanctum, whereas Shakta traditions may be non-vegetarian and include a wider range of offerings to the goddesses, including non-food items (Pinkney 2013, 738-742). Such diversity in *prasada* practice embraces larger theological and cultural differences as well as addresses the role of *prasada* as a symbolic channel between human and divine worlds where generosity, reciprocity, and respect are essential elements (Pinkney 2013, 743). The material and non-material sense of *prasada* is amalgamated in the classical Sanskrit *prasada* conception. The modern material *prasada*, the blessed food or items offered after worship, is entrenched in the traditions of Sanskrit texts as *prasada* refers to happiness, divine favour, clarity and grace (Pinkney 2013, 745-747). The *Skandapurana* and the *Visnupurana* describe cases of *prasada* as a material item and spiritual exultation, connecting the physical gift to great affective and cosmological energies (Pinkney 2013, 746-749).

Foodways and Cultural Memory

Traditional foods offered to local deities are repositories of cultural memory and identity. Foods such as *khichdi*, *puri-sabji*, *lapsi* and *thekua* are perceived not only as delicious types of food of the season but also as indigenous beliefs about place, farming cycles and ecological wisdom. Ritual meals are used to celebrate transitions, such as harvest, childbirth, or recovery, and carried out carefully to symbolize, on new utensils, clean spaces, and seasonal ingredients, which indicate, and strengthen, environmental sensitivity (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 192). The fact that these foodways have resisted the forces

of modernization and global cuisine is testimony to their contribution in the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage. An example is the making of special foods which are put up for Kaali Mai and Deeh Baba prepared in Kushinagar village, where devotee Sheela Devi explains how things have always been done, food being the last aspect of ethnicity to be altered.

Case Studies: Food Offerings to Specific Deities

Gorakhnath Baba and Khichdi Mela

In Gorakhpur city of Uttar Pradesh, the cult of the ascetic deity Gorakhnath Baba, who is admired throughout North India, is based on a most symbolic sacred offerings, *khichdi*. According to mythology and oral narratives, Guru Gorakhnath visited the Jwala Devi shrine (Himachal Pradesh) in the *Treta Yuga*. He declined a feast there, stating that as a *yogi* he subsisted only on alms. He travelled till Gorakhpur begging for alms and began meditating by the Rapti river. Meanwhile Jwala Devi kept water boiling for his return, for him to cook the rice he was given as alms. Awed by his divinity, devotees filled his *khappar* (begging bowl) with rice and lentils. While this mythology frames the ritual of offering *khichdi*, Briggs (1938, 86) confirms the historical significance of the site, noting that Gorakhnath came from Punjab to this location and established it as the central seat of the Kanphata Yogis. This blend of ancient legend and ascetic history has evolved into the massive Khichdi Mela observed today. *Khichdi* is a simple but nutritious blend of rice and lentils. It is served in the Gorakhnath Temple each year during the auspicious occasion of *Makar Sankranti* in the month of January. This is a ritual called the Khichdi Mela, which attracts thousands of its followers in the surrounding regions. And they come to offer *khichdi* to the deity as a show of devotion and appreciation. *Khichdi* is not just a dish but a meal that is more than just some ingredients. Being a dish traditionally linked to the plain subsistence, they represent purity, newness, and hope of the rich harvest in the next agricultural year. It symbolizes planting and harvesting, which is strongly associated with rural life. The Makar Sankranti festival, which celebrates the northward movement of the sun, is itself a festival of fresh beginnings that is entrenched in agrarian cosmology. The offerings reflect the villages' dependance on their land and the weather. During this festival the task of preparing *khichdi* is shared in the villages. This task is mostly performed by women. The process entails rigid ritual practices. Women are the main custodians of the kitchen practice *choka purna* (purity of kitchen space). They wear unstitched clothes, and do not taste food in the kitchen because of

the belief that the food will be contaminated by *jutha* (saliva pollution). This sacred tradition also serves to preserve family age-old recipes. The shared task of preparing *khichdi* fosters unity among villagers and facilitates the passing down of customs and cultural knowledge from older to younger generations. During interviews with villagers they told us that this offering is a promise to God and a social bond that binds the villagers.

Khichdi Mela defines the town's identity as a religious center. Attracting both pilgrims and traders, it represents the convergence of spiritual and economic life. Ritual food offerings, in addition to their sacred role, also serve the needs of the secular world and local markets, and are essential to the sustenance of village economies. The Mela has been institutionalized by the temple authorities and there are grand preparations which emphasize the purity of the food and the socio-religious significance of the festival. The Khichdi Mela is in these ways an example of the rich layers of meaning within the folk food offerings. Food offerings are symbolic scripts which define collective memory and identity in rural India especially when in line with ecological cycles. The Khichdi Mela of Gorakhnath Baba preserves these values in a material state, and since the ritual is an important part of the cultural life of the community.

Tarkulha Devi and Ritual Sacrifice

The Tarkulha Devi Temple, which is located in the Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh is a significant place of folk worship. It focuses on the goddess Tarkulha Devi, an incarnation of Durga that is worshipped in the area. The history of the shrine is firmly connected with the anti-colonial struggle. Local oral sources suggest that the freedom fighter Bandhu Singh had the dense *tarkul* (palm) forest as his hideout and that he used the place to venerate the goddess and as his *ishta devi* (presiding goddess). This deep connection between the goddess and her abode in the palm forest is immortalized in popular Bhojpuri folk songs sung by devotees:

Ye tarkulwe me maai tohar vaas bate

Ehise naam tohar

Duniya me khaas bate

Tohara ke kaise manai

Ye tarkulahi maai...

(O Mother, you reside within this *tarkul* tree (Palm tree),

Hence your name holds a special place in the world.

How shall I worship you, O Mother Tarkulha...)

It is believed that Bandhu Singh sacrificed the heads of British enemies as a form of tribute before commencing guerrilla warfare against British rule. Ritual practice of the temple is characterised by a strong tradition of animal sacrifice, and specifically the sacrifice of goats offered by pilgrims during thanks-giving for wishes that have been fulfilled or as a means of protection against evil spirits. There is an increase in sacrificial offerings during the annual Navaratri festival. Thousands of goats are reportedly sacrificed on the auspicious days of *Navami* and *Dashami*. It is a highly symbolic sacrifice that connects the devotion of the community to the martyrdom of the Bandhu Singh whose sacrifice and struggle continues to serve as a local mytho-historical point of reference. The sharing of goat meat in the form of *prasada* enhances the collective identity because of a tangible ritual connection which implies the unity of the devotee with the collective consumption of the blessings offered by the deity. Although it has a violent nature, the goat sacrifice is ritualized, with practical ethics of sacrificial offering being instilled in it to make it more of an offering than a slaughter. The sacrifice is viewed by the devotees as an inevitable stage towards spiritual favor and protection, something with which the fierce and protective character of the goddess is directly linked. Munari Devi of Chakdeiya village in Kushinagar district (Uttar Pradesh) informs that local devotees continue to participate in these rituals, reflecting how the worship of Tarkulha Devi extends beyond Gorakhpur and binds together surrounding rural communities.

Along with animal sacrifices, many temples also offer non-violent substitutes like the coconut offering ritual, which gives an alternative option to people who do not sacrifice due to religious or other ethical reasons. It is an inclusivity that indicates a wider malleability of folk traditions that strike a balance between the purity of rituals, social morality, and the evolving religious views. The sacrificial act is not only a sustaining force to the spiritual power of the temple, but also an economic driver of the region. The number of pilgrims that come to festivals help the local economy, whether it be in livestock trade, food production or the market of religious paraphernalia. At the same time, the ritual solidifies shared memories associated with anti-colonial struggle and martyrdom, a phenomenon of how food and sacrifice play an overlapping role of devotion, history and preserving identity.

Kaali Mai and Deeh Baba: Village Foodways and Ritual Offerings

The worship of Kali Mai and Deeh Baba as regional deities continues throughout the rural parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The celebration of their worship is usually characterized by the consumption of the locally produced delicacies. The people provide the same kind of food items to the deities in the neighborhood. Kaali Mai is the local mother goddess and Deeh Baba is the local protective spirit. The mythical origins of the Kaali Mai in this area are quite different as compared to the classical Puranic tradition. She is not only the destroyer of evil but in the rural folklore of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar she is the *gram devi* (village guardian), the female energy that protects village frontiers. Anthropological accounts, such as those by William Crooke (1896, 129), identify her within the tradition of the “Seven Sisters”, local goddesses associated with nature, fertility, and protection against disease. The village Kaali Mai is believed to reside in the Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*). Etymologically, the term “Deeh” or “Diha” refers to a mound of earth, a ruined site, or the land of a village, characterizing Deeh Baba as the “Guardian of the Soil” or “Boundary Master”. They receive offerings such as *kadhāi*, a ritual meal composed primarily of *puri*, *sabji* and *lapsi* (a halwa made of flour and jaggery) that highlights the connection of culinary practice with devotion. This tradition shows how food offerings bridge the gap between spiritual and material needs. At the same time, this practice remains with us as a cultural legacy, sometimes tangible (like actual food) and sometimes intangible (like tradition or belief). These offerings are not just rituals, they are a way of carrying forward our values and traditions. This practice also emphasizes how these ordinary dishes acquire sacred meaning. Just as *lapsi* represents divine purity, the *sabji* symbolizes the abundant yield of the earth. These ancestral recipes are shared among people, which increases community unity and strengthens relationships. Sheela Devi of Kushinagar says that this is not just a ritual, but a way to assert individual identity and the identity of society. This sentiment is vividly captured in local folk songs where devotees call upon the protector deity for prosperity and blessings while holding sacred offerings:

Rahiyā me thāad tiriya dhar leike

Aava deeh baba ghudsavar hoike

Deeh baba tahake ek kanya pukare

Kanya ke var de da mukh bhar ke

Aava deeh baba ghudsavar hoike

Deeh baba sthan ek nirdhan pukare
Kaali maai sthan ek nirdhan pukare
Nirdhan ke dhan dei da hik bhar ke
Aava deeh baba ghudsavar hoike...

(A woman stands on the path holding the *dhaar* (sacred offering),

Come, O Deeh Baba, riding on your horse.

O Deeh Baba, a maiden calls out to you,

Grant her blessings in abundance...

At Deeh Baba's shrine, a poor soul calls out,

At Kaali Mai's shrine, a poor soul calls out,

Grant the poor wealth to their heart's content,

Come, O Deeh Baba, riding on your horse...)

The traditions here demonstrate that food is a core part of our culture, preserving ancient customs, even as modern pressures or changing people's ways of living. And importantly, women often prepare and decorate food, maintaining the sanctity of the ritual and carrying forward the traditions of society. It is their responsibility to preserve folk religion and village culture. Religious offerings are linked to seasons and natural cycles, as their festivals and food rituals are determined by the harvests. (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 192). From one perspective, the practice of offering *kadhahi* makes people's religious faith more democratic, as everyone uses everyday food instead of luxurious food.

Chhathi Maai and the Festival of Chhath

Chhath is a major festival in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is one of the most nature-centric and culturally rich festivals. It is devoted to the worship of the Surya (Sun God) and Chhathi Maai, a localized emerging goddess image (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 183). The traditions are deeply embedded in the Epics and Puranas, and the legends indicate that such rituals as Sita and Draupadi performed them to ensure the well-being of their families, and the warrior Karna was the founder of the tradition of sun worship (Badikilaya 2019, 74). It is celebrated over four days during the autumn season, and involves rituals that offer a form of

gratitude to nature, solar cycles, and agricultural abundance. Chhath celebrations epitomize the close connection between food, nature, and spirituality. The food customs on each of the days of Chhath are multidimensional in terms of their symbolism, they reflect the ideals of cleanliness, religiosity and unity between the community. The four-day celebration is a gradual increase in ritual purity and ecological awareness embodied in the well-considered meals.

Day 1: Nahae-Khae – Ritual Purification and Simple Nourishment

On the first day, devotees have *nahae-khae*, which is a simple vegetarian meal, usually focused on *lauki-bhat*, a dish of bottle gourd and rice (Badikilaya 2019, 73). This also involves self-cleaning as a preparation of the body and mind for the fasts and offerings to come. The fact that locally sourced freshly cooked food is used in clay pots highlights the focus of the festival on the purity of nature and environmental harmony.

Day 2: Kharna – Sacred Sweetness and Energy

The second day, *kharna*, has an elaborate meal after sunset, which includes sweetened rice (*rasiya*), *puri*, fruits, and a unique *dosti roti*, a wheat chapati cooked in ghee (Badikilaya 2019, 73). These food items highlight the hospitality and sweetness of the festival, the blessing of prosperity and embracing of community. The *dosti roti* is also an exceptional culinary symbol of hospitality and piety, which is eaten at the evening meal to break the fast.

Days 3 and 4: Arghya – Divine Offerings and Communal Unity

The final days involve the offering of *arghya* (water and food offerings) at sunset and dawn. As well as, the preparation and serving of traditional sweets such as *thekua* and the *kasar*, sugarcane and fresh fruits (Badikilaya 2019, 74). These represent the seasonal harvest and the cycle of renewal. The ritual invitations that are spread among the relatives and the communities create an atmosphere of collective worship and social solidarity. The food procedures of the whole festival are focused on ecological consideration. Earthen vessels, mango wood fire for cooking, and natural ingredients highlight a sustainable approach embedded in the ritual framework (Yadav, Srivastava and Chandra 2025, 192). This festival celebrates personal religious beliefs as well as the local environment and its heritage. Chhath festival contributes to the preservation of our culture and traditions. They foster a living legacy of folklore, food systems, and rituals that resist the pressures of globalization (Badikilaya 2019, 75-76). Devotees themselves conceive of Chhath food offerings as a continuation of the

ancestral knowledge, and environmental and social sense of family. Thus, Chhath presents an excellent example of food as a repository of unseen cultural legacy.

Niksha Baba: Rituals and Food Offerings

Niksha Baba is a local deity in the district of Ambedkarnagar of the state of Uttar Pradesh, whose shrine is Pandal Tola close to Shivala Ghat in the twin town of Shahjadpur. The *baraat* (wedding) procession of Niksha Baba, according to centuries-old oral tradition, used to pass this area on their way to Jharkhandi in Tanda (a local town in Ambedkar Nagar district). On the third day, while returning, he received the tragic news of his bride's sudden death at a place called Ariya. It is said that he lost his worldly senses, and became an ascetic. Every year, on the first Tuesday of Sawan, there is the traditional *mela* (fair) in honor of Niksha Baba, which attracts hundreds of thousands of devotees of the whole district as well as others. This is a festival dipped in centuries-old religious belief as the faithful believe that honest prayers in the court of Niksha Baba are never in vain. The ritual worship of Niksha Baba has its own and necessary food offerings known as *kadhai*, a sacred *prasada* of *puri* (deep-fried wheat bread) and *lassi* (buttermilk) in front of the deity. During a visit to Niksha Baba temple, a local devotee named Laxmina Devi said, "Offerings are cooked and arranged with meticulous care by the devotees and form an essential component of worship at the temple."

The Niksha Baba Fair is not just a religious gathering, but also a social and cultural event. During the fair, the entire area is filled with devotion and celebration, with feasts, group *kirtan* and *bhajan*, and collective chanting. Devotees arrive on foot or in two and four-wheeled vehicles, offerings, and praying for the health, prosperity, and well-being of their families. However, the most popular sweet offering of Niksha Baba is a special mithai (sweet) named *damdan*, which is prepared in a different way with sugar and black pepper and only offered this time of the year during this mela. This sweet is not only offered to the deity by the devotees, but they also carry it home as *prasada* and this represents the holy continuity between the temple and household devotion.

The mela serves a religious, social and economic purpose at the same time. It develops the sense of community, revives regional cultural memory and encourages local business by preparing and selling the devotional food stuffs and paraphernalia in large quantities. The occasion is well coordinated by both the local officials and a mela committee so that the huge number of people who

visit can be facilitated and the sanctity and smooth running of the fair maintained. The ritual food offerings by Niksha Baba and the attendant celebrations unravel the deep aspect of food as a medium of folk religiosity, devotions and social identity in the Uttar Pradesh's rural spiritual world. The *mela* continues to serve as a vibrant example of the blend of ancient faith with contemporary cultural expressions.

Teej and Jitiya: Gender, Austerity, and Ritual Foods:

The cycle of folk fasting in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar would not be complete without the referencing of Teej and Jitiya (*Jivitputrika*) which are two festivals that emphasise the role of women as the spiritual custodians of family well-being. In contrast to the community act of feasting in the Mela, these religious practices are marked by severe fasting (*nirjala* or without water) and ritual foods, which are indicative of strong cultural conviction.

Teej, Devotion and Phalahar: In the folk traditions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Teej is not a singular event but is observed as a triad of festivals known as Haryali Teej, Kajari Teej and Hartalika Teej that are celebrated during the months of *Sawan* and *Bhado* in the rainy season. Whereas Haryali Teej embraces the rains during the month of *Sawan*, the other festivals that have strong ritual importance to married women include Kajri Teej and Hartalika Teej. The festivals are celebrated in the lunar month of *Bhado* and are dedicated to marital happiness and idolising of Shiva and Parvati. Although Kajri Teej is on the *Krishna Paksha* (dark fortnight) and Hartalika on the *Shukla Paksha* (bright fortnight), these two have one thing in common that they respect the divine couple.

According to *Uttar Pradesh District Gazetteers: Kanpur* (1989, 61), this is mainly a women's festival where women dress in colourful attires, sing folk songs known as *kajri* and pray to Mahadeva (Lord Shiva). The worship of Mahadeva is believed to be especially rewarding to married women. Hartalika Teej has elaborate ritual preparation. Conventionally, the followers make idols of Shiva and Parvati by hand with clay of a local pond/sand. The worship is characterized by the offering of *solah shringar* (sixteen adornments), i.e. *mehndi* (henna), *sindoor* (vermilion), bangles, and *bindi*, which symbolize the wish to see a long day of life of the husband. The ritual depends on sacred vegetal components like *belpatra*, *dhatura*, *shami* leaves and *suhag pitari* (bridal box). It is usually accompanied with *kheer*, *halwa*, *gujiya*, *malpua*, and fruits available at the time of year such as bananas and apples.

Jitiya: Jitiya or Jivitputrika is observed on the eighth day of the *Krishna Paksha* in the month of *Ashwin*. It is also devoted to a mythical character of Gandharva prince Jimutvahan who is worshiped for his ultimate self-sacrifice. The mythology states that Jimutvahan had volunteered to become the food of Garuda (the eagle deity) to spare the life of one snake. Moved by his sacrifice, the gods granted him the boon that the children of any mother who worships him would live a long life. This festival therefore is strictly followed by mothers to pray for long life and well-being of their children. According to Amravati Devi of Jungle Chauri (a village in Gorakhpur district) the customary offering is *dahi-chura* (curd and flattened rice), *gur* (jaggery), *puri* and a special vegetable curry prepared of *sarputiya* (sponge gourd). Contrary to the vegetarianism of most Hindu fasts, there are local variations which refer to older folk traditions which are non-Brahmanical. Bijuli Prasad, who remembers his family custom in Kushinagar, informs that his mother would offer the small fish to the deity. The addition of fish symbolises fertility and life that challenges the conventional discourse of vegetarian purity in ritual fasting. The women fast the whole day without water and it is only broken after the sun rises the next morning.

Continuity and Change in Food Practices

The continuity and the change are two aspects of a dynamic trading in food offering to deities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. As everyday practices are transformed by modernization, urbanization and migration, the significant symbolic and spiritual meanings are maintained. The community life continues to be rooted in traditional rituals like Khichdi Mela at Gorakhnath Temple, animal sacrifice at Tarkulha Devi and seasonal celebrations like the Chhath. Simultaneously, we can observe changes such as urban migrants tend to cook simplified or symbolic dishes, and the adoption of ready-made or commercially obtained food implies changing economic conditions (Mishra 2024, 26). This process is called symbolic psychological continuity, in which rituals change over time, but their cultural and psychological impact persists. It is through these changing rituals that the cultural identity of a community is maintained. The continuation of offerings represents a compromise it takes up the outside force without compromising genuineness. There is also an overlap with heritage and development, e.g., Chhath festival is now a tourist destination due to its religious heritage, which supports the local economies and also spreads agro-ecological expertise (Badikilaya 2019, 76). The contemporary media expands such traditions to more distant and younger populations and enhances oral practices by guaranteeing a continuity outside geographical locations (Yadav, Srivastava

and Chandra, 2025, 201). However, there is also the issue of commodification in this expansion since rituals may lose touch with grassroot authenticity. This change corresponds to the theory of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998, 149) of heritage as a new form of cultural production. With festivals such as Khichdi Mela growing into huge tourist attractions, the food itself transforms into a commercial aspect of the experience that visitors are offered, and in some cases of the festival, the novelty of ritual diminishes. Such a ritual economy supports the local market. Sellers of *damdan* sweets, jaggery, ritual paraphernalia all depend on this particular religious consumption to earn an annual income. This creates a complicated conflict between true piety and profit. Preservation and adaptation are, therefore, always negotiated in communities. Sacred food rituals in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh represent an example of living traditions which are both adaptive and persistent. They act as cultural memory, spiritual belonging and social cohesion ensuring that people, agriculture and the divine are connected even during modern changes.

Conclusion

Food, culture and beliefs are intertwined in the religious traditions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Through a multidisciplinary lens combining ethnographic observation, oral histories, and textual analysis, this paper has shown that food offerings to local deities such as Gorakhnath Baba, Tarkulha Devi, Kaali Mai, Deeh Baba, Chhathi Maai, Niksha Baba, Teej and Jitiya are far more than mere ritual acts. These figures represent specific folk manifestations rooted in the broader Hindu religious tradition, a shared lineage that explains their deep interconnectedness. They are powerful expressions of cultural identity and collective memory. They are also essential in shaping social cohesion in communities. Sacred food offerings operate within a unique symbolic system. Common items like *khichdi*, *puri-sabji*, *lapsi*, and *thekua* are a way to show devotion and connect with the community. These rituals integrate environmental and agricultural knowledge into daily life. They also reflect the villages' social and religious structures. These rituals not only strengthen shared history and relationships, but also ensure the preservation of this precious culture through time, even under pressures of modernization and urbanization. These different case studies show different manifestations of ritual food offerings. The Khichdi Mela festival is marked by the gathering of people and offerings of new harvest dishes. The sacrifice of an animal at Tarkulha Devi is prominently reflected in the martyr's folklore and his devotion. Kaali Mai and Deeh Baba's food offerings show the intimate, everyday nature of village ritual life. The Chhath

festival exemplifies the ecological and spiritual nexus of sun worship through detailed food observances; and the vibrant mela at Niksha Baba highlights folk religiosity's ability to foster large-scale community identity and ritual economy. These food offerings serve important economic and social functions. They support local markets and artisanal crafts. And also, religious tourism based on these traditions has the potential to foster sustainable community development. All these rituals represent a symbolic psychological process, where traditions continue to evolve without losing their original emotional and cultural meaning. Future research should focus on how the younger, migrating generation continues or discontinues these food-based traditions. This study concludes that to understand the social soul of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar's folk culture, one must first look at what is being cooked, offered, and collectively shared.

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