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Research Article

Madhu-Sravani: An Ecofeminist and Folkloric Perspective on Mithila's Sacred Traditions

Chandni Kumari[1]*

[1] *Banaras Hindu University, India*

Abstract

Madhu-Sravani, a traditional folk festival of Mithila, embodies the intricate relationship between women, nature, and cultural heritage through an ecofeminist lens. Rooted in the worship of Shiva, Parvati, and serpent deities, this festival serves as a unique confluence of mythology, folklore, and environmental consciousness. Women play a central role, not only as devotees but also as priests, challenging patriarchal norms and asserting their agency in religious and cultural spaces. The festival's rituals—ranging from serpent worship to the symbolic use of rare flora—highlight indigenous ecological wisdom and biodiversity conservation. Folktales associated with Madhu-Sravani, such as the story of the Nagakanyas, promote environmental awareness through oral traditions. Additionally, the festival's folk songs and Behula's devotion reinforce the deep interdependence of human life and nature, helping preserve collective memory and express the emotional and spiritual dimensions of this tradition. However, certain rituals, such as the Tami practice, also reflect gendered expectations and social constructs of sacrifice. By analysing Madhu-Sravani through the framework of ecofeminism, this paper explores how folklore and cultural traditions can serve as tools for both empowerment and sustainability, offering insights into the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems in the face of modernization and environmental challenges. This study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on textual analysis, thematic interpretation, and ethnographic insights. It relies on secondary sources—including scholarly articles, research papers, and cultural narratives—to explore the interplay between folklore, gender roles, and ecological consciousness in Mithila's traditions.

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1. Introduction

Folklore has long served as a powerful medium through which communities negotiate their relationship with nature, gender roles, and spiritual traditions. In South Asia, especially within the regional cultures of India, festivals rooted in folk traditions often serve as carriers of ecological wisdom and cultural identity. Among these, the *Madhu-Sravani* festival of Mithila occupies a unique place. Celebrated predominantly by newly married women, this festival intricately weaves together mythology, ritual, oral traditions, and environmental ethics. It is not only a celebration of fertility and prosperity but also a reflection of the deeply embedded ecological consciousness in local customs, revealing how nature and femininity are perceived as sacred and interdependent.

**Corresponding author*, 17chandani@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4684-6419

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The theoretical framework of ecofeminism offers a compelling lens through which the significance of this festival can be understood. As articulated by Vandana Shiva (1988) and further developed by various scholar (Bhattacharyya, 2022) ecofeminism underlines the parallels between the marginalization of women and the degradation of nature, both seen as consequences of patriarchal, capitalist, and technocratic systems. Shiva (2016) argues that women, especially in indigenous and agrarian societies, have historically acted as the primary stewards of biodiversity and ecological resilience. These ideas find concrete cultural expression in practices such as the *Madhu-Sravani* festival, where women perform rituals that directly involve elements of the natural world—such as the worship of serpents, sacred plants, and water—highlighting their custodianship over both cultural and ecological heritage.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of such cultural rituals in sustaining biodiversity and community-based ecological practices (Rismawati, Wildan, & Oktavinanda, 2025). In the context of Mithila, the symbolic art of *Aripana*, the oral retelling of serpent myths, and the ceremonial use of medicinal and rare plants underscore how folklore serves as a medium of both environmental education and intergenerational knowledge transmission. These practices also challenge conventional gender hierarchies by positioning women not just as passive participants but as ritual specialists and cultural leaders.

This paper explores how the *Madhu-Sravani* festival exemplifies the interconnectedness of ecology, gender, and spirituality in Mithila's cultural landscape. It argues that such festivals are more than religious observances—they are dynamic sites of resistance, resilience, and renewal. By drawing on qualitative methods, including textual analysis and ethnographic observations, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations around ecofeminism, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural sustainability in South Asia. In doing so, it highlights the relevance of traditional festivals in offering alternative models for ecological harmony and feminist agency in an increasingly globalized and environmentally precarious world.

2. Madhu-Sravani Festival: An Introduction

The *Madhu-Sravani* festival is an important socio-religious tradition observed primarily in the Mithila region of Bihar, with cultural echoes in parts of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Northern India, and southern regions of Nepal. The festival begins on the Panchami (fifth) day of *Krishna Paksha* in the auspicious month of *Saavan* and continues for fourteen days, culminating on the Tritiya (third) day of *Shukla Paksha* in the same month. The alignment with the monsoon month of Saavan imbues the festival with ecological, emotional, and ritual significance (Parajuli, 2022).

Etymologically, the word *Madhu-Sravani* is derived from *Madhu* (honey), symbolizing sweetness, fertility, and prosperity, and *Shravani*, which is associated with the month of Saavan. Together, the term encapsulates the sweetness and sanctity of newlywed life, particularly as it pertains to women's roles in sustaining marital harmony and household wellbeing. The rituals of this festival foreground the convergence of mythology, ecology, and gender roles, and are steeped in the narrative traditions of Mithila folklore (Rani & Soren, 2024).

The festival is primarily observed by newlywed women—particularly those from Brahmin, Kayastha, and Sonar castes—who undertake a 14-day fast for the longevity, health, and prosperity of their husbands. These women are seen performing daily rituals, which include listening to sacred tales (*kathas*) associated with Goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva, Surya (the Sun God), Chandra (the Moon), and the serpent deities (Nāgas). These narratives, often passed down orally by elder women or priests, link the festival to broader Hindu cosmological themes and folk customs.

One of the key features of the Madhu-Sravani festival is its fusion of ecological consciousness with gendered spirituality. The worship of serpent deities (*Nāga Puja*) during this period symbolizes an agrarian society's reverence for water, fertility, and protection from diseases such as snakebites during the monsoon. The socio-cultural dimensions of the festival offer insight into the performative roles of women in maintaining both familial bonds and ritual purity. As Richa Rani (2023) points out in her ethnographic study on Mithila festivals, *Madhu-Sravani* exemplifies a "ritual ecology of affection," where newly married women reassert their agency within the framework of patriarchal expectations through devotion, storytelling, and acts of abstinence.

Moreover, the festival's localized customs—such as the ritual drawing of symbolic motifs on walls with rice paste, the offering of milk and honey to Nāgas, and the group recitation of legends—illustrate the way oral traditions and material culture are used to pass on intergenerational knowledge among Maithil women (Jha & Kumari, 2022). In this way, *Madhu-Sravani* serves not only as a rite of passage but also as a form of cultural pedagogy

3. Women as Ritual Specialists: Redefining Priesthood in the Madhu-Sravani Festival

The *Madhu-Sravani* festival, celebrated predominantly in the Mithila region of Bihar, offers a unique instance in which the boundaries of gendered religious roles are consciously blurred and renegotiated. One of the most striking aspects of the festival is the active participation of women not merely as observers or assistants in religious life but as primary ritual performers—functioning effectively as priests (pandits) in their own right.

In a socio-religious landscape where priestly duties are largely monopolized by Brahmin men, *Madhu-Sravani* creates a culturally sanctioned space for women to assume the role of ritual authorities. During the fourteen-day festival, newly married women undertake a series of ritual practices without any mediation or assistance from male priests. These practices include daily recitations of sacred stories (kathas), offerings to serpent deities (Nāgas), and intricate pujas involving items such as honey, milk, rice paste, and symbolic drawings. The narratives told during the rituals—often recounting the benevolence of Goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva, and Nāgas—are orally transmitted by elder women, thus reinforcing an intergenerational female religious pedagogy.

Importantly, women in this context are not only spiritual practitioners but also interpreters and transmitters of sacred knowledge. Their command over ritual processes challenges orthodox frameworks that consider women as ritually impure or unqualified to mediate between the human and the divine. By asserting their autonomy in matters of worship, these women subvert long-standing patriarchal restrictions and re-inscribe the female body as a site of ritual power and authority. This transformation of women from devotees to ritual specialists also carries broader implications for discussions on religious agency and gender justice. The festival becomes a form of symbolic resistance against the exclusion of women from temple priesthoods and other formal religious positions across India. It also aligns with what feminist scholars term as "everyday forms of resistance," where agency is expressed not through overt protest but through ritual assertion within culturally legitimate frameworks (Mahmood, 2005).

Furthermore, the social recognition accorded to women's ritual performance during *Madhu-Sravani* reinforces the idea that religious authority need not be institutionalized to be valid. Instead, it can be community-based, vernacular, and embodied through lived practices. The festival thus acts as a microcosm of folk feminism, where women's religious labour is both spiritually and socially consequential. The *Madhu-Sravani* festival not only reinforces the ecological and matrimonial values associated with Maithil culture but also offers a compelling reconfiguration of ritual leadership—one where women reclaim spiritual space, challenge gendered hierarchies, and reaffirm their roles as guardians of sacred tradition.

4. Feminine Agency in the Oral Traditions of Madhu-Sravani

The Madhu-Sravani festival of Mithila offers a powerful matrix where folklore, ritual, and gender intersect. At its core lies a sustained celebration of women as *repositories and transmitters of cultural wisdom*. Through the festival's elaborate storytelling tradition—spanning twelve to fourteen days—women assume the dual roles of narrators and protagonists, asserting agency within and beyond the domestic sphere.

On the opening day, the tale of Bishara's miraculous birth sets the tone for the festival. Bishara, a snake deity central to Mithila's local cosmology, symbolizes divine protection and fertility. The ceremony also invokes the five Nagin sisters, venerated as ancestral protectors of marriage and community health. These serpent-goddesses—unlike male-centric snake legends—center feminine energy as curative and powerful, challenging perceptions of fear and marginality commonly associated with serpents. On subsequent days, the repertoire grows richer. Tales of Bihula, Mangala-Gauri, and Sati reimagine womanhood through themes of loss, sacrifice, endurance, and wisdom. In the Bihula-Lakhinder legend, Bihula emerges not merely as a faithful wife but as a negotiator with the gods. Her tenacity, strategic mind, and eloquence mark a sharp deviation from passive femininity. She sails alone on a raft to plead with Manasa Devi, thus becoming a *symbol of spiritual agency* and divine negotiation.

The third day shifts to cosmogonic narratives like the Samudra Manthan (Churning of the Ocean), where goddesses such as Lakshmi emerge from chaos, symbolizing renewal, prosperity, and feminine grace amidst conflict. This inclusion highlights that creation myths are not gender-neutral but often hinge on the balancing force of feminine divinity. In the following days, lesser-acknowledged yet potent tales surface—Maina's motherhood, Sandhya's marriage, and Sukanya's protective austerity. These stories diversify the archetypes of women: not just as wives or lovers, but as mothers, visionaries, ascetics, and defenders of ethical order. For instance, Maina's tale, told on the ninth day, reflects intergenerational wisdom and maternal strength, situating older women as bearers of continuity.

One of the most physically symbolic rituals occurs on the final day: Temi. In this rite, newly married women light oil lamps on their knees—a powerful bodily offering signifying devotion and endurance. Though the modern use of coolers to prevent burns reflects technological adaptation, the spiritual essence of self-sacrifice as empowerment remains intact. Here, the body becomes a sacred site of ritual knowledge. Through this curated ritual tapestry, women don't merely retell myths—they inhabit them. The act of storytelling, led predominantly by elder women or ritual specialists (*guni* or *sadhan*), becomes a pedagogical process—passing down values, cosmologies, and moral exemplars. Women collectively interpret these stories in ways that speak to their lived experiences, drawing strength from characters who embody resilience, intellect, and transformative potential.

Crucially, these tales destabilize the binary between the divine and the human, the mythical and the mundane. Goddesses like Ganga and Gauri, with their powers of creation, penance, and protection, mirror the emotional and spiritual labor of women in everyday life. Even earthly characters like Bihula or Sandhya become larger-than-life icons, bridging the gap between folklore and feminist ethics. Thus, the Madhu-Sravani tradition serves as an *unofficial archive of feminist resilience*, encoded not in texts but in oral performance. Women are not just subjects in these stories; they are their authors, performers, and preservers—asserting control over religious interpretation and cultural memory. Far from being passive inheritors, they embody a living continuum of ritual knowledge and folk epistemology.

5. Cultural Ecology of the Madhu-Shravani Festival

The *Madhu-Shravani* festival, an annual tradition in Mithila lasting about 14–15 days, continues to serve as a living conduit between folk culture and biodiversity conservation (ijrcs.org; wjarr.com). One of its earliest rituals, *Phool Lodhi*, involves newlywed women collecting seasonal native blooms—such as *Juhi*, *Jahi*, *Agar*, *Kusum*, *Tagar*, *Maina*, and *Mehndi*—to decorate ceremonial spaces. This practice goes beyond aesthetics; it reflects deep-rooted ecological knowledge and a conscious effort to preserve indigenous floral diversity.

The making of *Aripana* using biodegradable rice paste and natural pigments, alongside serpent motifs formed from *pithaar*, *chandan*, *mehndi*, and *kaajal*, exemplifies sustainable ritual art. These expressions are not only central to Maithil identity but also affirm a traditional ecological ethic that favors harmony with nature and the use of locally sourced, non-toxic materials. These practices promote a culture of ecological restraint and reverence for the environment within artistic and religious contexts. Ethnobotanical research from Mithila and adjoining regions confirms that many plants utilized in such rituals have multifaceted utility—as medicines, natural dyes, and components of folk craftsmanship—thereby anchoring ritual practices in tangible ecological functions and ensuring continuity of biocultural diversity (Mallik et al., 2020). Women play an indispensable role in the intergenerational transmission of such ecological traditions. Through floral collection, ritual artistry, and storytelling, they act as cultural ecologists and custodians of plant knowledge. Their agency in these domains fosters informal ecological education and community-based conservation. Moreover, the symbolic movement of ritual materials between the bride's natal and marital homes not only represents familial ties but also sustains a vernacular system of biodiversity stewardship (Chaudhary, 2023).

The final fire ritual, *Temi*, though physically demanding, encapsulates resilience, transition, and collective identity. Modern reinterpretations, such as opting for safer, symbolic alternatives, reflect an evolving ecological consciousness—where cultural authenticity and environmental prudence are delicately balanced. This dynamic adaptation highlights how traditional rituals can remain relevant while embracing environmental sustainability.

6. Folk Wisdom and Mythology in the Madhu-Sravani Festival

The Madhu-Sravani festival of Mithila is a rich tapestry of mythology, ritual practice, and ecological symbolism, deeply embedded in the oral traditions of the region. As an annual observance primarily celebrated by newlywed women in the Hindu calendar month of Shravana (July–August), the festival not only embodies rituals of fasting and purification but also acts as a conduit for transmitting folk narratives and indigenous wisdom across generations.

Central to the festival are the mythological tales of Lord Shiva and the Nagakanyas, which are recited during the eleven days of the ritual observance. One prominent narrative tells of a moment when Shiva, immersed in divine play with Parvati in a lotus-laden lake, deposited his semen on five lotus leaves, from which five serpent daughters were born. Parvati, unaware of their divine origin, reacted with jealousy upon seeing Shiva with these girls and attempted to harm them, prompting Shiva to reveal the truth of their birth. These daughters—Jaya Bishari, Dhothila Bhavani, Padmavathi, Mynah Bishari, and Manasa Bishari—later became revered as serpent goddesses, or *Nagakanyas*, symbolizing fertility, protection, and feminine power. A variation of the myth suggests

that these daughters emerged from strands of Shiva's hair that fell into Sonada Lake, initially blooming as lotuses and later transforming into human form at Shiva's wish (Roy, 1999; Jha, 1986).

The mythology is not merely ornamental but serves as a didactic vehicle through which social values and cosmological understandings are internalized. In particular, the figure of Manasa Bishari, the serpent goddess, is central to the festival and is closely associated with healing, protection from snakebites, and female agency. The famous narrative of Behula and Lakhindar, derived from the *Shiva Purana* and dramatized in regional ballads and performances, underscores themes of devotion, resilience, and the power of feminine determination. In this legend, Behula, the newlywed wife of Lakhindar, undertakes a perilous journey on a raft to the heavenly realm to reclaim her husband's life after he is bitten by a snake—a death orchestrated by the goddess Manasa due to her conflict with Lakhindar's father. The tale, while mythical, allegorically celebrates women's devotion and the transformative potential of love and prayer (McDaniel, 2004; Urban, 2001).

Such stories are not passive entertainments but perform critical pedagogical and ecological roles in the festival. They reveal a worldview in which nature, divinity, and human relationships are interdependent. As Sinha (2005) notes, oral traditions in Mithila often underscore the sacredness of nature and the role of women as its stewards. The Nagakanyas, born from lotus leaves or water, evoke a deep connection between femininity and aquatic ecology, reinforcing the idea that both nature and women are life-sustaining forces deserving reverence and protection.

Moreover, the festival enshrines values of kinship and familial respect. Traditionally, the newlywed bride returns to her parental home during this festival, marking a transition into womanhood and ritual responsibility. In some communities, even the groom resides with his in-laws during this period, symbolizing mutual respect and the integration of families. Through its weaving of kala (art), katha (narratives), and vrat (fasting rituals), Madhu-Sravani becomes a lived expression of Mithila's cultural heritage, where myth, ecology, and social structure converge (Jha & Jha, 2007).

The Madhu-Sravani festival exemplifies how mythological storytelling serves as a vessel for folk wisdom, carrying ethical, environmental, and gendered messages. It reflects the dialectical relationship between ritual and narrative, where stories are not merely recited but enacted in everyday life, shaping identity, belief, and community. Madhu-Sravani is not just a religious festival; it is a profound cultural tradition that embodies the principles of nature worship and ecofeminism. By centring women as the primary agents of religious practice and by venerating natural elements such as Shiva, Parvati, serpents (Naag), the Sun, the Moon, and planetary bodies, the festival reflects a harmonious relationship between the environment and the feminine spirit. This synthesis of spirituality, ecology, and gender empowerment makes Madhu-Shravani a significant example of ecofeminist philosophy in practice.

7. Worship of Nature in Madhu-Sravani

The Madhu-Sravani festival of Mithila embodies a deep ecological consciousness expressed through its ritual practices and symbolic narratives. This celebration, traditionally observed by newly married women, integrates nature worship, mythological storytelling, and ecological symbolism, demonstrating the rich intersection between folk religion and environmental reverence (Sinha, 2005).

7.1. Worship of Shiva and Parvati: Embodiments of Natural Forces

In the rituals of Madhu-Sravani, Shiva and Parvati occupy central roles, representing complementary forces of the natural world. Shiva, often associated with wilderness, mountains, and cremation grounds, symbolizes the raw, untamed aspects of nature. Parvati, in contrast, embodies fertility, nurturing, and agricultural cycles. Their joint veneration reflects a cosmic equilibrium between destruction and regeneration, underscoring the cyclicality of natural life and death. This duality echoes indigenous ecological ethics where nature is seen as both creator and destroyer, necessitating respect and balance (McDaniel, 2004).

7.2. Serpent Worship (Nāga Pūjā): Symbol of Biodiversity and Water Guardianship

One of the most distinctive features of Madhu-Sravani is Nāga worship, where women offer prayers and symbolic offerings to serpent deities, particularly the Nāga Kanyās such as Manasā, Jaya Bishari, and others. In Indic traditions, serpents are revered as guardians of subterranean water sources, representing fertility, rain, and protection. Their ecological role in controlling pests and maintaining balance within ecosystems aligns with a proto-conservationist ethos present in oral traditions and folk rituals (Roy, 1999). Through these practices, the festival conveys a tacit understanding of the interdependence between species and natural elements.

7.3. Celestial Bodies: Sun and Moon Worship

The Sun (Sūrya) and Moon (Chandra) are also venerated during Madhu-Sravani, reflecting agricultural dependence on celestial rhythms. The Sun is revered as the life-giver, crucial for crop cycles and energy, while the Moon is linked to menstruation, tides, and plant growth cycles. These rituals reinforce the awareness of nature's temporal rhythms, and the alignment of human activity with seasonal and lunar calendars—an embedded form of ecological timekeeping rooted in folk wisdom (Jha & Jha, 2007).

7.4. Planetary Worship: Cosmic Ecology

Traditional planetary worship (Navagraha Pūjā) during the festival acknowledges the influence of cosmic forces on human destiny. This cosmological framework is not merely astrological but represents a holistic worldview, where human life, natural elements, and celestial bodies form an interconnected system. Such rituals serve as reminders of humility and harmony with the cosmos, viewing nature as a sacred force rather than an object to be exploited (Urban, 2001).

8. Sita's Agni-Pariksha and the Temi Ritual: Trials of Loyalty and Gendered Expectations

The relationship between oral and written traditions in the context of literariness reveals how both modes shape the creation, transmission, and reception of literature. Oral tradition, is characterized by immediacy, communal participation, and a reliance on performance as a key aspect of meaning-making. In such contexts, the literary value is often embedded in the rhythm, repetition, and mnemonic devices that aid memory and engage audiences. The storyteller's role is central, with their voice, gestures, and improvisation contributing to the aesthetic experience. The oral mode allows for fluidity, as texts adapt to the needs of the moment, blurring the lines between performer and audience in what Bakhtin (1981) would call a dialogic exchange.

In contrast, the written tradition enables the fixing of words in time and space, allowing for reflective reading and complex syntactic structures. The stability of the written word facilitates critical analysis, intertextuality, and the development of abstract thought. Written literature can be preserved across centuries, enabling authors to reach audiences far removed in time and place, but it also detaches the text from the immediate human voice and performance. This detachment allows for what Barber (2007) calls "textual autonomy," where meaning resides in the text itself rather than in the performance context.

Despite their differences, both traditions share the capacity for literariness. As noted in the South Asian context, oral and written forms have historically coexisted, influencing each other's styles, themes, and modes of reception. Oral elements—such as repetition, formulaic expressions, and performative cues—are often embedded in written texts, while oral performances can incorporate excerpts from written works. The interplay of these modes enriches literature, making it both a fixed artifact and a living performance. In this sense, literariness is not confined to one medium; it is a quality that emerges from the aesthetic, cultural, and communicative functions of language, whether preserved on a page or carried in the living breath of the storyteller.

Source: https://www.madhesiyouth.com/opinion/revisiting-mithila-culture-gender-equality-madhes/

9. Ritual of Aripana

Aripana, known as Alpana in some regions, is one of the most distinctive and culturally rich art forms of Mithila. It is deeply rooted in the ritualistic and symbolic traditions of the region, where it originally served the dual purpose of purifying the ritual space and invoking divine blessings. Traditionally, the floor would first be smeared with a mixture of cow dung and clay, which was believed to have both purifying and protective properties. This prepared surface then became the canvas for the Aripana, which was drawn to mark auspicious occasions and to serve as an offering to deities, ensuring prosperity, fertility, and the well-being of the household.

The designs of Aripana are made using *Pithar*—a fine paste prepared by grinding rice into powder and mixing it with water. Women, often with remarkable skill and without the aid of tools, use their fingertips to create delicate and symmetrical motifs. The patterns typically incorporate sacred symbols such as the lotus, fish, tortoise, and geometric arrangements, each carrying specific ritual meanings. For instance, the lotus often symbolizes purity and divine beauty, while the fish is associated with fertility and abundance.

During the Madhu-Sravani festival, the making of Aripana takes on special significance. Women embellish the Puja Ghar or Gosain Ghar with elaborate designs, transforming the sacred space into a vibrant reflection of devotion and community heritage. This practice is not merely decorative; it becomes an act of cultural continuity, linking present generations with their ancestral traditions.

Source: https://deo-circle.blogspot.com/2013/11/madhushravani-festival-of-mithilanchal.html?m=1

10. Content of folk songs

Edward Said (1993) aptly describes folk songs as a dispersed body of cultural expression, often carrying the voices of communities that have been dominated, displaced, or silenced by the authoritative structures of textual traditions. Folk songs thus serve as living archives of collective memory, reflecting seasonal cycles, gendered experiences, religious devotion, and social values. Recent scholarship has also debated the need for reform in certain folk practices, especially those with gendered restrictions (Dwivedi, 2020).

The Madhu-Sravani festival of Mithila offers a rich corpus of such songs, sung primarily by women, which weave together mythological references, agricultural rhythms, and ritual obligations. For example:

Song:1 It evokes the passage of months
Savan vishar lel abtar

Bhadab vishar bhela Juwan
Aashin vishar khele jijhari
Kartik vishar gela aalsaya
Aghan Vishar bhela aalop
Chala apan desh aaship dai
Jiwathu hey kanya suhve tohra jeth bhey
Laakh baras ker hobe ahiwar
marking time through agricultural and ritual imagery, while blessing the bride with longevity and marital prosperity.

Song: 2
Purainik patta, jhilmil latta, tahi chade baisali Bishari mata
Haath supari khoicha paan Bishari karti shubh kalyan
It is devotional in tone, invoking Bishari Mata, a local goddess associated with health and protection, and offering symbolic items like betel leaves and supari as acts of propitiation.

Song:3
Lahu-lahu dhar sakhi bati
Dharkay komal chhati
Lahu-lahu paan pasare
Lahu-lahu dhurg duhu Jhapay
Madhur-madhur uth dahay
'Kumar' krah vidhi aajo
'Madhu-Sharavani' bhal kaje (singh,2012)
It depicts the ritual of Madhu-Sravani with sensory intensity, blending bodily metaphors with sacred acts, capturing the fusion of domestic intimacy and religious duty (Singh, 2012).
Collectively, these songs reveal how folk compositions operate as cultural narratives—dynamic, performative, and closely tied to the everyday experiences of rural women—while simultaneously expressing the intertwined themes of devotion, ecology, and gendered norms.

11. Intersecting Dimensions of Madhu-Sravani

The Madhu-Sravani festival exemplifies the intersection of folklore, ecofeminism, and religious tradition, creating a living cultural practice that is both spiritually significant and environmentally conscious. Deeply embedded in the socio-ecological fabric of Mithila, it highlights the interconnectedness of nature, mythology, and women's agency within a patriarchal context.

A defining aspect of the festival is the prominent role of women as custodians of ritual and tradition. In contrast to many mainstream Hindu practices, where priestly roles are largely male-dominated, Madhu-Sravani empowers women as ritual leaders, storytellers, and creators of sacred art forms such as Aripana. Through their roles in worship, oral narration, and symbolic artistry, women mediate divine power directly, challenging conventional structures of religious authority and asserting themselves as keepers of cultural wisdom and spiritual autonomy. Oral storytelling during the festival ensures that narratives of women's resilience, devotion, and strength—exemplified by heroines such as Bihula and Gauri—are transmitted across generations, presenting models of feminine power that are nurturing, protective, and transformative.

The festival also demonstrates how folklore serves as a vehicle for environmental stewardship. Its eco-conscious elements reveal an intimate knowledge of biodiversity and sustainable practices maintained by women. Rituals involving specific plants, flowers, and natural materials reflect traditional ecological wisdom, with practices like Phool Lodhi (flower collection) promoting the preservation of native flora. Similarly, Aripana designs created using natural pigments embody sustainable artistry. The worship of serpents (Naag Puja) further reinforces ecofeminist values by acknowledging snakes' ecological role in controlling pests and safeguarding water bodies, framing them as protectors of fertility and life. This sacred ecology predates modern environmentalism and embeds conservation ethics within religious devotion.

Socially, Madhu-Sravani reinforces themes of marital devotion, kinship bonds, and gender expectations. The Tami ritual, where women undergo a symbolic burning to ensure their husband's longevity, recalls Sita's Agni-Pariksha from the Ramayana, reflecting both the endurance of patriarchal ideals and the cultural valuation

of women's sacrifice. Yet the festival also holds space for women's emotional ties to their natal homes. The tradition of newlywed women returning to their parental households (naihar) during the festival highlights the enduring emotional and cultural significance of these bonds. Folk songs performed at this time capture the bittersweet emotions of marital separation and longing for familial comfort, giving the festival both celebratory and nostalgic dimensions.

Madhu-Sravani thus emerges as a multifaceted tradition—bridging mythology, ecology, and gender politics—that both challenges and reinforces aspects of the social order. While it retains patriarchal elements, it equally fosters female leadership, spiritual agency, and the intergenerational transmission of ecological and cultural knowledge. Preserving this festival is not merely an act of cultural heritage conservation but a recognition of folk traditions as vital repositories of environmental ethics and feminist thought. In an era of rapid modernization, documenting and integrating such practices into broader dialogues on sustainability, gender equality, and cultural preservation remains essential.

12. Conclusion

The Madhu-Sravani festival represents a distinctive blend of ecofeminism, folklore, and environmental consciousness, offering valuable insight into the enduring relationship between women, nature, and tradition in Mithila (Gaon Connection, 2020). Placing women at the heart of folk wisdom and spiritual leadership, the festival both affirms their agency in religious and ecological life and subtly challenges patriarchal norms.

Its rituals, storytelling traditions, and artistic forms like Aripana not only reaffirm the sacred human–nature connection but also serve as living practices that help preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage. The worship of deities such as Shiva, Parvati, and the Nagin sisters reflects an ancient ecological sensibility, where veneration of natural elements inherently promotes conservation. Through its focus on specific plant species, serpent worship, and the intergenerational sharing of ecological knowledge, the festival emerges as a lasting model of sustainable coexistence.

The celebration also provides women with a platform to assert spiritual and cultural authority, most visibly in their roles as priests and narrators of mythological tales. These narratives—centered on figures like Bihula, Sita, and Gauri—carry themes of sacrifice, perseverance, and divine wisdom, inspiring empowerment while simultaneously reflecting societal expectations of women. The Temi ritual, though rooted in tradition, recalls historical tests of loyalty such as Sita's Agni-Pariksha, underscoring the layered complexities of gender roles in the festival's context.

Madhu-Sravani is far more than a religious ceremony—it embodies the enduring power of folk traditions to protect cultural identity, nurture ecological balance, and promote women's agency. Safeguarding such festivals is vital not only for their historical and cultural worth but also for their role in advancing sustainability and empowering women. By recognizing and honoring the knowledge embedded in these practices, modern society can integrate folklore and ecological values into present-day dialogues on gender, the environment, and the preservation of heritage.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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