

Bali and Balangir: A Study on Animal Sacrifice in Odisha, India

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Abstract

Animal sacrifice (locally known as Bali or Pashu Bali) continues to be an important ritual practice among tribal and rural communities of Balangir district in Western Odisha. The present study examines the historical background, ritual process, and socio-cultural significance of animal sacrifice in the region. Based on field surveys, interviews with ritual specialists, and secondary sources, the study analyzes major festivals such as Sulia Jatra and other agrarian and goddess-centered rituals. The findings suggest that animal sacrifice is not merely a religious act but an integral cultural institution that reinforces community identity, social cohesion, and traditional belief systems related to agriculture, fertility, and protection. At the same time, the study also discusses contemporary challenges, including legal restrictions, animal welfare concerns, economic burden, and changing social attitudes. The paper argues for a balanced approach that recognizes the cultural significance of the practice while engaging with evolving ethical and legal frameworks.

Keywords: Animal Sacrifice, Bali Pratha, Tribal Culture, Folk Religion, Cultural Identity, Balangir District, Western Odisha

Introduction

Balangir, often described as the cultural heart of Western Odisha, is renowned for its rich traditions, vibrant festivals, and deeply rooted ritual practices preserved over centuries. The district represents a confluence of tribal, folk, and classical cultural elements, creating a distinctive socio-cultural fabric. Festivals such as Nuakhai, Sulia Jatra, Makar Sankranti, Kalasi Jatra, and Chhatar Jatra are not merely celebratory occasions; they function as important platforms for reinforcing communal bonds and sustaining ancestral customs (Kumar 1984).

Within this cultural milieu, ritual animal sacrifice locally known as *Bali Pratha* or *Pashu Bali* forms an integral component of certain religious ceremonies and reflects ancient agrarian beliefs associated with fertility, protection, and prosperity (Behera 2002). Among several tribal and marginalized communities of Balangir, animal sacrifice serves as a symbolic medium of communication with deities, spirits, and ancestors. Offerings are commonly made to local deities such as Sulia Pitha, Maa Pataneswari, Maa Samaleswari, and other *Grāmadevatās*, who are believed to ensure agricultural abundance, health, and collective well-being. These rituals are typically performed in sacred groves, temple courtyards, or open village spaces during festival seasons and are accompanied by music, dance, and, in some cases, spirit possession (Guzy 2014).

Historical Background of Animal Sacrifice

Textual traditions provide an important framework for understanding the historical roots of animal sacrifice in India. According to the *Kālika Purāṇa*, sacrifice and donation performed in accordance with prescribed ritual injunctions are believed to please the goddess and yield spiritual merit. The text specifies that sacrifices are permitted only near a goddess temple, *Śakti Pīṭha*, or *Devāyatana*, and not within private homes or public roads (*Kālika Purāṇa*, ch. 58). The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* identifies auspicious timings for sacrifice, particularly *Amāvasyā*, *Navamī*, and *Caturdaśī*, with nocturnal offerings considered especially efficacious for propitiating the goddess.

The *Kālika Purāṇa* further permits the sacrifice of animals such as goats, sheep, and buffaloes while explicitly prohibiting the sacrifice of cows and humans. Tantric texts such as the *Tantrasāra*

emphasise ritual qualifications, including purification through bathing, knowledge of mantras, and strict adherence to ritual discipline. Sacrifice, according to these texts, must not be performed in anger or disorder, and Brahmanas are generally restricted from performing *bali* unless initiated as *tantric sādhanas*. The ritual procedure involves worship of the goddess using Agamic mantras, incense, lamps, and oblations, followed by prayers seeking forgiveness and the restoration of peace (Tantrasāra; *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*).

Animal sacrifice is one of the most enduring ritual traditions in India, with origins traceable to the Vedic period. Vedic texts, including the *Yajurveda* and the *Brāhmaṇas*, describe elaborate sacrificial rites such as the *Aśvamedha* (horse sacrifice) and *Gomedha* (cow sacrifice), which were believed to maintain cosmic order and ensure prosperity. In later periods, inscriptions and imperial edicts reflect changing attitudes toward such practices. Emperor Aśoka's Rock Edicts, particularly Rock Edict I, record restrictions on animal slaughter and reveal early ethical concerns regarding unnecessary killing, indicating a gradual ideological shift toward *ahiṃsā* (Thapar 1997).

Ultimately, animal sacrifice in regions such as Balangir must be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon. While it sustains cultural heritage, reinforces social cohesion, and reaffirms traditional cosmologies, it simultaneously raises ethical debates, shapes moral sensibilities, and influences the intergenerational transmission of values within a changing socio-legal landscape (Jena 2022).

Study Area

Balangir district, situated in the western part of Odisha, possesses a rich historical and cultural legacy. Historically, the region formed an integral part of the princely state of Patna, which came under the rule of the Chauhan dynasty from the fourteenth century CE. Sonapur (present-day Subarnapur), which was earlier subordinate to Patna, emerged as a separate princely state during the seventeenth century.

Geographically, Balangir is bounded by Bargarh district to the north, Kalahandi to the south, Kandhamal, Boudh, Deogarh, and Subarnapur to the east, and Nuapada to the west (Figure 1). The district's physical landscape is characterised by the Gandhamardan hill range and a network of rivers, including the Tel, Suktel, Ong, Lant, and Raul, which play a significant role in shaping the

agrarian economy, settlement patterns, and ritual calendar of the region (Behera 2002; Mishra 2015).

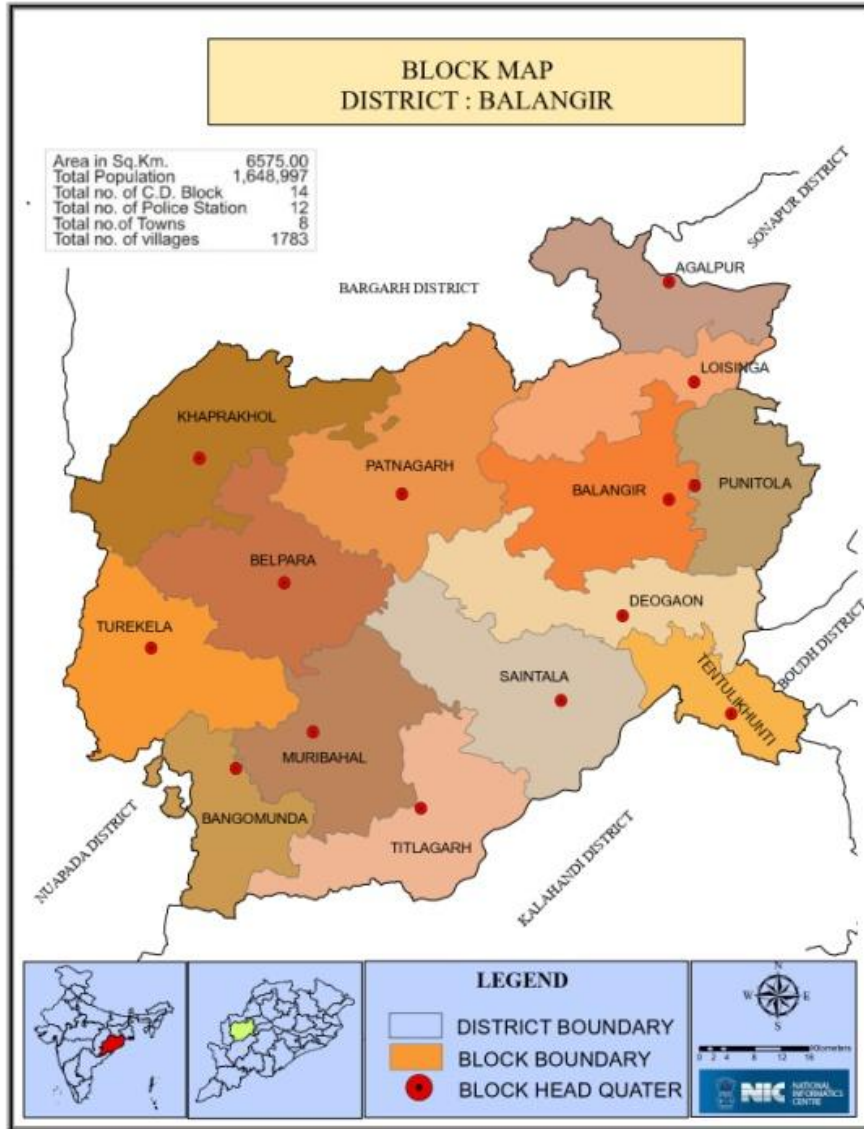


Figure 1: Study Area

Mode of Worship

Animal sacrifice in Western Odisha, particularly in districts such as Balangir, follows a highly ritualised mode of worship that integrates tribal, folk, and rural Hindu religious traditions (Behera 2024). These practices are commonly observed during village festivals dedicated to local deities

or *Grāmādevatās* (*jātrās*), harvest-related rituals such as Nuakhai, ceremonies intended to avert calamities, vow-fulfilment rites (*pratigyā*), and certain fertility or life-cycle rituals.

The venues for these rituals vary from temple courtyards and sacred groves to village commons (*chaur*) or specially demarcated sacrificial grounds located near the settlement. In tribal and folk traditions, the rituals are usually officiated by ritual specialists such as the *dehuri*, *ojha*, or village shaman/oracle, who function as intermediaries between the human and the divine worlds (Pradhan 2019).

The ritual process begins with the selection and consecration of the animal. Prior to sacrifice, the animal is ritually bathed, garlanded, and anointed with turmeric and vermilion as acts of purification and sacralisation. A range of offerings rice, flowers, coconuts, country liquor, betel leaves, sesame seeds, turmeric, incense, and lamps are assembled and presented to the deity. These offerings symbolically transform the animal into a sacred offering dedicated to divine will. The officiating priest or ritual specialist recites mantras or sings folk invocations, accompanied by traditional musical instruments such as the *dhol*, *niśān*, and *taśā* (Ota 1998).

Fire or oil lamps are lit on the altar, and ritual speech whether in the form of Sanskrit mantras or indigenous devotional songs serves to invoke the deity and sanctify the ritual space. In tribal contexts, poetic invocations in local dialects are common, highlighting the close relationship between language, ritual performance, and community identity (Mishra 2020).

The act of sacrifice is carried out with precision and strict adherence to customary norms. Typically, the animal is sacrificed with a single, swift cut to the throat using a sharp knife or sword (*khaṇḍā*), ensuring ritual correctness and minimising suffering. During festivals such as Sulia Jatra and Boil Jatra, the animal is first worshipped with hibiscus flowers (*mandār phūl*), incense (*dhūpa*), and lighted lamps (*dīpa*). In some cases, the animal is also offered a small ceremonial feed, locally known as *chara*, prior to sacrifice. The subsequent distribution and communal consumption of the sacrificial meat reinforce social cohesion and collective participation in the ritual act (Purohit 2018).

Table 1: Major Ritual Festivals of Balangir District Involving Animal Sacrifice

Name of the festival	God/Goddess	Month	Place and location	Animal/Birds
Sulia Jatra	Sulia Budha	Pausa (December-January)	Khairguda, Kirabhal, Madhiapali, Chantipadar	Goats, Cocks, Bulls
Boyle Jatra	Devi Pataneswari, Devi Samleiswari	Aswin (September-October)	Patnagarh, Balangir	Goats, Cocks
Patkhanda Jatra	Devi Patakhada Devi Samelei	Aswin (September-October)	Jarasingha, Uparajhar	Goats, Cocks
Jaden Jatra	Jaden Budha	Chaitra Shukladasahara (March-April)	Patharla, Antarla, Titalagarh	Pigs, cocks
Kado Jatra	Dharani Maa	Shravana (July-August)	Bhanjipali, Sadeipali, Negipali, Badhangorh, Kusang, Gandharel,	Sheeps, goats
Maheswari Jatra	Maheswari Devi	Aswin (September-October)	Balangir	Goats, Sheeps
Ghantasuni Jatra	Maa Ghantasuni	Aswin (Shukla Pakhya) (September-October)	Titalagarh subdivision	Goats, Cocks

Maden Jatra	Dharani Maa	Shravana (July-August)	Behrapali, Sadeipali, Negipali, Gandharel, Kasang	Goats, Sheep
Dwaraseni Jatra	Maa Dwaraseni	Aswin (September-October)	Sindhekela	Goats
Charadei Jatra	Charadei Devi	Kartika (October-November)	Balangir	Goats
Nagdeo Jatra	Nagdeo (Serpent Deity)	Chaitra (March-April)	Balangir	Goats
Budhi Aai Jatra	Budhi Aai Devi	Aswin (September-October)	Balangir, Bandhanghor,	Goats
Chhelia Pahad Jatra	Local Deity	Aswin (September-October)	Bharsuja, Uparbahal, Kesipali	Goats
Buddha Deo Jatra	Budha Deo	Pousa (December-January)	Loisingha	Goats

Sulia Jatra

Sulia Jatra is one of the most prominent and widely observed ritual festivals of Western Odisha, particularly in Balangir district, attracting thousands of participants and spectators every year (Panda 1990). Celebrated annually on the second Tuesday of the Hindu month of Pausa (December–January), the festival is centred on large-scale ritual animal sacrifice and represents a living cultural tradition of the Kondh tribal community.

The principal celebration takes place at Khaireguda village under Tusura Police Station, while associated rituals are also performed in neighbouring villages such as Chhatipadar, Mirdhapali, Kharlikani, Kultapada, Larkipali, and Jadamunda (Panda 2013). The origins of Sulia Jatra are traced back more than five centuries and are associated with the worship of Sulia Baba regarded as a local manifestation of Lord Mahadeva and the *Aradhya Devi* (Pasayat 2009). The main ritual grounds are known as *Bada Khala* at Khaireguda and *Sankhala* at Kumuria village. During the jatra, thousands of animals, including goats, buffaloes, and birds (mainly cocks), are ritually sacrificed as offerings to the deity.



Figure 2: Image of Animal Sacrifice during Sulia Jatra

Boil Jatra

Boil Jatra is one of the most vibrant and culturally significant festivals of Patnagarh in Balangir district. The festival involves the worship of Goddess Pataneswari, Goddess Dangei Devi, and Goddess Samaleswari, all of whom occupy a central position in the religious and social life of the region. Pataneswari Devi, the presiding deity of Patnagarh, is believed to be an incarnation of Goddess Durga, and the origins of her temple tradition are attributed to Ramai Deva, the first Chauhan ruler of Western Odisha.

A distinctive feature of Boil Jatra is spirit possession, during which the deity is believed to enter the body of the ritual specialist known as the *Barua*. In this state, the Barua moves through the streets of Patnagarh, interacting with devotees, listening to their *manasika* (personal vows or wishes), and offering spiritual counsel. Ritual animal sacrifice forms a central component of the festival. Devotees offer animals such as goats locally classified as *Bukka* (male goat) and *Pethi* (female goat) as well as cocks and pigeons, either in fulfilment of vows or in gratitude for blessings received. Following the sacrifice, the Barua ritually consumes a small portion of the animal's blood, after which the cooked meat is distributed among devotees as *prasāda*.



Figure 3: Image of Animal Sacrifice during Boil Jatra

Pathkhanda Jatra

Pathkhanda Jatra is celebrated at Jarasingha, a historic village situated on the banks of the Songad River in Balangir district. Historically under the Patna kingdom, Jarasingha has long been devoted to the worship of Budhi Aai, locally known as Pathkhanda Devi, a goddess symbolising unity, strength, and protection within the community (Barik 2009).

The festival is observed annually on the full moon day of the month of Ashada (June–July), although the most elaborate celebrations take place in the month of Aswina (September–October), beginning on the second day of the bright fortnight (*Śukla Pakṣa*). According to local oral traditions, Pathkhanda Devi is believed to reside in a sacred *mahula* tree, and her divine presence is represented by three iron idols that constitute the focal objects of worship. A major ritual occurs on Vijayadasami, the concluding day of the festival, when the goddess is believed to possess the body of the *Barua*, marking the climax of the jatra.



Figure 4: Image of Animal Sacrifice during Pathkhanda Jatra

Jaden Jatra

Jaden Jatra is celebrated primarily by the Kandha tribal community in the villages of Patharla, Santlada, Antarla, and Titilagarh in Balangir district. Rooted in ancient agrarian traditions, the festival functions as a rain-seeking ritual essential to the subsistence economy of the region (Patnaik 2017). The presiding deities of the festival are Kandhen Budha and Jaden Budhi, who are

invoked for timely rainfall and agricultural prosperity. The festival is observed annually during the month of Chaitra (March–April) on *Śukla Daśamī*, the tenth day of the bright lunar fortnight.



Figure 5: Image of Animal Sacrifice during Jaden Jatra

Dwaraseni Jatra

Dwaraseni Jatra is a major traditional festival celebrated annually in Sindhekela village of Balangir district. The festival is dedicated to Maa Dwaraseni, a revered goddess particularly worshipped among the Adivasi (tribal) communities. Observed during the month of Ashwin (September–October), the festival reflects strong tantric influences. Maa Dwaraseni is believed to be a tantric goddess whose cult developed alongside the spread of Tantrism in eastern India (Kakati 2017).

Maden Jatra

Maden Jatra is an important ritual festival celebrated in several villages of Balangir district during the month of Pausa (December–January). Deeply embedded in the agrarian culture of the region, the festival centres on the worship of Goddess Maden, a powerful rural and tribal deity believed to ensure agricultural prosperity and protect the community from misfortune. Animal sacrifice constitutes a central ritual feature of the festival. The jatra is observed in villages such as Beherapali, Sadeipali, Negipali, Gandharel, and Kusang.

Kado Jatra

Kado Jatra is one of the most significant agrarian festivals celebrated across several villages of Balangir district. The term *Kado* refers to the preparation and enrichment of soil prior to the transplantation of paddy seedlings. The festival is celebrated annually during the month of Shravana (July–August), usually following the Dhel Jatra. Villages observing Kado Jatra include Bhanjipali, Sadeipali, Negipali, Badhanghor, Kusang, Gandharel, Kapilabahal, and Beherapali.

On the morning of the festival, villagers worship Dharani Ma (Earth Mother) in the fields, offering milk, flowers, and incense to seek her blessings for fertile soil, timely rainfall, and abundant harvests. The ritual reflects the belief that agricultural success is directly dependent on divine favour.



Figure 6: Image of Animal Sacrifice during Kado Jatra

Ghantasuni Jatra

Ghantasuni Jatra is a prominent festival celebrated at Titilagarh in Balangir district in honour of Maa Ghantasuni. Observed during the month of Ashwin (September–October), the festival is marked by elaborate rituals and large-scale participation. A distinctive feature of the jatra is the practice of *bali pratha*, involving the sacrifice of goats, buffaloes, and hens. On the day of the main *pūjā*, the goddess is ceremonially bathed with milk, curd, and turmeric, and an *Akhanda Dīpa* (eternal lamp) is lit.



Figure 7: Image of Animal Sacrifice during Ghantasuni Jatra

Charadei Jatra

Charadei Jatra is a major festival celebrated annually in Balangir district during the month of Kartika (October–November) on *Śukla Ekādaśī*. The festival honours Charadei Devi, worshipped as *Ṣaḍbhujā Durgā*, the six-armed form of Goddess Durga symbolising power, protection, and the triumph of good over evil. Rituals commence on *Śukla Daśamī* with the consecration of sacred water, regarded as the embodiment of Lord Shiva. On the main day, a ceremonial umbrella (*chhatra*) is carried through the settlement, signifying the presence of the goddess.

Maheswari Jatra

Maheswari Jatra is one of the most revered festivals of western Odisha, particularly celebrated at Badhanghor village in Balangir district. The festival is dedicated to Goddess Maheswari and takes place at the Maheswari Gudi (temple). It is celebrated twice annually during Aswin (September–October) and on Chaitra Purnima. Goddess Maheswari is regarded as the *kuladevi* (clan goddess) of the Dumal community.



Figure 8: Image of Animal Sacrifice during Maheswari Jatra

Budhi Aai Jatra

Budhi Aai Jatra is an important traditional tribal and religious festival of western Odisha, especially observed in parts of Balangir and Bargarh districts. The festival centres on the worship of Budhi Aai (Old Mother Goddess), who is revered as a powerful village deity and protector of the community. The jatra is observed annually and involves collective worship, offerings, and ritual sacrifice.

Nagdeo Jatra

Nagdeo Jatra is an important tribal festival celebrated in Balangir district, focused on the worship of Nagdeo, the serpent deity. The festival reflects indigenous beliefs associated with fertility, protection, and the control of natural forces, particularly those related to water and agriculture.

Chhelia Pahad Jatra

Chhelia Pahad Jatra is one of the most vibrant tribal festivals of western Odisha, celebrated mainly in the hilly regions of Balangir district. The festival is observed in villages such as Bharsuja, Uparbahal, and Keseipali and reflects strong connections between landscape, tribal identity, and ritual practice.

Budhadeo Jatra

Budhadeo Jatra is a tribal festival celebrated in villages such as Nagaon and Loisingha in Balangir district. The festival centres on the worship of Budhadeo, a revered tribal deity, and is marked by collective rituals, offerings, and community participation, reflecting the cohesion and shared belief systems of the local population.

Government Response and Legal Framework

The practice of animal sacrifice during major festivals in Balangir district such as Sulia Jatra, Maheswari Jatra, and Ghantasuni Jatra has elicited a complex and often contested response from the state authorities. This response combines judicial interventions, statutory regulations, administrative directives, and cautious negotiations with tribal and religious communities. Among

these festivals, Sulia Jatra has attracted the greatest legal scrutiny due to the large number of animals primarily goats, sheep, and buffaloes traditionally sacrificed during the ritual (Mohanty 2015; Dash 2018). In 2005, the Orissa High Court issued a landmark judgment prohibiting animal sacrifice during Sulia Jatra, citing concerns over public order and animal welfare. This decision was subsequently reaffirmed in 2011, reinforcing the state's commitment to regulating ritual slaughter (Orissa High Court 2011). The principal legal instrument governing such practices is the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960*, which explicitly prohibits the infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering on animals. In addition, Sections 428 and 429 of the Indian Penal Code criminalize the maiming or killing of animals, prescribing penalties that include fines and imprisonment.

In Odisha, these national legal provisions are further reinforced through district-level administrative orders and policing measures, particularly during large public festivals. However, enforcement remains uneven during culturally sensitive rituals such as the goat and sheep sacrifices associated with Maheswari Jatra or the buffalo and poultry offerings observed during Ghantasuni Jatra. This inconsistency largely stems from socio-political pressures, local resistance, and the deep cultural embeddedness of sacrificial practices within tribal and agrarian belief systems (Patra 2021).

Impact of Animal Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice represents one of the most enduring ritual traditions in India, with origins traceable to the Vedic period. Vedic literature, including the *Yajurveda* and the *Brāhmaṇas*, contains detailed accounts of ritual animal offerings such as the *Aśvamedha* (horse sacrifice) and *Gomedha* (cow sacrifice), which were believed to appease deities, ensure prosperity, and uphold cosmic order (*ṛta*) (Bharati 1965). Epigraphic sources and imperial edicts from later historical periods further attest to both the prevalence of animal sacrifice and evolving state attitudes toward the practice. Emperor Ashoka's Rock Edicts, particularly Rock Edict I, refer to restrictions on animal slaughter in royal kitchens and express ethical concerns regarding unnecessary killing. These inscriptions reflect an early ideological shift toward the principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), especially under the influence of Buddhist moral philosophy (Thapar 1997).

In regions such as Balangir, the impact of animal sacrifice must be understood as multifaceted. On the one hand, the practice sustains cultural heritage, reinforces communal solidarity, and reaffirms indigenous cosmologies rooted in agrarian cycles and ancestral worship. On the other hand, it raises ethical debates concerning animal rights, evolving moral sensibilities, and intergenerational transmission of values in a rapidly changing socio-legal environment (Govindrajan 2015). Addressing these impacts requires a balanced and context-sensitive approach that respects cultural traditions while promoting awareness of animal welfare and encouraging alternative, non-violent forms of ritual expression (Panigrahi 2020).

Conclusion

Animal sacrifice in Balangir district is not an isolated or incidental ritual practice but a deeply embedded cultural institution shaped by historical experience, ecological conditions, religious belief systems, and social organization. Across festivals such as Sulia Jatra, Boil Jatra, Pathkhanda Jatra, Jaden Jatra, Dwaraseni Jatra, Maden Jatra, Kado Jatra, Charadei Jatra, Maheswari Jatra, and Ghantasuni Jatra, sacrificial rituals function as a central medium through which communities negotiate their relationships with the divine, nature, and one another.

Rooted in agrarian cycles, fertility concerns, and ancestral cosmologies, these rituals articulate a worldview in which life, death, and regeneration are interconnected and ritually regulated. The continued role of ritual specialists such as the *Dehuri*, *Barua*, *Ojha*, and *Mali* highlights the persistence of indigenous systems of religious authority that operate alongside and at times in tension with Brahmanical and state-regulated religious frameworks (Pradhan 2019). Through communal feasting, music, spirit possession, and shared ritual labour, animal sacrifice reinforces social cohesion, redistributes resources, and reaffirms collective identity, particularly among tribal and marginal agrarian communities (Skoda 2018). Animal sacrifice in Balangir must therefore be understood within its broader socio-cultural, historical, and ecological context. Rather than viewing it solely through legalistic or moral binaries, a holistic interpretative framework is essential one that recognizes the practice as a living tradition while engaging critically with its implications in a contemporary ethical and constitutional landscape.

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