

Facets of Orissan Studies — An Introduction to Current Interdisciplinary Research on Orissa

Cornelia Mallebrein and Lidia Guzy

Research on Orissa has been extensive and diverse and has produced many novel findings throughout history from earliest times until today.¹ At the 17th annual *European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies*, which took place in Heidelberg, Germany, in 2002, a panel was devoted to regional studies of Orissa. The participants shared their academic perspectives and presented richly nuanced case studies of their socio-cultural research on Orissa. Topics discussed included language, religion, subaltern thought, gender, social change and art. This Special Issue of the *Journal of Social Sciences*, which contains revised versions of some of the papers presented at the conference, provides a glimpse of the broad spectrum of modern research on Orissa.

Elinor Gadon's article "*Annapurna Ma, Priestess and Healer: Women's Agency in Folk Culture of Rural Orissa*" deals with the fascinating life of a self-initiated female priest. Gadon discusses the role of healing and ascetic practices in popular religion with reference to biographical material on the priestess. By demonstrating the importance of personal experience in religious activity, Gadon points out how crucial the criterion of self-initiation is for female agency. In this way, the article illustrates the dynamism of subaltern religious thought in rural Orissa.

Chris Gregory focuses in his article "*The Oral Epics of the Women of the Dandakaranya Plateau: A Preliminary Mapping*" on several central Indian women's oral traditions in relation to their socio-cultural and ecological contexts. Gregory analyses the structure and content of local epics and demonstrates the crucial role women play in processes of cultural creativity. By concentrating on selected epics such as Bali Jagar or Lakshmi Jagar Gregory reveals how little is known about women's epic traditions in India and, in so doing, identifies topics for further research in western Orissa.

Lidia Guzy's paper "*Babas and Alekhs – A Religion in its Making*" describes diverse

profiles of a recent ascetic religion, the Mahima Dharma. Guzy discusses the concepts and structure of the monastic community and contrasts this with the work of a Mahima Dharma mission in a tribal area of southwestern Orissa. By comparing different socio-cultural settings, she discovers striking differences within the Mahima Dharma's ascetic doctrine: in the monastic setting, the doctrine is becoming canonised and is mostly represented by ascetics; in the tribal context, the doctrine serves to preserve the continuity of indigenous ritual characteristics and is mostly represented by female shamans.

Katherine Hacker examines in "*Dressing Lord Jagannath in Silk: Cloth, Clothes and Status*" the complex ways in which cloth functions in ritual and social arenas related to the Jagannath Temple. As she argues, the particular circulation and consumption of a silk ikat textile with verses from the *Gitagovinda* underscore a dynamic process of status negotiation, contestation, or enhancement. Drawing on historical documents and contemporary practice, this study of visual culture especially foregrounds the significant roles of the *daitas* and authority within the temple culture in Puri and the weavers of Nuapatna

Barbara Lotz's article "*Promoting Tribal Languages in Education: A Case Study of Santali in Orissa*" discusses the challenging issue of minority languages in education. Using the Santali language as a case study, Lotz tackles the subject from many perspectives. She investigates the historical development of Santali identity and analyses the socio-political implications of the script that has been developed for this former "tribal" language. Her paper reflects the dynamics between language, society, socio-political issues and the formation of ethnic identity.

Cornelia Mallebrein presents two papers. In "*Ruler, Protector and Healer: The Clan Gods Sulia, Patkhanda and Sikerpat of the Kondh Tribe*" she examines how deities of tribal origin

are now on the verge of becoming assimilated into the fold of Hinduism. Mallebrein explores the legend of three tribal deities and shows that their myths of origin reflect the historical movement of the Kondh tribes from the jungle hills to the plains.

In her second paper "*Creating a Kshetra: Goddess Tarini of Ghatgaon and her Development from a Forest Goddess to Pan-Orissan Deity*" Mallebrein reports recent fieldwork done at the temple of the goddess Tarini in Ghatgaon which was, thirty years ago, an insignificant village in Keonjhar district. Since then Tarini has left her small jungle abode to become one of the most famous goddesses in Orissa. Tarini has many contradictory facets. On the one hand she is linked with the royal family of Keonjhar and her origin is said to be far away in South India. On the other hand, she is believed to have strong local roots. By looking at these various legends Mallebrein raises new questions about the relationship between kings and goddesses.

Uwe Skoda's paper "*Ritual Friendship in a Converging Tribal and Caste Society*" addresses the issue of friendship as a diversified category of socio-cultural relations and processes. Skoda's analysis is based on extensive field research among the Aghria. By analyzing friendship categories, Skoda discovers complex inter-group relations and emergent caste hierarchies on a

tribal border. Ritual friendship is a neglected topic in academic discourse and Skoda's analysis of the concept concentrates on inter-personal categories in order to investigate sociological processes in a converging society.

Together, these contributions explore the rich diversity of socio-cultural research. They portray diverse Orissan worlds and reveal various ways to understand them. The articles emphasize on the importance of studying the complex relations between tribal and caste communities with special reference to gender issues. They all focus on local traditions. Thus, the collection of essays offers new perspectives in the field of Orissan studies.

NOTES

1. Results of the first Orissa Research Project of the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg sponsored by the German Research Council (DFG), were published in 1978 by A. Eschmann, H. Kulke and G.C. Tripathi (eds.), in *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers. An extensive bibliography was released in 1981 by H. Kulke in collaboration with G.N. Dash, M.N. Dash and K.S. Behera *Orissa: A Comprehensive and Classified Bibliography*. Cuttack: Vidyapuri. At present a new Internet-bibliography is under preparation and will be released soon, see homepage of the second Orissa Research Programme (internet: <http://orp.uni-kiel.de>).

Authors' Addresses: **Dr. Cornelia Mallebrein**, Seminar for Indology and Comparative Science of Religion, Department of Indology, Münzgasse 30, 72070 Tübingen, GERMANY
E-mail: mallebrein@aol.com
Dr. Lidia Guzy, Institute of Ethnology, Free University of Berlin, Drosselweg 1-3, 14195 Berlin, GERMANY
E-mail: L.GUZY@gmx.de