



'Prasad Pakhali' Process at Shree Mahaganapati Temple, Goa

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Abstract: Across cultures, there are several rituals that are followed by individuals and communities that have an impact on their thinking and behaviour. Beliefs are often intertwined with rituals and play an important role in the sustenance of a certain ritual. The present study focuses on one such ritual, 'Prasad Pakhali' that is commonly practised in the temples of Goa and the Konkan belt. 'Prasad Pakhali' can be explained as a process through which devotees seek advice and guidance from God/ Goddesses in Goa (Newman, 2001). The 'Pakhali' (Petal) refers to the flowers or leaves that are used for communication purposes. The paper employs exploratory design as no studies have been carried out on this practice, though a few brief articles are available. General information about 'Prasad Pakhali' was collected from Rohit Phalgaonkar, Temple Historian, Panaji, Goa using a semi-structured interview schedule. Certain articles were also referred, to obtain an idea about 'Prasad Pakhali'. With the help of the observation method, the researcher observed the process of 'Prasad Pakhali' at Shree Mahaganapati temple, Khandola, Marcel, Goa. The interview method (semi-structured interview) was also used to collect information about 'Prasad Pakhali' from Pramod Vishnu Bhat, Priest, Shree Mahaganapati Temple, Khandola, Goa. The researcher also interacted with some of the devotees who believe in and seek 'Prasad Pakhali' regularly.

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Introduction

In India, many times people belonging to different backgrounds seek not only blessings but also advice and guidance from Gods/Goddesses. This advice can

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be sought for matters related to their work, marriage, relationships, journeys, medical issues, business-related issues and so on. There are several rituals in this regard that people follow, mainly practised with the hope of garnering positive outcomes in life. This is also being reflected in media, with movies like '*Kantara*' that focus on communication with a divine being. However, the question of its effectiveness relies on the beliefs that individuals hold (Katte, 2023).

Talking about rituals, they are a part of any individual's life and they often play a role in empowering individuals as well as communities. They could range from simple gestures like '*Namaste*' or specific words or they could involve a procedure or a process. Either way, they carry a social meaning and when a ritual is performed whether in a group or individually, there is some kind of process that is followed which is recognised publicly.

Various rituals are followed in day-to-day life, like offering prayers, lighting a lamp and so on. Further, various rituals are carried out in temples. One such ritual that is practised predominantly in temples in Goa and along the Konkan belt is '*Prasad Pakhali*'. The website of a temple in Goa, Shree Shantadurga Fatarpekarin, Fatarpa, describes '*Kaul Prasad*' as a practice that has been prevalent from ancient times, in which the people ask the Goddess about their problems and seek solutions through the Priest. Newman (2001) explained '*Prasad Pakhali*' as a process through which devotees seek advice and guidance from God/Goddesses in Goa. He referred to '*Prasad Pakhali*' as the '*Petal Oracle*' in his book, in which he briefly mentioned this ritual that is carried out in the temples of Goa. The term '*Prasad Pakhali*' has been used in the present paper, though often, terms like '*Prasad*', '*Prasad Pallo*', '*Kaul*', '*Kaul Prasad*', '*Prasad Kaul*' are also used.

When there is a discussion on rituals, it becomes necessary also to focus on beliefs that play an important role in sustenance in the practice of a certain ritual. '*Prasad Pakhali*' as a ritual, a practice, though common amongst the devotees in Goa, is not followed by each and every devotee but by people who have a strong belief in this ritual and its outcome. Thus, some section of people may believe in seeking '*Prasad*' before making important decisions, on the other hand, some may consult astrologers and others may not believe in either of these or may have some other belief. An alternative to '*Prasad*' is also consulting a '*Bhar*' (people possessed by God/Goddess). Further, not necessarily all the family members of the devotees may believe in the '*Prasad Pakhali*'. Thus, variations could exist not only in the rituals but also in the belief system that the people have. Beliefs and rituals thus can be linked together

and they can have a significant impact on the thinking pattern as well as the behaviour of an individual.

People who believe in such rituals could do so for various reasons like reducing anxiety, both individual and collective, celebrating certain life events and also for sharing and disseminating cultural information (Langley, 2022). Thus, observing and studying rituals can help in understanding individual and collective behaviour, also providing information about the cultural dynamics of certain groups of people.

With reference to the present paper, the first section focuses on understanding the practice and identifying certain common threads in how *'Prasad Pakhali'* is carried out across the temples. The main focus of the paper though is on the specific procedure of seeking *'Prasad Pakhali'* at Shree Mahaganapati temple, Khandola, Marcel, Goa.

Understanding *'Prasad Pakhali'*

The term *'Prasad Pakhali'*, comprises the words *'Prasad'* and *'Pakhali'*. The word *'Pakhali'* will be focused first in the present section and then the concept of *'Prasad'* will be discussed, which is much deeper.

The *'Pakhali'* (though the literal translation would be 'Petal') refers to the flowers, petals or leaves that are used for communication purposes. *'Prasad'* on the other hand means the holy offering that a devotee receives when he/she prays in a temple. In the present context, *'Prasad'* mainly denotes the process of seeking the opinion and blessings of the Deity regarding issues/problems/situations faced by the devotee. And the flowers, petals or leaves that are used as *'Pakhali'* during the *'Prasad Pakhali'* process are carried away by the devotees as *'Prasad'*. Focusing on the term *'Prasad'* from the point of view of the present paper, it mainly refers to the process of seeking the *'Prasad'*.

Devotees from all walks of life seek *'Prasad'* for decision-making and problem-solving, which may range from health-related issues, marriage, buying of property or vehicle, career, business, journey, disputes, relationship problems and protection from enemies and evil spirit, the building of temples and so on. It can be about a problem faced by an individual, a family or an entire village (Newman, 2001).

Two types of *'Prasad'* are sought by the devotees:

'Prasad' seeking the intervention of the God or Goddess. 'Prasad' is also taken to find out reasons behind accidents, illness or a bad incident and to find out solutions for a particular problem. This 'Prasad' is normally followed by 'Rakhanicho Prasad'.

'Rakhanicho Prasad' is mainly taken to seek the protection of the God/Goddess during auspicious events like engagement, marriage, naming ceremony, long-distance travel, to decide the arrival of a newly married daughter to her maternal home and to seek protection against the evil spirit.

In Goa, '*Prasad Pakhali*' plays a significant role especially while making important decisions. For instance, while fixing a marriage, often after the '*kundali*' (Horoscopes) of the girl and the boy are matched, '*Prasad*' is often sought by the prospective bride's and bridegroom's family from their respective family deities (*Kuladevata*). Once the '*Prasad*' is given by the respective family deities, the bride and the bridegroom then seek '*Rakhanicho Prasad*' from the family deity of the bridegroom.

'*Prasad*' is also sought for making decisions and solving problems regarding health, buying or building a house, buying land or vehicles, career-related decisions, business-related decisions and so on. It is also taken to seek protection from evil spirits or even those who are perceived as foes by the individual/family. '*Prasad*' is even sought concerning temple-related matters, for instance, building a new temple.

The process of seeking '*Prasad*' in various temples differs grossly with regard to the caste of the priest, the material used for '*Prasad*' whether petals or leaves, the pattern and number of petals or leaves, and the place where the '*Prasad*' is put. The material for '*Prasad*' varies from temple to temple. For instance, at Shree Shantadurga Temple, Fatarpa, small flowers of a plant called '*Tumbo*' are used, that are stuck on a thick wooden platform. At Shree Mahaganapati Idol, a leaf called '*Karmali*' is used.

An article titled "Kaul Prasad, a blessing from Kuladevata" (2023) by the admin of GSBKatte (<https://www.gsbkatte.com/kaul-prasad-a-blessing-from-kuladevata/>) briefly highlights the process of '*Koul Prasad*' in the Shantadurga temple and Damodara temple located in Goa (though specific locations of these temples is not mentioned). In the Shantadurga temple, the '*Prasad*' (flowers, petals and red Patala flower buds) is placed on '*Sinh Patta*', which is a picture of a lion which is 9 inches each in height and width. This '*Sinh Patta*' is on another '*Patta*' or belt that is 24 x 12 inches in size. The '*Prasad*' is placed at 58 places on this '*Patta*'. As described in the article "At 9 places full flowers are placed, at 18 places buds are placed and at 31 places petals are placed". Each of the 58 places has an explicit meaning and interpretation. Similarly, in the Damodara temple, '*tumba*' flowers are used as '*Prasad*', at various places on a '*Shioling*', each having a specific meaning and interpretation.

Though there could be differences in certain aspects of the '*Prasad*' seeking process, it is important to note that the process of '*Prasad Pakhali*' has been observed to be similar in the temples of the same Talukas. The '*Prasad*' is put either on a divine stone, an idol of the God/Goddess or a pillar according to the process followed in that particular temple. The petals or leaves are stuck on the surface in the shape of the deity. This shape is either in human form or in the form of '*Linga*' in the case of a '*Shiva*' temple.

In general, a bad sign is indicated by falling of the left-side petal (of the God/Goddess) and a good sign is indicated by falling of the right-side petal. The '*Prasad*' is sought either from a family deity or any other deity at the convenience of the devotee. But family deity is mainly approached about important decisions to be taken like a marriage.

General Procedure of Seeking '*Prasad*'

When the devotees visit a particular temple they pay their obeisance to the deity, take the devotional or blessed offering (flowers, '*tirth*' (sacred liquid), pieces of coconut, sugar, etc. that are given by the Priest of the temple) and sit near the idol or pillar, on which the '*Prasad*' is put. The priest often sits next to this idol/pillar and places the petals and interprets the meaning as the petals fall. The process of '*Prasad Pakhali*' starts after the devotee informs the temple priest that he/she is interested in taking '*Prasad Pakhali*'.

It has also been observed that there is a preference for Priests as well, as some Priests are seen as more meticulous in seeking '*Prasad*' as compared to others. The '*Prasad Pakhali*' is not necessarily carried out by a Brahmin priest. In certain temples, it is carried out by priests belonging to certain tribes like '*Gawdas*'. The knowledge of the process of '*Prasad Pakhali*' is passed orally over the generations with no known texts available for reference. The interpretation of the '*Prasad*' does depend on the knowledge and skills of the Priest. Thus, some Priests are preferred over others by the devotees based on their seniority, knowledge and communication skills. The priest plays the role of a medium between the God/Goddess and the devotee. The devotees see him as an authority figure and the suggestions given by the priests are equated with those of the God/Goddess.

'*Prasad*' is often sought to find out the reasons behind the illness/accident of a family member, any negative incidence like the appearance of a snake, a bad dream or in case of loss of a valuable item. The God/Goddess through '*Prasad*' guide the devotees about further measures to be taken. '*Rakhanicho Prasad*' is also taken for all the important occasions in a family including marriage,

naming ceremony, buying a vehicle/house, starting a business and building a temple. This type of '*Prasad*' is also taken to seek protection against evil spirits.

The firm belief and faith in '*Prasad Pakhali*' could be due to the deeply imbibed ritual of seeking '*Prasad*' over the generations and also due to the positive results after the '*Prasad*' is taken. Positive results and positive effects have been reported by devotees as they feel relieved of any mental stress and anxiety.

Devotees often express that '*Prasad*' has effectively guided them about illness, accident or any important decisions. One such incident was reported by a devotee, where her family sought '*Prasad*' to decide whether to buy a vehicle. A negative '*Prasad*' was given by the Goddess and as a result, they postponed buying the vehicle. The same month, the father of the devotee became seriously ill and a huge amount had to be spent on the treatment. According to this devotee if they had invested in buying the vehicle, probably they would have had to undergo a huge financial crisis, but the Goddess guided them appropriately. Similar incidents were reported by other devotees, which confirmed their belief in '*Prasad Pakhali*'.

As stated by Newman, (2001), '*Prasad Pakhali*' can be termed as therapeutic as the devotee feels that his/her problems are being heard by the deity and has faith that the deity is protecting him/her and is interested in his/her wellbeing. A bond is being perceived by the devotee between him/her and the deity that is based on faith and devotion that the devotee has towards the deity. This helps the devotee cope and deal with problems and make better decisions.

The structure of the Goan temples, with its cool and calm atmosphere, creates a conducive environment for the devotees to interact with the God or Goddess (through the medium of the priest). The situation is an informal one in which the devotees share a space to seek blessings and answers from the divine power.

Methodology

Objective

The objective of the study was to understand the concept of '*Prasad Pakhali*' and to study the process of '*Prasad Pakhali*' at Shree Mahaganapati temple, Khandola, Marcel, Goa.

Shree Mahaganapati Temple, Khandola, Marcel, Goa

The setting of the present study is Shree Mahaganapati temple, Khandola, Goa. As per the official website of the temple (<https://mahaganapatikhandola.com/about/>), the Mahaganapati and Mahamaya idols were earlier located in

Tiswadi area of Goa and were then relocated to areas of Navelim and Goltin during the 13th century. The idols were again relocated to Khandola during the 16th Century due to eviction by Portuguese missionaries. The selection of temples was based on convenience and the rapport of the researcher and her family with the temple priest.

Research Design

The paper employs an exploratory design as no studies have been carried out on this practice. A few articles are available that provide general information about the practice as carried out in various temples of Goa. But as such detailed observation and highlighting of the process in specific temples (as has been carried out in the present study) is not available.

Procedure

The researcher took up the present study out of interest and curiosity, though she had to wait for the right opportunity to observe the process. When the right opportunity came up, with the consent of the devotee and the Priest, the process was observed. The researcher had a basic idea about the process and further information was collected by referring to the limited articles available, temple websites, interacting with the devotees who have been regularly seeking '*Prasad*' and also by interviewing Rohit Phalgaonkar, Temple Historian, Panaji, Goa and Pramod Vishnu Bhat, Priest, Shree Mahaganapati Temple, Khandola, Goa.

Tools for Data Collection

The present paper mainly employs interview and observation methods. General information about '*Prasad Pakhli*' was collected from Rohit Phalgaonkar, Temple Historian, Panaji, Goa using semi-structured interviews and referring to certain articles on the topic. Using the observation method, the researcher observed the process of '*Prasad Pakhli*' at Khandola, Marcel, Goa. The interview method (semi-structured interview) was also used to collect information about '*Prasad Pakhli*' from Pramod Vishnu Bhat, Priest, Shree Mahaganapati Temple, Khandola, Goa. The researcher also interacted with some of the devotees who believe and seek '*Prasad Pakhali*' regularly.

'Prasad Pakhali' as Observed at Shree Mahaganapati Temple, Khandola, Marcel, Goa

In this particular temple, the interested devotee has to obtain a receipt after paying ₹ 5 towards the process of '*Prasad*'. Accordingly, a receipt was obtained

and the same was handed over to the priest and the process began. In the present paper, though the process of a certain devotee was observed, the focus is not on what was asked and what was the communication received from the Deity, but the focus is on how the leaves are placed and their interpretation.

At this temple, the '*Prasad*' is put on a '*Panch Dhatu*' (made of five metals) Shree Mahaganapati Idol. A leaf called '*Karmali*' in the local language is used. The leaves are stuck using water. The language used to communicate with the Deity is Sanskrit. Only one person can avail of '*Prasad*' at a time as there is only one idol. In this ceremony, the leaves are stuck on the idol in a special pattern. This is done by the priest who dips the leaves in water and places them on the idol.

A total of 52 leaves are used in the process that are placed on the different parts of the idol. A total of 27 leaves are put for '*Prabhaval*' which is the frame behind the Ganapati, out of these 27, thirteen leaves are stuck on each right and left side and one in the middle of the '*Prabhaval*'. Eight on the inner frame are called '*Sthanak*', which are placed four on each left and right side. Two each on ears, eyes, feet, and palms (two sets of palms), one on the trunk, four on the stomach, and one each on the knees.

The Priest began the process with a short prayer and informed God about the devotees by telling them about her family name and the name of the family deity. The intentions for seeking '*Prasad*' were also informed. Also, permission was taken from the family deity so that the devotee could ask '*Prasad*' from this deity.

The devotee then began with the questions about her problems and the deity answered them in terms of 'falling leaves'. The answers come through the patterns in which the slowly – drying leaves drop off onto the floor. The leaves falling from the left side are a negative indication and the leaves falling from the right are seen as a positive indication. Further falling of leaves from different positions also has a meaning (refer to Table 1).

'Prabhaval', the outer frame: About the 27 leaves stuck on '*Prabhaval*' or outer frame, 13 leaves are stuck on each side with one in the centre. Initially, when the priest is seeking permission from the deity on behalf of the devotee to ask questions, the Priest asks for leaf ('*Pakhali*') numbers 1, 3, 5, and 7 from the right side to fall as a positive indication and a green signal to continue with the '*Prasad*' process. If the leaves from the left side fall then it is interpreted that the deity is either displeased or wants the devotee to make an offering. An apology or a promise of offering normally serves the purpose and the process can be continued. In one instance, a devotee who came to seek '*Prasad*'

to understand the reason behind the conflicts taking place at home between her and her husband was refused permission by the deity. Upon which she was asked to put five 'Pradakshina', that is, circles around the main idol in the temple as an apology. Immediately after the completion of the fifth circle the third right side petal fell, thus, indicating the deity's permission.

Further, if the devotee has asked the deity about any kind of pending work, activity or event and the middle leaf falls then it is considered that the work will be successfully carried out.

'Sthanak', the inner frame: About 'Sthanak' or inner frame, four leaves are put on either side. These positions relate to the problems that an individual is having like health problems, loss of money or property, accidents and any other kind of harm to the devotee and his/her family members.

The first leaf indicates a problem, the second leaf is about the area of problem, the third leaf indicates a problem due to unfulfilled wishes and desires of a dead married woman 'Savashin' in the family and the falling of the fourth leaf indicates a problem concerning the place of residence of the devotee. Here again, the falling of the right-side leaves is 'positive' and the left-side is 'negative'.

Trunk: If the leaf on the trunk falls then the cause of the suffering of the devotee is related to harm caused to a snake by the devotee or his/her family members, mainly the area snake (King Cobra) that is supposed to protect residents of a certain area. It is believed in Goa that every area is guarded by a snake and so every evening a lamp is lit for it as a mark of devotion and respect.

Eyes: With regard to the leaves on the eyes, the falling of the leaf on the right side indicates that the devotee can go ahead with the intended activity, marriage, buying of property, vehicle, etc. In case of falling of the left leaf, the devotee is indicated not to go ahead with the activity, marriage, buying of property, vehicle, etc.

Ears: If the leaf on the left ear falls then it's an indication of evil eye or black magic performed on the devotee which is again the cause of his/her problems. The falling of the right leaf indicates the absence of such a thing.

Palms: The falling of the leaf on the left palm indicates some kind of restriction/obstacle and the one on the right palm indicates no restriction/obstacles.

Stomach: The falling of the leaves stuck on the stomach is an indication that the devotee owes something to God.

Knee: The falling of the right leaf on the knee indicates blessings of God and that on the left indicates a problem.

Feet: The falling of the right leaf on the feet indicates that the devotee will have to carry out a religious ritual like a 'Pooja' and the falling of the left leaf indicates that the devotee has a danger of evil over him/her

Table 1: Showing the Total Number of Leaves Stuck on The Different Parts of the Deity and Their Interpretation

Location	No. of Leaves	Interpretation		
		Right	Middle	Left
'Prabhaval' outer frame	27	Permission Granted to take Prasad	Any pending work of the devotee will be done	Permission not granted/ deity is displeased
'Sthanak' inner frame	8	No problem	-	Indicates the presence of a problem and also determines the type of problem
Trunk	1	The harm caused to a snake by the devotee or family member (s)		
Eyes	2	Go ahead with the intended activity like marriage, buying a property etc.	-	Not to go ahead with the intended activity like marriage, buying a property etc.
Ears	2	No evil eye or black magic	-	Evil eye or black magic
Palms	4	Restriction/ obstacles	-	No restrictions/ obstacles
Stomach	4	The devotee owes something to God		
Knees	2	Blessings of the God with the devotee	-	The devotee will face a problem
Feet	2	The devotee will have to conduct a ritual related to the God	-	Danger of evil eye

The duration of '*Prasad Pakhali*' can vary as some devotees may receive it sooner than others. Sometimes, the devotees wait for hours together to receive the '*Prasad*'. In certain temples, '*Prasad*' can be taken by multiple devotees. However, in the Shree Mahaganapati temple, Khandola, Marcel, Goa, where the process of '*Prasad Pakhli*' was observed, only one devotee can seek '*Prasad*' at a time. In certain temples, '*Prasad*' can be sought by many devotees at a time, for instance, in Shri Mallikarjun temple, Canconna, Goa, there is a particular pillar on which '*Prasad*' can be put by multiple devotees at a time.

Once all the answers are sought by the devotee, it is the turn of the next devotee. The leaves are then packed in a small paper envelope or a piece of paper and offered as '*Prasad*' or devotional or blessed offering to the devotee to take away with him/her.

The firm belief and faith in '*Prasad Pakhali*' were mainly due to the deeply imbibed ritual of seeking '*Prasad*' over the generations and also due to the positive results after the '*Prasad*' is taken. Positive results and positive effects are reported by the devotees as they feel relieved of any kind of mental stress and anxiety. Also, they reported that with regard to any kind of illness, accident or any important decisions, '*Prasad*' has effectively guided them.

The structure of the Goan temples, with its cool and calm atmosphere, creates a conducive environment for the devotees to interact with the God or Goddess (through the medium of the priest). Further, as the devotees wait their turn, there is also an informal communication and interaction that proliferates, in hush voices, that as such do not disturb the calm in the temple. On the whole, as is firmly believed by the devotees, seeking '*Prasad Pakhali*' helps the devotees cope better with their problems, make better decisions, and choose better options.

The Anthropological Significance of Rituals

Rituals play a substantial role in human societies, surpassing religious or cultural limitations to assist as essential mechanisms for managing our anxiety, creating a social bond or unity, and carrying symbolic interpretations. Several sociologists and anthropologists have explored the complex aspects of rituals, each resounding with unique insights into their relevance, significance and function.

Humans are designed to have a cognitive makeup that can forecast and make sense of the world around us based on past knowledge or experiences. However, in times of swift change and uncertainty, this predictive ability is compromised, creating anxiety. Rituals, identified by their structured, repetitive, and firm nature, provide an impression of order amidst a chaotic world around us. As highly predictable activities, they give us a sense of control, which is critical for lessening anxiety, even if this control is temporary and self-imagined or in short, illusory. As shown in this paper, devotees approached the designated temples for the ritual of '*Prasad Pakhali*' only when they needed answers or guidance to certain questions or certain life situations. After the ritual was performed by the priest and they got the interpretations of the ritual performed, they felt relieved and confident as whether positive or negative, the

answers to their queries were received and that too from a higher Divine being. This also builds trust in them.

This has been proved by empirical studies conducted in Mauritius where Hindus after performing temple rituals experienced lower stress levels. Similarly, Jewish students in the United States after participation in group rituals showed lower anxiety and stress levels, measured through physiological indicators such as heart rate and cortisol levels in both studies.

Rituals and Social Connection

When people come together to perform any group ceremony, there is some synchrony for example, they may dress alike, chant together, or perform any ritual collectively. They experience a deep sense of connection or unity. They feel connected to something bigger, larger and more powerful than themselves.

However, Sigmund Freud, in his seminal work *Totem and Taboo* (1918), gave a psychoanalytic explanation of rituals. He perceived rituals as non-rational and symbolic behaviours defying all logic. He stressed that rituals have a neurotic factor, and defied empirical explanations.

From a symbolic standpoint, rituals are regarded as culturally oriented behavioural patterns that build relationships between humans and the divine. Edmund Leach, a prominent cultural anthropologist, emphasised that rituals are symbolic statements derived from a group's social and cultural life. This perspective aligns with the views of Émile Durkheim, who also highlighted the interrelationship between society and religion. Leach's interpretation stresses the importance of understanding not just what rituals do, but what they signify within the cultural and social context. In this paper also the way or the pattern in which the petals were displayed on the Deity and the sequence or order in which they fell had a unique and specific explanation. Thus, every petal or '*pakhali*' put or displayed at a particular location was a symbol of a specific answer from the Deity.

Conclusion

The present paper, thus, focused on the concept of 'Prasad Pakhali' and also on the process of 'Prasad Pakhali' as was observed at Shree Mahaganapati Temple, Goa. It was observed, that a systematic procedure is followed while seeking the 'Prasad' and the overall belief that the devotees have about this practice can have a positive impact on their thinking and behaviour.

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