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The Role of Ritual Knowledge in Shaping Social Stratification in Medieval Odisha

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of ritual knowledge in shaping social stratification in Medieval Odisha between the ninth and sixteenth centuries A.D. It argues that the possession, transmission, and institutionalisation of ritual knowledge were closely linked with the construction and maintenance of social hierarchy. Brahmanical traditions, reinforced through temple institutions, land grants, and royal patronage, established ritual expertise as a source of religious authority and social prestige. In this process, Brahmins occupied a privileged position as custodians of sacred knowledge, while other social groups participated in ritual life according to their prescribed social status and occupational roles. Drawing upon inscriptions, literary texts, Smriti literature, temple records, and contemporary historical studies, the paper explores how ritual practices influenced patterns of social differentiation and legitimised political authority. It also examines the interaction between state power and religious institutions in promoting Brahmanical ideals, facilitating the integration of tribal and local communities into the expanding social order through processes of Brahmanisation and Sanskritisation. While ritual knowledge often reinforced existing hierarchies, it also created opportunities for social advancement, as ruling elites, administrative officials, and influential local groups acquired religious legitimacy through temple patronage, land donations, and participation in ritual activities. The study further highlights the significance of major temple centres, particularly those associated with Jagannath worship, as spaces where religious authority, economic resources, and political power converged. These institutions not only preserved sacred traditions but also contributed to the organisation of society by regulating access to ritual privileges and social recognition. By situating ritual knowledge within the broader framework of state formation and social mobility, the paper demonstrates that knowledge functioned both as an instrument of social control and as a medium through which individuals and communities negotiated status in Medieval Odisha.

Keywords: Medieval Odisha, Ritual Knowledge, Social Stratification, Brahmanisation, Sanskritisation, Temple Institutions, Social Mobility, State and Society.

Introduction

Knowledge has long been recognised as a powerful force in shaping social organisation, political authority, and cultural identity. In medieval Indian society, ritual knowledge occupied a privileged position because it determined access to religious authority, legitimised social status, and regulated relationships among different social groups. In Odisha, the expansion of Brahmanical institutions, temple-centred religious practices, and royal patronage strengthened the connection between ritual knowledge and the social order. Temples and agrahāras functioned not only as centres of worship but also as institutions for the preservation, transmission, and legitimisation of sacred knowledge.

The transmission of ritual knowledge was largely controlled by Brahmins, whose expertise in Vedic learning, religious ceremonies, and temple rituals conferred considerable social prestige and political influence. Through land grants, royal patronage, and temple administration, Brahmanical elites reinforced the hierarchical structure of society while providing ideological support to kingship and state authority. At the same

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time, temple institutions incorporated a wide range of occupational and service communities into the ritual sphere, creating a structured social order in which status was closely linked to ritual roles and religious responsibilities.

However, the emergence of increasingly elaborate and amorphous definitions of Varna and Jāti in a religiously responsive society engaged in the nearly continuous practice of temple ceremonial reflected a concomitant yet unevenly developed structural attribution of caste-based ritual transmission and fulfilment-related roles, privileges, rights, and restrictions to the various constituent groups of society. The relationship between knowledge and social stratification has long been a central theme in the study of premodern societies, where access to learning was often closely tied to hierarchy, power, and ritual authority. In the context of medieval Odisha, this relationship becomes particularly significant when examined through the lens of ritual practices and religious institutions. The ritual world, encompassing temples, priestly communities, sacred texts, and ceremonial performances and functioned not only as a spiritual domain but also as a structured social space in which knowledge was produced, preserved, and selectively distributed.¹

Medieval Odisha, known for its rich religious traditions and monumental temple culture, especially under dynasties such as the Eastern Ganga and Gajapati rulers, presents a compelling case for exploring how ritual knowledge reinforced social boundaries.² Brahmanical elites, temple functionaries, and specialized ritual practitioners occupied privileged positions within this framework, often controlling access to sacred knowledge such as Sanskrit texts, liturgical procedures, and esoteric doctrines.³ This control contributed to the consolidation of social stratification, as lower social groups were frequently excluded from formal systems of learning and ritual participation.^{4 5}

At the same time, the ritual sphere was not entirely rigid. The presence of vernacular traditions, devotional movements, and localized practices suggests that knowledge circulated in diverse forms, occasionally challenging established hierarchies. By examining inscriptions, temple records, literary texts, and ritual manuals, this study seeks to understand how knowledge functioned both as a tool of exclusion and as a medium of negotiation within the social fabric of medieval Odisha.

The complex definition of caste group expanded the space-tension field of rule within which Varna-based transmission was manifested and recognised. Additionally, the elaboration of concept, bases, and rule mirrored a growing need at the level of practice to regulate the consequent traffic in socio-cosmically charged knowledge, and form new communities of knowledge and practice.

Ultimately, this exploration highlights the dynamic interplay between knowledge systems and social order, revealing how ritual practices both reflected and shaped the stratified nature of society.

Role Of Temples as Social and Ritual Centres:

Temples in early and medieval India functioned as important social and ritual centers that extended far beyond religious worship. In the context of medieval Odisha, temples emerged as the most powerful institutions shaping society, economy, culture, and politics, especially under dynasties such as the Somavamshis and the Eastern Gangas.⁶ Far from being only places of worship, they functioned as integrated centres of public life. They were powerful institutions that combined religious authority with economic, cultural, and political influence. By assigning specific ritual roles to priests, elites, and devotees, temples reinforced existing social hierarchies and helped structure society according to established norms.⁷ At the same time, temples served as vibrant spaces for cultural gatherings, including music, dance, festivals, and community discussions, thereby strengthening social cohesion. They also played a significant economic role, as large-scale land grants, donations, and trade activities were often managed through temple institutions, making them key centers of local and regional economies.

In addition, temples also functioned as institutions of welfare. They provided food offerings (annadana), shelter for pilgrims, and support for the poor and travelers. This charitable role strengthened their image as a “house of humanity,” deeply embedded in the moral and social fabric of medieval Odisha. Politically, temples held considerable importance, as control over them meant influence over both society and resources, making them significant institutions in governance and power structures.⁸

Ritual as a Tool of Sovereignty and Social Order Reinforcement:

Rituals in medieval Odisha functioned as a powerful tool for reinforcing sovereignty and maintaining social order. They created a shared cultural identity that transcended social hierarchy, as festivals and religious observances involved participation from multiple social groups. Kings used these religious rituals to legitimize and strengthen their authority, where the deity was often regarded as the true sovereign and the king as its subordinate representative on earth.^{9 10} This belief system fostered deep emotional and religious loyalty among subjects. Rituals also promoted adherence to dharma, emphasizing moral conduct and social duties. The king was seen as the protector of social order and justice, and any disruption of established hierarchy was considered a violation of religious principles.¹¹ In this way, rituals helped maintain cohesion within a stratified society while simultaneously reinforcing caste-based roles and responsibilities.

Social Stratification:

In medieval Odisha, ritual was not merely a religious act; it functioned as the primary mechanism for defining and enforcing the caste system. Social stratification is clearly reflected in contemporary literary traditions, where texts composed in Sanskrit and Odia depict a society organized along rigid caste and occupational lines. Works such as the *Madala Panji* (the temple chronicle of the Jagannath Temple) and devotional poetry by Sarala Dasa and Jagannath Dasa illustrate how Brahmins and temple functionaries occupied a dominant position, while kings legitimized their authority through religious patronage.¹² These texts also highlight the roles of artisans, servitors, and peasants who were integrated into the temple-centered economy but remained socially subordinate. At the same time, Bhakti literature subtly challenged rigid hierarchies by emphasizing devotion over birth, suggesting a limited ideological space for questioning caste distinctions^{13 14}. Recent scholarship further indicates that although the caste system was deeply rooted in medieval society, it was not entirely rigid; a degree of occupational flexibility is reflected in literary and inscriptional records of medieval Odisha¹⁵. Because, the found the references of the participation of marginalized communities in ritual processes, revealing a dynamic interplay between exclusion and inclusion.¹⁶

Within this context, the Varna-Jati framework was continuously reinforced through ritual practices, which shaped and reflected social hierarchy. An individual's ritual role directly corresponded to their social position, and rulers strategically used ritual authority to consolidate their status at the top.¹⁷ Moreover, ritual responsibilities were closely tied to land ownership, linking religious function with economic power. Ritual participation thus acted as a gatekeeper for social inclusion, regulating access to status and privilege. However, despite its structured nature, the system allowed limited avenues for social mobility, as individuals and groups could occasionally elevate their standing through enhanced ritual participation and recognition.

Interconnection of Knowledge, Ritual & Social Hierarchy:

In medieval Odisha society, knowledge, ritual, and social hierarchy were closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Religious knowledge, especially of scriptures and sacred texts, was mainly controlled by learned persons, who used it to design, interpret, and perform rituals. Rituals codified status, reinforced shared values, and legitimized authority structures. Thus, knowledge created and controlled rituals, while rituals acted as a powerful means to sustain and legitimize the social hierarchy. For example, Jagannath Das used his knowledge to compose the Odia Bhagabata, which later

became a ritual practice to read and chant it every evening, and its readers gained higher social status within the social hierarchy.

In addition to literary traditions, temple-centered institutions in Odisha further strengthened this linkage between knowledge, ritual, and hierarchy. Temples functioned not only as places of worship but also as centers of learning where priestly groups preserved and transmitted sacred knowledge. The performance of daily rituals, festivals, and recitations required specialized expertise, which was restricted to particular social groups, thereby reinforcing occupational and caste-based divisions.¹⁸ Over time, participation in these ritual practices became a marker of social standing, ensuring that religious authority and social prestige remained closely tied to control over knowledge and ritual performance.

Conclusion and Summary:

The study concludes that ritual knowledge was a significant factor in shaping social stratification in Medieval Odisha between the ninth and sixteenth centuries A.D. The control and transmission of sacred knowledge strengthened the position of Brahmanical elites and provided ideological support for both political authority and the existing social order. Through temples, land grants, and religious institutions, ritual practices became deeply embedded in the administrative, economic, and cultural life of the region. At the same time, the findings reveal that ritual knowledge did not simply preserve social hierarchy; it also facilitated processes of social change. Royal patronage, temple endowments, and the adoption of Brahmanical customs enabled several social groups to acquire greater prestige and legitimacy within the prevailing social framework. Thus, social mobility in Medieval Odisha occurred not through the rejection of ritual traditions but through participation in and adaptation to them. The paper also highlights the importance of examining ritual knowledge within the broader context of state formation and social history. Ritual institutions served as instruments of governance, centres of learning, and agencies of cultural integration, linking political power with religious authority. The interaction between knowledge, ritual, and social status contributed to the development of a complex and dynamic society in which hierarchy and mobility existed simultaneously.

Overall, the study demonstrates that ritual knowledge was not merely a religious resource but a powerful social institution that shaped identities, legitimised authority, and influenced patterns of social mobility in Medieval Odisha. A closer examination of inscriptions, regional literature, and temple records continues to offer valuable insights into the interconnected histories of knowledge, power, and society in eastern India.

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