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Knowledge and Social Stratification in the Ritual World of Medieval Odisha

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between ritual practices, the distribution of knowledge, and the mechanisms of social stratification in medieval Odisha. During this era, the temple served as the epicenter of socio-political life, where rituals functioned as instruments of power that legitimized feudal structures and social hierarchies (Dash & Pattanaik, 2002). By examining religious knowledge encoded in temple practices, sacred texts, and performances, this study illustrates how specialized knowledge was restricted to Brahmins, temple servitors, and royal elites to reinforce societal divisions. Focusing on major temple institutions, particularly the Jagannath cult, the paper explores how access to specialized knowledge was restricted to certain groups such as Brahmins, temple servitors, and royal elites, thereby reinforcing hierarchical divisions within society. At the same time, it highlights the participation of marginalized communities in ritual processes, revealing a dynamic interplay between exclusion and inclusion. By analyzing inscriptions, literary sources, and ritual manuals, the study argues that knowledge in medieval Odisha was not merely intellectual but performative and embodied, shaping identities, occupations, and power relations. The transmission of ritual knowledge through hereditary lines further consolidated caste-based roles, while royal patronage of temples strengthened the alliance between political authority and religious expertise. However, the paper also considers moments of negotiation and fluidity, where devotional movements and popular practices challenged rigid hierarchies. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how knowledge operated as both a resource and a mechanism of control within the ritual sphere, offering insights into the broader socio-cultural fabric of medieval Odishan society.

Keywords: Social History, Social Stratification, Ritual Knowledge, Royal Patronage and Medieval Odisha.

Introduction

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 socio-religious structure of medieval Odisha was not static but dynamically shaped by the interaction of knowledge, ritual, and social hierarchy. Knowledge systems, often controlled by elite groups, legitimized ritual authority and reinforced social stratification, while ritual practices functioned as a medium through which power and status were expressed and maintained. At the same time, the synthesis of diverse religious and cultural traditions shows that there was a continuous process of negotiation and adaptation within society rather than rigid uniformity. Thus, medieval Odisha represents a complex social order where religion and knowledge together structured and sustained hierarchical relations while still allowing space for cultural integration. This interconnected system has left a lasting legacy, as many of its ritual practices and cultural traditions continue to influence Odia society today.

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