
***MĀ MĀṆIKĒŚWARĪ'S CHHATARA JĀTRĀ: AN OVERVIEW OF THE
SACRED AND THE SACRIFICIAL***

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Abstract

The worship of goddess has always marked the veneration of the feminine divine in Hinduism. Goddess, the feminine divine, has been construed to be *Śakti*, the ultimate cosmic force, simultaneously symbolizing both creation and destruction. One manifestation of *Śakti* is *Mā Māṅikēśwarī* of Odisha's Kalahandi district. Her popular religious procession known as *Chhatara Jātrā*, is intricately intertwined with the region's historical, tribal, and cultural narratives. Animal sacrifice has remained one infamously violent ritualistic segment of this festive procession which is performed by slaughtering different animals with a view to receive from the deity something of greater worth. With the enforcement of the regulation protecting animal rights, this bloody and violent practice has come under stern eyes each year with inevitable legal interventions. This study aims at delving deep into the intricate details and delicacies of the *Chhatara Jātrā*. It intends to look critically into the historical dimensions, the embedded reasons, the significance, and aesthetics of this cruel and controversial practice. This study also navigates the dialectics of faith, tradition, and the entailed ethical concerns by examining historical accounts, indigenous influences, and performative traditions like the *Ghumurā* dance. By integrating local oral traditions with broader theological and socio-cultural frameworks, this chapter aims at offering a nuanced perspective on the worship of *Mā Māṅikēśwarī* based on Her age-old *Chhatara Jātrā*, the prevalence of animal sacrifice as well as the tradition of goddess worship in contemporary Odisha.

Keywords: *Chhatara Jātrā*, Animal Sacrifice, Belief, Oral Tradition, *Kandha* Tribe, Tribal Influence.

Introduction

The worship of goddesses has been a vital part of Hinduism for centuries together. There are innumerable goddesses whose worship encompasses a wide range of perspectives and practices that vary by language, region, tradition, and context. It embodies a reverence for the feminine divine, which is often associated with creation, destruction, and transformation. Among myriad forms of goddess worship, the veneration of *Śakti*, the primordial cosmic energy, holds a central place. *Śakti* worship is perceived as a denomination of Hinduism which has its locus on the Goddess (Feminine God) as the supreme deity and the ultimate reality. The *Śakti* symbolizes force, strength, and potency, where the dynamic force that animates the universe, manifests in various forms of goddesses who are both nurturing and fierce in nature and function. This duality reflects the complex interplay of creation and destruction in nature as well as human life. One such manifestation of *Śakti* is found in the western belt of Odisha's Kalahandi district, known by the name, *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*. She is the revered deity of the district of Kalahandi and her worship is deeply intertwined with the cultural and spiritual identity of the region. Insofar as the duality force of nurturing and destroying is concerned, the *Chhatara Jātrā* of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* verily shows the passionate celebration of the devotees on one side, and slaughtering of animals and birds as a traditional form of animal sacrifice on the other. By nature, this issue has been very sensitive and remained a cogent one as much with the animal rights activists as with the proponents of human faith, belief and worship. This discussion on *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* encompassing distinct and diverse areas and aspects such as its historical background, the influence of the Early Settlers on the practice, the associated *Chhatara Jātrā*, the practice of Animal Sacrifice, the artistic practice of *Ghumurā*, the spirit of valor, and its age-old indigenous association will immensely help in understanding both the local narratives and global perspectives which go hand in hand with this religious and cultural practice and phenomenon.

Historical Dimension of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*

Before the initiation of the famous *Śakti* worship of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* and the practice of *Chhatara Jātrā*, Kalahandi was known for its 'Kandha' tribe-dominated area and its interesting indigenous practices of living and culture. The local history also traces back to the word 'Karunda', which translates to 'Corundum', meaning

valuable gem. This also influenced the then name of Kalahandi as *Karund* and the rulers who reigned over the region were named ‘*Karundadhipati*’, the Emperors of *Karund*. This title was beyond the religion of the ruler. It was rather a testament to the prowess of the ruler and its competence in achieving this gallantry. However, Kalahandi is also believed to be the land of treasures, where valuable stones like Ruby were found in considerable amounts. It led to the coining of the term *Māṇikya*, which is the local name for Ruby stone. The name of the presiding deity *Māṇikēśwarī* is attributive of this term *Māṇikya*. Thus, the appellation *Māṇikēśwarī* does have enormous geographical significance besides being central to the cultural motif of the place.

Beyond Kalahandi, *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* is also one of the most popular and believed Hindu deities in Western and Southern Odisha, where present-days Koraput, Phulbani, Boudh, Bolangir, Sonapur, Ganjam, Angul, and Bastar come under this regime. The royal family of Paralakhemundi in the Gajapati district is also associated with *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* as their presiding deity. This oral history of the naming and ascription of Kalahandi and *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* is very ethical and superfluent, adding some research articles to establish its claims, however lacks enough prime documentary evidence to prove in its true sense. But the belief and devotion in the deity and the enthusiasm to spread the culture and its richness continue the flow of knowledge and information with great passion, adding their own flavors and interpretations with time. This showpiece the quiet travel of devotion sewed in stories:

Odisha carries a strong memory tradition. Here history is granted immortality through cultural modes. Here history becomes a story and a performance. Through these performative modes, history becomes a living reality. History is not the objective or the impassioned chronicle and is consigned to writing and preserved through artificial modes. Here, history is performative and subjective. It is metahistory. It is not the history the manner in which the assumptions of the historiography in Europe have been made.

It is a literary form which remains open to the admission of several other things in the course of time. (Pattnaik and Panda 2024, 359)¹

The rulers of Kalahandi were believed to belong to the Naga dynasty, while some scholars claim that they were the successor of the Naga family from Chota Nagpur. This claim never subsided to any conclusion; rather it was always a very controversial topic to tuck in. It is the sixth king of the Naga dynasty, Raja Harichand Deo who led a very miserable life, filled with pain and agony. These disturbances in the King's life never made the queen feel secure in her identity and when the king died, she left for her parental home in Gadapur, Phulbani district. Her father belonged to the *Gaṅgā* dynasty and *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* was being worshiped in Phulbani as *Māṇikya Debi*. With the loss of their king, Kalahandi had to face a lot of political instability, lawlessness, and anarchy, spreading a very chaotic condition over the state. The *Kandha*-dominated area suffered a lot, especially the common public, who felt insecure about their lives having no ruler to save them. This forced them to go in search of their queen, and when they encountered her in Phulbani, they requested her and their future King Raja Ramachandra Deo to return and secure their homeland. Even though Ramachandra Deo was a minor at that stage, still he believed it was the right time to bring back the reign and he returned to their kingdom, bringing *Māṇikya Debi* with them and, was crowned as the successor. He had built a temple in the premises of the Kingdom and installed *Māṇikēśwarī Debi* therein. Reportedly, the temple built by Raja Ramachandra Deo has no ruin even attached to it in the present times. However, during the rule of the 27th king of the *Naga* dynasty Fatenarayan Deo, there was an epidemic outbreak in the capital. This took away the life of the younger son of the king and pushed his eldest son to the abyss of life and death. But, he believed, it was after the prayer before *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* and with her blessings only, the older son got cured. Manifesting a fresh start, he shifted his capital to Bhandesir Patna (present-day, Bhawanipatna) and constructed a new temple of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* in the year 1852. However, the present temple of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* which exists was built by Raja Brajamohan Deo in the year 1935.

¹ Pattnaik, J. K., & Panda, C. K. (2024). Historicising the overseas Odia diasporic experience. *South Asian Diaspora*, 16(2), 355-369

However, it is also interesting to notice that, even though the King is the ruler of the common people in Kalahandi, the common people only become the ones who coronate him. This culture again never existed from time immemorial; rather it is the time of the coronation of Raja Ramchandra Deo when he was crowned by one of the common men of the *Kandha* tribe, who is known as '*Pat-Majhi*'. This proceeding took place at Jenabalipatna or Jugsaipatana (Present day, Junagarh), which was the capital of Kalahandi back then, and not Bhawanipatna. This practice became the ritual since then, and still voyages over time, with every King of Kalahandi getting crowned at Jugsaipatna by a Kandha Man, who is traditionally called '*Pat-Majhi*'. This process makes it very evident that the tribal dominance is not only adjusted within the population of Kalahandi, rather it is celebrated and acknowledged as the very early settlers, who have been the protectors of nature and Mother Earth from the time being. This Adivasi culture and tribal discourse is also a highlight of the artistic presence that Kalahandi transcends in the present time, and also the leverage it has on the very famous *Chhatara Jātrā* and *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*.

The Early Settlers and Their Influence

The culture and tradition of Kalahandi are intertwined with its history, forming the foundation of its identity. Understanding the indigenous and tribal way of life necessitates an in-depth study of its cultural history. For insights into the cultural history of indigenous tribes, South-West Odisha, known as a tribal hub, becomes a focal point of interest. Specifically, the Kalahandi region, predominantly inhabited by tribals, has emerged as a center for study and research. The population of Kalahandi is predominantly populated by the *Kandha* tribe, which even has subgroups such as the *Kutia*, *Dangaria*, and *Desia*. They are subdivided based on their inhabitation and the places they live. They mostly live in the hills and are involved in forest-related occupations, for which the location thrives. Beyond the romantics and transcendentalists, who study nature, these people believe nature is the supreme power that enlightens their lives. Additionally, their lifestyle is deeply aligned with natural laws and the local climate, helping them preserve their traditional practices and communal harmony. Their way of life reflects a balance of health, happiness, and adherence to their cultural roots. They worship nature and the form of nature, the *Śakti* cult, *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*:

Kandhas are the worshipper of nature as they felt the presence of divinity in nature. Indeed, this is important from religious ground. They give more emphasis on three elements of nature. They worship the soil as mother earth, sun as religious god and water as the life giver. (Satpathy 2017, 33)²

The royalty of any royal blood has always been tainted with some personal benefits, which they have tried to gain in return for some cheap psychological impact on the public. Undoubtedly, the kingdom benefited from it, but it became a testament to how power dynamics always set the discourse more often. This similar practice was implemented with the probable 5th century A.D. King, Raja Tustikara, who ruled over the Kalahandi, Sonapur, Boudh, and Ghumsar regions. While the state was being formed in this part and the political boundaries were being extended, there was a need for more loyal farmer engagement, to generate surplus for the maintenance of his kingdom. This was the time when he adopted the tribal deity of the area, *Stambhesvari*, to conciliate the local inhabitants, which would help in the easy establishment of the kingdom. Meanwhile, *Stambhesvari* became the tutelary deity of the ruling dynasty, and the local people became influenced by the 'Raja-Dharma', as *Stambhesvari* became the *Ista-Devi* (presiding deity) of Raja Tustikara. The tribal people of this area played a leading role in agriculture, which became a significant factor in the extension of the kingdom. This became the initiation of the pillar worship as the form of Goddess:

Stambhesvari, the Goddess of the Post or Pillar, is one of the famous formless autochthonous deities widely worshipped in the hill tracts of south and western districts of Orissa. She also goes by the local colloquial name of *Khambesvari*. She is worshipped as a manifestation of Sakti in the forms of wooden posts or pillars and also through stones. She was the tutelary deity of some ruling dynasties like those of Tushtikara, the Sulkis, the Bhanjas and the feudatories of the Somavamsis like Ranaka Sri Jayarnnama in the early mediaeval period. (Rath 2009, 85)³

² Satpathy, K. K. (2017). A Study on Socio Cultural Life of Primitive Kandha Tribe of Kalahandi District of Odisha. *International Journal of Scientific Research*, 6(6)

³ Rath, A. K. (2009). Stambhesvari Cult in Orissa. *Orissa Review*, pp. 121-125

This initiation of pillar worship became very evident with time and is still prevalent among the tribal communities in one form or another. This similar pattern is found in the worship of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*, who has no head and is identified as the *Chhinnamastā*, the headless. A cylindrical structured body over which a clay head is fixed. Alike the *Nabakalebara* of *Prabhu Jagannātha*, this head of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* is replaced by a new clay head each year, at the midnight of *Mulastami tithi*. With a secret ritual, the old head is then immersed in the water in the *Purusottam Sagar*, within the temple premises. The concept of *Pārśvadevatā* or subsidiary deity is very prevalent in Hindu temples, as they are believed to provide protection and support to the primary deity, often representing different aspects or powers associated with the main deity. Similarly, from the presiding deity, there also exists the temple of *Budharaja*, as the *Pārśvadevatā*, temples of *Vaishavi*, *Narasimhi*, and *Varahi* within the premise. So, the tribal people especially *Kandhas* believe that *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* subtly blends the Tribal and the Non-Tribal culture, where the present form of *Māṇikēśwarī* and the *Kandha* traditional *Māṇikēśwarī* are interrelated. In a similar process, there is evolution of *Kondh* male deity *Budhapenu* taking the evolution of *Budharaja* or *Bhairaba*.

Although being the *Pārśvadevatā* or the subsidiary deity of *Māṇikēśwarī* temple, the worship of *Budharaja* brings an interesting touch to this immersive tale. The *Budharaja* temple is more mystic in nature and so are its practices. The temple is situated on the northern side of the main temple and it is only opened once a year, on the occasion of *Mahastami*. Being the *Śakti Pitha* also the practices never misplace the feminist or socialist yearnings. *Budharaja* who is believed and worshiped as the form of *Bhairava* is offered the first newly harvested rice. This is an extended tradition of *Nuakhai*, where the first harvested rice of the family is offered to the presiding deity before it is for familial consumption. This *Nuakhai* practice is generally observed on *Bhadra Shukla Panchami* or *Rushi Panchami Tithi* in Western Odisha, however, as the temple of *Budharaja* has the ritual of being opened once a year, the concept of *Nuakhai* goes through a little twist here. The royal family of *Bhawanipatna* helms the duty of offering the *Nabanna* or the newly harvested rice and then only they take it on the next day, *Nabami tithi*. This annual offering before *Budharaja* marks the initiation of the long-awaited and blessed *Chhatara Jātrā*, the *Nagara Paribhramana*, where the public elongates its deep-

rooted devotion to their deity in different forms, one among which is also animal sacrifice.

***Chhatara Jātrā* and Animal Sacrifice**

Sacrifices in worship have been deeply woven into the cultural fabric, symbolizing devotion, gratitude, atonement, and the strengthening of divine bonds. From the practice of Vedic Yajnas to the Roman and Greek offerings, sacrificial practices have played a crucial role in shaping belief systems. This practice of sacrifices also includes animal sacrifice (*Bali*), which is historically linked to goddess worship and is deeply embedded with the *Śakti* cult. This practice, rooted in Vedic and tribal traditions, verily symbolizes the offering of life force to appease the deity, fulfill vows, or seek divine intervention. The sacrifice of goats, buffaloes, and occasionally birds, is performed during major festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja, or *Navaratri*, especially in the month of *Aswina*, with ritualistic precision overseen by priests. The practice is believed to align human devotees with cosmic forces, reinforcing the notion of death and rebirth within Hindu cosmology.

This animal sacrifice becomes one of the major trajectories of the state which establishes the narrative of *Chhatara Jātrā*, where even with controversies, legal restrictions, and ethical debates; the slaughtering of animals never gets an excuse to cease. This large tradition of sacrifice initiates on the night of *Maha Astami*, where a *Podh*(Buffalo) is sacrificed before the sacred *Pārśvadevatā Budharaja* or *Bhairava*. The belief narrates *Budharaja* as the major tribal deity, and the tribal dominance of Kalahandi and especially *Bhawanipatna*, and the tribal references Kalahandi always had, put the worship of *Budharaja* first. Once the sacrifice is offered in this unique temple, which only opens once a year, the *Chhatara*, which represents *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*, is carried to *Jenakhal*. This place is located around three kilometers away from the main temple premises and is situated to the west of the temple. Once the *Chhatara* reaches *Jenakhal*, all the secret rituals are performed here, which also includes animal sacrifice as an integral part. This secret ritual of worship is still unknown to the commoners and is only embedded between the selected priests who preside over this worship. Interestingly, none of the commoners have ever questioned this ritual, or any local man has ever tried to peek into this secret worship. Out of respect to be believed, or out of fear to be perceived, the secret ritual still remains secret to date. However, the place *Jenakhal* holds more

significance in its name where all these rituals are performed. The literal meaning of *Jenakhhal* is derived from the dissection of two words: *Jena*, which means *Raja Putra* or the Prince, and *Khal*, which means a hole, representing the female sex organ or *yōni*. As we worship Shiva Linga as Lord Shiva in his seminal form, similarly in the *Śakti* cult *Yoni* in *Jenakhhal* represents *Śakti* here. It is also interesting to notice that, the *Yoni* worship is quite prevalent in the *Śakti* cult in some parts of western Odisha, like *Sindhekela* of Titilagarh or *Duarseni* at Khariar.

The *Chhatara Jātrā* begins after the secret rituals are practiced in *Jenakhhal*, after which the deity, in the appearance of the *Chhatara*, returns to her residence, which marks the *Chhatara Jātrā*. This return journey takes place with the early sunrise of *Maha Navami tithi*, accompanied by the musical and valor beats of *Ghumurā*, *Nishan*, and *Ghanta*, which are called *Jena Badya* or *Raja Badya*. The early practices narrate that only one musical instrument named ‘*Dum Baza*’ was being accompanied in the procession of the deity, which was an instrument from the royal family. However, with time new instruments were added and 42 *Ghanta* groups participated in this procession. This once-in-a-year celebration of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* attracts a lot of tourists and thrill, but at the same time, the beats of the *Jena Badya* are so bemusing and enthralling that they invoke fear and a sense of agitation among the bystanders. This fear and tribal perspective of the *Kandha* people brings out another narrative that cannot be skipped while studying *Chhatara Jātrā* is that, the *Kandha* people worship a deity whom they call *Chhatara Bauti*. Unlike *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*, she is portrayed as a malevolent deity and is believed to be the cause behind a child’s death. Hence, if a child cries by listening to the *Jenabadya* or while the *Chhatara Jātrā* travels, the local belief claims that the child is nearing death. This brings the tribal culture and influences closer and more prominent in the *Chhatara Jātrā* and *Mā Māṇikēśwarī*.

However, the *Chhatara Jātrā* begins with *Nagara Paribhramana* on the auspicious morning of *Maha Navami*, with tribal dances being performed to please the deity, which is the *Ghumurā* dance. *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* is depicted in the *Jatra* by a bamboo covered with a black cloth, and *Dasamahavidya Yantra* is mounted on the silver plate at the top, which reflects Tantric references in the *Śakti* cult. With a belief of having a significant material gain and prosperity in their life, the animals are slaughtered during this ritualistic procession. The animals include hundreds of he-

goats, shining the road with red blood. Although animals are killed, Pigeons are released by many devotees marking their fulfillment of wishes. These pigeons that are released, strangely fly and sit invariably on the top of the *Chhatara*, incognizant of the noise of thousands of crowds and noises of the musical instruments. This narrates another local folk belief that the pigeons ironically symbolize Peace in between the blood-tainted procession. The positioning of pigeons on the *Chhatara* showcases how *Śakti* is both the fierce destroyer and the caretaker simultaneously. While the state has illegalized the slaughtering of these hundreds of animals publicly, and animal protection activists trying to cease this practice, the ritual killing has never stopped. Rather the congregation of thousands of devotees and their indisputable ritual of offering the blood to the deity on their own hands made the government and the district administration stand on their heads, even after imposing Article 144 in the local areas to stop the practice. While the devotees regard it as an essential part of worship and their devotion, the social activists argue for its symbolic or vegetarian alternatives, such as offering pumpkins, coconuts, or sugarcane. Despite modern opposition, the ritual persists in the *Chhatara Jātrā* making it quite a controversial topic of debate each year around the same time, ending with no solution to the issue, reflecting the complex interplay between tradition, faith, and evolving societal norms.

The carnage of animals is followed by the *Lakha-Bindha* competition, which takes place on the *Vijaya Dasami tithi* after the *Chhatara* is carried to the nearby mango grove of *Naktiguda*. Here the *Chhatara* is worshiped and this worship also includes a *Boda* (He-Goat) sacrifice offering to the deity. After the worship, an earthen pot is fixed on the top of one tall mango tree, which the shooters need to aim and shoot. The early practice of the *Lakha-Bindha* competition included traditional weapons like bows and arrows, which the shooters used to fight their enemies back then. With time, the bows and arrows are replaced with guns, aiming the earthen pot on the tree as their enemy and the *Lakha Bindha* ground as the battleground; the shooters compete with each other. The winner of this competition is honored with the opportunity to participate in the remaining *Chhatara Jātrā* and lead the ritualistic procession back to the alma mater, making it a rare distinction on this special occasion.

The local narratives also suggest that there was a practice of human sacrifice in the early days of *Chhatara Jātrā*, which was prevalent at *Jenakhāl*. The belief narrates that the *Raja Putras* (The Princes) who were defeated were being sacrificed at *Jenakhāl* during the *Chhatara Jātrā*. Another narrative also suggests that the *Mukhiya* (Head) of the locals also has to sacrifice her youngest daughter when the prayers are answered by the deity and the citizens are saved from any hazardous disease or epidemic. This practice shows that sacrificing your loved one (The Youngest Daughter) is necessary when your loved ones (The Common People of the Place) are being saved from any difficult situation. However, time has traveled its whirl and has substituted human sacrifice with animal sacrifice. But the hope will always be that the whirlwind should not cease here, but also substitute the animal sacrifice and the slaughtering of the innocents with some vegetarian or symbolic alternatives, which time will only prove.

***Ghumurā* - Valor and Its Indigenous Association**

Dance has played a vital role in Indian ritualistic traditions, serving as an essential medium of devotion, storytelling, and community bonding. Many folk and classical dance forms in India have roots in religious and spiritual expressions, often performed as offerings to deities. Ritualistic dances like *Bharatanatyam*, *Odishi*, and *Kathakali* are deeply connected with temple worship, embodying mythological narratives through intricate movements. Similarly, tribal and folk dances such as *Ghumurā* serve as expressions of collective faith, linking the community to its spiritual and historical past. These dances also act as a means of preserving oral traditions, reinforcing cultural identity, and fostering social unity. *Ghumurā* dance traces its origins to ancient times, believed to have been performed by warriors before heading into battle. The primary musical instrument, the *Ghumurā*, is a semi-circular drum tied around the dancer's body, producing a resonant and rhythmic sound. Historical references suggest that *Ghumurā* was used in war and later transformed into a folk-art celebrating victory, devotion, and community spirit.

This victory dance subtly got embedded with the cultural ethos of Kalahandi, becoming the very way of life of its people. This indigenous dance is performed with males between 15 years to 40 years of age, where the seniors become the singers and the drummers. This participation in every commoner's life has made *Ghumurā* an instrument of an emotional bond of unity more than just a basis for entertainment.

The influence has swayed so much that, one can find a *Ghumurā* institution in almost every village, making it a local ritual of village efficacy. This love and atonement for the dance form have given it a huge shout-out to the national and international arena, where it presents the very touch and essence of Kalahandi and the tribal culture. However, this relevance is more prominent in the *Chhatara Jātrā*, where the grand procession of *Chhatara* is accompanied and led by the heart-throbbing beats of *Ghumurā* and its performances. *Ghumurā* dance which was once performed only in front of the royals in the palace of Bhawanipatna, has now conversed into competitions. The winning *Ghumurā* dance troupe is allowed the honor to lead the procession of *Chhatara Jātrā* the next year, which is an integral part of the grand procession. This specification of this dance in *Chhatara Jātrā* also enriches the value of this rich folk-dance form, which still is relevant and is grounded, when the world is influenced by modernization. This dulcet combination of song and dance also includes *Nisan*, *Jhanj* or *Tal*, *Dholak*, *Kada*, *Bheri*, *Turiand Mahuri* which are mainly by tribal people of Kalahandi. The costumes that one wears during this performance are also related to those of tribal folklore, which gives it a folk-dance touch in its trivial form. Hence, with *Ghumurā*, the tribal references and the indigenous effect in the famous procession festival of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* get consolidated only.

Conclusion

The worship of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* and the grand spectacle of *Chhatara Jātrā* epitomize the intricate confluence of devotion, history, culture, and indigenous traditions coming within the ambit of the *Śakti* cult. The veneration of the goddess in Kalahandi transcends mere religious practices, embedding itself deeply into the socio-cultural and political fabric of the region. The historical evolution of the deity's significance, from the coronation of kings to the spiritual sustenance of the masses, reflects an evolving yet enduring tradition that continues to define the identity of Western Odisha. However, the ritual of animal sacrifice within *Chhatara Jātrā* underscores the tension between long-standing beliefs and contemporary ethical concerns. While the practice is deeply entrenched in the *Śakti* tradition, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life and death, it remains a contentious issue in modern discourse. The unwavering devotion of the people, who perceive the ritual as an inseparable part of their faith, clashes with the emerging perspectives

advocating humane and symbolic alternatives. This dichotomy illustrates the broader conflict between cultural preservation and the evolving paradigms of morality and legal restrictions. Furthermore, the indigenous influences, particularly of the *Kandha* tribe, demonstrate the assimilation of tribal practices into mainstream religious worship, reinforcing the metahistorical nature of Odisha's cultural memory. Ultimately, the *Chhatara Jātrā* of *Mā Māṇikēśwarī* embodies the duality of tradition and transformation. As faith and history continue to intersect in complex ways, the festival remains a powerful testament to the resilience of belief systems that have withstood centuries of change. The future of these practices hinges on a delicate balance between reverence for tradition and the inevitability of cultural evolution, challenging scholars and devotees alike to navigate the intricate landscape of devotion, ethics, and historical consciousness.

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