

Culture as Domains of Contests & Protests: The Places, Forms and Practices of Religious Worship at Colonial Cuttack

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Abstract: *The paper examines the places, forms and the practices of religious worships at colonial Cuttack that reflected its multicultural population professing different religions and belonging to different sects and castes, which were a composite of both old and new practices. It elucidates the larger historical context of such cultural encounters between Europeans and the natives (Oriya), between Oriya and Bengali, between Oriya and the other non-Oriya peoples during the period. Since the cultural elements are considered as part of a complex than in isolation, it tries to map the many social encounters that took place in the realms of places, forms and practices of religious worships experienced in the city. In tune with the larger definition of culture, the study enquires how the process of social encounter and cultural exchanges took place among such groups within such domains at colonial Cuttack.*

Keywords: *Colonial Cuttack, Cultural encounter, neo-religious movements, Forms and places of worship*

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Introduction

Culture was an important site of colonial hegemony. Cultural encounter in colonial India is a complex phenomenon.¹ Colonialism represents a systematic attempt to transform the culture of the subject nation by transforming latter's customs, traditions and social organizations, and by introducing new boundaries between peoples and erasing others through the institutionalization of racism and the creation of new ethnicities. Thus, colonial encounter remains one of the most contested terrains in human history, more so in Indian context of cultural diversity, and the uneven pace of colonising that varied from region to region and locality to locality, and even within the locality. Cities and towns were the points of intense cultural interaction and served as the principal nodes of introducing alien colonial culture into colonised society. They became the cultural crucibles and the major transformative

agents in their regions, since new beliefs and practices frequently emerged from such centres and diffused outwards. The paper examines the places, forms and the practices of religious worships at colonial Cuttack that reflected its multicultural population professing different religions and belonging to different sects and castes, which were a composite of both old and new practices. In the process it elucidates the larger historical context that framed and shaped neo-forms, practices and places of religious worships engendered at Cuttack during the period.

Historiographical Tradition

Colonialism, apart from being a political, was a cultural² encounter as well, between the colonising and colonized. The culture is used in this study neither as an unimportant adjunct of the material transformation of cities nor a purely symbolic realm for differentiating social roles. Culture used here is both dependent and variable having significant material consequences. In tune with the fashion of the cultural historians it mainly concerns itself with values and symbols, wherever these are found in the everyday life of ordinary people.³

Places, Forms & Practices of Religious Worship at Colonial Cuttack

Places, forms and the practices of religious worships at colonial Cuttack reflected its multicultural population professing different religions and belonging to different sects and castes, which were a composite of both old and new practices. Its pantheon of gods and goddesses, and the rituals involving them were drawn from several sources: tribal, folk, Sanskritic, Saivite, Vaisnavite, Sakti, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, etc. The worship of Nataraja, Narasimha, Naga, etc., pointed to its South Indian origin; and the Vedic gods to North India. The mysterious Sakti worship was a typical representative of East Indian variety. Names of different localities and the rituals specific to them were also reminiscent of the leading persons who founded them and the ways of life associated with people living there as well as the changes they have undergone in the course of their passage in history. Several legends & folk tales are associated with them, which probably carry the silent voices that need to be vocalised. Thus, Jhanjirimangala reminds us of the Sanskritisation of a tribal deity into the Hindu pantheon as the Sakti Goddess Sitala with all such ritual changes in the process.⁴ Likewise, Meriabazar, going by its nomenclature, either points to an uncertain pedigree of the erstwhile practice of human sacrifice by the Kandh tribes who probably resided here in the ancient past, when it was full of jungles or to Mahurias, a lower caste people earning their livelihood by blowing *mahuri* (a kind of instrument blown with mouth) on auspicious occasions, as Ainslie's report of 1814 mentions a place called Mahooreabazar that in due course in all likelihood became Meriabazar. Thoriasahi probably reminds us of the packed bullocks used by the itinerant traders of the yore to carry their merchandise. Likewise, the stone embankment at Cuttack (now buried under ring road) carries legends romanticizing immortal acts of not only the royalty but also the common men in the city to protect it from the recurrent threats of the riverine floods.⁵ The dam was not only a marvelous piece of engineering feat of the natives but also was an ideal platform of the popular culture, as the site was being daily frequented by people of different hues for chit-chat, gossip, conviviality, relishing the delicacies from the swarming hawker/vendors (Cuttack was/is famous for such hawkers in umpteen numbers) as well as for solemn meditative and the creative literary thoughts. The place Ranihat was either a traditional *hat*/bazaar meant for queen's shopping or under the patronage of queen king during the royal days or was associated with the origin of a style of Odissi *Kirtan* (a chorous laity gathering), called Reniti/Ranihati.⁶ Along with neighbouring Mangalabag, it was the centre of horn-works craft in the city and produced a wide range of products like comb, birds, konark wheel, hand stick, etc.; which had achieved wide popularity

both within and outside Orissa. Trading importance of the place is evident from the fact that the Marwari trading communities mostly belonging to Digambar and Terapanthi sects of Jainism have had been living there and at the contiguous College Square. Deolasahi has been conjectured as the possible site of the famed (Purusottam) temple in past that was built by Anangabhima III and destroyed by Feroz Shah Tughluq, but no traces of it are found-- a mystery that needs to be resolved. At present it houses Nrusinghanath Raghunath Jew Mandir. Gangamandir celebrates the worship of nature in the form of river by incarnating her as Goddess Gangamata (named after the sacred river the Ganga) in the Hindu pantheon and its association with the tradition of fishermen; who seemed to be along with milkmen, potter, carpenter, weaver and occasionally barber and washermen; the original inhabitants of Cuttack in the Mahanadi delta given its riverine topography that was dotted with numerous ponds and swamps swarming with fishes and crabs.⁷ Many neighbourhoods in the city are named after such castes like Kumbharsahi, Tantisahi, Bhandarisahi, etc. Later with modern professions evolving; many doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, administrators et. al., started coming to and settling down in the city. Killahpadia valorizes a rich cultural space with elements rooted in both royal and commoner, and secular and the religious traditions. It has had been the site of *Baliyatra* festival celebrating Chaitanya's association with the place and the maritime tradition of Orissa, as it was the point of arrival and departure of merchant ships in hoary past. As a site of popular culture, it was a site akin to a traditional periodic religious festivity centre combining elements of market (merchandise included a variety both native & foreign), merrymaking & enjoyment (watching *jatras*, *palas*, *baunsarani*, etc), thrills of shopping from clothing to daily utilities, (including such items as *sukhua* - dried fish), eating tasty food items (like *bada/dahibada* – *aludam*, *alu-gobi*, etc), sermonising, chanting *mantras* and organizing *kirtans*, etc. Jobra, apart from pointing to its tribal linkages, signifies its importance as the site of commerce and the modern industry and transport—the site of East India Irrigation & Canal Company (founded in 1869) and the hub of steamer transport. Barabatti fort, although dilapidated by the vandalism of the colonisers and had ceased to be a military and political power centre, came to acquire cultural power as a symbol of the glorious royal and military tradition of Orissa, as it was appropriated as one of the icons by the advocates of rising Oriya identity vis-a-vis the hegemony both colonisers and their cohorts. Places like Bakharabad, Buxibazar, Alamchandbazar, Dewanbazar (named after Mughal Dewan, Mirza Zafar), Azamkhanbazar, Darghabazar, Kazibazar (named after *Kazi/Qazi*, who lived there), Lalbag, Chandinichowk, Mansinghpatana (named after the famous general of Akbar who defeated the Afghan rulers at Cuttack), etc., owe their origin to Muslim rule and retain distinct traces of the Islamic heritage and culture in the forms of monuments and their nomenclature. Chandinichowk in particular was the integral part of the Mughal Township, where the citizens used to gather to have a royal glimpse, marketing, merrymaking & socializing. In colonial times it served the purposes of a mall road found in a typical colonial township. Subsequent town growth, however, radically restructured the physical and social demography of such places. A new composite culture in due course evolved in which the people of diverse religious, social, linguistic and economic background lived in harmony. Muslims coexisted with Hindus & Jains, a living example of which was the *satyapir* cult, jointly worshiped by both Hindus and Muslims. There were exchanges of titles like Buxi, used both by Hindus and Muslims. Religious precincts like Qadam-i-rasul at Darghabazar and other such sites associated with *sufis* were (are) worshiped by both Muslims and Hindus. The city represented a unique Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis, which singled out it as the only place that witnessed no bloodshed and riot during the heyday of the communal frenzy in Indian subcontinent during the last days of freedom struggle in India. Telengabazar (ironically there is hardly a Telugu population at present), as per the oral tradition, reminds of the long association of the Telugu people with the place (from

Bahumakara days onwards, according to some); who came as soldiers, domestic servants, craftsmen (weavers, carpenters, barbers, ship builders, temple building masons et. al.), metal workers (gold, silver and copper), traders, intellectuals & administrators during pre-colonial period; and as traders and as both skilled & unskilled labourers during the colonial period.⁸ It housed the Raghunathjew temple, where people used to gather for listening to *Ramcharitamans* daily. Choudhurybazar (named after one Manjunath Choudhury who had come from Nagpur during Maratha rule), apart from being the main trade center in Orissa, also celebrates the cultural synthesis having deities of several religions and sects. Located here were the temples, *maths* (monasteries like Gopaljew) and *mandaps* (podiums where Durga idols were kept) of the Hindu deities like Gopal, Sriradha and Durga, the images of the Jain saints in a Jain temple (jointly worshiped by Hindus and Jains) and a beautiful temple nearby belonging to the Nanakpanthis. Tulsipur alludes to its association with Hindu tradition and housed many *maths* and *ashrams* of the monks like Garib Das, Chaitanya, Maunibaba, Mastarambaba et. al. Kaligali, apart from being the residence of native notables, was also associated with tradition of Sakti worship in the form of ferocious looking Goddess Kali. Starting from this place the worship of Kali has become a mass festival in city. Chandichhack likewise celebrates the Sakti tradition in the form of Chandi worship, to whom people resort as their ultimate savour. In due course, it evolved as a prime centre of worship and community life among the Hindus, who gathered their daily for getting assurances and enter into new relationships. Satichoura reminiscences its association with the Hindu practices of *sati* of the yore. Dagarpara in particular reminds of the days of royalty in the hoary past as being the residence of kingly messengers, which subsequently acquired fame as the residence of craftsmen producing exquisite gold and silvery jewellery, and the world famous silver filigree works. Oriyabazar probably carries the memories of Oriya weavers who lived there in hoary past, but its social demography have been radically changed owing to arrival of people from other communities like Muslims (predominantly) and Bengalis during the subsequent times. Kaflabazar (*kafila* in Arabic means pilgrim troupe) reminds of convergence of the troupes of pilgrims en route to Jagananth Puri via Cuttack from the days of yore. So also was the Purighat through which pilgrims used to ferry in and out of Cuttack on its southern (Puri) side. Gadagadiaghat reminiscences its association with Saivism in the form of the worship of Gadgadeswar Mahadev, Vaisnavism in the way of Chatanya's visit to the city and the hoary maritime tradition of Orissa. The places like Firingibazar, Christiansahi, Societypur, Mission Road, Paetonsahi, Cantonment (the camp of British soldiers), Chakrachandbazar (present Station Bazaar and College Square area)/ Chakrachandmaidan (now the campus of Ravenshaw University) carry the Western names that speak eloquently of their European origin and carry its cultural vestiges.⁹ Chakrachandmaidan or the associated bazaar came up to cater to the entertaining needs of the colonizers, who used to conduct horse races (particularly on special occasions like x-mass, new year, *darbar*, etc.) there frequently with collections both from them and the natives. It was a lush green grass field looked pleasing to eyes where thousands gathered to watch the pageantry of the horse race with riders putting on colourful dresses and with a hundred of police being deployed to keep the discipline. On signal the horse riders rode with the pace of wind. The horse that reached the specified spot in the circular field won the award to the restiveness of spectators who enjoyed every moment of that with cheer and eagerly cherished to watch the event again. Initially an all European affair, it came to involve the natives like *rajas* and *zamindars* from different regions in Orissa.¹⁰ Kaliaboda connects the city to Sikh tradition, as the place was consecrated by Nanak and his father who halted there en route to Puri. The gurdarwara, Dantansaheb, stands there celebrating such memory. Some connect Kaliaboda etymologically to Kalu Bedi, the father of Nanak. Dolamundai smacks of its association with the worship of Radha-Krushna of Vaisnavite tradition. It was probably a site of *holi* celebration, where at

present stands a Jagannath temple. Localities like Alamchandbazar, Azamkhanbazar, Tarachandpatana, Manisahuchhak, Madhupatana, Madhusudan Nagar, etc., were reminiscent of the leading personalities in different fields who flocked to the city. They either lived or had their concerns located at such places, i.e., the industrial estate, Madhupatana that was so named after the pioneer modern industry in Orissa, M. S. Das. Likewise, the name Madhusudan Nagar was given to the locality that house M. S. Das' tomb (at the Christian Cemetery, called Gorakabar), his statute, a library and a cultural institution named after him.

In the city as a whole there were practitioners of Vaisnavism, Saivism, Saktism, Mahima Dharma, local cults of different hues, remnants of the ancient animistic and magical practices, Sikhism, Jainism (of its sects like Svetambar, Digambar, Sthanikvadi, Terapanthi), Christianity, and Islam with its different sects like Sunni (predominantly), Shia (small in number) and the Sufis. People although subscribed to different religious practices hardly cherished a rancor against one another. Generally, a spirit of bonhomie and fellow-feeling undergirded their religious experiences. Thus, during the visit of a religious teacher (saint/*acharya*/dervish) the cross sections of people performed their rites and rituals with unfettered gaiety and in a spirit of bonhomie.¹¹ The worship of *Saty Pir* was one more bright example of such spirit, in which not only both Hindus and Muslims performed the rituals and gave offerings of banana, coconut, sugar, etc., but the language involved in such supplications were also drawn from both Hinduism and Islam.¹² Overarching nature of the *sahi* (neighborhood culture)/*bhaichara* (fraternal bond across the communities) had the enough sanitizing impact of hammering out a shared religious culture unique to Cuttack, where the religious celebrations had ceased to be an exclusive communitarian affair and had become a collective one involving people across the communities for a large part of the colonial rule. On its social side the special features of the *bhaichara* were to help both old and indigent *sahi* residents, carry the kids and the elders to hospital, lend a helping hand in marriage ceremonies, carry the dead bodies to cemeteries, assimilate a stranger to *sahi* community, enable the communities collectively enjoy the cultural events like *melody* (musical concerts) and *quwalli/mushahirra*, encourage the communities to organise and learn together in the institutions of learning, inspire the communities and castes together elect their joint representatives to the ruling bodies, exemplary respect and protection provided to womenfolk, Muslims/Christians having expertise in Hindu scriptures and composing / singing devotional songs on Hindu deities and the vice versa, etc. Even the cemeteries in and around Cuttack reflect(ed) its cultural bonhomie and syncretism. There were several of them specific to communities and those shared by several communities.¹³ They have had a unique place in culture as a place for cremating dead, a place for performing purifying rituals, remembering and paying homage to dead and respectful, and a place of pilgrimage as being the sites of sages and hermits, and the great men of culture. They had a great sanitising impact on society by being the place for disposal of dead and harmful, and maintained moral order in the society as an abode of ancestral spirits and the dreadful gods and goddesses like Siva & Kali, who took active interest in seeing that moral order prevailed in the society otherwise they would physically intervene by purging the evils by even violent means. The youth cultural associations like Young Men's Christian Association, Muslim Youth Cultural Club and Rastriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, even though propelled by separate ideals and working for specific communities, never opposed one another. It was the high profile communal politics of the 30s & 40s of twentieth century that tried to impinge markedly on the shared communitarian bond. But the *sahi/bhai cahara* culture ultimately triumphed in creating a livable bond across the communities and castes that preempted any religious and caste riots unlike in other cities in India.¹⁴

The encounter of eastern and western cultures that characterized the new age led to a new thinking in religion that threw up many new religious practices like *Brahmodharma* of Brahma Samaj, *Vedantism* of Arya Samaj, Vedantic Socialism of Ramkrishna Mission, Mahima Dharma, etc. All of which talked of the value of wisdom and the worship of truth/*brahma/sunya* (void) by shedding all exterior religious formalities and rituals, and the caste and idolatry. By advocating unity and love for the whole humanity, they put emphasis on developing human character by renouncing selfishness and cultivating love, purity and kindness. They were imbued with the nationalistic and patriotic spirit, and advocated pursuit of spirituality by eliminating self-interests. All these reflected the renaissance spirit and an urge on the part of people to create a more egalitarian social order. Such neo-religious practices became particularly fashionable with the educated class at Cuttack, as it became the central to such neo-religious movements in Orissa. *Brahmo* movement was the earliest of such movements, which came to symbolize the collective identity of the English educated neo-rich, and became a passport to power, influence and the jobs. The movement was first brought to Cuttack by *Munsif* Mahendra Ray in 1849. Devendranath Tagore's visit to the city in 1850 led to founding of a branch of Adi-Brahmo Samaj in the house of Dy. Magistrate Jagamohan Ray at Oriyabazar with the assistance of city's notables, which in due course contributed to the growth of its membership and the spread of its ideals in Orissa. The movement was subsequently carried forward by the Utkal Brahmo Samaj that was founded at Cuttack on 1st July 1869 by its Zillah School headmaster, Harnath Bhattacharya. He was instrumental to bring two most prominent members of the movement: M.S Rao and P.M. Acharya. It was situated on an acre of land the west side of the Gangamandir Pond with "*om bhomo krupa hi kevalam*," inscribed on it, where religious discourses used to take place every Sunday. The Samaj used to celebrate its establishment day on 24th January annually that coincided with the birth day of its founder, Raja Rammohan Roy. The celebration was accompanied by the house decorations, feasting, *kirtan* procession on the streets and the religious discourses for two days. Soon the Samaj had its newspaper, *Utkal Subhakari*, founded by one Bhagabati Charan Das.¹⁵ The movement later drew a number of notable persons in the city, as it became the symbol of elite status and provided leverage to power and pelf.¹⁶ A *Brahmo Mandir* (temple) was built in the centre of city at Oriyabazar in 1871 with donations raised by Jagamohan Lala and the financial assistance from Devendranath Tagore. The division of Brahmo Samaj into Adi Brahmo Samaj under Devendranath Tagore and Bharatiya Brahmo Samaj under Keshav Ch. Sen soon had its repercussions at Cuttack. The members of Adi Brahmo Samaj located at Oriyabazar used to congregate at the temple every Wednesday and those of Utkal Brahmo Samaj (a wing of Bharatiya Brahmo Samaj) every Sunday, when several devotional songs composed by M.S. Rao were caroled. Many leading persons from Bengal like Devendra Nath Tagore, Kesav Ch. Sen, Sivanath Sastri, Devi Prasanna Choudhury et. al., used to come to Cuttack, delivered speeches, practiced its rites and organised religious discourses; which used to have significant impact at Cuttack.¹⁷ The Samaj provided a useful forum where people from across the religious and social status used to congregate and interact, which included such native colonial officials like K.G. Gupta (Commissioner at Cuttack), B. L. Gupta (judge), S.C Sen (judge) and their family members. The wives of such officials had established a Mahila Samaj at Lalbag, the residence of Commissioner. It subsequently ran for sometime at Kaligali, where Reba Roy, the pioneer of women's progress movement in Orissa, had established under its aegis a Woman's School and a Sunday school for the Brahmo boys, which ran for sometime before getting closed down. The Samaj rendered a yoemen's service to the cause of neo-synthetic culture of modern Orissa in the fields of the spread of education, women's education and liberation, publication of news journals, enrichment of literature and fighting for the eradication of social evils. Its impact reverberated in the sociocultural life of then Orissa. Madusudan

Rao's Victoria School and Pyarimohan Acharya's Cuttack Academy were the two pillars of education in Orissa. The noted leader of freedom struggle, Bipan Chandra Pal, was for sometime the headmaster of the Academy, and was Pyarimohan's disciple. Madhusudan Rao's writings in different fields of Oriya literature were its gems like *Barnabodha*, *Sahitya Prasanga*, *Sahitya Kusuma*, etc. His paper *Nava Sambad* enriched the cultural life of Orissa by its publications on politics, literature and social reforms. Pyarimoha Acharya was the pioneering historian and a leading social reformer of Orissa who founded Cuttack Youngmen's Literary Association. As a journalist he edited a weekly paper, *Utkal Putra*, which used to expose and criticise corruption in public places. He was a fire brand speaker both in Oriya and Bengali, and could speak on anything from Oriya literature to corruption in public life and drug addiction. People used to be spellbound people through his speech. But because of his impetuous nature he often landed himself in controversy.¹⁸ Biswanath Kar was famed for his oratory, and was a leading literary critic and an essayist; who founded the famed literary Oriya Journal, *Utkal Sahitya*, which became the leading literary mouthpiece in contemporary Orissa.¹⁹ The movement also spread its ideals in the Christian missionary ways like denouncing idolatry among Hindus and undertaking religious discourses at public spaces like *hat/bazaars*. It adopted such techniques deliberately, as it was a social movement meant to attack the prejudicial social practices not meant to be practiced in private or in temples. Thus, it needed to blow its ideals at public spaces. The Christian missionaries also took satisfaction at the fact that the *Brahmos* by demolishing idolatry prepared ground for the spread of Christianity in Orissa that they considered as the 'garden of idolatry and superstitions.' It raised apprehensions and oppositions among the orthodox sections of people, who perceived acquiescence between two, although in reality there was antipathy between the two. The movement, however, declined in due course owing to a combination of factors, the most important being the internal schism and the opposition of conservative forces within the Hindu society.²⁰

Like *Brahmo* movement, the *Vedantism* of Dyananda Saraswati also rested itself on the wisdom, knowledge and reason by denouncing casteism, idolatry, obscurantist ritualism and the superstitious practices that had crept into Hindusm by giving a call to go back to the Vedas. It soon developed a following for itself at Cuttack, particularly among the educated elite. Ramkrishna Mission carried such trends to still larger domains of nationalism and state building by advocating a socialism that sought to address the problems of the poor. There were also certain religious movements, which unlike those mentioned above came from below and outside the city confines, like the Mahima Dharma, which even though had rural beginning came to have roots at urban centres like Cuttack during the early part of twentieth century. The followers of the sect were of two types: the dedicated sannyasis and the *grihastas* who lived with their families. Popularly the Mahima Dharma followers were called the *Kumbhi Patias*. They hailed from diverse background: rich and poor, upper and lower castes; but the lower castes and class predominated among them. The founder of the sect was, as believed by its followers, was one mysterious Mahima Swami who had supernatural power. It was Bhima Bhoi (the prodigious blind poet) who fused a protean folk-tribal tradition into popular a sectarian practice through his enthralling devotional poetical compositions.²¹ The order was further consolidated by Viswanath Baba, a much revered saint of the order. Despite opposition by the brahminical elements and the progress of scientism that characterized the epoch, the folk-sprung religious form came to have a significant following event at Cuttack city, to which, it is believed, Mahima Gosain himself visited two times: once in 1838 and once more afterwards in order to preach his doctrine. Its simplicity, catholicity, genuineness and newness appealed the people most. Although it operated within the Hindu fold yet like the aforesaid neo-religious movements it opposed the idol worship and the ritualism of Brahminical religion and sought to set up a true Sanatana Dharma by a mix of mysticism, humanism

and social activism. It venerated emptiness and an inseparable *prurusha* (primeval man), and advocated welfare of all. It emphasized bhakti, *prema* (love), sacrifice, proper karma and *niti niyama* (daily actions). Its followers were sworn by truth, submitted to the direction of a guru, renounced luxury, forsook any medicine, were devoid of desire and attachment, stayed cool in all circumstances, remained unclean and ate only during the day. They were advised to lead a chaste life by shunning the company of kings, brahmins, *bhandaries* (barbers), *majhies* (fishermen) and *daries* (women) in order to achieve the ultimate principle, called '*brahma prapti*' in their parlance. In ideological terms the Mahima Dharma not only represented a lower class/caste revolt against the rigid, oppressive and offending caste rules and the ritualism of the brahminical religion but also a sharp reaction against the motivated campaign of the Christian missionaries. It sought to redeem downtrodden by vocalizing them and establish a genuine egalitarian social order. In order to achieve that some fanatical elements of the sect attacked the Jagannath temple to break the idols of Jagannath, as they thought once that was achieved Hindus would be converted to Mahima Dharma. Because of such offensive behavior on the parts of some of its fanatical followers and its unconventional ways, many conservative people became apprehensive that the sect was out to destroy traditional religious beliefs and the social order based on caste.²² In 19th century, it became quite popular (particularly) in Orissa, as evident in mushrooming growth of its associated institutions. Even at Cuttack, it had several *tungis*/Ashrams (houses of religious discourse, many of which were built during the post-independent period) such as at Chandinichowk, Alishahabazar, Chauliganj, Machhuabazar, Khatbinsahi (1937), Kaflabazar, Biranasi (1925, the oldest), Chataghat, Nuabazar, Khanagar (1947), Darjisahi, Badambadi and Jobra; with that at Chandinichowk being the chief and the holiest *gadi* (podium)/ *tungi* built during the early part of 20th century, as it was supposed to be visited by Mahima Gosain himself and the sect's chief pontiff Viswanath Baba was involved in its rebuilt after it was burnt by the miscreants. It was also the richest of the *tungis* in the city owing to hefty donations it received from its devotees. It was also on the efforts of Viswanath Baba that Mahima Dharma assumed a significant following at Cuttack among the cross sections of society irrespective of caste, creed and status. Those *tungies* were frequently visited by the monks of Mahima Order and people used to throng such places to partake in the religious gathering that was characterized by the religious discourses, burning of lamps and the singing of *bhajans* (chorous devotional songs) to the accompaniment of musical instruments like *khanjini* and *jhanja*. With the evening fall the ambience of the 'rur-ban' Cuttack was filled with the musical tones emanating from the *tungis* dotting the city landscape. *Magha Purnima* was the main festival of the followers of the sect that they celebrated with much gala. Such *tungis* have had played the vital role in the spread and the continued popularity of Mahima Dharma, and also in maintaining peace and social harmony in the city and the state of Orissa as people from all the ages, gender, levels, ranks, status, educational and professional achievements joined its ranks with equality and fellow feeling. Apart from such popular side of the Mahima Dharma, it had an intellectual side as well, as it in due course received patronage from the elites and intellectuals of the city, who were meeting frequently and discoursing on its tenets, thereby, further contributed to its growth and popularity. Their writing being published in the printing press accelerated the pace of its popularity and it came to occupy a special place in the society at Cuttack in particular and Orissa in general.²³ But owing to lack of proper publicity it could not be as popular as other religious reform movements in contemporary India; even though it had potential to be so.²⁴ All such neo-religious movements, except the Mahima Dharma, remained essentially confined to the urban elites and could not spread beyond the urban confines owing to their discourses being in elitist languages like English, Bengali or at best literary Oriya. Deification of their preachers also contributed to their decline, as they came to indulge in practices condemned by them. The forms that

continued to exist were their vestigial relics in the form of a few followers, a few places of worship and a few book collections on such practices. They were both scions and pioneers of cultural renaissance and transformation in modern Orissa.

To conclude, the colonial Cuttack was the point of intense cultural interaction and served as the principal node of introducing alien colonial culture into contemporary Orissan society. It became a cultural crucible and the major transformative agent in the region, since new beliefs and practices frequently emerged from it and diffused outwards. The cultural encounter that raged there took rich and varied forms enveloping all the aspects of people's life and experience, including myriad forms and places of worship. Many new vistas of human experience were explored in all the aforesaid spheres that had lasting impact on the posterity. Places, forms and the practices of religious worships at colonial Cuttack reflected its multicultural population professing different religions and belonging to different sects and castes, which were a composite of both old and new practices. Its pantheon of gods and goddesses, and the rituals involving them were drawn from several sources: tribal, folk, Sanskrit, Saivite, Vaisnavite, Sakti, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, etc. The encounter of eastern and western cultures that characterized the new age led to a new thinking in religion that threw up many new religious practices like *Brahmodharma* of Brahma Samaj, *Vedantism* of Arya Samaj, Vedantic Socialism of Ramkrishna Mission, Mahima Dharma, etc. All of which talked of the value of wisdom and the worship of truth/*brahma/sunya* (void) by shedding all exterior religious formalities and rituals, and the caste and idolatry. By advocating unity and love for the whole humanity, they put emphasis on developing human character by renouncing selfishness and cultivating love, purity and kindness. They were imbued with the nationalistic and patriotic spirit, and advocated pursuit of spirituality by eliminating self-interests. All these reflected the renaissance spirit and an urge on the part of people to create a more egalitarian social order. Such neo-religious practices became particularly fashionable with the educated. All such neo-religious movements, except the Mahima Dharma, remained essentially confined to the urban elites and could not spread beyond the urban confines owing to their discourses being in elitist languages like English, Bengali or at best literary Oriya. But they were both scions and pioneers of cultural renaissance and transformation in modern Orissa. In due course, it was the overarching nature of the *sahi* (neighborhood culture)/ *bhaichara* (fraternal bond across the communities) of Cuttack city that led the religious celebrations to become a collective one involving people across the communities for a large part of the colonial rule. Generally, a spirit of bonhomie and fellow-feeling undergirded their religious experiences as the syncretic culture of the city became triumphant.

Notes

1. Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chatterji, *The Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta*.
2. The term culture has been taken here in the anthropological sense of it, meaning the attributes and products of human society in all their plurality and diversity, and the values and symbolism they encode. Gold, & Gold, 'Culture and the City', pp. 182-184.
3. Barker, 'On the problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution', p. 197.
4. Dhar, *Kataka Nagar*, p. 2. Ratha, *Cuttack Darshan*, p. 28. Das, *Kataka Nagar*, p. 91.
5. Ref to Baimundi legend. Baimundi, who eked out a living by stone cutting, donated his savings to the King Marakat Kesari at Cuttack to build a stone embankment in order to protect the city from floods. The king appreciated the concern of Baimundi and built a stone embankment accordingly. There is another legend on its construction that it was built on donation of ill-gotten money by one Siddeswara Raut. The

veracity of both the legends is doubtful. The embankment once built became the protecting shield of the city that was taken care by all the subsequent governments, including the British. Common people also contributed their mite by putting their labour and constantly invigilating on its safety during the floods and cyclones, as happened during the extremely high floods of 1855. Das, *Unnabinsa*, p. 64.

6. There are three styles of Odissi *kirtans* in Orissa: Manoharsahi, Ranihati and Garanahati. Dhar, *Kataka Nagar*, p. 14. Das, *Kataka Nagar*, p. 94.
7. Pattanaik, 'Katak Nagar Barasha Hazar', pp. vii-viii.
8. There were some 2500 Telugus at colonial Cuttack, according to some estimates, many of whom used to migrate to Cuttack city with their families in search of employment, i.e., used to work with the Irrigation Company. Das, *Unnabinsa Satabdira*, p.72. Das, *Desha Kala Patra*, p. 63.
9. Dhar, *Katak Nagar*, p. 82. Das, *Kataka Nagar*, p. 84.
10. *Utkal Dipika*, 01-01-1869 & 04-09-1869. Ratha, *Cuttack Darshan*, p. 26-27.
11. On the occasion of the visit of Sankaracharya of Sringeri, people at Cuttack irrespective of caste, class and creed performed *puja, homa* (burning of sacrificial fire), etc. *Utkal Dipika*, 29-01-1903.
12. Important *Satya Pir/Sufi* centres at Cuttack, where both Hindus and Muslims congregate(d) for worship, were (are) the graves of Bukhari Shah at Barabti Fort, Malang Shah at Buxibazar and Bibi Alam at Firingibazar, etc. *Satya Pir* worship probably started during the *subedarship* of Dewan Alam Chand under the Nazim rule. Das, *Kataka Nagar*, p. 41, 85.
13. Notable such cemeteries were Sati Chaura, Kaliaboda (shows etymological association with Sikhs), Khannagar (shows etymological association with Muslims), Gora Kabar (of the Christians), etc.
14. Doctor Masud in a Muslim conference held at Syed Seminary at Cuttack in 1933 was stressing the need for communal harmony at Cuttack. *Utkal Dipika*, 18-02-1933.
15. *Utkal Dipika*, 05-06-1869. Mukherji, *History of Orissa*, p. 466. Das, *Desha Kala Patra*, p. 376. Mohapatra, 'Katakare Brahmo Samaj', pp. 467-70.
16. The city notables who joined the *Brahmo* movement were Jagamohan Ray, Jagamohan Lala, Gourisankar Ray, Madhusudan Rao et al.; who carried it to other parts of Orissa, including *Garjats*. One unique trait of the Brahmo followers of the period was that they used to converse and exchange letters in Bengali, including M.S. Das, as that was considered to be language of elite of the city dominated by Bengalis. Not only that many of the Brahmo followers who were in critical sectors in government gave preference to Brahmo followers in recruitment to several jobs. Das, *Desha Kala Patra*, pp. 282-3, 307, 379, 387.
17. Devi Prasanna Choudhury's long speech at Cuttack on 5th March 1889 on the character of *Brahmhodharma* had notable influence at Cuttack. *Utkal Dipika*, 10-03-1889.
18. One controversy was his severe criticism of the eroticism in the writings of Upendra Bhanja, a great poet of Orissa. Another was his denunciation of superstitions in Hinduism. Owing to his *Brahmo* leanings he was misconstrued as anti-Hindu. Still another was his views on the desecration of the idols of Jagannath by Kalapahara in his textbook on History of Orissa in Oriya language. He was misunderstood as one denigrating the status of Jagannath as the supreme divine deity of Orissa. But many of such controversies were raised by the vested interests at the behest of textbook publishers at Calcutta. Das, *Desha Kala Patra*, pp. 313-5.
19. Another side of coin was that the newspapers became carriers of traditional religious and superstitious practices by taking up staple stories on the talismanic activities of saintly persons, and the rumors on their *mahatmya* (divine glory) and their patron deities like Vishnu, Shiva, et. al., including their local manifestations. *Utkal Dipika*, 19-06-1869 & 29-05-1869.
20. A conservative Hindu association, called Bhagabat Bhakti Pradayani Sabha, protested strongly at the Brahmo activities of trying to convert the susceptible youth studying at educational institutions to the Brahmo ideals, which put the Hindu society and religion in jeopardy. They took strong umbrage to the

- involvement of government officials and teachers in such matter. It resolved to bring the attention of colonial government to such affairs. The lead in such matter was taken by the leaders like Ramsankar Ray, Govind Rath, Kapileswar Nandasarma, et. al. Das, *Desha Kala Patra*, pp. 376-9. *Utkal Dipika*, 18-12-1869. Mohapatra, 'Katakare Brahmo Samaj', p. 470.
21. Bhima Bhoi's notable devotional compositions were: *Srutichintamani*, *Bhajan Mala*, *Brahma Nirupan Gita*, *Ashok Vihari Gita*, *Chautisa Grantha Mala*, etc. Besides such texts and the oral tradition on that, there was no authentic text that existed on the sect. Therefore, an effort was made by the devotees at Chandinichowk Ashram to compile an authentic history of the sect. Viswanath Baba was given charge of it, who compiled it with the assistance of others like Ananta Baba, Pitambar Baba, Keshav Ch. Das et. al. Mohapatra, 'Katakare Mahima Dharma', p. 435, 443.
 22. Opposition of people to Mahima Dharma was evident from the prevalent popular saying: '*kuadu asile kumbhi patia, stri purushanku kale bayia*'. Some opponents also took such outrageous step as burying the *tungis* of Mahima Dharma such as that at Chandinichowk in Cuttack city. Ibid. p. 435.
 23. The leading figures of Cuttack who were associated with the Mahima movement were: Narayan Ray, Laxminarayan Sahu, Bichhanda Ch. Pattnaik, Braj Kishore Das, Ghansyam Das, Sashibhusan Ray, Nabakrushan Choudhury, Lingaraj Mishra, Pranakrushna Parija, Arta Ballbh Mohanty, Mayadhar Mansingh, Vinod Kanungo, et. al. They used to meet frequently at different venues and were discoursing on the tenets and the social dimension of the Dharma. A Satya Mahima Dharma Samiti was also formed to propagate the principle of Mahima Dharma. Viswanath Baba. Ibid. pp. 443-6.
 24. M.S. Das disagreed with the opinion of others like G.S. Ray that Mahima followers were the disturbing elements and committed the act of treason. Rather he argued that had such a movement took place in states like Maharashtra, Bengal or Punjab; its founder Mahima Gosain would have been as popular as the Dayananda Saraswati and Ramohan Ray. Das, *Desha Kala Patra*, p. 306.

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