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### Cultural dynamics and significance of rice

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#### Abstract

Rice is a staple food for half the global population, transcends its dietary value to embody prosperity, fertility, and spiritual blessings. The present investigation explores the cultural, traditional, and symbolic significance of rice in various Hindu rituals, focusing on its role in life-cycle ceremonies of Chhattisgarh state, through participatory research methods, including interviews, group discussions, and on-site observations, the study investigates how different forms of rice, such as whole paddy, unbroken rice, and puffed rice, are utilized in rituals like Annaprashan, weddings, death and post-death rites. The findings highlight rice's central role in marking key life transitions, symbolizing nourishment, protection, and divine connection in the Hindu community. This research underscores rice as a vital cultural element that unites communities and preserves traditions across generations.

**Keywords:** Forms of rice, rituals, rice culture, rice tradition, significance of rice, marriage rituals

#### Introduction

Human socialization is closely linked to cultural beliefs and traditions. Similarly, the development of biodiversity also increases and thrives due to various factors. The rice crop is deeply connected to cultural traditions in different ways. So, rice is not just a source of calories but a key staple food for half of the global population <sup>[1,2]</sup> it also has a profound symbol of culture, heritage, and sustenance for billions of people globally. This versatile grain has been a cornerstone of civilizations, shaping traditions, societal structures, and economics for thousands of years.

Widely consumed and cultivated, rice remains an integral part of global food systems and the socio-cultural landscape of numerous regions. Its adaptability and nutritional significance make it an indispensable component of human survival and agricultural practices. Rice is the most crucial crop globally, as it is consumed daily by half of the world's population <sup>[2]</sup>. Rice is grown in at least 114 countries, among them over 50 producing at least 1 lakh tons annually. Global production reached 742.6 million tons from 160.6 million hectares <sup>[3]</sup>.

In Asia, it is deeply ingrained in daily life, influencing festivals, rituals, and communal practices. Beyond Asia, rice plays a vital role in diets and cultural traditions across Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The cultivation methods, particularly paddy farming, have demonstrated humanity's ability to innovate and work harmoniously with the environment.

The cultural importance of rice transcends its dietary role. It prominently features celebrations, folklore, and spiritual practices, symbolizing prosperity and fertility. For example,

in India, rice holds ceremonial significance in weddings and religious rituals, while in Japan, it is sacred and tied to traditional Shinto practices. Similarly, rice embodies unity and sustenance in many African communities, reflecting its deep cultural roots.

Celebrations and rituals form a fundamental part of Indian culture, providing opportunities for communities to unite, express gratitude, and strengthen social bonds. A significant aspect of these cultural expressions is the use of symbolic elements in religious ceremonies and cultural practices. Among these, rice holds profound spiritual and ceremonial importance, especially in Hinduism. Rice symbolizes prosperity, fertility, and auspiciousness due to its life-sustaining properties. Its use in rituals goes beyond nourishment, reflecting its sacred status. Rice plays a vital role in traditional ceremonies, where it serves as a medium for conveying blessings and divine protection. In Hindu beliefs, a bride is often seen as an embodiment of Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and prosperity. To bless the couple with a prosperous married life, rice is traditionally sprinkled over the newlyweds during wedding ceremonies. Additionally, the bride and groom offer rice into the ceremonial fire as a sacred offering believed to ward off negative energies and invite divine blessings. This research focuses on the cultural and ritualistic significance of rice in contemporary Indian festivals and ceremonies. The present investigation focuses on the cultural, traditional, and societal significance of rice, specifically through the lens of Chhattisgarh's diverse customs and practices. By exploring various cultural beliefs, rituals, taboos, and rites, the study aims to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in rice-

related traditions. The article seeks to illustrate how rice transcends its role as a mere food crop and becomes a symbol of cultural identity and societal cohesion. Through examining these evolving rituals and practices, the research provides insights into how rice plays an essential role in shaping and preserving cultural heritage.

**Objectives**

This paper aims to explore:

1. To document the cultural and traditional importance of rice.
2. To understand the symbolic significance of rice.

**Methodology**

To gain insights into the various rituals and traditions followed by the Hindu community, participatory research tools such as group discussions, semi-structured interviews, key informant discussions, and on-site observations were employed. Information was also gathered from friends, relatives, men, women of villages, elder married individuals and couples, and *Pandits/Purohits*. These methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the usage and symbolic importance of different forms of rice in ceremonies. The researcher also utilized personal curiosity and prior knowledge to generate observations. Attending wedding ceremonies allowed for direct observation of the construction of ceremonial devices and procedures followed in various rituals. Furthermore, observing multiple ongoing marriages highlighted the diverse forms of rice used, such as whole paddy, unbroken rice, yellow rice, white rice, parched paddy (*Lai*), and puffed rice (*Murmura*), emphasizing their symbolic cultural significance. Researchers studied multiple research articles to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon. This process helps them explore existing theories, methodologies, and findings, contributing to a well-rounded perspective and informed conclusions in their own studies. This methodological approach facilitated a detailed examination of how rice, in its different forms,

plays a significant role in a person's life cycle within the context of the Hindu community.

**Results and Discussion**

Rice holds significant importance in rituals performed at various stages of life. It is prominently used during ceremonies such as *god bhara*i (a celebration during pregnancy), birth rituals, and the initiation of a child's feeding. Its presence symbolizes prosperity, nourishment, and blessings, making it a key element in marking life's important milestones.

**A. First Rice Ceremony (*Annaprashan*):** The “First Rice Ceremony,” is a traditional Hindu ritual marking a baby’s transition from a milk-based diet to solid food, typically rice. The term is derived from Sanskrit, with "anna" meaning "food" or "rice" and "prashan" meaning "eating." Performed when the baby is 6 months old<sup>14</sup> for boys and 6–10 months for girls, the exact date is chosen based on the Hindu lunar calendar and the baby’s health. The ceremony symbolizes blessings for the child’s health, growth, and prosperity while integrating them into familial and community traditions. Sweet rice pudding (*kheer*), known for its digestibility and symbolism of sweetness, is often the first solid food fed, using auspicious items like gold or silver utensils. The ritual varies regionally; for instance, in Bengal, it is called *MukheBhaat* and involves rice and ghee, while in Kerala, *Choroonu* is performed in temples with offerings made to Lord Krishna <sup>[15]</sup>. In Nepal, Pasni involves a grand feast and blessings, and in Tamil Nadu, *Annaprashana* process includes rice with ghee and jaggery. *Annaprashan* reflects the central role of food in Indian culture, symbolizing life, prosperity, and the integration of tradition with modern practices. It is also a part of early nutritional inadequacy can lead to long-term impairment in growth and health of the growing child <sup>[6]</sup>.

**Table 1:** Forms of rice and their symbolic importance

S. No.	Form of rice	Symbolic significance	Uses
01	Whole paddy	Fertility, prosperity, and growth	Childbirth rituals and <i>Chowkpurana</i> .
02	Un-broken rice	Purity, abundance, and unbroken blessings	Applied during <i>tilak</i> , blessings, and <i>havan</i> rituals.
03	Common rice	Nourishment, sustenance, and health	Offered as food in daily prayers and rituals.
04	Parched rice ( <i>Lai</i> )	Detachment, spiritual transition	Used in wedding <i>feh</i> ritual, funeral processions and ancestral rites
05	Puffed rice ( <i>Murmura</i> )	Prosperity, peace, and simplicity	Distributed during festivals <i>prasadi</i> , and fasting rituals.
06	Rice flour	Purity, protection, and warding off evil	Used in rangoli, rice dishes and protective and respect giving rituals.
07	Coloured rice	Positivity, Decorative abundance, and good fortune	Decoration of <i>mandap</i> , Chowkpurana and pots

**B. Marriage ceremony**

**Invitation:** In Hindu marriage traditions, the first ritual involves invoking Lord Ganesha to seek his divine blessings for the removal of obstacles and to ensure the smooth conduct of the wedding. Traditionally, before the use of printed wedding cards, unbroken rice coloured with turmeric and vermilion was employed as a symbolic invitation. This coloured rice, representing prosperity, purity, and health, was either offered to Lord Ganesha or spread during prayer rituals. Turmeric, in particular, was

believed to add the value of health, happiness, and joy to the invitation. Even today, in rural areas, the practice endures, where turmeric-coloured rice is spread in the homes of invitees as a symbolic invitation for the upcoming marriage. This tradition underscores the deep cultural and spiritual significance of the marriage invitation process within Hindu customs.

**Decorating *Madawa/Mandap*:** For traditional wedding *mandap* preparation, paddy and rice play a significant role in

decoration. *Madawa* (bamboo poles) are firmly fixed at the *mandap*'s-corners, symbolizing stability and strength (Fig 2). The poles and edges of the *mandap* are adorned with colourful paddy or rice, representing prosperity, fertility, and auspiciousness. This vibrant decoration not only enhances the beauty of the *mandap* but also reflects cultural values tied to abundance and blessings for the couple's new life together.



Fig 2: Decoration of *mandap* with coloured rice



Fig 3: *Choukpurna*

**Chowk Purana:** Before setting up the *chowk*, the area is coated with a layer of cow dung. It involves the decoration of floors and walls with intricate patterns, crafted using paddy, rice flour, or sometimes rice or rice flour pest. The style of *chowkpurana* varies according to region (Fig 3). The term 'Chowk Purana' means; '*Chowk*', which signifies a square-shaped sacred space, and '*Purana*', which refers to the act of creating decorative patterns on floors and walls. This space symbolizes purity, divinity, and spiritual sanctity, representing an untouched and sacred area (*PavitraSthal*). Sacred symbols and footprints of deities are often drawn within the Chowk to attract positive energy and divine blessings. As a significant part of Hindu traditions, the ChowkPurana holds profound spiritual importance in marriage ceremonies, ensuring prosperity, purity, and divine blessings for the couple's new life together.

**DhanKalash and Telmati:** The *Kalash* holds deep spiritual significance and is used as a sacred vessel during rituals. Traditionally, it is made of either brass or copper and symbolizes the Earth, the universe, and divine presence. The *Kalash* is filled with water, representing life and purity. Mango or banana leaves are placed on its mouth, along with a lit oil lamp, symbolizing divine energy and enlightenment. Often, a coconut is also placed on top, and the leaves are filled with paddy (un-husked rice) or white rice, signifying prosperity and fertility. This ritual completes the *KalashSthapana*, marking the sanctity and auspiciousness of the wedding ceremony. *Telematics* a process in which sacred soil is excavated from a holy site in the village for

use in the wedding *mandap*. Before digging the soil, a ritual is performed to honor the site (Fig1a.) and the shovel is used for excavation by applying a ceremonial mark (*tilak*) made from rice flour (Fig 1b).



Fig 1: a. Honour to soil b. Honor to shovel



Fig 4: Eating *Khichadibhat*

**Khichadibhat:** On the first day of the marriage, both the groom and the bride eat *khichdi*, a light and healthy sweet dish (Fig4). The groom eats with five others, while the bride shares the meal with seven girls. The numbers may symbolize the different rituals followed by men (five) and women (seven) during the wedding, as seen in other ceremonies like *haridralepan*. The tradition reflects the cultural roles and energies associated with each gender, starting the marriage with a healthy foundation.

#### Mayan Bhat (cooked rice) or Mayan Bharna

A significant ritual performed on the second day of a Hindu wedding involves the circumambulation (*parikrama*) of the *mandap* and the *KulDevta* (family deity) by the blood relatives of the bride and groom. During each round of circumambulation, a mixture of rice and sesame seeds (*til*) is offered into the sacred fire (*havan*)(Fig5), symbolizing purification, prosperity, and divine blessings. This ritual underscores the essential role of rice in maintaining spiritual sanctity and ensuring abundance in marital life. The ceremony is considered incomplete without the use of rice, reflecting its deep spiritual and cultural significance in Hindu weddings. *Mayan bhat* is a feast for the close family member after praying the family deity.



Fig 5: *Mayan bharna* process



**Rice parching (*Lai fodna*):** In traditional Indian weddings, parched rice (*lai*) plays a significant role during the pheras (rounds). The bride's aunt and uncle (*Bua-Fufa, didi-jija*) prepare the *lai*, while the bride's brother's wife (*Bhabhi*) creates hurdles to prepare it through water on the earthen stove (fig6). Female relatives sing playful songs, emphasizing familial involvement and creating a joyful atmosphere. Parched rice symbolizes detachment from the parental family and emotional transition. During the pheras, the bride's brother places parched rice in her palm, which is then released with the groom's assistance, symbolizing her emotional departure from her parental home. Additionally, the groom uses the bride's feet to drop the rice using a grinding stone (*sil-batta*) once per round. These roasted paddy grains (*Lai*) reflect emotional detachment and familial bonding, highlighting the bride's transition and the collective nature of marriage. In Bengal the process of preparation of parching is called *LawaBhoonjana* and their process of use *Lajahoma* (Kavya and Kumar, 2015).



**Fig 6:** Decorative use of rice flour *Lai fodna* process

**Chawalmuthiya:** made from rice flour by the female aunts of the groom and bride, is used during the wedding ceremonies to ward off the evil eye and provide protection. These are typically used just before the groom's procession (*barat*) leaves and after it arrives at the bride's home. Along with the rice *muthiya*, *gobarmuthiya* (made from cow dung) and small sticks of *arhar* (red gram) are also used in the rituals. These items hold symbolic significance and are meant to protect the couple from negative energy, ensuring a prosperous and blessed life ahead. The use of these items reflects cultural beliefs in purity, protection, and good fortune.

**Panigrahan and Tikawan:** During the marriage ceremony, after all the traditional rituals, family members, relatives, and friends offer their blessings and gifts to the bride. As part of this ritual, they apply a rice *tilakon* her forehead, typically during the *tikawan* ceremony, and present her with gifts. Additionally, they spread yellow rice on the provided gifts, symbolizing prosperity and well-wishes. This ceremony is believed to bring good luck, growth, and positive energy to the bride's new life. This ritual reflects the family's and loved ones' hopes for her happiness, success, and abundance in her future.

**Spreading yellow rice or rice tossing:** The tradition you described involves the spreading or tossing of yellow rice (rice mixed with turmeric powder) during significant moments in an Indian wedding ceremony. Here's how it unfolds:

- **During the Groom's Departure (Barat):** When the groom is leaving for the bride's house, the family often spreads yellow rice behind him. This is done symbolically, and the rice represents prosperity and good luck for the journey ahead.

- **During the Bride's Departure (Bride Leaving Her Parental Home):** When the bride is leaving her parental home to join her husband's family, a similar tradition is followed. The bride's family spreads rice behind her as she leaves, symbolizing blessings and good wishes for her new life ahead.

**Rice bundle (scarves):** When the bride leaves her parental home, she carries a bundle of rice along with her saree, and paddy with her gifts called *Pachahar*, both symbolizing prosperity and growth. The rice bundle, prepared as part of her wedding rituals, represents abundance, nourishment, and the blessings of her family. Along with this, the bride takes paddy, which signifies fertility, wealth, and the hope for a fruitful future in her new home. These elements reflect the family's wishes for her new life to be filled with prosperity, happiness, and growth, while also symbolizing her connection to her roots and the nurturing spirit she brings to her new family.

**Welcoming bride paddy and rice:** When the bride returns to her in-laws' home after the wedding procession (whether by car, bike, doli, or cart), she first places her foot in a bamboo basket filled with paddy before stepping into the house. This act signifies fertility, prosperity, and the bride's contribution to the family's growth and well-being. Afterward, as she steps into the house, she intentionally drops a metal pot full of rice with her foot, symbolizing that her arrival brings happiness, abundance, and good fortune to the family. This ritual is a symbolic representation of her role in bringing joy, continuing the family lineage, and ensuring the well-being of her new home.

**Akchhat:** During various rituals of the marriage ceremony *purohit* (priest) is used every time. The word *akchhat* refers to unbroken rice grains that are often used in Hindu wedding rituals and other auspicious ceremonies. The term "*Akshat*" comes from the Sanskrit word "*Akṣata*," which means "unharmed" or "unbroken."

### C. Death rites

**Spreading parched rice:** In death rites, spreading parched rice during a funeral procession symbolizes detachment from material bonds and the completion of worldly responsibilities. As the deceased is carried for cremation, parched rice is scattered along the path, representing offerings to ancestors and ensuring the soul's peaceful transition. This ritual reflects gratitude for life and seeks blessings for the departed's liberation and spiritual journey beyond the physical realm.

**Rice Khichadi:** After a loved one's passing, the family observes mourning by avoiding lighting the *chulha* (stove) for three days, and taking meals at relatives' homes instead. When cooking resumes, rice *khichadi* is prepared, and a portion is first offered outside for the departed soul, often to crows or dogs, symbolizing peace and spiritual transition.

**Jalarpan at pond:** After the funeral, all family members bath daily in a pond as part of the mourning rituals for ten days. Following the bath, they offer water mixed with rice, symbolizing purification and a prayer for the departed soul's

liberation. Rice holds deep spiritual significance in this ritual, as it is believed to aid the soul in crossing the cycle of life and death, guiding it toward ultimate moksha (liberation).

### Conclusion

Rice plays a vital role in various life-cycle rituals, symbolizing prosperity, nourishment, and spiritual well-being. It is integral to ceremonies like Annaprashan and marriage rites, signifying blessings, fertility, and health. The use of rice in death rites and other rituals reflects its deep cultural and spiritual significance. Whether in the form of unbroken rice or parched rice, it serves to protect and guide individuals through life's transitions. Rice continues to connect generations, fostering community, family bonds, and divine blessings. Its symbolic importance transcends food, representing abundance, purity, and growth. Through these rituals, rice remains a central element in Hindu traditions. Ultimately, it represents the sustenance of both body and soul.

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### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by the authors.

### Author Contributions

MLS conceptualized the primary idea and theoretical framework of the research. LRV and VC collected the data, and LRV further contributed to technical writing and manuscript drafting. AKG conducted a comprehensive review of the paper, ensuring clarity and linguistic refinement.

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