

RICE CULTURE AND SACRED SIBLINGSHIP
Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia celebrations in Western Odisha, India*

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the ritual performances of Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia in western Odisha, arguing that these ceremonies, which are deeply embedded in the region's rice culture, simultaneously reaffirm and momentarily unsettle the patrilineal structure. Based on eleven months of ethnographic research in Bargarh district, the study explores how rice cultivation is not merely an economic activity but a resource that sustains cross-siblingship as a cultural value. While Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia ritualize the sacred bond between brother and sister, their enactment reveals a gendered paradox: sisters are central to the moral and spiritual order of their natal homes, yet remain structurally marginalized within the patriline. By interrogating the interplay of kinship, gender and agrarian ritual, this analysis demonstrates how rice culture in western Odisha reproduces social worlds through the ideology of reciprocity, ambivalence and the transformative power of feminine energy or power (*sakti*).

INTRODUCTION

During my eleven months of fieldwork (May 2022–December 2023) in Haliapali village (Figure 1), located in the Bargarh District, western Odisha,¹ I participated in the vibrant celebrations of Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia. In Sambalpur, 'nua' means 'new', and 'khai' means 'to eat', while 'bhai' means

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¹ My fieldwork formed part of my doctoral research within the Sonderforschungsbereich (SFB) 1070 'ResourceCultures: socio-cultural dynamics in dealing with resources', funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). I use a pseudonym for the village to maintain its anonymity, as requested by certain participants during my doctoral study.

'brother' and 'jiuntia' refers to either 'long life' or a ritual thread.² Nua Khai is the most sacred event of the region, during which the first fruits of the year, particularly paddy,³ are worshipped and ritually consumed. Bhai Jiuntia, when sisters (*bauni*) pray for the long life of their brothers, is traditionally observed during the Dasara festivities in western Odisha,⁴ coinciding with the first rice harvest. Given the sparse academic accounts on Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia, the connection between the enactment of the brother-sister bond and the cycle of rice cultivation – that is, the production, exchange, consumption and the ritual worship of the year's first paddy – remains unaddressed. While Uwe Skoda's monograph on the Aghria of western Odisha provides a descriptive account of the Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia rituals (2005: 525–532), the present article aims to understand the performance of cross-siblingship as a value within these rituals as an integral aspect of the region's rice culture.

To understand the complex interplay between rice cultivation and the value of cross-siblingship as expressed in these ritual performances, this study adopts the SFB 1070 framework on resources. The SFB 1070 approach to studying 'ResourceCultures' worldwide conceptualizes resources (in this case, rice) not merely as a means of sustenance, but also as 'a means related to certain cultural ideas and practices' (Hardenberg, Bartelheim and Staecker 2017: 14). By establishing from the outset that rice is a resource, this paper not only underscores its crucial role within the agrarian landscape of western Odisha, but also builds on a non-dichotomous approach to studying rice and its cultivation. It is therefore recognized as both materially and symboli-

² Sambalpuri, an Indo-Aryan language of western Odisha, derives its name from Sambalpur, its historical centre. Sambalpuri does not have its own script; its speakers predominantly use the Odia language script today, though Devanagari was used in the past. In the Indian context, ritual threads, typically made of red or yellow strands of cotton, serve as sacred symbols of blessing and protection, often being tied around the wrist or neck after ritual ceremonies.

³ Locally, the term 'dhan' denotes paddy (unhusked rice), while 'chaul' refers to rice (dehusked paddy grain). However, in this text, I use the terms 'paddy' and 'rice' interchangeably, as well as 'crop' and 'plant', to refer to the rice grain and plant in a general sense, rather than specifying distinct stages of rice-processing. While these stages have cultural and economic significance, my usage aims to facilitate a broader discussion rather than emphasize technical distinctions.

⁴ The Odia (the term refers to both the language and cultural identity of the people of Odisha) month of Asvina (September to October) is locally referred to as Dasara, a term distinct from the Dasara ('ten days') celebrated in other parts of India. The latter marks the tenth day after Navaratri ('nine nights') dedicated to the Goddess Durga. For a detailed discussion on these terminological complexities, see Fuller (1992: 109).



Figure 1: Location of Haliapali in Bargarh District, Odisha, India 2021 (<https://earth.google.com/>).

cally fundamental to shaping and sustaining social relationships, values and community identities. Drawing on this perspective of resources, the article explores how cultural values and identities are constituted and renewed, particularly as embodied in the annual agrarian performances of Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia in western Odisha.

The article begins with a brief introduction to Haliapali to establish the ethnographic setting, followed by an overview of the cultural significance of cross-siblingship in Middle India.⁵ While the brother-sister dyad has deep cultural value in western Odisha, the roles and expectations of sons and daughters within the patrilineal family structure (*kutumb*) remain distinct, with daughters perceived as transient members of their natal families. To explore how this dynamic unfolds in everyday local contexts, I turn to a family myth in the village. Following Charles Nuckolls (1993: 196), I understand family myth as a symbolic narrative that reinforces kinship values, in this

⁵ Georg Pfeffer uses the term 'Middle India' to refer to the region between the Ganges and Godavari Rivers, the Aravalli Hills in the west, and the Bay of Bengal in the east (2019: 3). Similarly, Chris Gregory uses 'Middle' or 'Central India' to describe this area, noting its distinct cultural complex, separate from both Northern and Southern India (2010, 2020).

case, employing a paddy allegory to articulate the gendered roles and valuations of women. However, these gendered valuations are not uniform across social contexts, particularly in the religious sphere. The next section, ‘Feminine and filial ties of rice’, examines how the community’s world view foregrounds feminine energy or power (*sakti*) as central to the cosmology of rice cultivation, shaping the ritual identity of sisters in the performances of Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia. The subsequent sections discuss Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia, exploring how these rituals construct and reaffirm the value of cross-siblingship and the ritual significance of sisters through their engagement with rice cultivation and consumption. Finally, drawing on ethnographic accounts, I analyse whether the reciprocity emphasized between cross-siblings and the ritual significance of sisters in these performances challenge dominant kinship ideologies in this patrilineal society.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Haliapali, a small village with fewer than hundred households, is a half-hour bumpy ride from the Bargarh Road railway station, accessible via a narrow five metre mud road. Surrounded by rice fields on three sides and bordered by the Donta River on the fourth, the village is home to a diverse mix of Adivasi and caste Hindu communities.⁶ These groups reside in distinct settlements known as *pada*, though the boundaries between them are not always clearly marked with the exception of the Harijan *pada*,⁷ where the Ganda

⁶ In Haliapali, indigenous communities use terms like ‘Adivasi’, ‘Adivasi jati’, and ‘jati’ interchangeably. I use ‘Adivasi’ here to reflect its local usage, including communities recognized as Scheduled Tribes (ST) by the Government of India. For a scholarly analysis of ‘Adivasi’, see Damodaran and Dasgupta (2022). Adivasi communities in Haliapali include the Mirdha (earth workers, ST) as well as Kondh and Soara (hunters, gatherers and shifting cultivators, ST). Caste Hindu communities in Haliapali include members of Ganda (musicians and weavers, Scheduled Castes [SC]), Keuto (fisher folk, SC), Gaud (cattle-herders, Other Backward Classes [OBC]), Brahmin (cooks and priests in village temples, Forward Castes [FC]) and Bairagi (spiritual teachers devoted to God Vishnu, adhering to the principles of Vaishnavism, OBC). For a detailed account of the categories, including ST, SC, OBC, see Jeffrey and Harris (2014).

⁷ The term ‘Harijan’, coined by Gandhi in an effort to elevate the status of the so-called ‘untouchables’ – those positioned at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy – was initially embraced by the community but was later contested and largely replaced by ‘Dalit’ (‘oppressed’), a term many preferred as a self-identifier (Johnson 2009). While Harijan remains a contentious term due to its paternalistic connotations, it continues to be more commonly used than Dalit in Haliapali, reflecting local historical and social dynamics.

musicians live. Nearly all the villagers identify as Hindus, though there are three Christian families in the village and no Muslims.⁸ The regional language, Sambalpuri, is widely spoken, though some Adivasi groups, like the Mirdha and Kondh, also speak their native languages, Kun Boli and Kui, respectively.

During our time in Haliapali, Maheswari Mahapatra, whom everyone called Mahi, and I stayed at a house near the village centre.⁹ As two unmarried women in our mid-to-late twenties, we initially struggled to explain our presence in the village, particularly in a social landscape where marriage in the early twenties is the norm. Our decision to live alone and conduct research challenged conventional expectations, making our position somewhat uneasy at first. However, in the initial days of settling into the village our connection with Iti Shree who had completed her schooling two years ago and had been tutoring schoolchildren in the village provided an opening. Through her, we first established relationships with her family, with whom we quickly grew close. They belonged to the Keuto caste and cultivated rice on a small plot of land by the river. We spent nearly every day at their home, and with the support of the female head of the household, who also served as the village health worker, we gradually built connections with other communities. This allowed us to participate in and observe both Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia in different settlements. On Nua Khai, all the communities came together to worship the village goddess (*gram devi*), Bausenpat. However, for Bhai Jiuntia, while women from Adivasi and other caste Hindu groups celebrated the festival in two small, mixed groups at the village centre, women from the Harijan community conducted the rituals within their own quarter. This segregation highlights the ongoing practice of untouchability in the Adivasi and caste village of Haliapali.

For the Nua Khai celebration, the entire village – women, men and children – engaged in cleaning, organizing and painting their homes in preparation for the festivities. One family, having recently welcomed a newborn, promptly performed Ekoisia, the twenty-first-day ritual marking the end of the pollution period associated with birth. By doing so promptly, they ensured their reintegration into the community and their ability to par-

⁸ It is difficult to enumerate the Christians of the village since two other families visit the small Baptist church in the village built by a Telugu-speaking family, but do not want to make their religion official.

⁹ Maheswari Mahapatra supported me with Sambalpuri-to-English interpreting, and helped transcribe the interviews. As a native Tamil speaker with limited Hindi, it took me more than six months to become conversationally fluent in Sambalpuri.



Figure 2: A sister performing rituals for her younger brother during Nua Khai, in the presence of agnatic family members. Hali-apali 2022 (all photos: I.K.)

take in eating the new paddy and celebrating with others during Nua Khai. What piqued my interest in the brother-sister relationship during Nua Khai was the evident expression of the sacred bond and its renewal, as unmarried sisters performed rituals (Figure 2) and tied a thread on to their brothers' wrists on this significant day.

Similarly, during Bhai Jiuntia, the married sisters visiting their natal homes, demonstrated their unwavering devotion to ensuring they made no mistakes while fasting, fearing that even something as simple as drinking water could be seen as drinking their brothers' blood – an idea that was striking. Equally remarkable was the anxiety felt by brothers over the possibility that their married sisters might not

return to their natal home to offer prayers for their well-being for Bhai Jiuntia. One of the brothers' wives noted that it is important to welcome and give a feast to the sisters, especially since they had just successfully completed the paddy harvest. Observing these expressions first-hand, I came to understand that the celebration of rice cultivation was not merely a marker of material success but a deeply symbolic act, one that reaffirmed familial and communal relationships.

SIBLINGSHIP IN MIDDLE INDIA

In Middle India, the bond between brother and sister (*bhai-bauni*) is often considered stronger and is regarded more positively than the bond between husband and wife. This emphasis on the brother-sister relationship contrasts with the North Indian context, where the husband is revered as a god in ritual practices and cultural perceptions. For instance, in several origin myths

of Adivasi groups in Odisha and Chhattisgarh, the mythical founders of the society are a brother and sister (Berger 2018, Hardenberg 2018). Chris Gregory highlights an expression in Halbi (a vernacular language spoken in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh) that describes the region as the ‘kingdom of the brother and sister’ (‘bhai-bahin co raj’), thus emphasizing the significant value placed on cross-siblingship (2010: 4).

Within the patrilocal and patrilineal structure of Middle India,¹⁰ the strong bond between cross-siblings persists despite a daughter’s physical relocation to her husband’s household. Unlike in strict virilocal systems where married women sever close ties with their natal homes, kinship practices in this region exhibit a degree of flexibility. As Doranne Jacobson (1977: 282) notes, there is an ‘ambiguity’ regarding the rights of natal and conjugal families over married women, allowing younger married daughters and sisters to visit their birth families more frequently. This flexibility enables them to maintain enduring relationships with their natal kin, particularly their brothers.

The theme of a brother’s unwavering support for his sister and the sister’s devotion to her brother until death and beyond is a recurring motif in folktales throughout India, particularly from the north-eastern region to the south (Beck 1986: 98). Middle India, which is situated between these regions, ascribes extraordinary significance to the concept of ‘siblingship as a value’ – a phrase articulated by Gregory – by consecrating the bond between brother and sister as divine (Gregory 2010: 3). This is particularly evident in Odisha, where the god Jagannatha is venerated alongside his elder brother Balabhadra and younger sister Subhadra in the main sanctum of the renowned Puri temple, emphasizing the sacredness of sibling relationships in the region.

In Haliapali, I observed how siblingship as a value is manifested through the rituals of Bhai Jiuntia and Nua Khai, along with the narratives associated with them. While I will elaborate on the ritual aspects of these festivals later, I would first like to recount two stories that highlight the sacredness of the sibling bond and the sisters’ ritual duty in western Odisha, emphasizing the deep sense of dedication and spiritual love (*snehasamparko*) shared between brothers and sisters.

¹⁰ For instance, in Haliapali it is customary for sons to remain in their father’s house after marriage (patrilocal) and inherit the family wealth (patrilineal), while daughters move to their husband’s father’s house (virilocal) upon marriage.

Firstly, the myth of ‘Dhunkel bandana’ or ‘Dalkhai bandana’ from western Odisha,¹¹ as documented by Lidia Guzy (2013: 242–252), recounts the vow of Ahalyaa, the adopted daughter of the divine couple Shiva and Parvati. In the narrative, Ahalyaa seeks a vow that has no precedent in the world. Without hesitation, Shiva grants her the sacred duty of performing rituals for the well-being of brothers, emphasizing it as a fundamental, yet often overlooked responsibility of a sister. Ahalyaa embraces this divine role with joy, dedicating her life to this cause alongside sisters worldwide. Shiva’s act of adopting a human daughter and bestowing this boon makes Ahalyaa and all sisters sacred protectors of their brothers, elevating the bond of siblingship to a divine duty.

It is relevant to compare this myth with another legend from the Tamil-speaking region of south India, in which the divine father Shiva punishes his elder son Ganesh to prevent an incestuous relationship with his mother Parvati (Beck 1974: 11). In both narratives, Shiva’s role as the divine father is central to maintaining moral order, safeguarding the integrity of both divine and human families, and preventing transgressions. While the Tamil legend addresses the taboo of an incestuous relationship between mother and son, the Odishian story emphasizes the sacredness of the brother-sister bond, established through the sister Ahalyaa’s solemn promise to fulfil her ritual duty of protecting her brothers.¹²

The second story comes from my fieldwork in Haliapali, where an elderly woman recounted the tale of Malathi and Mathana Kumar. In this narrative, Malathi fervently prayed to the goddess Durga to safeguard her brother, Mathana Kumar, ultimately rescuing him from the clutches of death through her unwavering devotion. The woman explained that this tale is found in *Bhai Jiuntia osa katha*, a small booklet containing narratives associated with religious vows.¹³ I observed married sisters in the village gathered in a large group at the village centre on the evening of Bhai Jiuntia to read and recite this sacred story as part of the ritual performance. Both stories,

¹¹ A *dhunkel* is a bow-and-string musical instrument, while ‘bandana’, as translated by Guzy (2013), denotes a song but can also signify ritual worship in Sambalpur. ‘Dalkhai’ is an Adivasi dance performed by several Adivasi communities in western Odisha.

¹² The present article does not address the topic of incest between brothers and sisters. Brenda Beck notes that any mention of sexual attraction between siblings is typically avoided in legends and folktales (1986: 98), a finding supported by my own fieldwork. However, scholars have explored this theme in folktales (Beck 1986) and mythologies (Malamoud 1992, Nuckolls 1993), identifying subtle references to erotic attraction between cross-siblings.

¹³ ‘Osa’ means ‘religious vow’ and ‘katha’ means ‘story’.

‘Dalkhai bandana’ and ‘Bhai Jiuntia osa katha’, underscore the sacredness of the brother-sister relationship and elevate the sister’s role to one of divine significance, portraying her as a ‘sacred sister’ and protector of her brother.

While cross-sibling relationships are imbued with sacred significance in western Odisha, they represent an idealized social construct that often overlooks the complexities of gendered identities in everyday life. Nonetheless, the roles and expectations assigned to cross-siblings – as sons (*pua*) and daughters (*jio*) – are shaped by the structural imperatives of patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence. Within this framework, daughters are perceived as transient members of their natal families, while sons embody lineage continuity and household permanence. This dynamic is vividly captured in a popular paddy allegory in Haliapali, which encodes the gendered logic of kinship and belonging, revealing the tension between ritualized ideals of cross-siblingship and the lived realities of gendered kinship roles, particularly for women.

FAMILY MYTH: AN ALLEGORY OF CHILDREN AS PADDY

In his essay on sibling relations among the Jalari, a fishing community in the state of Andhra Pradesh, south India, Nuckolls (1993) uses the term ‘family myth’ to describe an avian metaphor employed by Jalari men. They refer to themselves as ‘birds of a single nest’, symbolizing their allegiance to the patriline into which they are born. Though they eventually ‘fly away’ to establish their own families, the metaphor evokes enduring feelings of kinship and support. Nuckolls characterizes this as a myth of denial, one that emotionally affirms patrilineal unity while obscuring underlying conflicts and competing interests (1993: 196). The nest thus serves as an idealized reference point, reinforcing the moral expectation of patrilineal solidarity rather than acknowledging its fractures.

Similarly, the paddy metaphor frequently recounted in Haliapali serves as a myth of exclusion, articulating an idealized vision of kinship that naturalizes the marginalization of daughters within their natal families while privileging sons as the family’s true wealth. Laxmi Mirdha, an elderly woman from the village, provided insight into this perspective during an evening conversation. She contrasted the roles of sons and daughters, explaining that sons remain to support the family, while daughters marry and move to their husbands’ households. To illustrate this dynamic, she employed a metaphor

from rice cultivation. Mirdha likened daughters to *pol*, an immature paddy grain that absorbs nutrients from the plant-mother, but never fully develops. In contrast, sons are seen as *dban*, the fully matured paddy grains that sustain the family. Sons, likened to *dban*, are viewed as providers and protectors of their parents, whereas daughters, likened to *pol*, are seen as immature, lightweight grains that fly away during the cleaning process, symbolizing how daughters leave the family without contributing to its enduring wealth. 'Like *pol*', it is said, 'daughters are born to go to a different house' ('*pol bhalia jhia janam para gharaku*').

In my observation, families in the village speak of unmarried daughters as individuals who are 'to be protected' and 'taken care of' by the male members of the family. Nonetheless, the entrenched cultural narrative – that daughters are the wealth of another family, not their natal one – ultimately transcends the partilineal identity of their birth. While daughters are often perceived as only temporarily connected to their natal homes, their ritual role as sisters – particularly during pivotal moments in rice cultivation – reveals a more complex and layered understanding of their family position. In this way, the paddy myth, like Nuckolls' avian myth, by framing sons as the bearers of family wealth and lineage, constructs an emotional and symbolic order that prioritizes male continuity while naturalizing the marginalization of daughters. This myth ultimately sustains the moral expectation of patrilineal continuity, inheritance and obligation while downplaying the enduring ritual significance of women in their natal homes. The tension between the linguistic framing of daughters as *pol* in the myth in question and the ritual agency of consanguineous women in the cosmology of rice cultivation becomes evident through the village's emphasis on feminine power or *sakti*, which underpins the sisters' ritual significance and authority.

FEMININE AND FILIAL TIES OF RICE

Satyanarayan Behera, a man in his seventies, is often the first person encountered upon entering Haliapali. He spends hours on the extended platform of his mud house, its walls plastered with red soil and cow dung. While long conversations with him are rare – he often excuses himself to visit the fields or bathe in the pond – his reflections, like those of many villagers, invariably turn to the feminine energy or power of the goddess. In Hindu ideology and folk belief, goddesses embody both the material universe (*prakriti*) and its

life-energy (*sakti*) (Tachikawa 1999: 29–31). Villagers of Haliapali emphasise *sakti* primarily as a divine feminine power, personified as goddesses – encompassing the creative force, life-energy and its manifestations in the material world. Behera and others articulate a worldview in which life, both human and non-human, is seen as a manifestation of the goddess, referred to as ‘forms of the goddess’ (*devinkara rupo*).¹⁴ This perception is evident in their reverence for the land, addressed as Dhorothi Maa (earth goddess), and the rice plant, personified as Maa Lakshmi. Both are regarded as embodiments of the goddess and her *sakti*, being endowed with the power to nurture, grow and sustain life. This interconnectedness underscores the life-giving and nurturing attributes of the earth, the rice plant and the goddess, collectively symbolizing feminine powers of fertility and abundance.

The paddy crop is believed to be under the protection of the village goddess Bausenpat, worshipped aniconically as a triangular piece of black rock anointed with vermilion. Prayers are offered to her during three key rituals tied to rice cultivation: Kathu Jatra (the soil festival), Mirdh Jatra (the sacrificial festival), and Nua Khai (first fruits). After paddy sprouts are sown in Asad (June/July), they grow into saplings within a month. During Kathu Jatra, saplings are taken to Bausenpat’s shrine to seek her blessings for the crop’s growth. In Pous (December/January), animal sacrifices are performed at Mirdh Jatra to thank the goddess for protecting the harvest.

Jagya Mavusi,¹⁵ in her early sixties, is an active and approachable woman who tends sheep and works in the rice fields. As she noted, the rice plant is seen as an embodiment of the goddess Lakshmi, blessed by her mother, the earth goddess. Thus, the rice plant derives life from the earth, embodies Lakshmi and receives protection from the village goddess. The entire cultivation cycle, from sowing to harvest, is interwoven with *sakti*.

Farming families in the village form deep emotional bonds with their paddy crop, treating it like a child. A local saying, ‘rice flourishes with water, as a boy grows strong with oil massages’ (*pan pokka dhan, thel pokka pua*), reflects this sentiment. This analogy illustrates how farmers meticulously nurture their rice plants, mirroring the care they give to their sons. Once harvested, though the rice plant is an embodiment of the feminine principle, it is understood locally as contributing to the patrilineal family much like

¹⁴ In the village, goddesses are referred to as ‘devi’, and the phrase ‘devinkara’ means ‘of the goddess’, while ‘rupo’ means ‘form’.

¹⁵ ‘Mavusi’ means ‘mother’s sister’ in Sambalpur.

sons do. Both paddy and sons are regarded as the family's wealth, essential for prosperity.¹⁶

As already noted, the rice plant, as the wealth of both the village and the family, is protected by the village's mother goddess. Similarly, the son, regarded as the family's wealth, is also safeguarded by a feminine figure and her *sakti*: his most sacred consanguineal kin, the sister. Sisters, though seen as the removers of natal wealth through marriage, are revered as the bestowers of auspiciousness (*subho*) and goodness (*balo*), vital for the brother's life and the family's prosperity. *Subho* and *balo* can be understood as 'the manifestations of a certain type of power' linked to the idea of *sakti* (Marglin 1985: 21). As Frederique Marglin (1985) observes, *sakti* is tied to fertility, life, death and decay, its transformative nature allowing it to shift between auspiciousness and inauspiciousness depending on the context. Sisters, as embodiments of *sakti*, wield the power to bestow life or death, underscoring their sacred role.

The sister's sacred identity is culturally valorized in western Odisha. Families without daughters often adopt girls through *dharmā* bonds,¹⁷ as a sister's ritual worship for her brother's welfare is highly valued (Skoda 2005: 157). A sister's auspicious presence and prayers bless the brother, who inherits the family's rice fields, ensuring both his well-being and a bountiful harvest. Thus, the agrarian cycle and familial vitality are safeguarded by the *sakti* of the goddesses and the sisters.

NUA KHAI: RENEWING BONDS AND RITUAL DUTIES

In Haliapali, I witnessed a deeply emotional moment after a wedding when a bride bid farewell to her natal home before departing for her husband's

¹⁶ The concept of wealth varies across communities, often being shaped by the exchange practices (prestations) between wife-takers and wife-givers. In the village, while the unmarried sister is viewed as a potential drain on wealth, the daughter-in-law is welcomed as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, largely due to the practice of dowry. For a different perspective on wealth, consider the Dongria Kondh community of southern Odisha, where a betrothal fee is given to the bride's family (Hardenberg 2018: 283–285, 609–622). For a broader understanding on the idea of wealth in Middle India, see Gregory (2020).

¹⁷ The term 'dharmā' is used to signify the creation of kinship ties that can be forged within one's own community, with others, or even across different religions. In this context, a *dharmā* brother or sister relationship is established by adopting a daughter into a family or a sister by a brother, thereby creating a bond beyond biological kinship.

house. The bride and her mother wept inconsolably for hours, soon joined by the bride's sisters and friends. What stood out during these final moments of departure – marked by the collective mourning and wailing of the women, a conventional display mixed with intense grief over the bride's separation from her mother's home – was the striking absence of her brothers.¹⁸

The brother-sister bond is rarely expressed publicly. Sisters demonstrate their affection by reserving special snacks for their brothers, offering them comfortable sleeping arrangements during the winter, and refraining from waking them early on ritual days. Brothers, in turn, express their love by taking their sisters to fairs, buying them their favourite foods and giving them money or clothes on special occasions like local fairs (*jatras*). However, this relationship is fragile.

Mothers frequently show preferential treatment toward their sons, readily forgiving their mistakes while being harsh with their daughters. From as young as six or seven, girls begin assisting their mothers with household chores, while boys spend most of their time outdoors, engaging in activities like playing with friends or roaming in the village forest. During my fieldwork, as I tutored students in English and became close to several families, many college-age girls shared their frustrations over financial constraints that led their families to prioritize their brothers' education over their own. While parents were willing to take out loans to support their sons' higher education, they often viewed daughters' schooling as secondary to their marriage prospects. Unlike men, who had communal spaces to gather and exchange ideas in the village, unmarried daughters had limited opportunities to meet and share their concerns outside of ritual gatherings. On several occasions, I was called upon to speak with young women who faced opposition from their parents or brothers regarding their education or employment. These conversations revealed how deeply entrenched gendered expectations contribute to the feelings of isolation and inferiority among daughters within their own homes. The daughters often expressed that, unlike their brothers, they must constantly navigate strong familial resistance by justifying their decisions to stay in hostels for education or relocate for work.

Though seldom openly acknowledged, the differential treatment of sons and daughters makes cross-sibling relationships more tenuous than

¹⁸ For a detailed exploration of the grief, separation and conventional displays of emotion experienced by new brides in rural north India during their departure from their natal home to their husband's village, see Sax (1990: 499–501).

sister-sister bonds,¹⁹ while brother-brother relationships are often strained by conflicts over property and inheritance.²⁰ These emotions, expressed by daughters who feel the weight of gendered differentiation, are woven into the everyday fabric of kinship. Yet, they coexist with the sacredness and endurance of cross-siblingship, highlighting the complex interplay between lived realities and idealized kinship values. In western Odisha, the mutual obligations and moral value of cross-sibling relationships are vividly expressed in rituals performed during Nua Khai. From an early age, young sisters participate in these rituals, fostering a strong ritual bond with their brothers on this significant festival, which is celebrated across communities. Sisters grow up praying for their brothers' health and well-being during Nua Khai before marriage and Bhai Jiuntia after marriage.

Nua Khai marks the ceremonial consumption of the first ripened paddy on the fifth day of the waxing moon in Bhadraba (August/September). In Haliapali, this festival centres around the first paddy, cultivated after the monsoon in Asad, which is ritually worshipped in front of the village goddess. The village priest (*jankhar*) plays a pivotal role in Nua Khai, distributing new paddy kernels to every household. Within each family, the male head leads the worship, offering devotion to the house gods, goddesses, the regional presiding goddess Samlei, and the ancestors. As part of the ritual, a small amount of freshly ground paddy of the season mixed with jaggery is prepared and presented as the main offering to these deities. Following this,

¹⁹ Sharangpani (2018) explores the normalization of kin-based violence, particularly by adolescent brothers towards their sisters. In Haliapali, I observed similar dynamics, with even preadolescent brothers physically confronting adolescent sisters. Sisters are expected to remain calm, and it is rare for parents to condemn their brothers' violence. Daughters are seen as adaptable, while sons, perceived as uncontrollable, are excused with the expectation of assuming family responsibilities later. Beck's survey of Indian folktales highlights the recurring theme of physical aggression between brothers and sisters (1986: 98). However, this dynamic shifts once a sister is married; cross-sex sibling bonds gain in significance, and a brother may even intervene if his sister faces mistreatment in her marital home. In Haliapali, a married sister who separated from her husband and later developed a mental health condition has been living permanently with her brother's family in her natal home, with only her mother surviving after her father passed away a decade ago. Nonetheless, in the village, the presence of two married daughters who, for different reasons, remained in their natal homes after separating from their husbands is considered 'shameful'. They face stigma both within their families and from the wider community.

²⁰ For a comparative analysis of sister-sister, brother-sister, and brother-brother sibling relationships in central, western and southern India, see Kolenda (1993). G.N. Ramu's work gives a good overview of anthropological studies of cross-sibling relationships in India (2006: 141–147).

the male head of the family – often the married elder brother – brings the ground paddy in a small leaf-bowl to distribute. Family members, including the father, mother, wife, sons, daughters and possibly the male head's younger brothers, their wives and families, stand in a straight line to receive and reverently consume the ritual offering (*prasad*).

Once the family members consume the first ripened paddy, the young unmarried sisters promptly begin gathering ritual items from the worship room and kitchen to prepare for a ritual dedicated to their unmarried brothers. The ritual sequence unfolds as the sisters light a lamp, and the brothers stand on a wooden platform facing east. The sisters then wash their brothers' feet, apply sandalwood paste to their foreheads, place a flower on their right ear, offer sweets and tie a ritual thread around their right wrists. Figure 2 shows that the sister performs the rituals for her younger brother during Nua Khai, following the guidance of the senior women in the family. The photo was taken hurriedly, as I stood amidst the entire family in a small hallway under construction. In return, brothers offer a small gift or money as a symbolic gesture, signifying their commitment to being a source of financial support for their sisters in the future. The rites performed by the sisters are considered their duty or 'work' (*kamo*), yet the ritual itself is believed to bring auspiciousness to the entire family.

As the sister concludes her rituals, the male head of the family begins to tie small yellow or white threads on to important material possessions, symbolizing wealth. These possessions include rice plants (Figure 3), motorcycles, wooden furniture and power tillers among other items. Once he completes the tying of the threads, the family head walks out of the house to greet (*juhar*) the neighbours and other farmers of the village allowing them to forget minor feuds and renew their relationships.

Nua Khai, as Gregory (2009) notes in his discussion of Nava Khani – the festival of first rice consumption in Chhattisgarh – serves as an occasion to express patrilineal solidarity. Agnatic brothers and their families partake in a ritual feast, sharing the first paddy as a means of reinforcing kinship and patrilineal unity (Figure 4). On this day, in the presence of the entire family, the sacred bond between brother and sister is enacted, highlighting the latter's ritual obligations. The sanctity of this bond and the recognition of the sister's role as a bringer of auspiciousness form the moral core of patrilineal family values, ritually embodied in the Nua Khai ritual. Thus, Nua Khai, as villagers emphasize, centres on consuming the first rice to ensure the continued availability of rice each year. In my view, the growth and consumption of



Figure 3: The male head of the family tying a thread on to a rice plant during Nua Khai. Haliapali 2022.



Figure 4: A son of the married brother taking a selfie with the entire agnatic family gathered for Nua Khai celebrations. Haliapali 2022.

the first rice mirror the renewal and continuity of kinship ties, symbolizing the interdependence of agricultural prosperity and familial bonds. On this occasion, it is emphasized that the ritual duties are entrusted to the sister, while the moral and material responsibilities lie with the brother, thereby linking the family's well-being and agricultural success to the preservation of the patrilineal family and its most sacred value: cross-siblingship.

BHAI JIUNTIA: RETURNING SISTERS AND THE RITUAL ECONOMY OF THE FESTIVAL

Bhai Jiuntia embodies the spirit of wishing and praying for the long life of brothers. It is celebrated on the eighth day of the waxing moon in the Odia month of Asbina, during which married daughters are invited to their natal homes by their brothers to perform rituals for the goddess Durga, seeking her blessings for their well-being. For Bhai Jiuntia, brothers begin visiting and inviting their married sisters from their husbands' homes about a month before Dasara. This invitation is marked by the exchange of *lia dhan*,²¹ jaggery and ritual threads (*jiuntia*) – all essential items for Durga worship. The exchange of *lia dhan* is of particular importance, as this short-term paddy variety, planted after the first rains in June, is primarily used for ritual purposes during Dasara. Through this act of exchanging *lia dhan*, the natal family symbolically shares the success of the rice harvest and invites the daughter home to pray for her brother, who is central to the patriline. Following this exchange, the sister is usually escorted by her brother or brother's son to her natal home a few days before the festival.

This custom of inviting the married daughter back to the natal home has deep cultural significance. Families often fear a sister's refusal to attend – due to unresolved conflicts in her marital or natal home – which may be inauspicious for the natal family. Some even express concerns about the possibility of a sister casting a curse (*sapya/abhisap*),²² particularly if she feels

²¹ 'Lia dhan' refers to a variety of paddy known for its heaviness, round shape, and suitability for making parched rice. The word 'lia' denotes parched rice, while 'dhan' refers to paddy, and *lia dhan* is the paddy used for making parched rice. Locally, the term 'lia dhan' encompasses several varieties of paddy with trade names such as Paddy 1010, Swarna, and Sindhu, which share these characteristics. Its defining feature is its ability to pop into well-formed *lia* when exposed to the right temperature in a stove.

²² Within the Indian context, curses carry diverse implications. Lindsey Harlan (1994) discusses how the curse of a *sati* (from Sanskrit and Hindi, meaning 'a good woman' whose

wronged, such as being denied her rightful share of the dowry or family support. Such resentment felt by married sisters can lead to a transgression of their role as the protectors of the family's well-being. Village women note that a married sister's curse could jeopardize the fertility of the patrilineal family, potentially resulting in childlessness or illness and death among her brothers' children. Thus, Bhai Jiuntia becomes a vital occasion for natal families to welcome married sisters back home, treating them 'like a queen', as the women put it, to secure their goodwill. While Nua Khai highlights the sister's auspicious role and spiritual duty, Bhai Jiuntia reflects the ambivalence of married sisters by emphasizing both her sacred identity as a protector and the need to appease her potential anger through special care and gifts.

Reducing the special care given to married daughters during Bhai Jiuntia to a mere fear of misfortune overlooks the genuine affection involved, though some families emphasize instead the financial burden of the celebration. The ritual reaffirms the sacred role of consanguineous women in safeguarding their brothers, while also influencing the status of married women within their affinal households. As one married sister noted, strong natal ties provide emotional and financial security, which enhances a woman's standing in her marital home. Conversely, married women with weaker natal bonds are often more vulnerable to mistreatment. Thus, the ritual that highlights the value of cross-siblingship thrives on a delicate balance of love, obligation and mutual dependence within kinship units.

On the seventh day of the waxing moon, the evening before Bhai Jiuntia, sisters begin a water-less fast (*nirjala upas*) that continues through the day of Bhai Jiuntia and concludes the following morning. On Bhai Jiuntia day, the sisters first perform a morning ritual at a pond dedicated to Ban Durga.²³ Later in the evening, around twenty women from both Adivasi and caste

devotion and moral purity are believed to extend to self-immolation) in Rajput traditions (the erstwhile aristocracy of Rajasthan) is not merely considered an act of vengeance, but a moral force shaping familial well-being. A *sati*'s curse functions within kinship structures, allowing her to exert influence even after death.

²³ 'Ban' means 'forest'. This version of Durga, although sharing characteristics with the popular Hindu goddess Durga, is specifically invited from the forest for the ritual, as some women from the village explained to me. Some women used the names Ban Durga and Durga interchangeably, while others referred to the goddess as Ban Durga only during rituals at the pond, and not when worshipped at the village centre. When asked, the women did not provide a specific reason for this distinction. However, forest goddesses are generally believed to possess greater power, as seen in the case of the goddess Mangala, who was invited from the forest but notably is never referred to as Ban Mangala. I



Figure 5: A sister carrying *lia jugar* and other ceremonial items for Durga worship during Bhai Jiuntia. Haliapali 2022.

groups (excluding women from Harijan quarters) gather at the village centre for Durga worship.

In preparation for the worship, the main ritual offering (*mukeya bhog*) is made using *lia dhan*. About a week before the festival, an elderly woman from the neighbourhood collects paddy from the various households, roasts it in a stove and redistributes the parched rice. It is stored in an airtight container until Bhai Jiuntia, when it is used to create *lia jugar*, small conical-shaped figurines made by mixing the parched rice with melted jaggery.

During the worship, each woman presents several *lia jugar* on her plate, the number reflecting that of the brothers for whom she is praying (Figure 5). After the worship, the tip of a *lia jugar* is broken

off and offered to the goddess. Some women interpret this act as symbolizing the head of a sacrificial goat, though not all villagers share this view. A few women also mentioned that animal sacrifice was once a part of Durga worship. However, for a long time, animal sacrifices have not been conducted within the village, but only at the precincts of the village goddess, during her festivities at the village boundary. The remaining *lia jugar* are crumbled; some are consumed by the sisters, and others are distributed among the villagers, along with coconut shreds and bananas. A few are taken back home.

The following morning, the sisters perform another pond ritual to Ban Durga. At the end of the ritual, they tie a thread around their necks before returning home to complete the final rites of Bhai Jiuntia. At home, sisters invite their brothers, wash their feet, apply sandalwood paste to their foreheads and tie ritual threads onto their wrists (Figure 6). Afterward, the brothers are served *lia*, the ritual offering from the previous evening's worship, and the

was told that sisters pray to the powerful Ban Durga to secure blessings for their brothers' protection.



Figure 6: A sister performing the concluding rites of Bhai Jiuntia for her brother. Haliapali 2022.

sister presents a small gift, such as a towel or shirt, to her brother. In return, the sisters are honoured with a grand feast and gifts before they return to their affinal homes. When I asked one brother why it is important for sisters to visit their natal home and perform the rituals, he explained that brothers view it as essential because it brings joy (*kushi*) to the family, particularly through the visit of a married sister and the reunion of the entire family. He added that the rituals mainly make the brothers feel strong (*takat deuchi*) after their sister prays to Durga, as though they are receiving the goddess's blessings directly.

The *lia* paddy plays a central role in Bhai Jiuntia, from the invitation of married sisters to its collective preparation by the women, and finally in its distribution and consumption. Harvested during Dasara, this paddy has special significance in the sisters' ritual performance, being shared symbolically to recognize them as integral kin of the natal family. As I observed, *lia* paddy also serves as a sacred offering to local goddesses, including Samlei, Mangala and Durga. Its use reflects a unique ritual economy of rice cultivation, where the economic and human spheres of exchange, distribution and

consumption are intertwined with the divine realm of sacred blessings. This interplay underscores the ritual role of women and goddesses in ensuring the spiritual well-being of both the family and the community.

The concept of ritual economy is employed here to highlight how the rice harvest in the village's social realm is intertwined with the ritual sphere, creating an inseparable socio-cosmic field (Hardenberg 2017: 17). Bhai Jiuntia enacts this socio-cosmic sphere, reaffirming the cosmological significance of consanguineous women, particularly married sisters. By emphasizing their enduring ties and ritual obligations, Bhai Jiuntia challenges the prevailing social construction of daughters as transient members of their natal families. The ritual underscores the sacred value and ritual power of consanguineous women, aligning with what Lynn Bennett (1983: 141–162) terms *filiafocality*, a kinship model that centres on the sacred role of consanguineous women, in contrast to the *patrifocal* model, which prioritizes the duty and obedience of affinal women. While Nua Khai affirms patrilineal solidarity through collective feasting during the ripening of rice, Bhai Jiuntia emphasizes *filiafocality* by centring the return of married daughters during the rice harvest. Their return is marked by an elaborate feast for them and their children, highlighting their ritual significance within the socio-cosmic framework of rice harvest festivities.

Having discussed Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia, it is worth clarifying how they differ from the more widely known celebration of Raksha Bandhan in northern and western India. Raksha Bandhan, celebrated in the month of Sraban (July/August), is referred to as Rakhi Purnima in coastal Odisha, but it is not widely observed in western Odisha. Like Raksha Bandhan, both Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia involve sisters tying a protective thread on their brothers' wrists. On Nua Khai, unmarried sisters tie the thread on their unmarried brothers, while on Bhai Jiuntia married sisters tie it on both married and unmarried brothers. These sacred threads symbolize a barrier against incest and reinforce the prohibition of marriage between brothers and sisters, echoing the performance of Raksha Bandhan (Malamoud 1992: 41). Similarly, as in Raksha Bandhan, non-kin individuals can be ritually adopted as brothers through the thread-tying ceremony on Bhai Jiuntia.

However, equating Bhai Jiuntia and Nua Khai with Raksha Bandhan would be an oversimplification. Unlike Raksha Bandhan, which emphasizes themes of warfare and brotherly protection, discussed by Stanley and Ruth Freed (1998: 254–255) and Oscar Lewis (1956), Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia are deeply embedded in the agrarian and familial life of western Odisha.

While Freed and Freed (1998) note the ritual use of barley plants in Raksha Bandhan, suggesting possible agrarian connections in the past, its contemporary observance primarily revolves around a thread-tying ceremony with mythical references to historical military contexts. In contrast, Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia are rooted in the agrarian culture of western Odisha, integrating practices of both Adivasi communities and caste Hindus. The sacredness of cross-siblingship, celebrated in these festivities, is directly tied to agricultural prosperity and the family's well-being, diverging from the broader historical and political themes often associated with Raksha Bandhan.

CONCLUSION

Rice cultivation lies at the heart of collective life in western Odisha, being deeply embedded in the social and ritual fabric of its communities. Its growth cycle aligns with communal life and kinship obligations, endowing it with profound symbolic significance. As a resource, rice is intertwined with cultural ideas and practices that enable the creation, maintenance, and transformation of social relations, units and identities, constituting a dynamic model of 'ResourceCultures' (Hardenberg, Bartelheim and Staecker 2017: 20). Skoda (2016: 211) identifies rice as a 'key category' in the western Odishian way of life, a cornerstone of its 'rice culture'. Within this cultural framework, rituals like Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia emerge as performative enactments of this rice culture, linking agricultural prosperity to kinship and communal vitality.

In the performance of Nua Khai, the reciprocal dependence of brothers and sisters is emphasized. However, while Nua Khai momentarily foregrounds this mutual dependence, it ultimately reaffirms the authority of sons, reinforcing their control over lineage continuity and material prosperity. Bhai Jiuntia, meanwhile, ritually welcomes married daughters back as integral kin, challenging their perception as transient 'outsiders-in-waiting'. Although Bhai Jiuntia establishes married sisters as figures of ambivalent power wielding their *sakti* over their brothers' well-being and the spiritual-moral order of their natal homes, their return for these performances ultimately reinforces the patrilineal structure. The ritual positions these 'sacred sisters' as indispensable to the moral and spiritual continuity of the patriline, even as it upholds a system that privileges male inheritance. Examining Nua Khai and Bhai Jiuntia through an ethnographic lens highlights how these

rituals not only reinforce cross-siblingship as a value, but also sustain gendered distinctions between sons and daughters within a patrilineal system.

In conclusion, this analysis suggests that Nua Khai and Bhai Juntia illuminate the intricate interplay between rice cultivation, kinship and gendered identities in western Odisha, demonstrating how this rice culture reproduces social worlds through the ideology of reciprocity, ambivalence and the transformative power of *sakti*. While these enactments momentarily unsettle the patrilineal emphasis on male heirs by affirming the sacred significance of consanguineous women, Nua Khai and Bhai Juntia ultimately reinforce the very structures they appear to challenge, reflecting the complex dynamics of patrilineal societies.

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