

# Nuakhai

Nuakhai or Nuankhai (Oriya: ନୁଆଖାଇ or Oriya: ନୁଆଁଖାଇ) (also known as Nabanna) is an agricultural festival mainly observed by people of western Orissa in India. Nuakhai is observed to welcome the new rice of the season. According to the Hindu calendar it is observed on *panchami tithi* (the fifth day) of the lunar fortnight of the month of Bhadrapada or Bhaadra (August–September), the day after the Ganesh Chaturthi festival. This is the most important social festival of Kosal

## About the festival

Nuakhai is also called *Nuakhai Parab* or *Nuakahi Bhetghat*. The word *nua* means new and *khai* means food, so the name means the farmers are in possession of the newly harvested rice. The festival is seen as a new ray of hope, held the day after the Ganesha Chaturthi festival. It has a big significance for farmers and the agricultural community. The festival celebrated at a particular time of day which is called *lagan*. Arisa pitha is prepared to celebrate this festival. When the *lagan* comes, the people first remember their village god or goddess and then have their *nua*.

Nuakhai is the agricultural festival of both the tribal people as well as the caste-Hindus. The festival is observed throughout Orissa, but it is particularly important in the life and culture of the tribal dominated area of western Orissa. It is a festival for the worship of food grain. It has its best celebration in the Kalahandi, Sambalpur, Balangir, Bargarh, Sundargarh, Jharsuguda, Sonapur, Boudhand Nuapada districts of Orissa.

## Ancient origin

According to local researchers Nuakhai is of fairly ancient origin. Some researchers found the fundamental idea of the celebration can be traced

back at least to Vedic times when the *rishis*(sages) had talked of *panchayajna*, the five important activities in the annual calendar of an agrarian society. These five activities have been specified as *sitayajna* (the tilling of the land), *pravapana yajna* (the sowing of seeds), *pralambana yajna* (the initial cutting of crops), *khala yajna* (the harvesting of grains) and *prayayana yajna* (the preservation of the produce). In view of this, Nuakhai may be seen as having evolved out of the third activity, namely *pralambana yajna*, which involves cutting the first crop and reverently offering it to the mother goddess.

### Origin of the current form

Although the origin of the festival has been lost over time, oral tradition dates its back to the 12th century AD, the time of the first Chauhan Raja Ramai Deo, founder of the princely state of Patna which is currently part of Balangir district in Western Orissa. In his efforts to build an independent kingdom, Raja Ramai Deo realized the significance of settled agriculture because the subsistence economy of the people in the area was primarily based on hunting and food gathering. He realised this form of economy could not generate the surpluses required to maintain and sustain a state. During state formation in the Sambalpur region, Nuakhai as a ritual festival played a major role in promoting agriculture as a way of life. Thus credit can be given to Raja Ramai Deo for making Nuakhai a symbol of Sambalpur culture and heritage.

### Deities that are offered Nua

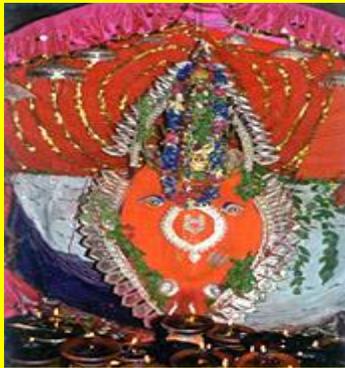
Every year, the *tithi* (day) and *samaya* (time) of observance was astrologically determined by the Hindu priests. Priests sat together at the Brahmapura Jagannath temple in Sambalpur and calculated the day and time. The *tithi* (date) and *lagna* (auspicious moment) were calculated in the name of Pataneswari Devi in the Balangir-Patnagarh area, in the name

of Sureswari Devi in the Subarnapur area, and in the name of Manikeswari Devi in the Kalahandi area. In Sundargarh, *Puja* (worship) was first offered by the royal family to the goddess Sekharbasini in the temple which is opened only for Nuakhai. In Sambalpur, at the stipulated *lagna* (auspicious moment), the head priest of Samaleswari temple offers the *nua-anna* or *nabanna* to the goddess Samaleswari, the presiding deity of Sambalpur.

### Rituals of the nine colors of Nuakhai

People in the Kosal region initiate preparations for the event 15 days in advance. Nuakhai is understood to have nine colours and as a consequence nine sets of rituals are followed as a prelude to the actual day of celebration. These nine colours include:

1. *Beheren* (announcement of a meeting to set the date)
2. *Lagna dekha* (setting the exact date for partaking of new rice)
3. *Daka haka* (invitation)
4. *Sapha sutura and lipa puchha* (cleanliness)
5. *Ghina bika* (purchasing)
6. *Nua dhan khuja* (looking for the new crop)
7. *Bali paka* (final resolve for Nuakhai by taking the *Prasad* (the offering) to the deity)
8. *Nuakhai* (eating the new crop as *Prasad* after offering it to the deity, followed by dancing and singing)
9. *Juhar bhet* (respect to elders)



## Details of the rituals of Nuakhai

The preparations begin some 15 days prior to the date of the festival, when the elderly persons of the village sit together at a holy place after the *beheren* calls the villagers by blowing a trumpet. Then people get together and discuss with the priests the *tithi* and *lagna* (auspicious day and time) for Nuakhai. The priest consults the *panjika* (astrological almanac) and announces the sacred *muhurta* (a period of time equal to about 48 minutes) when *nua* is to be taken. This part of the preparations shows elements of both the original tribal festival and elements of Hindu religion. When the caste-Hindus migrated into the area the local tribal people adopted the idea of an astrological calculation of the *tithi* and *lagna* for the Nuakhai festival. In the same way, when the caste-Hindus adopted Nuakhai from the tribal people, they introduced some Sanskritic elements so as to make it more readily accepted by the caste-Hindus.

There was an attempt made during 1960s to set a common *tithi* for the Nuakhai festival all over the western Orissa. It was decided this was not a workable idea. The idea was reintroduced in 1991 to set the Bhadraba Sukla Panchami tithi for the Nuakhai festival. This became successful and since then, the festival has been celebrated on that day, and the Orissa State Government has declared it an official holiday. Although for the sake of convenience a common auspicious day is set for Nuakhai, the sanctity of the ritual has not lost its importance. Today, however, the system of setting

the *tithi* and *lagna* and calling elderly persons for a consensus does not happen in urban areas.

Nuakhai is celebrated both at the community and domestic level. The rituals are first observed at the temple of the reigning deity of the area or to the village deity. Afterward, the people worship in their respective homes and offer rituals to their domestic deity and to Lakshmi, the deity of wealth in the Hindu tradition. People wear new clothes for the occasion. It is a tradition that after offering the *nua* to the presiding deity, the eldest member of the family distributes *nua* to other members of the family. After taking the *nua*, all the junior members of the family offer their regards to their elders. Thereafter follows the *nuakhai juhar*, which is the exchange of greetings with friends, well wishers, and relatives. This symbolizes unity. This is an occasion for people to lay their differences to rest and start relationships afresh. Towards the evening people meet one another, exchanging greetings. All differences are discarded and elders are wished *nuakhai juhar*. The elders bless their juniors and wish them long life, happiness, and prosperity. Even the partitioned brothers celebrate the festival under one roof. In the evening, folk dances and songs are organized called *Nuakhai Bhetghat*. People dance to the foot tapping traditional Sambalpuri dance forms like *Rasarkeli*, *Dalkhai*, *Maelajada*, *Chutkuchuta*, *Sajani*, *Nachnia*, and *Bajnia*.