

Beyond Rituals: The Artistic Alchemy of Himachal's Chaj Char

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Abstract

Indians have a strong spiritual side and are incredibly rooted in Indian traditional wisdom. Indians find divinity in ordinary life by connecting devotion with practicality. Himachali people embrace faith with simplicity, making spirituality open and real. Indian rituals have their origins in ancient writings such as the *Rigveda*, which speaks of religious rituals. Rasa-shastra is an ancient science that studies the potential of metals for spiritual growth and healing. India's timeless wisdom is reflected in this blending of faith and pragmatism.

Indian rituals are to celebrate important life events by skillfully combining social customs, cultural identity, and spiritual significance. The long-standing traditions of Himachal Pradesh, which have been carefully maintained over the years, are a profound expression of the rich tapestry of India's heritage. Deep faith, unbroken continuity, and strong interconnected bonds are embodied by these living traditions in lower Himachal. Every ritual, from harvest festivals to birth ceremonies, highlights the collective consciousness that characterises Himachali community life while acting as a sacred link between traditional knowledge and contemporary practice. These rituals are performed by using locally available materials like metals, durva grass, and turmeric, as well as gestures like handprints and circumambulation, encode Vedic-tribal syncretism.

This paper figures out the five significant rituals as dynamic nexus points of performative art, sacred geometry, and cosmic symbolism: Sehra-Chudda offerings, Aipan, Batt Pujan for blessing from Kull-Devta/Devi, House inauguration, and Piaayi Kadhna. This study also demonstrates how Himachal's rituals preserve intangible heritage by fusing art in varied motifs, nature, and devotion in the face of modernity by capturing their accuracy, Bhartiya shastra visual symbolism, and adaptability.

Keywords: *Aipan, Baat Pujan, Himachali Rituals, Household Ceremonies, Kull-Devta, Motifs, Piaayi Kadhna, Sehra, Symbolism, Rigveda, Rasa-shastra.*

Introduction

Rituals really do serve as vital connections between nations. Rituals go beyond just physical places and really showcase what makes each culture special; they play a huge role in pretty much every aspect of life. Customs vary widely around the globe, but at their core, they share some pretty fundamental traits, like marking those big moments in life, fostering a sense of belonging, and even linking us to something greater than ourselves.

These rituals have this amazing ability to inspire awe and create a feeling of continuity, whether it's through communal ceremonies, meaningful gestures, or sacred objects. It's fascinating how they manage to keep traditional knowledge alive while also adapting to modern times. At the end of the day, all of this highlights a common human yearning to find purpose in the everyday and to bring people together across generations. So, all over the world, rituals are timeless evidence of human beliefs and customs that act as links between the material and the spiritual.

Ritual is sacred. It is the most methodical course of action that aims to achieve a holistic life plan and way of living arising from a spiritual understanding of divinity. This shows complete surrender and a strong belief, which displays solid will and a strong commitment to perform flawlessly: (RIGVEDA , 2013).

India is an incredible living museum of rituals. Each region has its own unique customs, all deeply rooted in ideas of social unity and spirituality. Take the *Sikh Anand Karaj*, which is their wedding ritual, or the Hindu *Namkaran* for naming a child, not to mention the vibrant *Bihu* festivals from Assam and the stunning *Theyyam* performances in Kerala. It's pretty fascinating how these rituals weave together mythology, creativity, and community spirit. Rituals are not just about religion; they really play a key role in preserving culture and adapting to change while still keeping that sacred touch.

From the joyous occasion of a baby's birth to the heartfelt farewells when someone passes away, the folks in Himachal Pradesh embrace a rich tapestry of customs that highlight those significant moments in life. It's like each tradition tells a story, connecting people across generations. These traditions really help to strengthen social ties, nurture spiritual beliefs, and reinforce cultural identity (Bhasin, 2007). The beautiful mix of tribal, folk, and *Vedic* influences in these symbolic ceremonies, like *Byah Sanskar*, housewarming rites called *Griha Pravesh*, or the birth rituals known as *Piaayi Kadhna*. Each one is filled with meaningful motifs - sacred geometries, special ritual objects, and gestures that all serve as tactile and visual reminders of our place in the universe, respect for our ancestors, and the harmony within our communities.

The visual and performative aspects of these household practices are still poorly understood, despite their importance in *Pahari* culture. The structural and symbolic frameworks of Himachali domestic rituals are examined in this paper, along with their visual representation in material culture and motifs. These rituals really act like living archives of Himachal's rich intangible heritage. It's fascinating how every little gesture and artifact holds so much meaning: (Sax, 2009).

By looking at these practices through the lens of Himalayan ethnography, we can see how they fit into a bigger picture. The rituals in Himachal are anything but static. They're alive, evolving all the time, a true celebration of cultural preservation. It's fascinating how they manage to hold onto their sacred essence while also making room for the modern world. With the help of ethnographic studies and visual records, they're doing this intricate balance of honouring tradition and staying relevant.

The following are the five significant rituals as dynamic nexus points of performative art:

- **Piaayi Kadhna**

In Himachal Pradesh, the *Piaayi Kadhna* ceremony for newborn males goes beyond custom to become a profound work of sacred art. According to Sunny Pandit ji its central idea is the construction of a cone-shaped Soil cotted form-made of anthill soil, embellished with coins, betel nut, *Kusha* grass, and black cardamom, and embedded with *Panch Dhatu*: (Pandit, 2025). This ritual brings together forms, geometry, and performance in a really unique way. it mostly performed at a child's first birthday or during the Mundan ceremony, which is all about that first haircut. It's like a visual feast that embodies cosmic harmony, protection, and prosperity. The shiny metallic look of the *Panch Dhatu*, and the rich, earthy feel of anthill soil. It all comes together to create something truly special.



Figure 1 Piaayi "Ritual for protection and prosperity", 07 March 2025

The cone-shaped form is a symbolic *Mahameru* that unites the divine and the earth. The base is made of anthill soil, which is valued for its purity and hardy beginnings and stands for stability and fertility. With the metals - gold, silver, copper, zinc, and iron radiating planetary energies -

solar vitality, lunar tranquility, and martial strength - the *Panchdhatu* figurine is embedded into this cone. These five metals also with roots in *Ayurveda* and *Vedic* cosmology: (Misra, 2018), each metal stands for: Gold - *Surya*: Immortality, purity, and solar energy Silver - *Chandra*: Emotional equilibrium and lunar serenity Copper - *Shukra*: Health and vitality Zinc - *Shani*: Durability and steadiness Iron - *Mangal* : fortification and defense. *Rasa-shastra* and *Agni purana* also talk about metals: (Agni Purana, 1998). The cone shape form represents the climb toward spiritual awakening. It totally brings to mind those beautiful temple spires and the stupas we see in the Himalayas. The set up of the ritual space, it transforms into this temporary mandala. The addition of some coins for material abundance, add black cardamom to ward off evil, betel nut to honor an unbroken lineage, and Kusha grass, are stands for resilience.

And we can really see how this all ties back to the Vedic yantras. It's showing us how form can direct divine energy, and that geometric precision really hits home and everything comes together in such a meaningful way.

- **Household ceremonies**

In Himachal Pradesh, the house inauguration is a profound fusion of domestic spirituality, communal performance, and sacred art. Through these rituals, a newly constructed or acquired house is turned into a temporary gallery of ritual art, with each wall serving as a blank canvas for a divine invocation. Mango leaves, Raw cotton thread- *kaccha dhaaga*, *kusa grass*, *sindur*, *rice*, and some *wheat flour mixed* with turmeric. When all of these are carefully arranged, it turns the whole ceremony into a kind of artistic performance. It's not just about the looks, it's filled with deep symbolism, beauty, and, of course, a lot of family members' involvement. Each piece is chosen for its cultural and spiritual significance, creating this temporary yet powerful installation that really blesses the home and strengthens those social and spiritual connections.

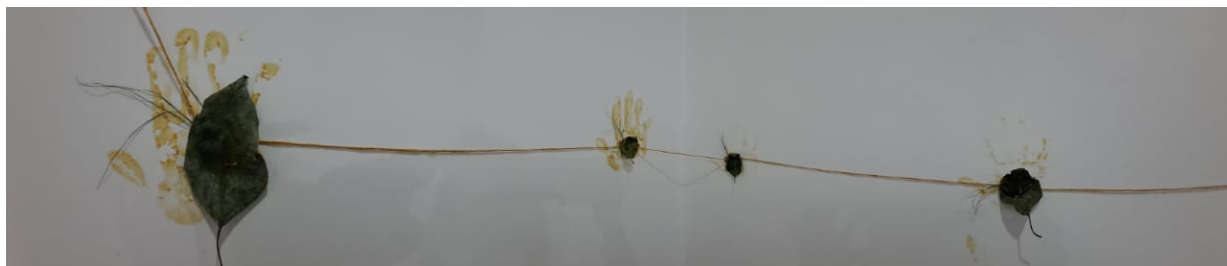


Figure 2 Handprint Ritual during Griha Pravesh ceremony 1, 06 March 2025

The handprint, or *Hastachinha* as it's called. This sacred motif is at the heart of the *Griha Pravesh* ceremony. So, the heads of the household, usually the husband and wife get this paste that's made from rice flour and turmeric. They dip their hands in it and then press those hands right against the walls of their new home. It's not just some random thing they do. it's kind of a gesture they're leaving their mark, a



symbol of their family's spiritual identity. In a way, it's their way of claiming the space and adding a little sacred feeling to it. The handprint becomes the main feature of a multi-layered, group artwork, frequently encircled by mango leaves, which stand for eternal life and *Vedic* purity. According to the Pandit Shivsingh, each member of the family adds to this living *mandala* to symbolize unbroken familial unity, one person wraps *kaccha dhaaga* around the handprint; other tucks *Kusha* grass, rice grains and *sindur*. The offerings are then sealed into a seamless ritual sculpture using a binding agent made of wheat flour and turmeric.

This process is not limited to one place. The architecture of the house is essentially transformed into a sacred circuit as the family proceeds through it, repeating the motif at strategic locations such as the kitchen, the *puja* room. The structure of a pattern, where walking and marking space produce a living structure of cosmic order, is mirrored in this circumambulation (*Pradakshina*):

(ShivSingh, 2025). Because each layer of material must be lined up intentionally, turning the home into a temporary temple.

Figure 3 Handprint Ritual during Griha Pravesh ceremony 2, March 2025

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The materials picked for the house inauguration, are not just random selections. When all the elements come together, they create this lively ceremonial palette that's just overflowing with meaning- both spiritual and cultural. Each item is a symbolic offering, almost like a little artwork on its own. *Aam ke patte*- these evergreen leaves, which are hung around the handprint and in doorways, stand for enduring beauty and divine favor. Also use dates back in *Vedic* traditions, when they were thought to protect against negative energies and purify the air. These elements really act like a natural frame that surrounds the sacred space in ritual art. *Kaccha Dhaaga* - this unbleached, untreated thread symbolizes purity and continuity. When it's tied around a handprint, it's like this thread drawing connects the family's fortunes right back to their home, turmeric, or *haldi* It is not just any spice it is a purifier and a sacred pigment or work as medicine according to *Ayurveda*. When you mix it with rice or wheat flour, it forms this beautiful golden paste that kind of captures solar energy and the antimicrobial properties turmeric really help enhance the health benefits of the ritual, aligning perfectly with Ayurvedic principles. *Kusha* grass is associated with strength and grace from above. it adds a nice textural contrast to the mix, balancing the softness of organic materials with the sturdiness of things. *Sindur* isn't just eye-catching red powder it's the visual centerpiece of the whole ritual. It represents life force, marital harmony, and all that feminine strength. These staples - rice and wheat flour stand for nourishment. They combine with turmeric to create a sculptural glue that holds the other components together. Rice scattering is also reminiscent of *Vedic yajnas*, in which grains are presented to the sacred fire. In *the Grihya Sutra*, all these motifs are mentioned: (The Grihya Sutra, 1886).



Figure 4 Performing Handprint Ritual, 06 March 2025

- **Offering of Sehra and Chudda**

In Himachal Pradesh, the bride's *Chudda* and the groom's *Sehra* are really packed with meaning and tradition. When it comes to the groom, he wears this intricate headpiece called the *Sehra* during the wedding ceremony. It's not just for show- it's actually meant to ward off the evil eye and keep everything sacred during those important rites. *Sehra* is something that is adorned with threads, pearls, beads, and a whole bunch of sparkly bits; it's like a little treasure. It acts as a spiritual shield, keeping the groom's innocence safe as he dives into this big life change. It is not just decoration, it is packed with meaning. It stands for growth, protection, and even wealth. For the duration of the marriage ceremonies, the groom is transformed into a sacred figure by its flowing, intricate, and surrounding form. However, cultural beliefs warn that if the groom sees his own *Sehra* again after the ceremonies are over, it could bring bad luck or ruin the peaceful beginning of married life.

The act of *Arpan* is a special ritual where the groom's sister or a close female relative takes the *Sehra*. They either offer it at a temple or tie it onto a *vata* tree. It's all about warding off any bad omens that might be hanging around. The protective energy of the *Sehra* is transferred to a divine space through this offering ritual, maintaining the couple's new life will continue to be blessed. As *vata* vriksha symbolizes Creation from the Divine - Spiritual reality appears in the material world: (Shvetashvatara Upanishad, 1949).



Figure 5 Offerings of Chudda and Sehra at Vata tree , 08 March 2025

Alongside the *Sehra*, there's the *Chudda*, those beautiful red and white bangles that newlywed brides wear. They're pretty significant in Himachal customs. The *Chudda* isn't just for show; it symbolizes protection, growth, and a woman's marital status. After getting married, a bride usually keeps her *Chudda* on for a whole year. During that year, the *Chudda* can be switched out three, five, or even seven times. Each of those numbers carries a lot of meaning. Take the number three, for instance- it represents creation, preservation. It's like the cycle of life, and it's connected to the

gods Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma. The *Panchamahabhutas* - earth, water, fire, air, and ether - are the five elements that make up the universe, and the number five represents them. The number seven symbolises spiritual wholeness, as evidenced by ideas such as the seven body *chakras*, the seven holy rivers, and the seven steps (*Saptapadi*) that couples take during marriage rituals: (Bhasin, 2007). At these intervals, changing the *Chudda* brings the bride's personal journey into alignment with cosmic forces and renews the blessings and sacred energy surrounding her.

The bride offers all of the *Chuddas* she wore during that time to a sacred tree, usually the *vata* tree near temples, after a year has passed. The offering symbolises the passage from a newlywed bride into a more developed, mature role within the family structure as well as gratitude for divine protection. This collective set up has a very strong visual impact. The thick, ancient roots and branches of the *vata* tree, bound with layers of red and gold *Sehra* and *Chudda* offerings, form a random yet deeply significant sacred offering. Together with the natural roughness of bark and root, the thick layering of textures, soft cloth, glittering beads, and metallic threads creates a dynamic, ever-evolving kind of collective art. Bright red colours predominate, representing life force, wealth, and *Shakti*. This structure serves to be evidence of collective memory, spirituality, and, in addition to being a place of ritual offering. Each piece tied to the tree represents a living record of a person's journey through significant life events, woven into the collective spiritual story of a community.

The everyday ritual items can go beyond just their physical presence. They can actually become part of something much bigger- a communal, sacred art form that's rooted in nature. The *vata* tree, for instance, it transformed into this vibrant symbol of the ongoing connection between our human devotion and the vast cosmos. This visual collection- it's like a huge tapestry woven with blessings, hopes, and those sacred moments of change.

- **Aipan**

Making an *aipan* is really something special. It's like a heartfelt way to invite blessings from the family's ancestral deities, the *Kull Devi* and *Kull Devta*. This ritual is performed by newlywed couples. it's more than just a tradition- it's like a heartfelt prayer for safety, prosperity, and a way to strengthen those all-important spiritual and family connections. Made with vermilion and rice flour paste, *aipan* is revered as a sacred space where participants can receive blessings from the divine energies: (Gupta, 2012). The white circle made of rice flour stands for the protection, purity, and wholeness of the cosmos. In Indian ritual terminology, white is the colour of sanctity and spiritual elevation, signifying the sacred boundary that contains and nurtures life and the prayers that are held within. The circular shape represents continuity, eternity, and the complete embrace of the divine forces, in the endless cycle of life.

The red *sindur* circle in the middle of the white circle has a deep meaning. Red represents growth, blessings, the life force itself. The red dot is the centre of energy in the context of *Aipan*. it is the seed of fresh starts, and the focal point of the blessings that the newlyweds are seeking. Its positioning in the centre of the white circle alludes to the harmony of emptiness and creation, passion and purity, and stillness and vitality. White and red combine to create a complete, resonant symbol of the couple's new journey into shared life and duty, while also balancing the natural dualities of life.



Figure 6 Figure 6 Aipan for Blessing from Kull-Devta/Devi, 25 April 2025



This *Aipan* set up has an elegant, minimal design with deep meaning from a visual arts standpoint. While the fluid, imperfect circle suggests human devotion over structural precision, the contrast between the delicate rice paste and hard ground establishes a meaning in its place. Energy is held down within the growing white circle by the striking red dot in the center, which produces tension both visually and spiritually. The mandala and other sacred geometries are evoked by this elemental use of *sindur* and rice flour, which embodies universal themes of spiritual encounter,

continuity, and protection. Between devotion, tradition, and fresh starts, the *aipan* serves as a silent yet potent link.

- **Batt Pujan**

A newlywed bride enters her in-laws' home after marriage and performs the sacred tradition known as *Batt Pujan*. According to the pandit ji, this ceremony marks the start of the bride's married life and her acceptance into the new family. In order to receive blessings for wealth, harmony, and a smooth transition into her new life, the bride worships the path leading to the house. It expresses appreciation for the welcome, reverence for custom, and a wish for a joyful and trouble-free future. This extremely important ritual entails creating a clean, holy surface by covering a specified area, typically the ground or courtyard, with a thin layer of cow dung. In Indian culture, cow dung is highly valued for its auspicious and purifying properties, and also cow dung is mentioned in the Garuda Purana: (Shah, 2015). It is thought to drive out negativity and draw in the blessings of growth, wealth, and good health. The bride carefully arranges fresh flowers, *sindoor*, *Kusha* grass, and rice grains, a historically significant sign of sustenance and plenty on this revitalised surface.

From the angle of visual arts, the *Batt Pujan* has a natural aesthetic and deep symbolic meaning as to how the earth became a canvas for this ritual. Cow dung's smooth, earthy base gives the ritual a grounding texture that visually connects it to the home and the natural world. A rhythmic, almost melodic visual composition is produced over this background by the *Kusha* grass tufts and flower, lining up with *sindoor* streaks and strewn with rice. A vivid, sacred palette is created by contrasting the earthy brown of the cow dung, the deep green of the *Kusha*, the fiery red of the *sindoor*, and the delicate of the flowers.



Figure 7 Ritual of Batt Pujan

This arrangement, which represents themes of growth and protection, is more than just ornamental; it is a visual prayer. The offerings' linear and split alignment points to a symbolic path that might be similar to the bride's own journey from her birthplace to her new home, which she consecrates through gratitude and devotion. The materials' brief nature - they will break down and return to the earth also serves as a reminder of how short yet cyclical ties and life are. By mixing earth, life, and spirit into a living canvas, the Batt Pujan goes beyond ritual to become a greatly close and communal art form.

Conclusion

Every small gesture and item in the rituals of Himachal Pradesh carries a ton of divine meaning. It's like a blend of sacred art, spiritual symbolism, and a real sense of community. Take the *Piaayi Kadhna* ceremony, for instance, the cone-shaped structure made from anthill soil and infused with Panch Dhatu metals. This isn't just a decoration, it's a three-dimensional representation of the universe, all shrunk down into a small form. Pretty, and the way it tapers - it actually reminds you of those Himalayan stupas. With elements like coins, betel nut, and kusa grass involved, it really symbolises a kind of spiritual ascent while also channelling cosmic energies. Then there's the house inauguration, which is something else entirely. It turns the house into this living gallery of ritual art. The walls transform into sacred canvases painted with vermilion, adorned with raw cotton threads and mango leaves. Handprints made from mixer of turmeric and wheat flour paste. Those become spiritual signatures that really add to the atmosphere. It's all about creating this collaborative artwork that sanctifies the whole space, forming what's known as a temporary mandala.

Before the final offering, the bride's *Chudda* bangles undergo some symbolic changes linked to cosmic numbers. Meanwhile, the groom's *Sehra* isn't just for show, it acts as a protective veil and a spiritual artifact that he has to move carefully to the *vata* tree. These marriage rituals demonstrate how personal adornments transform into sacred offerings. Through layers of ornamentation, these cumulative offerings on the *vata* tree produce a constantly changing collective art installation that chronicles marital journeys. Through the stark red centres and white circles, the *Aipan* designs are a perfect example of sacred minimalism. The patterns of vermilion and transient rice flour serve as visual mantras that invoke divine blessings. Brides perform *Batt Pujan*, which consecrates their transition into a new life by creating a temporary earthly canvas with grains, flowers, and cow dung arranged in a natural composition. The multiple elements of these rituals as creative forms are what set them apart. They stand for a living tradition in which art is devotion itself, short-term in form but eternal in meaning.

when we look at how cow dung, *kusha* grass, and anthill soil are used, it really highlights a deep connection with nature. These materials aren't just random, they actually weave in the principles of *Vedic* cosmology using numbers, shapes, and elemental symbols. These practices go beyond typical rituals, tapping into a sacred artistic expression that seeks to align human life with the broader cosmic order. Honestly, the rituals in Himachal Pradesh are a perfect example of how

tradition can feel so alive. They really know how to mix spiritual depth with gorgeous aesthetics. Each item used in the ceremonies becomes a work of art in and of itself, not merely a decorative piece. And those who take part are not just viewers; they are participants, contributing to this exquisite, quite divine art form. The way that artistic vision and sacred intention are seamlessly merged in these practices serves as a reminder that true ritual is art in its most profound and participatory form, one that, for a moment, brings divinity into our midst before vanishing back into the earth and being recreated with every generation.

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