



BACKGROUNDERS

Press Information Bureau

Government of India

Chhath Mahaparva

From Riverbanks to World Heritage Status

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As the golden rays of the rising sun shimmer on the waters of rivers and ponds and the chants of "Om Suryaya Namah" echo through the dawn, millions of devotees across India and the Indian diaspora worldwide bow in reverence, not just to the celestial sun, but to a centuries-old promise between nature and humanity. This is Chhath Mahaparva, the Vedic festival dedicated to the sun god (Surya), and Chhathi Maiya, a festival of unwavering devotion, ritual purity, and ecological harmony, now on its radiant path to UNESCO's representative list of the intangible cultural heritage, Which includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.



Chhath Puja is one of the oldest religious traditions in India, dating back to the Rigvedic era. Mainly celebrated in Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and parts of Nepal, it has also gained popularity among the Indian diaspora in countries like Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad & Tobago, the UK, the US, and the UAE. The festival's rituals demonstrate a deep respect for nature, water bodies, and ecological harmony. Chhath is derived from the Sanskrit word Shashthi, which means the sixth. That's why it is celebrated after six days of Diwali or on the sixth day of the Hindi month of Kartik.

During Chhath puja, the goddess worshipped is Chhathi Maiya, also known as Usha in the Vedas, believed to be Surya's younger wife. Its origins date back to the early Vedic period, when sages performed the Puja to thank the Sun god for the gifts of life. It is linked to stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, such as Goddess Sita and Lord Rama performing the Puja in Bihar after exile, Kunti praying for a son, and Draupadi hoping to restore their kingdom. These legends have made the Puja especially popular in northern India, like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Celebrated over four joyful days, the festival begins with a heartfelt cleanse of the body and home. This is followed by a peaceful fasting period and community-driven preparations of offerings. As the evenings arrive, the atmosphere becomes magical with the dramatic evening and morning arghya rituals, where devotees lovingly offer water and light to the setting and rising sun. Entire towns and villages blossom into shining sanctuaries of devotion, with ghats glowing with lamps, folk songs filling the air, and a deep sense of unity blooming beyond caste, class, and creed. The celebration may be simple, but its meaning runs very deep; each offering is natural, every act is sustainable, and all gestures bring the community closer together.



Unlike most festivals that involve temples or priests, Chhath Puja is entirely people-led. The rituals are passed down orally, primarily through women, whose songs in Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi have never been formally recorded but are remembered word for word by generations. There is no written scripture, no central authority, only shared memory, discipline, and devotion. This unique form of intangible heritage, based on collective practice, ecological balance, and oral transmission, is precisely what UNESCO seeks to preserve and promote.



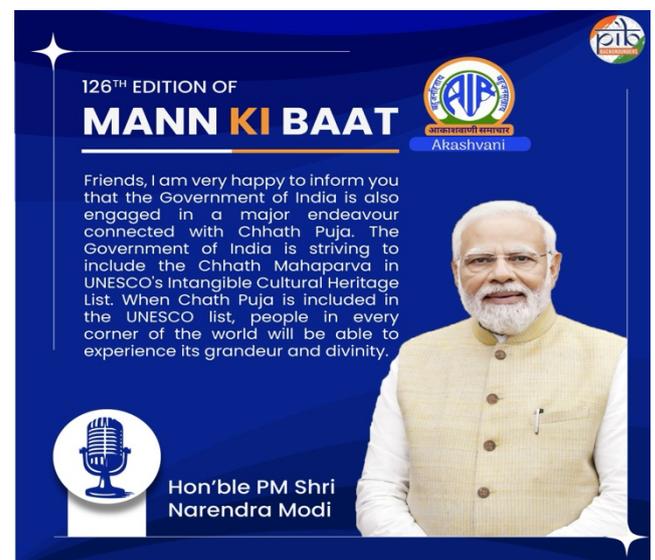
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Intangible Cultural Heritage

The Government of India has officially nominated Chhath Puja for UNESCO's list. In his recent Mann Ki Baat speech, the Prime Minister highlighted Chhath as a symbol of India's cultural resilience and spiritual ecology. The Ministry of Culture has provided detailed documentation for the nomination, including community testimonies, visual archives, and safeguarding plans to preserve the authenticity of the rituals amid a changing world.

The UNESCO recognition would not only symbolise an honour but also serve as a practical platform for protecting and celebrating this age-old tradition. It would promote research, tourism, heritage education, and sustainable development grounded in cultural practices. Additionally, it would motivate young generations to embrace and preserve their ancestral heritage with pride.

As the world seeks community-driven sustainability models, Chhath Puja provides a profoundly Indian response. Its practices avoid plastics, processed foods, and synthetic decorations. Instead, everything is sourced from nature, bamboo baskets, clay lamps, and local ingredients, and is returned to the environment thoughtfully. Participants clean their area, repair riverbanks, and craft temporary ghats by hand. This festival not only venerates nature but also actively restores it.



Chhath is more than just a religious ritual; it's a heartfelt way of life that resonates with everyone. It celebrates the beauty of simplicity, the strength of unity, and our deep connections with the sun, river, soil, and one another. As the world watches and UNESCO considers its nomination, India offers more than a tradition, it shares a beautiful, simple truth: that light, offered with humility and love, becomes a treasured heritage.

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