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Dr. Abhishek Chauhan
Associate Professor Faculty of
Business Management Saral
Birla University Ranchi
Jharkhand, India

Dr. Alok Kumar
Assistant Professor
Department of Anthropology
Ranchi, University Ranchi
Jharkhand, India

Sacred space and local identity: An anthropological study of Deo Sun Temple, Bihar

Abhishek Chauhan and Alok Kumar

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Abstract

This anthropological study examines the Deo Sun Temple in Bihar as a sacred space that plays a central role in shaping local identity, social relations, and cultural continuity. The temple, dedicated to the Sun God, functions not only as a religious center but also as a focal point for collective memory, ritual practice, and community cohesion. Through participant observation, informal interviews with priests, devotees, and local residents, and documentation of festivals such as Chhath Puja, the study explores how sacred landscapes are socially produced and continuously reinterpreted. The findings reveal that the Deo Sun Temple mediates relationships between the past and present, reinforcing regional identity through myth, ritual performance, and everyday religious practices. The temple also contributes to the local economy and social hierarchy, influencing patterns of interaction, authority, and belonging. Overall, the study highlights the dynamic relationship between sacred space and local identity, emphasizing the temple's significance beyond its religious function.

Keywords: Sacred space, local identity, Deo Sun Temple, anthropology, ritual, Bihar

Introduction

Magadha, the center of sun worshipers and religious sects, and especially Gaya, could not be disturbed. In fact, the history of the Saura sect existing in the region dates back to ancient times. The importance of Magadha in the history of sun worship is evident from the surprising number of sun temples and depictions in the area. The Deo Surya Mandir is located in a small town named Deo which is situated in the Aurangabad district of Bihar. Deo is at a distance of 180 kilometres from Patna the capital city of Bihar. In Hindi the term Deo means Bhagwan in Hindi or God in English. In reality the unique name of Deo is "Surya Nagari Deo" which indicates the residence of Sun god. Above all the Puranas evidently clarifies the existence of the Dev Sun Temple. As per the mythology and folk tales and as per the Puranas the Dev Sun Temple was constructed in Treta Yug it is estimated that the Sun Temple of Dev is 9,50,000-year-old. It is a scared place of worship for the followers of the Hindu religion. The temple is well-known for its attractive design and also for its extensive history. The historical Tretayugin Sun Temple located in Deo of Aurangabad district in Bihar remains the centre of unwavering faith of the local people, tourists, devotees and Chhathvrati specially. The name Deo Sun Temple, Devark or Dewark Sun Temple from the combination of Deo Means God and Arka known as the sun. The background of the term Deo is unclear, but probably refers to the Deo location of this temple either within a larger temple complex or in relation to other sun temples on the subcontinent. Whereas the Arka refers to the Hindu Sun God Surya.



Corresponding Author:
Dr. Abhishek Chauhan
Associate Professor Faculty of
Business Management Saral
Birla University Ranchi
Jharkhand, India

Deo Sun Temple: A Historical and Cultural Overview

The Deo Surya Mandir is very old. Researchers and scholars believe it was built around the 8th century. This means the temple is approximately over 1,200 years old. It has stood for countless centuries, watching history unfold. As per the information shared by the local resident of Kashur village - Mr.Jitendra Singh and Mrs.Sharda Singh that this temple was constructed and built by a divine architect. This architect is known as Vishwakarma. He is believed and regarded to be the divine builder of the universe. This legend adds to the temple's sacred and mysterious feeling. The temple's design is a mixture of various Indian traditional and cultural building patterns or styles. It syndicates elements from the Nagri, Dravidian, and Vesara architecture too. This combination makes the temple's look unique and interesting. It displays how various art styles derived together long ago. Chandravanshi king Bhairavendra Singh is believed to have built the ancient temple in the 8th century AD. But according to an inscription on the present structure, it dates back to AD 1548. The temple also finds mention in narrations in the Puranas. Many legends say that King Ela of Prayaga now Prayagraj was suffering from leprosy. Suddenly on one fine day King Ela came near the Sun temple of Deo, the King Ela asked his supportive for water to drink. The King's supportive went to a pond and brought some water. King Ela took the water, suddenly a miracle happened. The pond water drops fell on the King's body and those particular areas were cured out of leprosy. The King was shocked and went to the pond and he dipped in the pond water and his disease was cured.



King Ela had a dream on the night when he had a dip in the pond water, in the dream the King saw that the pond has three idols of Sun god in the form of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. And the Sun god suggested him to construct a temple. The King followed his dream and built the Sun Temple with a beautiful architecture. The Sun Temple ranges about 101 feet long. The temple architecture was done by the Lord Vishwakarma. The ancient stories say that the Sun Temple was built in a single day, the three idols - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiv of Sun god were placed in the temple. The Sun god appears in 3 forms in this temple Udayachal, Modhachal and Astachal Surya.

In ancient days this temple had a threat from the enemies, that they would destroy this temple. The temple priests pleaded them no to break the temple. They placed a condition in front of the priests that if the temple main door shifts/moves to the west side then they would not destroy. Then in the morning the miracle was seen, the temple main doors were shifted they were facing toward west rather than east. This is the only temple facing towards west. People say this all because of the power of Sun god, due to which the temple doors or opening is shifted toward the west side.



Socio-Cultural Anthropology of Sacred Architecture

The Deo Sun Temple of Aurangabad is not merely a religious structure but a cultural text, where architecture, cosmology, material choice, and ritual orientation together express deep-rooted Indian and folk anthropological worldviews. Each architectural feature reflects how communities historically understood time, nature, power, and cosmic balance.



1. The Only Sun Temple Facing towards the West: Most Sun temples in India are oriented towards the east, symbolizing sunrise, birth, renewal, and life. Though, the Deo Sun Temple distinctively faces west, towards the setting sun, which holds profound anthropological significance.

Through anthropological point of view, the westward positioning reflects a cyclical understanding of life, communal in folk and tribal as well as non-tribal cosmologies. In various indigenous belief systems, the setting sun is not associated with death alone, but with completion, rest, regeneration, and continuity. The offering of arghya to the Astachal (setting) Surya during Chhath Puja resonates strongly with this worldview.

This west-facing structure symbolically confirms the idea that decline is as sacred as growth, an understanding deeply present in agrarian, non-tribal and tribal societies where sowing, harvesting, decay, and renewal are all interrelated. Thus, the temple's orientation bridges folk ecological wisdom with formal temple architecture.

2. Three Forms of the Sun God: Udayachal, Madhyachal, and Astachal Surya (Associated with Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva):

The Deo Sun Temple visually and symbolically represents the three temporal forms of the Sun God:

- **Udayachal Surya (Rising Sun):** linked with Brahma, the creator
- **Madhyachal Surya (Midday Sun):** linked with Vishnu, the preserver
- **Astachal Surya (Setting Sun):** linked with Shiva, the transformer

Through this anthropological lenses this triadic representation reflects the cyclic concept of time, rather than a linear one. This worldview is central to tribal and non-tribal cosmology and Indian philosophical cultural-traditional, where creation, preservation, and destruction are not opposites but are the interdependent procedures.

In everyday life, agrarian and tribal communities experience time through sun movement, agricultural cycles, and seasons too are related with the movement of the earth around the Sun in an orbit directly. The temple hence becomes a cosmic clock, embedding metaphysical philosophy into material form. Above all this Chhath Puja rituals especially offering "Arghya" not only to rising Sun from the east but also to the sun when it sets in the west mirror this triadic understanding of existence.

3. Use of Black and White Stones in Temple Construction:

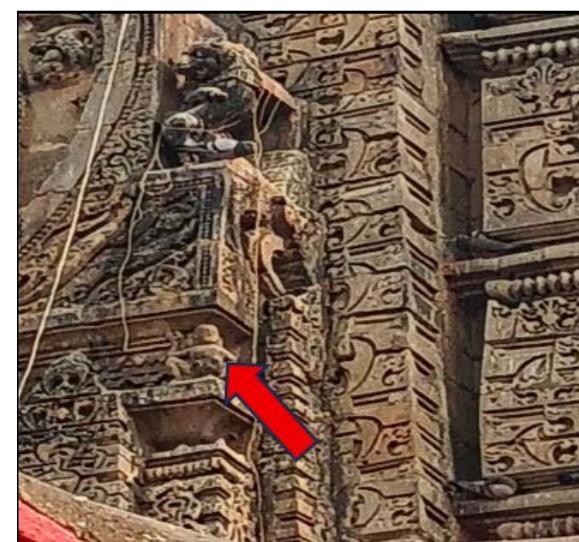
The thoughtful use of black and white stones in the construction of the Deo Sun Temple conveys strong symbolic and anthropological meanings. In indigenous and folk traditions, black and white represent duality—day and night, light and darkness, life and death, male and female, visible and invisible worlds. Relatively than opposing forces, these dualities are observed as the complementary and balanced relations existing between the man and nature. Even by the anthropological point of view, it reflects the non-dualistic thinking prevalent among the non-tribal and tribal belief systems, where harmony arises from coexistence of opposites. The material choice accordingly communicates a worldview where cosmic balance is maintained through equilibrium, not through the dominance. Moreover, the use of locally available stone suggests ecological adaptation and indigenous knowledge systems, showing how religious architecture evolved in dialogue with the environment.



4. Shikhara with Golden Kalash: The golden Kalash placed at the top known as Shikhara of the Deo Sun Temple is not just a decorative but deeply symbolic. In Indian cosmologies, the Kalash signifies the womb of creation, abundance, fertility, and the cosmic reservoir of life. As this has been placed at the highest point indicating the connection between the earthly realm and the spiritual world.

On the other hand, this Kalash acts as an axis—a symbolic pillar connecting humans, gods, and cosmic forces. The golden colour reflects solar energy, purity, and divine authority, strengthening the Sun's position as the ultimate life-giver and saver too.

This symbolism strongly aligns with Chhath Puja practices, where devotees seek blessings for fertility, health, continuity of lineage, and prosperity, values central to agrarian and kinship-based societies. The Kalash has been indicated with the help of arrow in the picture.



5. Temple had gold urn weighing 320kgs: During this research as per the information gathered from the local residents of Deo, it is believed that a thief once attempted to steal a golden urn known as the "kalash" weighing

approximately eight manas from the top of the temple. Even as per the descriptions provided by the temple pandits and priests, one mana is approximately equal to 40 kilograms, demonstrating the immense weight and value of the urn. It is believed that while climbing the shikhara, the thief suddenly heard a loud thunderous sound, due to which he became immovable and later on the thief's turned into stone. While discussing with the local people, they narrated this legend by pointing toward a nearby stone symbol or figure design which is believed to be the transformed thief, serving as a symbolic reminder of divine authority, moral restraint, and the sacredness associated with the temple. This can easily be observed in the picture indicated with colour or mark.

Cultural Memory and Pilgrimage at Deo Sun Temple

The Chhath Puja is one of the oldest Vedic folk festivals of India, dedicated to God Sun known as Lord Surya and "Chhathi Maiya", regarded as the guardian of children and family well-being. This festival is related with the direct worship of nature and natural elements, especially related with the Sun and water bodies. This festival does not rely on idols or priestly mediation in general. Whereas during this Kartik Chhath, the Deo Sun Temple, at Aurangabad, becomes a major pilgrimage centre, where various temple worship and folk ritual traditions practiced, emphasizing the continuity of nature worship not only in India but within the various parts of the world.

Table 1: Timing and Occasions of Chhath Puja

Type of Chhath Puja	Hindu Month	Gregorian Months	Observance Pattern	Cultural Note
Kartik Chhath	Kartik (Shukla Paksha, Shashthi)	October-November	Most widely celebrated; after Diwali	Major pilgrimage to Deo Sun Temple
Chaiti Chhath	Chaitra	March-April	Observed by fewer devotees	More prevalent in rural areas

This table-1 indicates regarding the seasonal and cyclic nature of Chhath Puja, indicating how this festival is aligned with the Hindu Hindi lunar calendar and agricultural rhythms. Above all this Kartik Chhath, performed after Diwali, coincides with the post-harvest period, as during this period the agrarian communities' express their gratitude to the God Sun for agricultural or crop fertility and survival. Even the large-scale celebration and performance of this festival at the Deo Sun Temple reflects the temple's role as

a regional pilgrimage hub.

On the other side this, Chaiti Chhath, performed and celebrated during the spring season, indicates about the continuity of ritual practice within urban, rural households, indicating how sun worship familiarizes to both communal and domestic religious spaces. Finally, as per the anthropological point of view this seasonal duality demonstrates how ritual time is structured around ecology, agriculture, and cosmic cycles.

Table 2: Four-Day Ritual Cycle of Chhath Puja at Deo Sun Temple

Day	Name of Ritual	Major Practices	Anthropological Significance
Day 1	Nahai-Khai (Bath & Eat)	Holy bath (traditionally in the Ganga or sacred water bodies); preparation of satvik food; single meal (kaddu-bhat)	Ritual purification; bodily discipline; ecological cleanliness
Day 2	Kharna / Lohanda	Nirjala fast; evening offering of kheer, roti, fruits; beginning of 36-hour fast (especially by women)	Endurance, self-restraint, communal sharing of prasad
Day 3	Sandhya Arghya (Chhath)	Evening arghya to setting sun; Kosi ritual in select families; offerings in bamboo trays	Acceptance of decline and transition; lineage continuity
Day 4	Usha Arghya (Paarun / Bihaniya)	Pre-dawn arghya to rising sun; breaking fast with ginger and sugar	Renewal, hope, regeneration, ritual closure

As per the table-2 four-day ritual process indicates that Chhath Puja as a processual ritual, where each step are builds upon the previous one to transmute the devotee physically, mentally, and spiritually. Initiating through purification locally known as - "Nahai-Khai" and concluding in renewal through "Usha Arghya", the sequence reflects a rite of passage, marked by separation,

liminality, and reintegration. The emphasis on fasting, bodily discipline and controlled consumption reflects indigenous concepts of moral order and self-regulation. From an anthropological perception, the cycle symbolizes a cosmic rhythm, mirroring the movement of the Sun from sunset to sunrise and reinforcing a worldview where endurance, restraint, and renewal are central cultural values.

Table 3: Kosi Ritual (Special Observance on Day 3)

Aspect	Description
Occasion	Celebrated in families after childbirth or marriage
Duration	One-day ritual
Symbolism	Earthen lamps placed under five sugarcane sticks symbolizing solar energy
Significance	Fertility, family continuity, gratitude to Sun God

This table-3 Kosi ritual signifies the relation existing between the rituals, kinship, and fertility, highlighting the social and cultural dimensions of Chhath Puja. Its performance after childbirth or marriage specifies the community's concern with lineage continuity and reproductive prosperity. Above the traditionally and culturally symbolic use of sugarcane and earthen lamps

reflects solar energy and agricultural abundance, strengthening the relationship existing between the nature and human reproduction. Through anthropological point of view, Kosi functions as a domestic ritual extension of temple worship, where family milestones are integrated into a broader cosmological framework centered in relation with the Sun.

Table 4: Ritual Practices during Sandhya Arghya

Element	Description
Puja Offerings	Thekua, coconut, banana, seasonal fruits
Offering Medium	Bamboo basket/tray
Devotees	Women (Pavitrins) wearing turmeric-coloured sarees
Chanting	Gayatri Mantra
Ritual Space	River banks or sacred water bodies

This table table-4 indicates that how material culture, gender roles, and sacred space converge during the Chhath Sandhya Arghya rituals. The use of bamboo trays, seasonal fruits, and earthen objects signifies an eco-friendly ritual economy, avoiding permanence and excess. The central participation of women locally known as *Pavitrins*, dressed in turmeric-

coloured sarees and chanting the Gayatri Mantra, highlights the gendered nature of ritual authority during this Chhath Puja. During this festival the rituals are performed at the riverbanks underscores the anthropological concept of transitional spaces, where water serves as a mediator between the human and sacred sphere.

Table 5: Essential Materials Used in Sun Temple Chhath Puja

Category	Items
Food Items	Wheat flour, sugar, rice, dates, coconut, seasonal fruits
Ritual Objects	Bamboo basket, copper pot, earthen lamps, puja thali
Sacred Materials	Akshat (rice), sindoor, turmeric, moli (red thread)
Offerings	Panchamrit, wheat (anaaj), flowers (especially red hibiscus)
Worship Items	Dhoop, camphor, ghee, cotton wicks, coins (dakshina)
Deity Symbols	Idols of Lord Surya and Lord Ganesha

The table-5 ritual resources listed in this table reflect the representative simplicity and ethical restraint that define Chhath Puja. Items like- grains, fruits, turmeric, vermillion or sindoor, and red flowers emphasize purity, fertility, and solar energy. The predominance of biodegradable and locally available materials illustrates an indigenous and

traditional ecological ethic, where ritual practice remains harmonious with the environment. Anthropologically, the material culture of Chhath Puja links values of non-accumulation, sustainability, and respect for natural resources.

Table 6: Religious, Cultural, and Social Importance of Chhath Puja

Dimension	Significance
Religious	Gratitude to Sun as source of life, health, and cosmic energy
Cultural	Rooted in folk traditions of Bihar, Jharkhand, eastern UP, and Nepal
Social	Strengthens family bonds; women play central ritual role
Ecological	Eco-friendly practices; biodegradable offerings; no idols
Anthropological	Ritual landscape integrating ecology, gender, identity

This table-6 Religious, Cultural, and Social Importance of Chhath Puja makes the multi-dimensional significance of Chhath Puja, viewing how religious devotion encompasses into cultural practice and social organization.

Gratitude to the Sun reflects a cosmology centered on life-giving forces, although strong cultural roots in eastern India highlight regional identity. The central role of women and collective participation supports family unity and community solidarity. Ecologically, the festival stands out as a model of sustainable religious and cultural practice. But through anthropological perception, Chhath Puja at the Deo Sun Temple signifies a ritual landscape, where belief, ecology, gender, and memory interact to sustain cultural continuousness across generations.

Conclusion

Finally, this Chhath Puja at the Deo Sun Temple signifies a cultural and traditional combination of ritual practice, ecological ethics, and collective cultural life. As explained by Prof. L. P. Vidyarthi's anthropological concept of the *Sacred Complex*, the Deo Sun Temple can also be explained as a cohesive system of sacred geography, sacred performances, and sacred specialists. The physical

landscape of the temple its westward orientation, the presence of sacred Kalash, the triadic symbolism of the Sun, and its proximity to natural water bodies constitutes the *sacred geography*. The performance of Chhath Puja, marked by severe fasting, gendered ritual discipline, and collective offerings to the setting and rising Sun, forms the *sacred performances*. In the meantime, the historical role of the *Shakdwipiya* priests as ritual custodians signifies the *sacred specialists* who ensure continuity, legitimacy, and transmission of religious and cultural practices with knowledge.

Through this anthropological perspective, the Deo Sun Temple functions not simply as a site of worship but it won't be wrong to mention that it functions as a living *sacred complex* where cosmology, ecology, social organization, and cultural memory converge. The ritual reaffirmation of God Sun worship during Chhath Puja bears indigenous ecological wisdom, reinforces regional identity not only in the Magadh area but all over the Bihar State and within the neighbouring states of Bihar, and maintains social cohesion across generations. Therefore, the Deo Sun Temple illustrates how sacred complexes remain to operate as dynamic cultural institutions, preserving ancient

traditions and cultural practices while remaining deeply relevant in urbanized and digitalized social life.

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