

What is the chhath festival history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Chhath is most important festival in this region and is celebrated with great zeal and fervor. This festival is a tribute to the ' Sun God' and his two wives ' Usha' and ' Nisha' and is celebrated 6 days after Diwali. Celebrated over 3 days it involves strict rules and regulations and offering ' arghaya' to sun god standing in knee deep water which requires pond or tank or a river. Our assignment on collective action involves the construction of water tank and ghats in our fieldwork village (Muhammadpur Kowari) and challenges faced, actors involved, leadership roles and style, collective action theories and the outcome of this collective effort.

About the village:

For the fieldwork segment we were assigned Muhammadpur Koari village in Samastipur district of Bihar. This village is 25 kms away from Samastipur and 35kms away from Muzaffarpur the two important towns in Bihar.

Muhammadpur Koari was the gram panchayat consisting of present village and Digambara. Panchayat status was granted way back in 1995 This village was very large sized consisting of 24 tolas and we were staying at Narvada tola on the southern corner of village after that Shahpur Bagauni panchayat started.

Population size: The population of total village (Muh. Koari) was around 11, 500 and Narvada tola had 160 households with the population of 1200. The village derived its name from ' Koeri' caste of the hindus and the muslim population which constituted the majority while there were other castes but small in numbers compared to them.

Breakup into social groups:

The village population comprised of two religions- Muslims and the Hindus. Muslims constituted 58% of the total population while Hindus formed 48% of it. The muslim community was further divided into Sheikh, Syed, Julaha, Dhuinya and Kujara. Out of these sheikhs and syeds were considered higher in economic status and caste basis whereas, julaha, dhuniya and kujara were lower caste and were very poor. On the otherhand, if we talk of Hindus there were no higher castes like Brahmins, rajputs and bhumihars but there were backward and schedule castes as kushwahas (also known as ' koeri'), lohar, thakurs(barbers), pasi and chamars. But, if we talk of Narvada tola where collective action for Chhath puja took place it had muslims (about 62%) and kushwahas, lohars and pasis only.

Caste dynamics: dominant caste, power structure:

If we go by demographic numbers, muslims are dominant in Muhammadpur Kowari village and if we talk of dominant caste among the hindus, Kushwahas were more in number compared to other castes.

The Kushwahas are also known as ' Koeri' because their main occupation was of growing vegetables. They are also the landowners and have large land holdings as compared to the other castes in the Hindu community who owned very little land. Only higher caste muslims had lands more than or equal to Kushwahas. Vegetable growing was common occupation for landholders in the region. The lower caste/class muslims were involved in labour works, both agricultural and non-agricultural and used to work in Samastipur or migrated to metropolitan cities and returned once a year. Some were landowners and worked in their fields cultivating vegetables and

<https://assignbuster.com/what-is-the-chhath-festival-history-essay/>

tobacco. Members of the paswan community were also involved in mundane tasks such as labor and farm workers. Their income sources ranged from shop keeping, to government service mainly as teachers or chowkidaars to rickshaw pulling or working in eateries. The upper class Muslims were mainly indulged in trade related to agricultural produce like tobacco and fruits in Kolkata, Nashik etc. Migration was a common observable phenomenon that can be found across both religions and castes. More than seventy percent of the households had atleast one member working outside in other state or city.

Very clearly and with no exception the power structure was based on the lines of castes and income/affluence levels. The two communities Hindu and Muslim respectively did not compete with each other for power but it was a homogeneous group based on income levels that was more dominant. Also, the tussle for power was found in same caste or religion as more the income and landholding, the greater the respect was commanded. It can also be attributed to caste hierarchy as Kushwahas were ranked above lohars and paswans on caste lines. Therefore, the two main groups that can be said to be higher in the power level and caste hierarchy level were the rich muslims and the kushwahas among Hindus.

Community decisions:

Within the same caste the decisions were taken by the respective leaders of a caste (i. e. who had higher income and land holding). For e. g. Ramprasad Mahto was looked for among the Kushwahas and Md. Samsujjuma (alias Mukhiyaji) among the muslims. Apart from that respective tolas had active

self proclaimed leaders who were found active as it were the time of elections but they did not had a strong say in community decisions.

Moreover, it was the time the Babri Mosque verdict came and it seemed the communal tension would sweep away and RAF's/police patrolling had increased but surprisingly there were no unpleasant news and one can find villagers having chit-chat over a cup of tea at village chowkri debating the coming elections or political news without a slightest sign of ' controversy'. The village shared a good bonding and many decisions that were taken included the members of the community. In the celebrations of chhath the whole Hindu community came together irrespective of caste difference planned, contributed and executed the celebrations with great zeal. Similarly in any other activities pertaining to have a wider impact on the village or related to religious issues the view of every group was kept in mind before arriving to any decision.

The name of influential actors in this collective action in the village are mentioned below which had a respect and a say in all the decisions that were concerning the village.

Influential actors:

1). Mukhiyaji: His original name is Mohammad Samsuljjuma but he is popular with this name and had been the mukhiya since 1999 after the death of previous headman. Now this seat was reserved for women candidate so he made his wife Amiri Khatun to contest the elections and eventually she won. However, she may be called proxy as all decisions are taken by her husband, Mukhiyaji. He is a very prominent figure in village and commands huge

respect and power. Also, the villagers found the duties performed by mukhiya very satisfactory. He was efficient when it came to management of funds or implementation of policies, Any scheme that would have been launched he was quick to respond to it.

Power sources: Mukhiyaji belonged to Muslim community and had huge support and vote bank behind him. He was such a influential person that people would cast votes to party he said for. Not only that he had good rapport with other community leaders as well and looked by other community groups with great respect. He was equally popular among all and maintained a neutral image in terms of caste/ religious dynamics. Very recently he was forged in a law suit (allegedly false) by his rival who supported another political party but owing to support behind him he came victorius. It was his first steps that many NGOs worked successfully here and showed keen interest in developments as SHGs and health drives etc. In the collective action of ' Chhath' puja he was actively involved in arrangements.

Leadership style: Mukhiyaji was a charismatic leader and also enjoyed rational legal authority over the villagers. He was 12th pass but sounded very knowledgeable and spoke words of wisdom. He believed in walking together and was good at administration and management skills. He was laconic and very practical approach to everything he did.

2). Zainul Ansari (Professor): He was the key opponent of Mukhiyaji in Panchayat elections and he was well educated and worked as lecturer in urdu language at Karpurigram college. He lived in Jungalia tola and enjoyed support of people from this tola and dhobi tola. He was not so popular

because people could not identify themselves with him and said he had superiority complex. When Mukhiyaji put an idea to fill the pond in Jungalia tola with waterpump he opposed and insisted to shift to other pond citing reasons for congestion and pollution of pond after puja. But the other pond would be far away and inconvenient to people of other tola.

Power Sources: He had support of Jungalia tola and dhobi tola people. People of Hindu community did not like him much because of his hard liner ways and could not identify the pulse of people. However, he was respected for his education and job he held and often used to support and guide students in getting admissions to college. People said his altruistic ways were to woo people for elections this April.

Leadership style: He was looked up to by people by virtue of his education and affluence level.

3). Nagendra Mahto/ Jhamanji: He was the main actor and anchor for this collective action. Jhamanji worked for AKRSP (I) for past 2 years and was in his 30s. A very witty person he could make friends easily with people. He was liked by all and shared good rapport; also he had exceptional ability to mobilize people be it for the Self Help Savings Group or the Chhath puja collective action. He was a good manager to handle people and get work done in minimum time and resource available. He was considered to be the right hand of Mukhiyaji and used to do his small works.

Power Sources: His source of power was his goodwill and rapport among the villagers. His image was very clean and his wit and talks were rich in humour

and these qualities made him popular. He used to advice men and women on government schemes and loans and bank accounts issues.

Leadership style: His leadership was mainly a managerial one and he mobilized people and resources that culminated in successful event. He made sure no single family would be left for sake of money and one could contribute to his will and strength as he felt joy of festival is in being together. However he could not convince one group because they wanted tank to be build nearby their house but actually they had issues with Ramprasad.

4). Ramprasad Mahto: A man in his sixties was wealthiest among the kushwahas and was looked by this community on important issues and interests. He was not popular among other castes because of his ways such as charging high interests on money lended and exploited agricultural workers by underpaying or overworking. He used all his tricks to be benefitted by government schemes and had BPL cards despite having 40 bighas of land and his sons had good business and government job (teacher).

Source of Power: He had support of Kushwaha and lohar castes and used to represent them in village/panchayat meetings. He was very crafty in talks and dealings and had worked in favor of his community despite of his mean ways.

Leadership Style: he enjoyed the traditional leadership because he was the eldest and wealthiest person among the Kushwahas. Also, owing to auspicious Chhath puja he agreed to gave 2 kathhas of his land in Narvada

<https://assignbuster.com/what-is-the-chhath-festival-history-essay/>

tola to make the water tank when decision on jungalia tola pond could not be arrived and other ponds had dried up owing to 2 years of poor rains.

5). Ansarul Islam: He was in his fifties with good personality and used to run fresh fruit business in Kolkata and visited once or twice a year. He was very calm and influential person among the muslim community and commanded lots of respect. He was rich man and often helped poors by lending money without any interests and also helped one julaha to get his daughter married. He was religious kind of person and known for his good temperament.

Source of Power: He was highly revered for his altruistic ways and looked after on important occasions and advice. If he were in the village no meeting would begin until he arrived and he was the few of important men to be invited first on personal/family occasions.

Leadership Style: He was a charismatic leader who was equally popular among hindus and muslims. However he stayed out most of times of year but his respect and popularity was highly regarded. He had given his pump set to fill the newly built tank and said to arrange for diesel also he donated Rs. 100 for puja contribution.

6). Pappuji: His occupation was running generator service to provide electricity for 3 hours in evening and charged Rs. 50 per household per month. Actally he used to do a lot of things like pandal decoration, band-baja for marriages but for a year he settled for current occupation. He was no nonsense man and meant business straightway. One may say he was the Jack of village as he may arrange anything for you need at a short notice.

Source of Power: He commanded power in the sense that lot of people were directly or indirectly dependent on him. He had information that created dependency like whom to contact for litres of milk or decoration at cheap price or doctor or Kisan credit cards etc etc.

Leadership Style: He was not a leader basically nor did he mobilized people but he was good source of information and managerial skills when it came to managing events. In this case of collective action he had two generator sets one of which he rented in Digambara for Chhath puja (as there were limited generators and demand was high during festivals) because it would pay him more than he would get here. However, for the villagers he gave his generator sets fully operational for two days without charging fees but agreed to arrange for diesel and other gen set from Tajpur on negotiable prices. Very clearly he wanted to earn money of this occasion but did not wanted to displease villagers.

Challenges faced during the collective action and how they were resolved:-

According to the ritual the worshiper has to worship the sun when it rises and also when it sets. This worship is done while standing knee deep in water the ritual is called ' arghaya'. The worship is done in some pond or river as it involves offering ' arghaya' to the sun god. The problem that the community was facing was that village pond had dried up and there was no water body nearby, nearest being four kilometers away. The pond in jungalia tola was dissuaded to use for Chhath owing to protests leaded by Professsor who was arch rival of Mukhiyaji. Though there was a stream nearby but it had dried up and polluted by defaecation.

Another issue was the conflict between Ramprasad Mahto with the some Paswan households so they decided to keep themselves out of this collective action and instead took trouble to go 4 km away. It was tried best by Jhamanji to involve them but in vain and this was the only case where people were not part of this action.

So, there was a question of what was the way out for this problem. The villagers got the answer of this question as collective action. For this purpose, a group of five members was formed to look after the collective effort of constructing the tank and ensure the smooth going of puja. This group include Jhamanji, Ramprasad Mahto, Pappuji, Shivkumar Mahto and Mukhiyaji. Ramprasad Mahto allowed construction of tank on his land, Jhamanji mobilized the villagers and made sure no one left because of money, Pappuji provided generator set and arranged for decoration of ghats, Ansarul Islam contributed with pump set whereas Mukhiyaji assured smooth functioning and arranged for funds when it met shortage at the last moment.

Community mobilization:

This work was done primarily by Jhamanji to convince each and every households about the problems arising and challenges encountered. A week before the puja, a meeting was held at Ramprasad's house where the conflict pertaining to Jungalia tola pond was discussed and other options like stream which was dried and polluted due to open defaecation and other pond that was 4 km away from Narvada tola. Later, it was Ramprasad who volunteered to offer 2 kattha lands as it was sowing time for tobacco and cauliflower and most farmers had opted out to this option. There were few households who did had issues with Ramprasad so they put away

themselves with this event and it was the only case. Rest Jhamanji ensured by going to everyone and contribute in any form putting no upper or lower ceiling.

Incentive for contribution:

The next question arises why people participated in this collective action with great zeal and fervor and were there any incentives. Well, it can be understood from the given perspectives:

- 1). Importance of festival- In this part of the country this is the most important festival and people tend to forget their differences on this auspicious occasion. Such is the atmosphere that people think to earn 'punya' (blessings) by helping others.
- 2). Avoiding the difficulties in making arrangement individually, as good arrangement within reach motivate them.
- 3). People think the inconvenience is everybody's problem and think it as duty to contribute. This was reflected by voluntary labour provided by those who could not contribute by money.
- 4). Muslims also contributed by providing money and resources as a gesture of brotherhood as similar act had been reciprocated in past on eve of Eid/Bakrid.
- 5). Incentives for leaders was that of a mixed bag as discussed above about leaders. While some had the profit motive other had the altruistic motive or selfless feeling to contribute and address the problem.

The shortage of funds was faced at last moment because Ainul Ansari and Laxman Thakur had promised of contribution and arrangements for decoration and gen set but failed to meet deadline. The community had tried a collective action in the previous year to counter this problem and this year also they planned for the same and it would have not been successful without involving community. The task undertaken was big and required huge responsibility and sharing time, labour and cost of event combined with scale of operations.

Effects of collective action:

Apart from meeting the objective of successful hosting of event it triggered the self-confidence among villagers to tackle any problem by pooling collective effort and resources and in future they can handle any issues since they did it before. Also, it strengthens the bondage and brotherhood and doubles joy by learning to share. Last but not the least it helped to arrive at win-win solution to both class and caste as individual effort was high in cost and time constraint.

Boundaries of action:

This festival was celebrated as the collective festival where all Hindu castes irrespective of status and affluence participated and contributed by means of labour or money or resource sharing. Interestingly Muslims also participated but were not involved directly but through equipment sharing and monetary contributions as a part of goodwill gesture. Except few families in narvada tola all participated to celebrate together.

Collective action theories seen in organizing the event:

1). Dispute over common property and its use: The pond in jungalia tola belonged to the whole village but the protest from people of that tola led by ' Professor saa'b' created a heck of it and at no cost they were ready to allow Puja. Mukhiyaji and laxman mahto tried every way to placte and arrive at win -win outcome but the personal rivalry of two leaders (mukhiyaji and professor) came in between. Two years ago the two poles had severe issues in NREGA works implementation in that area.

2). Conflict and negotiations: Keeping in view the controversy the leaders of Hindu community offered to clean up the whole area after the festival was over but it did not proved to be successful. Going one step further they offered to pay rent for the pond which would go the the village fund used for development works in that tola but the opposition put severe conditions that seemed impractical. Only outcome of this was either to go to the pond that was few kilometers away or to build a tank in village by collective action. Later, it was decided to go for second solution for which Ramprasad volunteered two katthas of land and labour would be provided by community.

3). Norm oriented collective action: Few norms were set for dos and don'ts of the collective action. It was also institutionalized and conventional in nature as during the festival strict rituals are to be followed so every care was taken to maintain the norms of rituals.

4). Symbolization: Chhath festival was more than the celebration; it symbolizes years of customs and traditions and a common thread that linked

the community irrespective of caste or class. Earlier attempts have been made for community toilets and public handpumps as collective action but it turned out to be failure. It invoked a sense of collectivity among villagers who would often quarrel for petty things, it not only guided their course of action but provided collective identity.

5). Leadership style: The strong faith of villagers on Mukhiyaji and allegiance he commanded was unparalleled than any other village or community leader. He shared a clean image and villagers felt the funds would not be misutilized. The initial steps taken by him for tank construction was backed by Jhamanji and Ramprasad. Jhamanji had good communication skills and was popular among locals, often he used to mobilize people for savings group as a part of work for AKRSP. Ramprasad Mahto was tacitly the traditional leader of Hindu community and he had to set an example unlike his reputation of stingy fellow. Ansarul Islam leaved here for very short period and helping monetarily earned good name and it was his belief to donate a part of earning according to Koran. Pappuji had to run the business and he could not afford to displease his customers also it as a chance for him to earn goodwill and he would not miss that. Similarly Shivkumar was the LIC agent and surely his involvement in this collective action would earn more networks and popularity.

Thus, we can see the collective action was a mixed bag of altruism and personal gains and would help the leaders involved in long run and community also to meet any challenge through collective action.

Impact of collective action: Almost all the families took part in this auspicious occasion and was a great success. One could feel the enthusiasm and zeal and it tacitly told the story of ownership of event rather than going and participating in charity thrown by others. Moreover, the leadership umbrella of Mukhiyaji who shared a clean reputation and strong faith backed by active involvement of other leaders made this collective action a success. Also, it instigated a sense of collectivism to face any challenge by joining hands together and minimizing cost and time required.

They took pride that they contributed in every way they can through labour and money and it seemed a big family. It was during this occasion we found the difference of caste and class omitted, at least for a while. The religious faith was the glue that instigated collectivity we found as earlier other collective efforts on health issues had miserably failed. Also, the individual bearing of costs would have been heavy thus cost sharing was an attractive incentive besides convenience. Moreover, other actors also benefitted from this action as aforesaid.