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Rivers in Mithila (North Bihar)– A Grand Site of Cultural Manifestation

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Abstract: *Mithila region in India has been a site of rich culture that is very much inscribed around the fine network of natural and man-made water bodies. The region has an intricate web of big and small rivers around which the civilization evolved and flourished. These rivers have been sustaining the generations over millenia through nurturing the regional attributes including humans, plants, animals and agricultural crops of various hues. Human attachment with rivers has been manifested in the form of various festivals and rituals that are performed alongside rivers. Ganga is the mighty river in the region that has a number of tributaries like Kosi, Gandak, Burhi Gandak, Kareh (Bagmati), Kamla Balan, Mahananda etc. Small rivers making confluence with bigger ones make the site more reverential and provide ideal sites for festivals.*

The paper takes into account the rivers in Mithila region of Bihar manifesting themselves as sites of festivals althrough the year.

Key words: *Cultural Manifestation, river, agricultural crops, Mithila, North Bihar, Festivals, confluence.*

INTRODUCTION- Festival is an event celebrated at community level. It is special recurring event solemnized on a cultural, religion or historical basis. Festivals range from a single day to multiple days event, involving worship, music, feast and other related attributes.

Mithila region in India and Nepal is known for its rich cultural heritage that is manifested mostly around water bodies like ponds, tanks, canals, rivers, dams etc. Having a subtropical climate, most of the rituals here are performed around water bodies. Taking holy bath in Ganga and other rivers is the mainstay of Mithila culture. Various sorts of rituals are performed throughout the year on the river banks with a view to attain eternal bliss. Performing cremation and immersing the ashes in the river is considered a matter of great solace. Rivers are a great source of water for agriculture, pisciculture, navigation and sustenance of aquatic wild life (Mishra 2005, 2017 etc.). Sahriday (2012) has provided a glimpse of the rivers in the state.

METHODOLOGY- A survey was made of the festivals observed along side rivers in Mithila region on Bihar. Timing of the festivals and the rivers involved therein were taken into account along with socio-cultural and economic aspects.

DISCUSSION- Chhath Festival Provides a Great Glory to the Rivers: All types of lentic (stagnant water bodies) and lotic water bodies (rivers) in the region are the sites for holding Chhath festival solemnised on the 6th/7th instant of the bright fortnight of Kartik month (October-November). Ghats (earthen or pucca podia) are prepared by the devotees along side the banks of rivers and ponds. Chhath festival is performed with a sense of utmost devotion, tranquillity and cleanliness. Bihar, Jharkhand, eastern Uttar Pradesh, bordering areas of West Bengal and terai region of Nepal are the main sites of Chhath festival. It is a basically a 4 –day festival starting with Nahay-Khay and a holy dip is performed on this day also in the rivers. This also takes shape of a festival. All the rivers and water bodies are in full glory on the occasion of Chhath (Kumar and Das 2023, Yadav and Chandra 2024, Prasad 2025 etc.)

Festivals on the River Ganga: Simariya, on the left (northern) bank of the mighty river Ganga in Bihar is called the Gateway of Mithila. It has been held as the most prominent of the Ganga ghats where people flock round the year for Gangasnan (sacred bathing in the holiest of the holy river). It is during the month of Kartik (November), that devotees make a month long 'Kalpavaas' (stay on the ghat) as per lunar/solar calendar. The Begusarai district administration makes all necessary arrangements for a comfortable stay of the devotees. Simariya has now emerged as a site of Kumbh that witnesses a heavy congregation of human being every six and twelve years that are know as Ardh' or 'Purna' Kumbh. There has been an earlier practice of holding 4 Kumbhs at Haridwar (Uttarakhand), Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh), Nasik (Maharashtra) and Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh). The campaign of holding Kumbh at Simariya was initiated by Swami Chidatmanji Maharaj in 2011. Since then regular 'Arti' is performed everyday. Chamthaghat on Ganga on the border of Samstipur and Begusarai districts also hosts a 10-day long festival on the occasion of Kartik Poonima. On every auspicious day earmarked in the almanac for the proverbial 'Gangasnan', people flock this site in millions. Ganga Dashahra (Jyeshtha Shukla Dashmi) is another significant day when the festival of the holy bath is solemnized.



Festivals on the River Kamla: River Kamla, throughout its course, hosts several festivals, mostly on the occasion of Kartik month, on the Poornima (full moon) day. The river originates in the Churia range in Nepal and flowing through the Siraha and Dhanusha districts, it enters India near Jaynagar on Indo-Nepal border. Treversing through Madhubani, Darbhanga and Samastipur districts, it confluences with the river Kosi near Badlaghat in Khagaria district. It is considered to be the lifeline of the western Mithila districts. Legendary heroes of the region have their stories inscribed around the river. The river is known to have changed its courses over millenia. The main channel of the river today flows through Jhanjharpur in Madhubani district. It has about a dozen paleochannels that get enlivened during rainy season. Several Gahbars (old temples) of Kamla are there alongside its old channels. The river witnesses large human congregations on the occasion of Kartik and Magh Purnimas. The combined stream from the Kamla and Kareh rivers then flows into the Kosi river. The endeavour is meant for popularising the importance of the river Kamla amongst the masses. Earlier the event used to be held at Janakpur town only in the Dhanusha district of Madhesh province in Nepal. Earlier the Kamla and Balan rivers in Madhubani district had separate streams but now the two rivers have been made to combine as Kamla-Balan at Pipraghat in Madhubani district that is a point of big human assemblage during Kamla festival in the month of Kartik. A river called Soni that earlier made a confluence at this point has become extinct. Kartik Poornima festival on river Kamla is held at several places along its course including Jaynagar, Pipraghat, Raghauli, Gausaghat, Trimuhani Chhaprar ghat etc. Pipraghat mela is the most significant one where the river Balan confluences with river Kamla. The third river Soni has almost lost its existence now. The site is held a point of sacred festivals where devotees throng in thousands. They perform the traditional Bhagait worship (a form of prayer through body actions) and also offer a sacrifice of she- goats called 'Paathi' (as against the usual sacrifice of he-goats i.e., Chhagar). However, the she-goat is not killed. Instead, the mallahas (fishing community) take hold of the 'sacrificed' goat. Ripened paddy panicles are also offered to the river deity. This helps the dispersal of the seeds through the river current. 'Kamla Jaladhar Sanrakshan', a voluntary forum of Kamla activists has strived to hold 'Matkor' festival related with the customary marital ritual of Goddess Sita with Lord Ram in the river Kamla at village Sakhoba Maran of Nepal (on the western bank). The endeavour is meant for highlighting the association of river Kamla as sister of Sita. Earlier this event was held only at Janakpur town, the birthplace of Sita in Dhanusha district of Nepal. Kamla activists in India and Nepal are trying their best to strengthen the people to people relationship under the aegis of Bharat Nepal Kamla Maitri Manch.

Festival on the River Burhi Gandak: Singhiaghat on the river Burhi Gandak in Samastipur district in Rosera subdivision hosts a unique Snake festival on the day of Nag Panchami in the Indian calendar month of Shrawan. Thousands of people from far and wide flock the place. The fair has been held continuously for nearly 200 years. It is believed that a devotee who visits the place to offer prayer to the serpent deity (Nag devata) has his wishes fulfilled and attains spiritual entitlement.

Festivals on the River Baghmati: River Baghmati that enters India from Nepal (passing through Kathmandu) hosts a fair around the Jatmalpur village on the border of Darbhanga and Samastipur districts on the occasion of Shivratri. It has been famous for its wooden furniture market and also for cattle fair. On account of diminishing role of cattle in agriculture, the Pashu mela has not been held for over two decades now. A fair on this river is also held at Bhagwatpur and Dheng during Ramnavami and Kartik Poornima respectively.

Festivals on the River Kosi: The river Kosi in the region is the largest tributary of Ganga. Barakhshetra in Sunsari district of Nepal hosts Mahakumbh at every twelve years on the pattern of the 4 Mahakumbhs held in India (Poudel 2024). Kosi hosts several fair festivals in its course including Sahsoul (Madhepura), Bargon (Madhepura), Nonaiti (Saharsa), Lagma (Saharsa), Rajanpur (Saharsa) etc.

Artesian Rivers on Indo-Nepal Border-Also a site of Festivals: Indo-Nepal border is also known for its artesian well system that gives rise to a number of small rivers. One such river inside the Salhesh Phulbari in Siraha district of Nepal is a site of Salhesh Festival solemnised on the occasion of 'Jur Shital', the first day of the Nepalese New Year Day, also called as Mesh Sankranti. Thousands of people flock together at this place to offer prayers to the demi-God (Raja Salhesh). An orchid flower called Sunakhari blooms on this day and is major point of attraction for the pilgrims.

A number of Trimuhani exist at several places in the region. Trimuhan/Trimuhani refers to the three fronts emerging after at least two rivers make a confluence. Three rivers making a point of confluence are termed as Triveni. A sharp bend of a river creates two fronts of its own and a second river make confluence at the point of bend. A Triveni exists near Janakpur in Nepal in north-eastern direction on the



border of Sindhuli and Udaipur districts where three rivers– Kamla, Vajjanti and Taukhola rivers make a confluence.

The central theme behind this entire process of river worship is a longing for having a child. The couple who do not have an offspring, perform this ritual of Kamlasnan, a holy bath in Kamla river) with their garments tied with a knot Kamlasnan is a manifestation of their earnest desire to have a male child (or a female child as well if they have no issue at all). Small rivers like Jiwachh (derived from the Sanskrit word Jivavatsa, a river that can bless the birth and survival of a child) or Bachhraj (derived from the Sanskrit word Vatsraj), again, has the same meaning. Childless couple bathe in these rivers on auspicious days that take the shape of a festival.

EPILOGUE- There is need to make a detailed micro level survey of festivals held alongside rivers in Mithila region that has an intricate web of lotic channels. Changing patterns of rainfall in the last few decades have led to a number of small rivers getting dried up during summer months. This has created a piquant situation in the form of a severe crisis of even drinking water. People in affected villages now have to make a temporary migration to their near relations in rural and urban areas. This summer migration is a sad tale for the region that was once known as a water surplus area. So much so that local people pump out underground water into the rivers to facilitate the accomplishment of rituals.

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