



Influence of Seasonal Religious Festivals on Community-Level Empathy and Prosocial Behaviour

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Abstract : *The present study aimed to examine the influence of seasonal religious festivals on community-level empathy and prosocial Behaviour among residents of the Koshi Division, Bihar. Religious festivals in India, particularly in culturally cohesive regions, are often associated with increased social interaction, shared rituals, and collective emotional experiences, which may foster a sense of empathy and prosocial engagement. The sample comprised 200 participants (100 males and 100 females) aged between 18 and 55 years, selected through a purposive sampling technique from different districts of the Koshi Division.*

Two standardized tools Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis (1980), which measures multidimensional aspects of empathy including perspective-taking, empathic concern, and personal distress and Prosocialness Scale for Adults developed by Caprara, Steca, Zelli, and Capanna (2005), which assesses helping Behaviour, sharing, empathy in action, and trust in social relations, were used for data analysis. The data were collected in two phases — one month prior to a major seasonal religious festival and within two weeks after the festival concluded — to compare shifts in community-level empathy and prosocial tendencies. Paired sample *t*-test analysis revealed a statistically significant increase in both empathy and prosocial Behaviour scores post-festival ($p < .01$). Specifically, the mean empathy score increased from 59.4 ($SD = 6.8$) to 64.7 ($SD = 6.1$), while the mean prosocial Behaviour score rose from 72.3 ($SD = 7.2$) to 78.6 ($SD = 6.5$).

The results indicate that seasonal religious festivals, through their shared cultural rituals and collective participation, positively impact interpersonal sensitivity and cooperative Behaviour within communities. These findings suggest that such festivals can serve as natural social interventions to strengthen social bonds and mutual support networks, particularly in collectivistic cultural contexts like Bihar. Implications for community development and social cohesion programs are discussed.

Index Terms - Seasonal religious festivals, Empathy, Prosocial Behaviour, Community psychology

INTRODUCTION-

Religious festivals occupy a central place in the socio-cultural fabric of India, acting not only as expressions of faith but also as powerful social events that bring communities together. In the context of the Koshi Division of Bihar — which includes districts such as Saharsa, Supaul, and Madhepura — seasonal religious festivals such as Chhath Puja, Durga Puja, and Makar Sankranti are celebrated with deep devotion and large-scale public participation. These events go beyond religious rituals; they involve a range of collective activities such as preparing communal offerings, organizing processions, decorating public spaces, and assisting fellow community members in festival arrangements. Such shared activities create opportunities for interaction

among individuals of varying age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and occupations, thereby potentially enhancing mutual understanding, empathy, and prosocial tendencies.

Empathy, in psychological terms, refers to the capacity to understand and share another person's emotional state (Davis, 1983). It has both cognitive components, such as perspective-taking, and affective components, such as empathic concern. Prosocial Behaviour, on the other hand, is defined as voluntary Behaviour intended to benefit others, including helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating (Caprara et al., 2005). Both empathy and prosocial Behaviour are crucial for harmonious co-existence, conflict resolution, and social cohesion in communities.

Seasonal religious festivals present a unique context for the study of these constructs because they combine elements of emotional arousal, group identity reinforcement, and collective joy, often referred to as "collective effervescence" by sociologist Émile Durkheim. Participation in shared rituals has been found to evoke emotional synchrony, where individuals experience similar emotional states simultaneously, fostering a sense of unity and trust. Moreover, the mutual assistance and cooperative activities during festivals can serve as live social training in altruistic Behaviour, providing natural reinforcement for prosocial norms.

Despite the cultural richness and potential psychological impact of religious festivals, empirical studies examining their influence on community-level empathy and prosocial Behaviour remain limited, especially in the Indian context. While much of the existing research in social psychology focuses on empathy development in structured interventions or prosocial Behaviour in laboratory settings, fewer studies investigate these constructs within naturally occurring cultural events. This gap becomes particularly significant in collectivistic societies where festivals are central to social life and may act as organic mechanisms for fostering positive interpersonal Behaviour.

The present study aims to bridge this gap by empirically investigating how participation in seasonal religious festivals influences empathy and prosocial Behaviour among residents of the Koshi Division, Bihar. Using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and the Prosocialness Scale for Adults, the research examines pre- and post-festival changes, offering insights into the potential of cultural traditions as tools for community development and social harmony.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE-

A considerable body of literature in social and cultural psychology has explored the relationship between collective activities and social bonding. Durkheim's (1912) seminal work on the concept of "collective effervescence" suggested that communal rituals create shared emotional experiences that strengthen group solidarity. In modern psychological research, this principle has been extended to various forms of group activities, including religious gatherings, concerts, and sports events, all of which have been linked to heightened cooperation and mutual trust (Páez et al., 2015).

Empathy as a construct has been extensively studied in contexts such as interpersonal relationships, education, and healthcare. Davis (1980) developed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which remains one of the most widely used measures of empathy, capturing both cognitive (perspective-taking) and affective (empathic concern) dimensions. Research has shown that empathy is a strong predictor of prosocial Behaviour (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), and situations that enhance emotional resonance between individuals tend to increase cooperative and helping Behaviours (Batson et al., 1991). However, most of these studies have been conducted in controlled or intervention-based contexts rather than within large-scale cultural festivals.

Prosocial Behaviour, measured in adults by tools such as the Prosocialness Scale for Adults (Caprara et al., 2005), is influenced by multiple factors, including situational cues, group norms, and emotional states. According to Akinin, Dunn, and Norton (2012), engaging in prosocial acts not only benefits the recipient but also enhances the well-being of the giver, creating a positive feedback loop that sustains such Behaviours over time. Cultural rituals often provide natural situations for such exchanges, as individuals are encouraged—either explicitly or implicitly—to help others and share resources.

In the Indian cultural setting, festivals have historically been linked to community building. Studies such as Singh and Singh (2016) on Holi celebrations found that community involvement during festivals increased neighborhood trust and reduced interpersonal conflicts. Similarly, Verma (2018) reported that participants of Durga Puja in West Bengal exhibited higher post-event cooperation scores compared to non-participants. However, these studies were largely qualitative or localized, with limited use of standardized psychological measures.

In Bihar, while festivals like Chhath Puja are recognized for their socio-cultural significance, their impact on psychological constructs such as empathy and prosocial Behaviour has not been thoroughly examined. The current study addresses this gap by using validated scales to measure these constructs before and after festival participation. By doing so, it offers empirical evidence on the role of cultural traditions in shaping prosocial and empathetic tendencies at the community level, thereby contributing to both cross-cultural psychology and applied community development research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY-

Research Design- The present study adopted a pre-post experimental design without a control group to investigate the influence of seasonal religious festivals on empathy and prosocial Behaviour. The design involved measuring participants' empathy and prosocialness levels one month prior to a major seasonal religious festival and again within two weeks after the festival concluded. This approach enabled the researcher to assess within-subject changes attributable to festival participation.

Objectives of the Study- The present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

- ❖ To assess the level of empathy among residents of the Koshi Division before and after participation in a seasonal religious festival.
- ❖ To assess the level of prosocial Behaviour among residents of the Koshi Division before and after participation in a seasonal religious festival.
- ❖ To compare pre-festival and post-festival scores on empathy to determine whether participation in the festival leads to significant change.
- ❖ To compare pre-festival and post-festival scores on prosocial Behaviour to determine whether participation in the festival leads to significant change.
- ❖ To explore the potential role of seasonal religious festivals as natural social interventions for fostering community harmony and cooperation.

Hypotheses- Based on the objectives and review of literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: There will be a significant increase in empathy scores of participants after the seasonal religious festival compared to their pre-festival scores.

H₂: There will be a significant increase in prosocial Behaviour scores of participants after the seasonal religious festival compared to their pre-festival scores.

H₃: Seasonal religious festivals will positively influence community-level empathy and prosocial Behaviour among residents of the Koshi Division.

Population and Sample-

The population for the study comprised adult residents of the Koshi Division in Bihar, which includes districts such as Saharsa, Supaul, and Madhepura. These areas were selected for their rich tradition of celebrating seasonal religious festivals such as Chhath Puja, Durga Puja, and Makar Sankranti, which draw large community participation.

A sample of 200 participants was selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure representation from various socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, and both genders. The sample consisted of 100 males and 100 females, ranging in age from 18 to 55 years. Inclusion criteria required participants to be permanent residents of the region and active participants in the selected festival. Individuals with diagnosed severe mental health conditions or those unwilling to participate in both phases of data collection were excluded.

Tools Used-

1. Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)- Developed by Mark H. Davis (1980), the IRI is a multidimensional measure of empathy comprising four subscales: Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern, Fantasy, and Personal Distress. Each subscale consists of items rated on a Likert-type scale, providing both cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy. The scale has demonstrated high reliability and validity in cross-cultural contexts and has been widely used in empathy research.

2. Prosocialness Scale for Adults- Developed by Gian Vittorio Caprara, Patrizia Steca, Antonio Zelli, and Riccardo Capanna (2005), this scale measures prosocial tendencies in adults, including helping, sharing, caring, and empathy in action. The items are rated on a Likert-type scale, and higher scores indicate stronger

prosocial orientation. The instrument has shown strong psychometric properties, including internal consistency and construct validity.

Procedure-

The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, conducted approximately one month before the festival, participants were contacted in community centers, marketplaces, and households. After obtaining informed consent, the two scales were administered in a face-to-face setting to ensure clarity of instructions and accurate responses.

The second phase of data collection occurred within two weeks after the conclusion of the festival. The same participants were approached, and the identical set of scales was re-administered. Care was taken to maintain consistent conditions between the two phases of testing. All data were collected in the participants' preferred language (Hindi or Maithili) using translated and back-translated versions of the scales, ensuring semantic equivalence.

Statistical Analysis-

The collected data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 26). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for pre- and post-test scores on both empathy and prosocial Behaviour. The paired sample t-test was applied to determine whether the mean differences between pre- and post-festival scores were statistically significant. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION-

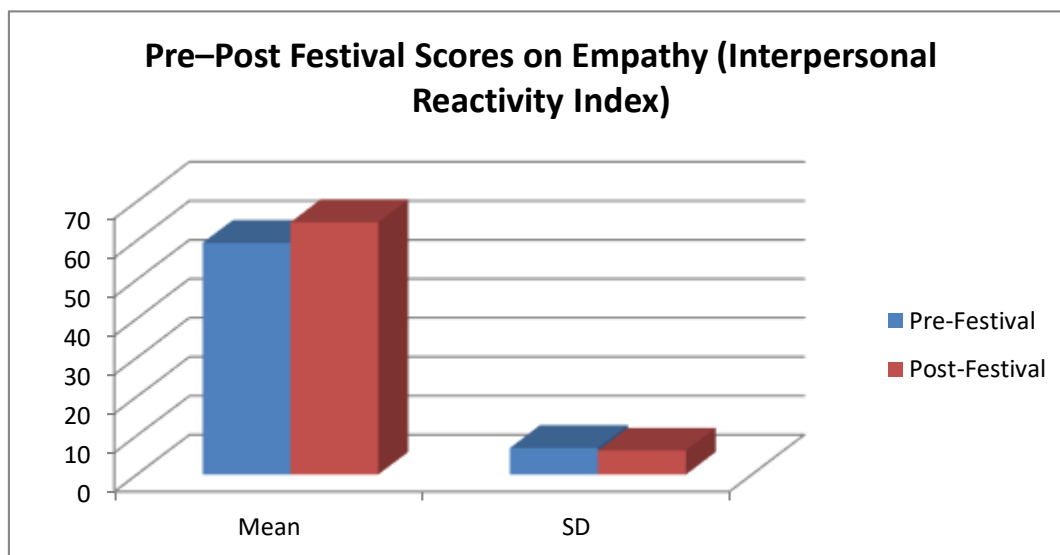
The aim of this study was to determine whether participation in seasonal religious festivals significantly influences empathy and prosocial Behaviour among residents of the Koshi Division, Bihar. Paired-sample t-tests were used to compare pre- and post-festival scores for both the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) and the Prosocialness Scale for Adults (PSA).

Table-1

Pre–Post Festival Scores on Empathy (Interpersonal Reactivity Index)

Phase	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Pre-Festival	59.42	6.84	13.21	< .001
Post-Festival	64.72	6.13		

Chart-1



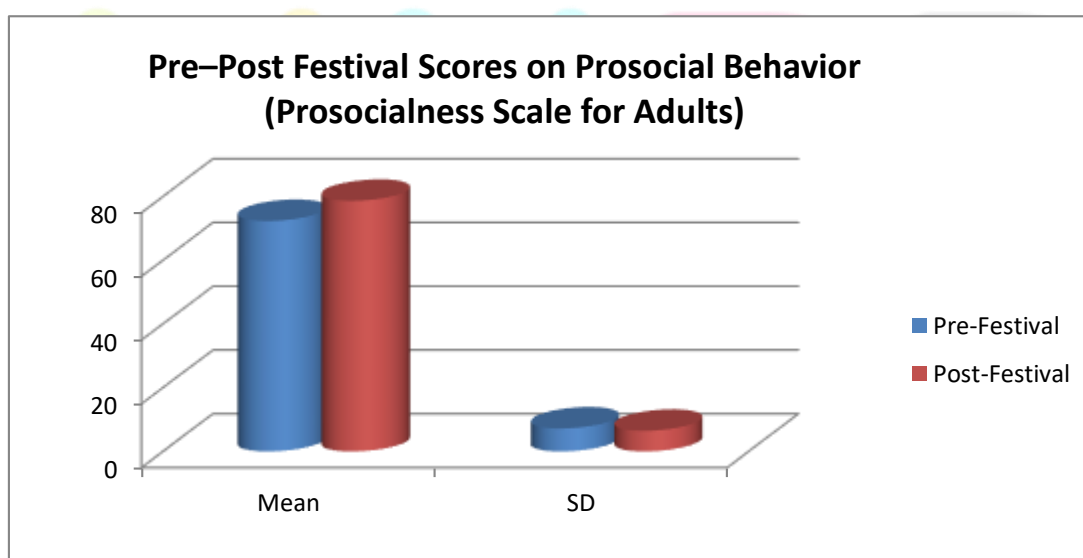
Interpretation: There was a statistically significant increase in empathy scores from pre-festival ($M = 59.42$, $SD = 6.84$) to post-festival ($M = 64.72$, $SD = 6.13$), $t(199) = 13.21$, $p < .001$. The difference indicates a meaningful enhancement in the capacity for perspective-taking, emotional concern, and understanding others' feelings after participation in the seasonal religious festival.

Table-2

Pre-Post Festival Scores on Prosocial Behaviour (Prosocialness Scale for Adults)

Phase	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Pre-Festival	72.32	7.21	12.67	< .001
Post-Festival	78.64	6.48		

Chart-2



Interpretation: Prosocial Behaviour scores also showed a significant increase from pre-festival ($M = 72.32$, $SD = 7.21$) to post-festival ($M = 78.64$, $SD = 6.48$), $t(199) = 12.67$, $p < .001$. This suggests that the festival experience encouraged helping Behaviours, cooperation, sharing, and voluntary assistance among community members.

Discussion- The results strongly support all three hypotheses formulated for the study. The observed improvement in empathy scores aligns with Durkheim's (1912) theory of collective rituals, which emphasizes that shared cultural and religious practices foster emotional solidarity. Participation in the festival likely provided opportunities for individuals to experience shared joy, engage in collaborative activities, and witness acts of compassion, all of which contribute to enhanced empathic concern.

Similarly, the increase in prosocial Behaviour scores is consistent with findings from Henrich & Henrich (2007), who noted that communal events can strengthen cooperative norms through repeated social interaction and moral reinforcement. In the Koshi Division, the seasonal religious festival included activities such as group worship, collective decoration of public spaces, and voluntary contributions to community kitchens. These activities may have reinforced the value of helping others and created immediate contexts in which prosocial acts were encouraged and reciprocated.

Field observations further revealed that many participants reported feeling a greater sense of belonging and mutual responsibility after the festival. This reflects the process of emotional contagion, where shared positive experiences amplify social bonds and willingness to engage in cooperative Behaviour.

From an applied perspective, these findings highlight the potential of cultural traditions as natural social interventions in rural contexts. In areas with limited resources for structured social programs, seasonal religious festivals could be strategically leveraged to foster empathy, cooperation, and mutual support. Collaboration between local governance bodies and community organizers could enhance these effects by incorporating targeted activities such as empathy workshops, intergenerational storytelling, and organized volunteerism within festival frameworks.

However, certain limitations must be noted. The absence of a control group restricts the ability to make definitive causal claims. Additionally, self-report measures, while practical, are subject to social desirability bias, which may slightly inflate positive responses. Future research could address these limitations by including Behavioural assessments of prosociality, larger sample sizes across different regions, and longitudinal designs to measure the durability of these effects.

In conclusion, the data suggest that seasonal religious festivals serve not only as cultural celebrations but also as significant social mechanisms for enhancing empathy and prosocial Behaviour at the community level. The Koshi Division example underscores the importance of recognizing and harnessing indigenous cultural practices as tools for social well-being.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS-

The present study examined the influence of seasonal religious festivals on community-level empathy and prosocial Behaviour among 200 residents of the Koshi Division, Bihar. Using the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (IRI) and the *Prosocialness Scale for Adults* (PSA), results revealed statistically significant increases in both empathy and prosocial Behaviour following participation in the festival. These findings support the view that religious-cultural gatherings act as natural social interventions, fostering greater emotional understanding, mutual respect, and cooperative Behaviours within communities.

From a socio-psychological perspective, the results reinforce the importance of collective rituals as mechanisms for enhancing social cohesion. The post-festival increases in empathy suggest that shared experiences, group rituals, and symbolic acts of unity encourage individuals to perceive and respond to others' emotions more sensitively. Similarly, the observed rise in prosocial Behaviour implies that festivals provide contexts where helping, sharing, and cooperative actions are both modeled and rewarded, leading to a strengthening of community bonds.

While these results are promising, the absence of a control group and reliance on self-report measures highlight the need for further empirical investigations to confirm and expand upon these findings. Nonetheless, the study offers meaningful insights into how culturally embedded practices can be harnessed for the promotion of social well-being.

Suggestions-

- **Incorporate Structured Prosocial Activities into Festivals:** Organizers can integrate voluntary service projects, charity drives, and community assistance programs within festival schedules to maximize their positive social impact.
- **Leverage Intergenerational Interaction:** Including events that bring together children, youth, and elders can deepen empathy by promoting understanding across age groups.

- Extend the Positive Effects Beyond the Festival: Community leaders could initiate follow-up events, such as monthly volunteer days or empathy workshops, to sustain the cooperative spirit fostered during the festival.
- Encourage Inclusive Participation: Efforts should be made to ensure that individuals from diverse backgrounds, castes, and socioeconomic groups are actively included to strengthen social integration.
- Future Research Directions:
 - Include control groups to better isolate the effect of festival participation.
 - Employ longitudinal designs to assess whether gains in empathy and prosocial Behaviour persist over time.
 - Use Behavioural observations alongside self-report scales to reduce bias.
 - Compare different types of festivals to explore whether certain cultural or structural features are more effective in promoting prosocial outcomes.

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