



A Study of the Nearly Extinct Folk Ritual of Rural Barak: Rākhāl Sebā or Āi Pūjā

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Abstract

This paper explores Rākhāl Sebā or Āi Pūjā, an almost extinct folk ritual once prevalent in the rural areas of Barak Valley. Rooted in agrarian life and the pastoral culture of the region, this ritual centred on the worship of Lord Krishna as the divine cowherd, performed collectively by village boys who tended cattle. Unlike Brahmanical forms of worship, Rākhāl Sebā was entirely non-ritualistic in the orthodox sense, devoid of priests, sacred icons, or Vedic mantras. It embodied a purely emotional, intimate relationship between cowherds and their deity, shaped by everyday agricultural needs and local cosmology. The study examines the ritual's structure, associated folk songs, community participation, oral traditions, and symbolic practices, highlighting how modernisation and the decline of agrarian labour have led to its near disappearance. By documenting this vanishing practice, the paper underscores the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage in the Barak Valley.

Keywords: Rākhāl Sebā, Āi Pūjā, Barak Valley, folk culture, agrarian rituals, Krishna devotion, cowherd traditions, intangible heritage.

Introduction

The Barak Valley, known for its rich tapestry of folk rituals, once celebrated thirteen festivals across twelve months. Among these, Rākhāl Sebā, also known as Āi Pūjā, stood out as a unique ritual centred on pastoral life. With the rapid advance of modernity and urban values, this humble, intimate worship practice has almost faded from rural memory. Once a source of communal joy and cultural cohesion, it now survives only as fragments in oral histories, songs, and recollections of elderly villagers.

This paper examines Rākhāl Sebā as an ethnographic and cultural phenomenon, exploring its ritual elements, social significance, and the reasons behind its disappearance.

The Social Context of Rākhāl Sebā

The name Rākhāl Sebā ("Service of the Cowherds") itself suggests the central role of young cattle-tenders—boys roughly twelve to fourteen years old who herded cows and buffaloes in agrarian households. The ritual was entirely outside the domain of Brahmanical orthodoxy. No priest, no Sanskrit incantation, no icon, and no elaborate paraphernalia were required. Instead, the cowherds themselves were the priests, organisers, performers, and devotees.

Lord Krishna—eternally imagined as the divine cowherd—served as the spiritual inspiration for the boys. Their daily labour of tending cattle created an affective bond with the deity, whom they regarded both as protector and companion. In this ritual, Krishna was not the majestic cosmic god but a playful village boy reflecting the lives of the Barak Valley’s own gopal (cowherd children).

Agrarian Life and the Need for Divine Protection

The Barak Valley was historically agriculturally dependent, with cattle serving as the backbone of cultivation. The wellbeing of cows and buffaloes directly determined the year's harvest. Thus, farmers believed that Krishna, the guardian of cattle, must be pleased to ensure healthy livestock.

During Kartik, when the golden paddy fields were ready for harvest and cattle rested from plowing duties, the cowherd boys prepared to perform the ritual. Since some material resources were needed to arrange the worship, the boys visited households after dusk, singing songs to collect offerings such as rice, coconuts, bananas, or small coins.

The Tradition of Song and Community Participation

The ritual’s most distinctive feature was the musical procession. Without any formal announcement, the boys would gather at night and begin singing devotional songs centred on the childhood pranks of Krishna. These songs, passed orally from one generation to another, reveal the deep localisation of mythology into village life.

Examples include:

Stories of Krishna stealing nani (butter), here transformed linguistically into lani.
Depictions of Nanda and Yashoda as ordinary householders.
Playful admonitions and humorous scenes narrated through folk idiom.

The boys sang in call-and-response style; one led while others repeated as dohar. Although not everyone possessed a melodious voice, the collective joy of singing mattered more than musical precision.

Households welcomed the cowherds with affection, believing that Krishna himself visited them in the guise of village boys. They rarely let the children return empty-handed, for doing so was considered inauspicious. Some families even placed personal requests—such as blessing a coconut tree to bear fruit—believing the ritual songs could bring good fortune.

Myths, Beliefs, and Ritual Efficacy

Local beliefs endowed Rākhāl Sebā with spiritual power.
For instance:

Using the pāñchāl (the ritual banana-leaf implement) to lightly tap the house was believed to help women conceive.

Cattle blessed during the ritual were believed to remain healthy year-round.
Fruit-bearing trees promised offerings to the ritual would flourish.

These beliefs demonstrate the intimate integration of spirituality with agrarian needs.

The Ritual of the Pāñchāl

On the day of Saṅkrānti in Kartik, villagers gathered at a designated open space, cleaned and purified with cow dung—a traditional rural method of sanctification. Each household brought both cattle and the ritual object known as pāñchāl.

A pāñchāl is crafted by:

Cutting a full banana leaf with its stalk.
Removing sections from two sides and shaping the upper portion.
Binding two such leaf-pieces together.
Decorating them with flowers and arranging them upright.

This constructed symbol served as the ritual "image." The boys placed offerings, lit incense and candles, and sang songs narrating the tale of Āi, recited by an elder participant.

Verses included lines such as:

Āir bāfar nām nāi,
Hāir bāfar nām Sudām,

and so forth—brief oral-texts that framed the ritual's mythical dimension.

At dusk, as the ceremony concluded, participants collected their pāñchāl and touched their cattle gently with it before returning home, marking the ritual's end.

Cultural Decline and Modernity

The disappearance of Rākhal Sebā reflects broader transformations in rural society:

The decline of traditional agriculture.
Reduced dependency on cattle.
Changing caste and labour dynamics.
Penetration of urban modernity and Hindu standardised rituals.
Loss of oral transmission as younger generations migrate or adopt new cultural patterns.

Even as Ganesh Chaturthi and other pan-Indian festivals gain prominence, intimate, non-Brahmanical folk rituals like Rākhal Sebā fade into obscurity.

Conclusion

Rākhal Sebā stands as a poignant reminder of the rich folk traditions of the Barak Valley—traditions that linked agriculture, pastoral labour, mythology, music, and community life. Its informal structure, absence of priesthood, and emotional depth distinguished it from mainstream Hindu rituals.

Documenting such practices is crucial for safeguarding intangible heritage. As modernity continues to reshape rural life, preserving memories of rituals like Rākhal Sebā allows future generations to appreciate the cultural diversity and historical resilience of agrarian communities.

References:

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