



Rohini Festival And The Commencement Of Aman Paddy Cultivation In Purulia: A Cultural And Agrarian Synthesis

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Abstract

The Rohini festival in Purulia, West Bengal, marks the ceremonial onset of Aman paddy cultivation, a monsoon-dependent rice crop critical to the region's agrarian economy. This study examines the festival's cultural, ecological, and socioeconomic dimensions, emphasizing its role in fostering community resilience, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), and sustainable agricultural practices. Through ethnographic insights, historical analysis, and ecological perspectives, the article argues that Rohini embodies a synthesis of cultural heritage and agrarian sustainability. It highlights how rituals, gender roles, indigenous practices, and the celestial significance of Rohini Nakshatram shape rural livelihoods while addressing modern challenges such as climate change and rural migration. This work underscores the festival's relevance for sustainable development and cultural preservation in agrarian societies.

Keywords: Rohini festival, Aman paddy, traditional ecological knowledge, sustainable agriculture, cultural heritage, Rohini Nakshatram, Purulia, West Bengal.

1. Introduction

In the semi-arid landscapes of Purulia, West Bengal, agriculture transcends mere economic activity, embodying a profound cultural and spiritual practice woven into the region's social fabric. The **Rohini festival**, observed during the **Jaisthya month** (May–June) in the Bengali calendar, heralds the commencement of **Aman paddy cultivation**—a monsoon-fed rice variety pivotal to Bengal's food security. Celebrated on the **13th day of Jaisthya**, coinciding with the **Rohini Nakshatram** (lunar constellation), the festival integrates ritualistic practices, communal labor, and ecological wisdom, reflecting a holistic agrarian worldview deeply rooted in Hindu cosmology and indigenous knowledge systems.

This article explores the Rohini festival as a case study of **cultural-agrarian synthesis**, where indigenous knowledge, gender dynamics, astrological beliefs, and sustainable practices converge. Drawing on ethnographic observations, historical records, ecological analysis, and the mythological significance of Rohini Nakshatram, the study addresses three key questions: (1) How do Rohini rituals, shaped by the celestial and mythological attributes of Rohini Nakshatram, reflect the interplay of culture and agriculture? (2) What ecological and social benefits do these practices confer in the context of Purulia's agrarian landscape? (3) How can the festival inform modern strategies for sustainable rural development? By situating Rohini within broader discourses of **traditional ecological knowledge (TEK)**, agroecology, and Hindu astrology, this work contributes to scholarship on indigenous agricultural systems and their relevance in addressing contemporary challenges such as climate variability and rural outmigration.

1.1 Rohini Nakshatram: The Celestial Context of the Festival

Introduction to Rohini Nakshatram

Rohini Nakshatram, one of the 27 **Nakshatras** (lunar mansions) in Hindu astrology, is intrinsically linked to the **Moon** (known as *Chandra* or *Soma* in Sanskrit), a celestial body symbolizing emotions, mind, and maternal instincts in Hindu mythology. Revered as one of the most auspicious Nakshatras, Rohini is associated with **prosperity**, **beauty**, and **creativity**, qualities that resonate with the fertility and abundance celebrated during the Rohini festival. The Nakshatra's presiding deity is **Brahma**, the creator god, alongside his consort **Saraswati**, the goddess of wisdom and arts, underscoring its spiritual and cultural significance. In Purulia, the alignment of the festival with Rohini Nakshatram is not merely astronomical but a deliberate invocation of divine blessings for a bountiful harvest.



Rohini Nakshatra, ruled by the Moon and symbolized by a chariot, reflects creativity, emotion, and abundance linked to Lord Krishna, it favours careers in art and healthcare, with relationships thriving on empathy, loyalty, and emotional depth (Source: *Times of India*, 18th July 2024)

Etymology and Symbolic Meaning

The name **Rohini** derives from the Sanskrit root *Roh*, meaning “to rise” or “to grow,” reflecting the Nakshatra's association with **growth**, **fertility**, and **prosperity**. Symbolized as a **red cow** in Vedic texts, Rohini embodies nourishment and abundance, mirroring the agrarian aspirations of Purulia's farming

communities. Variations of the name, such as *Rohini Nakshatra* in South India or *Rohini Nakshatram* in North India, highlight its pan-Indian reverence, though its core attributes remain consistent. In the context of the Rohini festival, the Nakshatra's symbolic qualities—beauty, creativity, and good fortune—infuse the rituals with optimism, reinforcing the community's faith in the monsoon and the Aman crop's success.

Mythological Significance

Rohini Nakshatram is steeped in Hindu mythology, most notably through the tale of **Chandra**, the Moon god, and his 27 wives, the daughters of **Daksha Prajapati**. Chandra's favouritism toward Rohini, his most beloved consort, sparked jealousy among her sisters, leading Daksha to curse the Moon to wane. Following divine intercession, the curse was modified to allow the Moon's cyclical waxing and waning, symbolizing renewal and balance. This myth resonates with the Rohini festival's themes of regeneration and fertility, as the lunar cycle parallels the seasonal rhythms of planting and harvest.

In the **Mahabharata**, Rohini Nakshatram is associated with **Krishna**, an incarnation of **Vishnu**, whose birth under this Nakshatra elevates its sanctity. Krishna's pastoral and agrarian associations further align Rohini with rural life and abundance. Regional folklore in Purulia also attributes special talents and auspicious destinies to those born under Rohini, reinforcing its cultural prominence. During the festival, these mythological narratives are invoked through songs, dances, and rituals, linking the celestial to the terrestrial and sanctifying the act of sowing Aman paddy.

Rohini Nakshatram and Agrarian Timing

The selection of **Rohini Nakshatram** for the festival is rooted in **traditional ecological knowledge (TEK)**, which integrates astronomical observations with agricultural practices. In Purulia, farmers interpret the Nakshatra's alignment with the pre-monsoon season as an optimal time for preparing fields and sowing seeds, ensuring synchronization with the impending rains. The Moon's influence on tides and soil moisture, acknowledged in both Vedic astrology and local wisdom, underscores Rohini's suitability for initiating cultivation. This celestial-agricultural synergy exemplifies how Purulia's communities harness cosmological beliefs to enhance ecological resilience.



2. The Agrarian Context of Aman Paddy Cultivation

2.1 Aman Paddy and Its Significance

Aman paddy, a long-duration rice variety, is cultivated during the monsoon season (June–November) and harvested in late autumn. In Purulia, where irrigation infrastructure is limited due to the region's undulating terrain and rocky soil, Aman relies heavily on seasonal rainfall. The crop's cultivation cycle involves sowing seeds in nurseries during Jaisthya, followed by transplantation to main fields in Asharh or Shravan (June–July) when monsoon rains stabilize. Aman paddy accounts for approximately 60% of West Bengal's rice production (Directorate of Agriculture, West Bengal, 2023), making it a cornerstone of food security and rural livelihoods. In Purulia, its cultivation is particularly vital for tribal communities such as the Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij, who depend on rain-fed agriculture for subsistence.

2.2 Timing and the Rohini Nakshatram

The alignment of the Rohini festival with **Rohini Nakshatram** reflects a sophisticated understanding of ecological and celestial rhythms. Local farmers believe that sowing seeds during this Nakshatra enhances crop resilience to pests and diseases while maximizing yield. This belief is supported by empirical observations, as the Nakshatra coincides with the pre-monsoon period when soil moisture and temperature create optimal conditions for seed germination (Chattopadhyay, 2019). The Moon's gravitational influence on soil moisture, acknowledged in Vedic astrology, aligns with scientific findings that lunar phases can affect water retention in soil (Zurbenko & Potrzeba, 2013). This integration of celestial timing with agricultural practice underscores the festival's role in blending traditional wisdom with practical outcomes.

3. Ritual Practices and Cultural Symbolism

3.1 Ceremonial Practices

The Rohini festival begins at dawn with a ceremonial first ploughing, performed by village elders or community leaders. The ritual involves offerings of rice, flowers, vermilion, and incense to the earth, symbolizing gratitude and a plea for fertility. The ploughing act is not merely agricultural but deeply spiritual, representing a covenant between humans and nature. Women play a pivotal role, preparing seedbeds and sowing seeds in nurseries. They also engage in domestic rituals, such as smearing cow dung on household walls and thresholds, a practice rooted in folk wisdom for repelling insects and snakes. Scientific studies confirm that cow dung contains compounds like phenols and volatile fatty acids, which act as natural repellents (Mondal & Ghosh, 2020).

3.2 Communal Bonding and Cultural Expression

The festival fosters collective labour and social cohesion. Villagers gather to share meals, sing folk songs (e.g., *Bhadu* and *Tusu* songs), and exchange knowledge about farming techniques. These activities reinforce community identity and intergenerational knowledge transfer, ensuring the continuity of cultural and agricultural practices. The songs and dances often narrate myths of Chandra and Krishna, linking the festival

to its celestial and mythological roots. Such expressions serve as repositories of oral history, embedding values of environmental stewardship and community solidarity.

3.3 Symbolism and Indigenous Cosmology

Rohini reflects an indigenous cosmology that views the earth as a living entity. The festival's rituals invoke deities like **Dharitri Maa** (Mother Earth) and local folk gods, emphasizing a worldview where human prosperity is intertwined with ecological balance. This aligns with Berkes' (2018) concept of **TEK**, which integrates spiritual beliefs with practical environmental management. The symbolic act of sowing during Rohini Nakshatram is seen as a collaboration with divine and natural forces, ensuring the land's fertility and the community's well-being.

4. Ecological and Sustainable Dimensions

4.1 Sustainable Agricultural Practices

Rohini's agricultural practices exemplify sustainability. Farmers use organic manure (cow dung and compost) to enrich soil fertility, reducing reliance on chemical fertilizers. The timing of sowing during the Rohini Nakshatram optimizes natural resources, as pre-monsoon showers provide sufficient soil moisture without requiring artificial irrigation. This practice aligns with **climate-smart agriculture**, minimizing environmental impact while ensuring economic viability. Additionally, traditional intercropping systems, such as pairing Aman paddy with pulses, enhance soil health and pest resistance, contributing to long-term ecological stability.

4.2 Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

The festival embodies **TEK**, defined as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations" (Berkes, 2018). For instance, the belief that Rohini-sown crops are pest-resistant may stem from observed ecological patterns, such as lower pest activity during the pre-monsoon period. Such knowledge is validated by studies showing that early sowing can reduce pest damage by disrupting pest life cycles (Singh, 2010). TEK also informs seed selection, with farmers preserving indigenous varieties that are resilient to Purulia's semi-arid conditions.

4.3 Biodiversity and Agroecology

Aman cultivation during Rohini often involves traditional seed varieties, which are more resilient to local climatic conditions than hybrid seeds. These varieties contribute to **agrobiodiversity**, preserving genetic resources critical for food security in the face of climate change (FAO, 2021). The festival thus serves as a conduit for maintaining ecological balance and agricultural resilience, aligning with agroecological principles that prioritize biodiversity and ecosystem health.

5. Sociocultural Significance and Gender Dynamics

5.1 Cultural Continuity and Identity

Rohini is a vibrant expression of Purulia's cultural heritage, blending tribal and non-tribal traditions. Elders narrate stories of past harvests and local deities, embedding values of environmental stewardship and community solidarity in younger generations. The festival's songs, dances, and rituals are repositories of oral history, reinforcing cultural identity in a rapidly modernizing world. By invoking myths of Rohini Nakshatram, the festival bridges ancient cosmology with contemporary rural life, fostering a sense of continuity and pride.

5.2 Gender Roles and Labor

Women's participation in Rohini highlights their integral role in agrarian labor. From sowing seeds to preparing organic inputs, women's work bridges domestic and productive spheres. Their leadership in rituals, such as seedbed preparation and household purifications, challenges mainstream agricultural narratives that often marginalize women's contributions (Agarwal, 1995). The festival thus provides a lens to examine gendered labour dynamics and advocate for inclusive agricultural policies that recognize women as key stakeholders in sustainable farming.



6. Modern Challenges and Opportunities

6.1 Challenges

Despite its cultural and ecological significance, the Rohini festival faces threats from modernization, rural-urban migration, and climate change. Younger generations increasingly migrate to urban centers, leading to a decline in participation in traditional festivals. Climate change disrupts monsoon patterns, threatening the viability of rain-fed crops like Aman paddy. Data from the India Meteorological Department (2024) indicates a 15% increase in rainfall variability in Purulia over the past decade, posing risks to traditional sowing schedules aligned with Rohini Nakshatram.

6.2 Opportunities for Revival

The growing global interest in **agroecology** and sustainable farming presents opportunities to revitalize Rohini's practices. NGOs and local organizations in Purulia are promoting organic farming and traditional seed banks, aligning with the festival's ethos. Initiatives like the West Bengal Biodiversity Board (2023) are documenting TEK to integrate it into modern agricultural frameworks. Rohini can also serve as a model for **climate-resilient agriculture** by leveraging its timing and practices to adapt to shifting monsoon patterns. Additionally, the festival's cultural vibrancy can be harnessed through eco-tourism, generating income and curbing rural outmigration while preserving heritage.

7. Conclusion

The Rohini festival in Purulia, anchored by the celestial and mythological significance of **Rohini Nakshatram**, exemplifies a profound synthesis of cultural heritage and agrarian sustainability. Its rituals, ecological wisdom, and social cohesion highlight the enduring relevance of indigenous systems in addressing modern challenges. By integrating **TEK** with agroecological principles, the festival offers a blueprint for resilient agricultural systems. In an era of environmental and socioeconomic challenges, Rohini's practices provide valuable lessons for sustainable rural development, emphasizing the need to preserve indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage.

Future research should focus on quantifying the ecological benefits of Rohini's practices, such as pest resistance and soil health, and exploring policy frameworks to support such traditions. By bridging cultural heritage with modern agroecological strategies, Rohini can inspire sustainable development models not only in Purulia but also in other agrarian societies worldwide.

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