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Social Mobility in Medieval Odisha: A Study of Literature and Ritual

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Abstract

In medieval Odisha, social mobility was not fixed but constantly shaped by literature, religion, and ritual practices. This study explores how ordinary people navigated their place within a structured social order using the cultural tools available to them. While the period is often seen as dominated by rigid caste hierarchies, a closer look at vernacular writings and local traditions reveals a more fluid and changing society. A key role in this transformation was played by the Bhakti movement, especially through the works of the Panchasakha poets, who wrote in Odia rather than Sanskrit. By using the language of the people, they made spiritual ideas more accessible and challenged elite control over religious knowledge. At the same time, the Jagannath tradition created a shared religious space where people from different social backgrounds such as tribal communities, lower castes, and elites could come together in acts of devotion. Beyond these larger movements, everyday rituals in villages and temples also shaped social relations. Marginalized groups, including Adivasi and Dalit communities, often held important ritual roles as specialists and caretakers of sacred spaces. Their participation was not merely symbolic; it gave them a degree of recognition and influence within local power structures. By bringing together literary and ritual perspectives, this study shows that social identity in medieval Odisha was not simply inherited but actively negotiated. It highlights how communities, even those on the margins, found ways to assert their presence and reshape their social standing.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Ritual Practices, Identity and Hierarchy, Literature and Subaltern Agency.

Introduction:

Medieval Odisha is often imagined as a society tightly bound by caste hierarchies and rigid social divisions. At first glance, it appears to leave little room for change or movement between social groups. Yet, when we look more closely at the region's cultural and religious life, a different picture begins to emerge such as one of negotiation, adaptation, and subtle transformation. Social mobility in this period did not always take the form of open rebellion or dramatic shifts; instead, it unfolded gradually through everyday practices, shared beliefs, and cultural expressions.

One of the most important forces shaping this process was the rise of vernacular literature. The spread of devotional writing in the Odia language, especially through the works of the Panchasakha poets, brought spiritual ideas closer to ordinary people. No longer confined to Sanskrit texts accessible only to elites, religious knowledge became part of popular culture. These literary traditions did more than express devotion; they created new ways for people to imagine themselves, articulate their identities, and question established social boundaries.

At the same time, ritual practices played a crucial role in structuring and reshaping social relations. The Jagannath tradition, centered in Puri, offered a unique space where diverse communities could participate in shared acts of worship. While this did not erase social differences entirely, it created moments of interaction and inclusion that softened rigid divisions. Beyond major temples, village-level rituals and local festivals also provided

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opportunities for different groups to assert their roles and importance within the community.

This study seeks to understand how literature and ritual together enabled forms of social mobility in medieval Odisha. By focusing on both textual traditions and lived practices, it highlights how individuals and communities actively negotiated their positions within society. In doing so, it argues that social identity in this period was not simply inherited, but continuously shaped through cultural participation and collective experience.

Social Stratification in Medieval Odisha: Evidence from Literature:

Medieval Odisha exhibited a complex tapestry of social hierarchy, where literature and ritual practices collectively reflect and reinforce stratification, illuminate the roles of distinct communities, and reveal mechanisms of mobility or constraint across caste, clan and temple-centered network. Literary works in Odia especially devotional poetry, translations of epics, and saintly narratives are offer valuable glimpses into how hierarchy was understood and experienced in everyday life. These texts often acknowledge the presence of caste divisions, occupational roles, and social ranking, but they do not always present them as fixed or unquestionable. Instead, they show how people thought about status, dignity, and belonging within a layered social world.^{1 2}As Balaram Dasa, he challenged traditional Brahminical hegemony over knowledge and declared before King Prataparudra Deva that everyone has the right to acquire knowledge.³

What makes these literary sources particularly important is the way they give voice to broader sections of society. Through accessible language and familiar themes, writers brought religious and social ideas into the lives of ordinary people. In many cases, devotion was presented as more important than birth, suggesting that spiritual merit could challenge inherited status. Stories of humble devotees gaining divine recognition, or of morally upright individuals transcending social barriers, subtly questioned rigid hierarchies without directly overturning them.

Across different occupations and family lineages in medieval Odisha, literary and narrative sources reveal a society that was more fluid than it might first appear.⁴ These accounts show how ritual approval, everyday work, and social movement were closely connected. Rather than being fixed, social position could shift through participation in recognized practices and community life. Artisans, for instance, were not only valued for their skills but also for their roles in ritual settings, especially in temple-related activities. Belonging to guilds or professional groups gave individuals a sense of identity and support, while also opening pathways to wider social networks. In some cases, people on the margins were granted limited or in-between permissions that allowed them to take part in certain rituals or social functions, even if they were excluded from others.

At the same time, these texts did not completely reject the existing order. Rather, they reflect a balance between acceptance and critique. Social roles were still recognized, but literature created space for imagining alternative forms of respect and identity. By reading these works closely, we see that medieval Odisha's social structure was not simply imposed from above like it was also interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes reshaped through cultural expression.

Ritual Cultures as Loci of Mobility:

Ritual cultures function as dynamic arenas where mobility manifests through sacred spaces, performative circuits, and embodied practices, enabling social actors to navigate hierarchies, reconfigure affiliations, and negotiate status across regional and temporal scales in medieval Odisha. Ritual cultures also functioned as important spaces where social boundaries could be both reinforced and quietly negotiated. Temples, festivals, village ceremonies, and devotional gatherings were not only expressions of faith but also arenas where different social groups came into contact with one another. Participation in these rituals often provided individuals and communities with visibility, recognition, and a sense of belonging that went beyond their assigned social positions.⁵

Even those from lower or marginalised backgrounds often found roles within these ritual spaces. They might serve in temple activities, assist in festivals, or contribute to sacred performances. These roles gave them a form of recognition and helped them connect with wider networks of religious and local authority.^{6 7} While this did not completely erase social differences, it did create moments where status could feel more flexible and open to negotiation.

In this sense, ritual culture worked like a bridge between different sections of society. It allowed people to move, interact, and sometimes improve their standing through participation and service. Medieval Odisha's ritual world was therefore not just about maintaining tradition but it was also about creating opportunities for connection, recognition, and subtle forms of social change.

Institutions and Interfaces: Education, Endowments and Legal Norms:

Education, endowments, and legal norms together shaped the channels through which social mobility operated in medieval Odisha, with monasteries, village schools, and temple trusts mediating knowledge, patronage, and customary law to either reinforce or challenge hierarchical boundaries. In this context, the education functioned as a primary interface for mobility, moving beyond the walls of Sanskrit *pathashalas* to include vernacular training for the isolated caste people.⁸ By mastering administrative skills, land records, and the Odia script, these individuals bridged the gap between the royal court and the village, turning literacy into a ladder for political power.⁹ This shift transformed education from a ritual privilege into a practical tool for governance,

allowing a professional class to emerge that was defined by its skill rather than just its lineage.

At the same time, Religious Endowments served as the economic backbone of the social structure. Land grants made by kings, local chiefs, and wealthy patrons supported temples, educational centers, and ritual specialists. They were doing more than just performing an act of piety; they were creating institutional interfaces that managed vast resources. These endowments provided a legal and financial framework that integrated marginalized groups into the temple economy.¹⁰ For instance, priests, artisans, and service providers on endowed land gained a recognized legal status within the temple hierarchy, which often protected them from the arbitrary whims of local feudal lords and provided a stable identity within the broader imperial system.

Finally, Legal Norms in medieval Odisha were not static codes but were lived experiences mediated through the temple and the throne. The concept of *Dharma* acted as a flexible legal interface where customary local practices could be synthesized with royal law. This allowed for a process of negotiation where upwardly mobile groups could have their status formalized through royal decrees or ritual recognition.¹¹ By fulfilling specific service roles known as *Sebayats* of various castes and tribal groups secured their social and legal standing in the eyes of the state.¹² However, these legal frameworks were not always rigid; they often adapted to local conditions and negotiated practical realities on the ground. In many cases, temple authorities and village councils played an important role in mediation, blending ritual authority with legal decision-making. Together, education, endowments, and legal norms formed an interconnected system that structured medieval Odishan society while still allowing room for negotiation, adaptation, and limited forms of social mobility. Thus, through the combination of schooling, land management, and legal recognition, medieval Odisha maintained a complex social balance that allowed for growth and integration within its traditional framework.

Conclusion:

This study of social mobility in medieval Odisha through literature and ritual practices highlights a society that was more dynamic and negotiable than a strictly rigid caste model suggests. While social hierarchy remained an important organizing principle, it was continually shaped and sometimes softened by cultural, religious, and institutional practices. The interaction between vernacular literature, especially Bhakti traditions, and ritual life created meaningful spaces where identity and status could be reinterpreted.

One of the key findings of this study is that vernacular literary traditions, particularly those associated with the Panchasakha poets, played a crucial role in democratizing religious knowledge. By using the Odia language and emphasizing devotion over birth-based status, these texts allowed broader sections of society to engage with

spiritual ideas and imagine alternative forms of social recognition. Literature thus became not only a medium of devotion but also a subtle tool for questioning and reshaping social boundaries.

Another important finding is the role of ritual culture, especially within the Jagannath tradition and village-level religious practices, as a space of interaction and limited inclusion. Ritual participation enabled marginal and lower-status groups to occupy visible roles within religious and social life, creating opportunities for recognition and engagement with dominant power structures. Although these interactions did not completely dismantle hierarchy, they allowed for moments of negotiation and symbolic equality.

Finally, the study shows that social mobility in medieval Odisha was not always formal or institutionalized but often operated through everyday cultural participation. Literature, ritual, and institutional arrangements such as temple endowments and customary norms together formed a flexible social framework. Within this framework, identity was not only inherited but also actively shaped through participation, contribution, and cultural expression, revealing a society marked by both structure and subtle change.

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