



TRIBAL AND RELIGIOUS LEGACY OF THE NALA, TUNGA AND BHANJA DYNASTIES OF EASTERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The tribal dynasties of Eastern India, particularly the Nalas, Tungas and Bhanjas, played a significant role in shaping the political, social and religious history of Eastern India in general and Odisha in particular during the early medieval period. Emerging from the tribal hinterlands and forested regions of ancient Odisha between the fifth and twelfth centuries C.E., these ruling families gradually transformed themselves into powerful regional dynasties. Their rise reflects an important phase of state formation in which tribal chiefs assimilated with the mainstream socio-political order while preserving several indigenous traditions and cultural practices. The process of legitimation adopted by these dynasties reveals a remarkable synthesis of tribal identity and

Brahmanical ideology. Through the patronage of temples, grants to Brahmanas, performance of religious rites and adoption of Sanskrit titles, the Nalas, Tungas and Bhanjas established their authority and gained social recognition. At the same time, they contributed immensely to the spread of regional culture, art, architecture and religious traditions in Odisha.

KEY WORDS: Nala, Tunga, Bhanja, tribal, Hiranyagarbha, Risivasaka, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism.

INTRODUCTION :

The tribal dynasties of Eastern India, particularly the Nalas, Tungas and Bhanjas, played a significant role in shaping the political, social and religious history of Eastern India in general and Odisha in particular during the early medieval period. Emerging from the tribal hinterlands and forested regions of ancient Odisha between the fifth and twelfth centuries C.E., these ruling families gradually transformed themselves into powerful regional dynasties. Their rise reflects an important phase of state formation in which tribal chiefs assimilated with the mainstream socio-political order while preserving several indigenous traditions and cultural practices. The process of legitimation adopted by these dynasties reveals a remarkable synthesis of tribal identity and Brahmanical ideology. Through the patronage of temples, grants to Brahmanas, performance of religious rites and adoption of Sanskrit titles, the Nalas, Tungas and Bhanjas established their authority and gained social recognition. At the same time, they contributed immensely to the spread of regional culture, art, architecture and religious traditions in Odisha. Their support to Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and local tribal cults created a unique cultural harmony that enriched the religious life of Eastern India. Thus, the tribal and religious legacy of these dynasties occupies an important place in the historical and cultural evolution of Odisha.

Tribal origin

In this research article we will discuss how the Nalas, the Tungas and the Bhanjas had their origin from tribal communities? From their epigraphic record it is noticed that the rulers of all the three dynasties adopted highhanded title, donated land to the brahmanas, and established titular deities. In nutshell we can say that they behave like Kshatriya ruling dynasties of their time. Now the questions need to be answer is how did the tribal chieftains of the hinterland region Kshatriya status? Was it deliberate or accidental? What are the processes through they assimilated into the mainstream society? and in what way they contributed to the Odishan culture through their activities? In the subsequent paragraphs an attempt will be made to elaborate all these questions.

In early times the non-Aryan ruling class, those who were beyond the pole of the Brahmanic and Khatriya society attempted to raise their social status by associating their families with the Brahmanas or high Khatriyas. Through the process of social mobility, the ruling chiefs achieved social, political and economic status which led them to maintain matrimonial relationship with ruling chiefs of the Aryan stock. The engagement of Brahmin priest in socio-religious ceremonies further accentuated the royal status. Some non-Aryan tribal royal families of the south are known to have celebrated Hiranyagarbha sacrifice to justify their origin from the Hiranya Yoni¹.

The totemistic origin of the Nalas as the indigenous tribals may also be taken into account². 'Nal' or 'Nala' is the name of a tree or a species of grass which might have been the totemistic symbol of the early Nala kings. The names of the three early kings viz. Vyagraraja, Vrisadhvaaja and Varaharaja show their totemistic and animistic relation with animals. Most probably people who looked after and revered the 'Nal' plant or shrub might have been known as Nalas. Even now, many non-Aryan tribals worship the totemistic objects like tree or animal as their family deities from which they trace their origin. Thus, the 'Nal' plant or shrub might have been the early Nala kings' totemistic symbol from which they traced their descent. With the increase of their political importance as a ruling power, the totemistic Nala rulers might have associated their origin with the 'Epic Nala'. That is why they repeatedly call themselves as 'Nalanvaya or Nalovamsodbhava'. Had they belonged to either a Brahmana or Kshatriya class, they would not have mentioned again and again as Nalanvaya in their records to glorify their origin. It is known that epic Nala belonged to the Iksaku race and so the historical Nalas should have called their family as Iksakuvamsa instead of Nalavamsa had they not been to totemistic tribals. Therefore, it is probable that the Nalas might have been totemistic tribals originally³.

The Tungas who migrated from Rohitasa identified with Rohtasgarh in Bihar⁴. Number of copper plates were issued by the members of the Tunga dynasty. From them we know that Yamagarta mandala comprised of an extensive territory covering major part of the Dhenkanal district Pallahara, Talcher of Angul district eastern portion of Sundargarh and Western portion of Keonjhar district. The Yamagartta mandala as referred to above included the adjoining portions of Dhenkanal, Keonjhar, Sundargarh and Sambalpur district and the chief place of the mandala has been identified with Jamurdi in Pallahara taluk of Dhenkanal district⁵. The king of the dynasty has been described as the lord of eighteen classes of Gonda people (Astadasa Gondramadhipati Mahadhipati) fairly deep valley as were the peculiar feature of this region. It must have been situated in the hilly territory and river valley. As described in modern geographical works some of the highest peaks of hills and mountains in Odisha are Malayagiri in Pallahara Gandhamardan and Mankadnacha Keonjhar and Panchadhara in Sambalpur district⁶. The grants of the family, so far discovered begin with the description of hill named Risivasaka and the founder of Tunga dynasty had come from the place named Rohitasa, modern Rohtasgarh in Bihar.

Careful study of the copper plate charters of the Bhanjas of Khijinga kotta and Khinjali leads us to derive the following conclusion which will show; that the Bhanjas of both -the territories were, in some way or other, connected with one another. The charters of the Bhanjas of Khijinga unanimously declare that their progenitor Virabhadra alias Adibhanja emanated miraculously by breaking open an egg of a pea-hen. In some of their charters issued from Dhrtipura, the Bhanjas of Khinjali have also claimed themselves as *Andajavamsa prabhava* which shows that they belonged to the 'egg-born

dynasty'. The 'egg-born dynasty', here, refers to no other family but the Bhanja dynasty of Khijjinga who were ruling over a territory contiguous to that of Khinjali. The adoption of the title 'Bhanja' and the namesake of the Bhanja rulers of Khijjinga by the rulers of Khinjali prove, beyond doubt, that they were of one origin. In their records the Bhanja kings have described themselves as Andaja-Vamsa prabhava till 18th century A.D. The early mythological tradition which describes the progenitor of the Bhanjas as born of a pea-hen's egg indicates tribal character of totemism and it leads us to believe that they might have belonged to some indigenous tribes. Some scholars sought to correct them with the Bhuyans and Bhanjas. But there is no concrete evidence to establish the theory. In this connection our attention is drawn to the Asanaput Stone inscription of Satrubhanjadeva who according to many scholars, belonged to the 4th century A.D. This is the earliest inscription of a king bearing the name of the Bhanjas. In an opening line of the inscription, Satrubhanja has been described as belonging to the Naga dynasty (Nagavamsavardhamona). Satrubhanja is a very common name in the Bhanja families of Dhrati pura, Vanjulvaka and Khijjinga-Kotta. It appears that the Nagas in Odisha assumed the surname Bhanja and they tried to give them a separate Identity by establishing a mythological origin of their progenitor. Subsequently they came to be regarded as belonging to the Bhanja race.

Kshatriyaization of Tribal dynasties through legitimization

The Nala, Tunga and Bhanja were originally tribal chief and subsequently through the process of legitimization they moved in the social ladder and turn into Kshatriya. The first question is how the tribal claimed kshatriya status? For this we need to understand the Indian social milieu in early medieval time. According to M.N. Srinivas "the caste system is far from being a rigid system and it was flexible, where movement has always been possible. A low caste was able, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. This process was called 'Sanskritization' and it was always there in ahistorical times over the entire length and breadth of India."⁷ In this process of emulating the behaviour of higher caste, some land owning and minor chieftains tried to imitate the Kshatriya groups in order to acquire the social status, then it is called Kshatriyaization."⁸

Thus, Kshatriyaization has largely been considered as a process of social and cultural change following the "Kshatriya model". Kshatriyaization was initiated in tribal areas by the Zamindars, chiefs or Rajas in order to strengthen their legitimization as Hindu rajas in their own society and to broaden the basis of their economic and political power. In early medieval Odisha many tribal ruling chiefs followed this process of Kshatriyaization, by adopting the model of their overlord or legendary and historical dynasties. They invited brahmins to their territory and issued land grant for them, established brahmin (*brahmodaya*) village (*Sasana*), accepted and declared major Brahmanical deities as tutelary deity and constructed temples for them. Perform sacrifices according to Brahmanical rituals and most importantly adopted Sanskrit language for their record.

The adoption of status symbols which are not mere items (e.g., a royal umbrella) but social institutions like a Hindu temple or a Brahman (*agrahara* or *sasana*) village, however, initiated further Sanskritization both "from below" (adoption) and "above" - in order to create for this adopted social institution a social context which is similar to the one to which it belonged. In other words, adoption by local chiefs and rajas of status symbol, rites etc. from regional rajas has to be viewed as Sanskritization "from below.". In the beginning, endowments granted by the local rajas enabled the temple and its priests to be economically "independent." But, after a few generations, the Brahman temple priests of lower status, and their family members, were economically forced to build up their own clientele which could be found only among members of Hindu castes. This fact influenced both vertical social mobility of tribes "entering" the Hindu caste fold and horizontal or spatial mobility.⁹ Spatial mobility was promoted by Brahmins in tribal areas who encouraged Hindus to settle down in "their" area in order to enlarge their clientele. Even more important for our thesis is the fact that in tribal areas Brahmins, in their own interest, tolerated or even encouraged vertical social mobility of tribes through Sanskritization by accepting their invitation to become their priests¹⁰.

Process of legitimation and state formation in hinterland Odisha

Ruling elites find it difficult to justify their power by de facto possession of it, and therefore try to find a moral and/or ethical basis for it. Legitimation helps in addressing the concerns and compulsions emanating from within local society, as well as in conforming to and becoming a part of the pan-Indian tradition. Patronage, with its inherent capacity to confer status and influence the domain of popular perceptions, has always been an important factor in socio-political processes, including the legitimation of royal authority. Rulers derived their legitimation through patronage of brahmanas, local deities and religious centers, among others. The patron, the recipient and the objects of exchange were the interacting elements in the act. The dynamics of the relationship between the constituent elements were rooted in the particular society, for, ultimately, conceptions of status, power and authority were culturally patterned. Patronage included not only impressive monuments but also more modest efforts and services, for what really mattered was the perception that such activities created at the popular level and the image that they helped to project¹¹. Patronage being a significant component of the dominant ideology and, therefore, of the strategies of domination, its changing forms, it is hoped, will reflect the trajectory of socio-political transformation in early Odisha.

RELIGIOUS ELEMENT IN THE IDEOLOGY OF KINGSHIP

Like other ruling families of early medieval Odisha, the seals, invocations, and the eulogistic introduction (*prasasti*) of the royal grants of the Nalas, Tungas and Bhanjas expressed the religious elements in the ideology of kingship.

The Nalas: The Nala copperplate grants do not bear seals. Arthapati is described in the Kesari-beda plates as "*Mahesvara-Mahasen-Stirsta-rajya-vibhavah*"¹². This epithet may be taken to mean 'one upon whom the glory of royalty has been bestowed by Mahesvara (Siva) and Mahasena (Skandakarttikeya)'. "It may also signify that the king dedicated his kingdom and his wealth to these gods."¹³

While the early Nala kings, thus, were Saivas, the later kings Skandavarman and Vilasatunga were Vaisnavas. The Podagadh stone inscription of Skandavarman, which records the erection of a temple (*pada-mula*) of Visnu, accompanied by the distribution of a large amount of fees (*daksina*) to officiating priests, and the gift of a holding (*pura*) for Purusa" begins with a eulogy of Hari (Visnu), describing him as the object to be conquered, the victor, and victory itself.¹⁴ An imprecatory verse in the inscription was against any transgression of the king's order and states that he who conforms to the good path followed by kings will find refuge with the god Vasudeva¹⁵. The Padagarh inscription refers to Skandavarman as having repelled his enemies with his valour and credits him with having repopulated the deserted town of Puskari¹⁶. It may be suggested that the shift to a Vaishnava affiliation, the construction of a Vishnu shrine in what was the capital city of the Nalas, and the endowment of land for this shrine may have been related to the decisive political events referred to in the Podagadh inscription.

The Rajim stone inscription of Vilasatunga eulogizes and invokes the blessings of Hari (Visnu). The first five verses invoke Visnu. The first is almost entirely lost; the second refers to Visnu's churning of the ocean of milk; the fourth verse is in the form of a dialogue between Hari and his consort (Laksmi); the fifth describes the dwarf incarnation of Visnu. Verse describes Nala as one who surpassed Smara, the god of love, in the splendor of his form, and whose lotus-feet were kissed by the bee-like crest-jewels of a crowd of hostile kings who submitted to him. In verses 8 and 9, Prithiviraja is described as having been created by the creator on seeing the world tainted by the evils of the Kali age. The subsequent verses eulogize Prithiviraja's son Virarupa, and refer to Vilasatunga, probably a son of Virarupa. The Rajim inscription, like the Podagadh inscription, records the erection of a Visnu temple.

The Bhanjas of Khinjalimandala: The seals attached to the copperplate grants of the Bhanjas of Khinjalimandala invariably bear the motif of the couchant bull and the name of the king in the genitive case. Other symbols that appear are the crescent moon, the crescent moon and sun/star, and the lotus. The Kumurukela plates of Satrubhanja begin with an invocation to Visnu, the god whose chest is embraced by his consort Laksmi¹⁷, followed by a verse that invokes Siva in his fearsome aspect

as Bhairava, the terrible destroyer who killed the demon Andhaka¹⁸ The grant itself is said to have been made in the name of the lord Visnu (Visnu-bhattarakam=uddisya)¹⁹. The subsequent grants of the Bhañjas of Khinjali-mapdala invoke Siva as Bhairava(in the same manner as in the Kumurukelaplates). The Singhara plates of Ranabhañja, however, state that the gift recorded therein was made in the name of the lord Nārayana (Sri-Nārayana-bhattarakam-uddisya).²⁰

The early Bhanjas of Khinjali-mandala claimed to belong to the egg born lineage (andaja-vamsa-prabhavah). As far as the royal epithets are concerned, Satrubhanja of the Kumurukela and Sonpur plates is described in these inscriptions as a parama-vaishava. These two sets of plates refer to the many Bhanja kings whose power issued from their holding the favour of Laksmi²¹. The copperplates of Ranabhanja, the son and successor of Satrubhanja, describe Ranabhanja as a parama-mahesvara²². Further, the grants issued by this ruler so long as he bore the title of ranaka and the epithet samadhigata-panca-mahasabda describe him as having obtained the favour of the goddess Stambhesvari (Stambhesvari-labdha vara-prasada)²³. The reference to Stambhesvari is conspicuous by its absence in the Baudh plates of Ranabhanja²⁴, "dated in his fifty-fourth and fifty-eighth year, wherein Ranabhanja is given the title maharaja.

Satrubhanja and Rapabhanja are described in their inscriptions as delighting their people by their munificence²⁵. Sarubhanja is compared with Brhaspati in the Sonpur plates²⁶ while Ranabhaija's inscriptions compare him with Svayambhu²⁷.

Some of the seals attached to the copperplate grants of the later Bhanjas of Khinjali-mandala are too worn for any motif or legend to be discerned. However, where the impressions are still clear, the motifs that of a lion, accompanied by the name of the king in the genitive case. The grants of this group of kings begin with an invocation to Hara (Siva), eulogizing his brilliant third eye which destroyed the god of love, and to the waters of the Surasarita (Ganga), which descended from the locks of Siva ²⁸.

The grants of Nettabhanja Kalyanakalasa describe him as a parama mahesvara. Silabhanja Tribhuvanakalasa was also a parama-mahesvara. Vidyadharabhanja Amoghakalasa is not endowed in his inscriptions with any sectarian titles. Netabhañja Prthivīkalasaa, the son and successor of Vidyadharabhanja, is described as a parama-vaishnava, as are Satrubhanja Tribhuvanakalasa and Netabhan Tribhuvanakalasa. Satrubhanja Mangalaraja bears the epithet parama-mahesvara. All the inscriptions of the later Bhañjas of Khinjali-mandala describe these kings as having removed the impurities or stain of the Kali age (nirdhuta-kali-kalusha, nirdhuta-kali-kalusa-kalamasah).

Bhanjas of Khijjīngakotta: The seals attached to the copperplates of the Adi-Bhanjas usually bear the name of the king in the genitive case and the motifs of the couchant bull (described as a humped bull in the two Adipur plates of Narendrabhanja). Other motifs that make their appearance are the lotus, crescent moon, conch, and trident. The copper medallion attached to the Khandadeuli plate of Narendrabhaja has been described as bearing in bas-relief svastika, a bull, and a goddess. The invocation in all the copper plate grants of the Adi-Bhanas (except the Adipur plate of Durjayabhanja, which does not contain any invocation) is to Bhava (Siva), consort of Bhavvni, the omniscient lord of all the worlds, the destroyer of the fear of rebirth, who knows the various techniques of meditation. One of the Adipur plates of Narendrabhanja prefixes this invocation with the mangala "Om namo Avighnesvaraya".²⁹ The Khichhing plate of Mahanmadahavabhanjadeva describes the grants as having been made in the name of the lord Sankara (*Sankara-bhattarakam Uddisya*),³⁰ The Kesari plate of Satrubhanja makes a similar statement (*bhagavad-bhattāraka-Sankaram samuddisya*)³¹. The Khandadeuli plate of Narendrabhanja states that the grant it records was made in the name of the lord Mahadeva, i.e. Siva (*bhagavantam Mahadeva-bhattarakam uddisya*).³²

One of the Adipur copperplates of Narendrabhanja describes this king as one whose sins have been removed through his worship of the feet of Hara (Hara-carana-aradhana-ksapita-papah),³³. The other Adipur plate refers to him as a bee at the lotus feet of Siva (Siva-carana-saroja-satpadah), ³⁴". Narendrabhanja's prasasti compares him with Smara (the god of love) in appearance and with Yudhisthira in his protection of the earth.³⁵ The Bamanghati plate of Ranabhañja, the Bamanghati plate of Rajabhanja, the Khichhing plate of Mahanmadahavabhanjadeva, and the Ukhunda plate of Prthvibhanja describe these kings as ones whose sins were destroyed by their worship of the feet of

Hara, ie. Siva (*Hara-caran ardhana-ksayita-papah*), ³⁶and the Khandadeuli plate of Narendrabhanja contains the same epithet with a minor variation (*Hara-carana- Aradhana-ksayita-papah*).³⁷ The comparisons with Smara and Yudhisthira occur in the Bamanghati plate of Ranabhanja, the Bamanghati plate of Rajabhanja, the Khichhing grant of Mahanmadahavabhañja, and the Khandadeuli plate of Narendrabhanja. The Kesri plate of Satrubhañija contains no sectarian epithet, but does refer to Satrubhanja's father Ranabhanja as intent on the worship of the feet of Hara (*Hara-caran-aradhana-tatparab*)³⁸ Satrubhanja is compared with Yudhisthira in his being intent on the protection of his people.³⁹

The Adipur plates of Narendrabhanja introduce the account of the miraculous birth of Ganadandla Viabhadra, the progenitor of the Adi-Bhanja family, who is said to have burst out of the egg of a pea-ben in the great hermitage of Kotyäkrama, where he was reared by the sage Vasistha.⁴⁰ This account makes its appearance in all the Adi-Bhanja inscriptions except for the Adipur plate of Durjayabhanja. The Kesari plate of Satrubhanja contains a variation on the account of the origin of the Adi-Bhaija dynasty. It refers to the 88,000 sons of Virabhadra, and on account of the prayer of these sons, Virabhadra was protected by Ramadeva and made lord of 88,000 villages⁴¹.

The seal of the Jurada plates of Nettekabhanja bears the figure of a jar of nectar (*amrita-kalasa*). The inscription invokes the protection of the lord Narayana, the god who is the beloved of Sri, destroyer of the Daityas, and bestower of the reward of deliverance (*moksa*) on his devotees. It refers to the deity's splendid discus (*cakra*), mace (*gada*), sword (*asi*), conch (*sankha*), and bow (*dhanus*), and to his vehicle, the Garuda. The god Narayana is, further, described as the *kula-devata-tutelary deity* of the kings born in the illustrious lineage of the Bhanjas. Nettekabhanja is described in his *prasasti* as a *parama-vaisnava*.⁴²

The Bhanjas of Baudh: The seal of the Baud plates of Salonabhanja bears the figure of a vase in relief; that of the plates of Kanakabhanja is simply shaped in the form of a lotus. The inscription of Salonabhanja commences with an invocation to the god Narayana ("Om namo Narayanaya"), while that of Kanakabhanja does not contain any invocation. Salonabhanja is described in his copperplate grant as a *parama-vaisnava* and is eulogized for giving away land, cows, God, and gain, and for having had constructed various lakes and embankments⁴³. Kanakabhanja does not bear any sectarian epithet. He is compared in his Baud plates with Visnu, Rudra, Sunasira (Indra), Soma, Marut, Dhanada, Madana, the earth, the sun, and Dhisana (Brhaspati), and is said to embody the qualities of all the Gods ⁴⁴. Kanakabhañja is, further, described as the great-grandson of Salonabhaija, who is praised for his good works including making provisions for food and water for travellers, laying pleasure gardens, and digging water channels. He is said to have performed severe austerities, after which he retired to Varānasi, entrusting the affairs of state to his competent ministers. ⁴⁵ The inscription eulogizes the kings of the Bhañja family for their munificence in making grants of land.⁴⁶ The Baud plates of Salonabhanja and Kanakabhanja trace the ancestry of the Bhanja lineage to the sage (*muni*) Kasyapa.⁴⁷

The Antirigam plates of Yasabhanja do not bear a seal. The Antirigam plates of Jayabhanja bear a lump of copper with the name of the king on it. Neither set of plaques contains an invocation to a deity. Yasabhanja is not endowed with any sectarian titles in his inscription. He is described as a worshipper of Rakesa (Siva) and the multitude of the twice-born, and as incessantly engaged in the preservation of dharma⁴⁸. The grant of Jayabhanjadeva describes him both as a devotee of Sañkara (*sri-Sankara-bhaktiman*) as well as a worshipper of Si and Visnu (*Sri-vaisnavah*)⁴⁹. Jayabhañja's father Rayabhañja is described as engrossed in the worship of the twice born and gods (*dvija-deva-pujana-rajah*), and is compared with Sukra in bravery⁵⁰. Jayabhanja is compared in this inscription with Madana (in beauty), Kama (in munificence), Duryodhana (in pride), and Sukra (in bravery).⁵¹

The Tungas: The seals of most of the Tunga copperplate grants bear the name of the king in the nominative or the genitive case. The sun, moon, a bull facing a tree, and couchant deer facing a tree are the motifs that variously appear on the seals. The only Tunga inscription to contain an invocation is one of the Talcher plates of Gayadatunga (no. 1), which commences with an invocation to Somardhadharin (the deity weaning the half-moon, i.e. Siva), the god who is omniscient, the manifestation of knowledge, who possesses divine vision, and is the means for the attainment of excellence.⁵² All the Tunga

inscriptions endow these kings with the epithet parama-mahesvara. Mahaparvata, the place of issue of three of the Tunga grants (nos. 2,3, 4), is described in the inscriptions as being purified by the sound of the Rig, Sama, and Yajur Vedas and by the smoke of sacrificial fires, and as a place where the abodes of the *risis* were made joyous by the accumulation of smoke arising from the oblations being incessantly made by the twice born.⁵³

CONCLUSION

The recurrent themes in the *prasastis* of the kings of the Nalas, Bhanja and Tunga of the early medieval Odisha are the bravery and the military exploits of kings, their physical beauty, and the various admirable qualities with which their personalities were endowed. Comparisons with the heroes of the Mahabhairata, Yudhisthira in particular, are frequent, as are comparisons with legendary kings such as Puru, Dilipa, Prthu, Nala, Nahusa, Māndhata, Bharata, and Bhagiratha. Among the frequently occurring themes in the *prasastis* of the kings of ancient and early medieval Odisha is that of the Kali age, the king being eulogized for instance as the remover of the stain of the Kali age (or some similar statement), and thus as one countering the forces of degeneration.

The king is eulogized in a few inscriptions as the protector of his people and as the maintainer of dharma. The inscriptions of some kings specify the items gifted by kings; these included land, gold, grain, cows and elephants. The land grant charters invariably contain a series of benedictory and imprecatory verses eulogizing the act of giving land to Brahmanas, citing the authority and recommendations of sources such as the Mahabharata, the Dharmasastras, the Manu Smṛti, and the ancient seers (*risis*). The Russelkonda plates of Nepabhanja give the king the epithet of parama-brahmanya (greatly devoted to the Brahmanas). Apart from the references in the royal *prasastis*, the evidence of several hundred records of royal grants indicates that throughout the period under review, ritual giving (*dana*), particularly the giving of land (*bhumi-dana*) to Brahmanas and religious establishments, was the pious activity par excellence for kings. A small number of inscriptions refer to the temple-building activity of kings. While one refers to the king's construction of lakes and embankments (Baud plates of Salonabhanja). Majority of the kings of these dynasties claimed an association with Vaisnavism or Saivism. Among the significant references to autochthonous deities are those of the goddess Stambheavari who finds mention in the Terasingha plates of Tustikara, and some of the grants of the early Bhañjas of Khinjali-mandala. The cult of this goddess is an instance of the Hinduization of an autochthonous deity, and her worship is still prevalent in western Odisha, although she is no longer always represented by a post.

The earliest assumption of specifically Vaisnava or Saiva sectarian epithets by the kings of Odisha dates to about the fifth century C.E, and this became the general practice soon thereafter. It may be noted that while parama-māhesvara appears in the inscriptions as the usual Saiva epithet for kings, the Vaisnava epithet parama-bhagavata was replaced early in the period under review by parama-vaisnava.

A few of the royal inscriptions are inclusive rather than exclusive in their sectarian associations. Thus, the Kumurukela plates of Satrubhanja (one of the early Bhanjas of Khinjali-mandala) begin with an invocation to both Visnu and Bhairava, describe the king as a parama-vaisnava, and refer to the grant as having been made in the name of the lord visnu. The Singhar plates of Ranabhanja begin with an invocation to Bhairava, describe the king as a parama-mahesara, and state that the grant was made in the name of the lord Narayana. The Antirigam plates of Jayabhañja (one of the Bhaijas of Kolada) describe this king as a devotee of Sankara as well as of Sri and Visnu.

The Bhanjas & Tungas were among the more prominent dynasties of early medieval Odisha, who display a consistency in sectarian affiliation. It may be noted that all these kings claimed Saiva affiliations. The reference in the Jurida grant of Netabhanja to Narayana being the kula-devata of this particular branch of the Bhanja family. In several cases, there is no consistency in 'the sectarian epithets assumed by the various rulers of a particular dynasty, and the epithets parama-mahesvara and parama-vaisnava seem to alternate without any rationale except perhaps reflecting the changing personal predilections of the kings who bore them.

In some instances, however, changes in the sectarian affiliation of the kings of a particular dynasty may be associated with certain political events. Reference may be made in this connection to the political background of the shift of the Nala rulers from Vaisnava to Saiva affiliations, which coincided with and may have been a consequence of certain political events, namely the resurrection of Nala power after a series of military reverses, perhaps at the hands of the Vakatakas or the Calukyas.

The Nala claimed an origin that links them to lineages of the Epic-Pauranic tradition, the elaboration of mythical origin accounts as an aspect of royal legitimation is a more marked feature of the early medieval period.

The miraculous birth from the egg of a pea hen-is alluded to in the inscriptions of the early Bhañjas of Khinjali-mandala and elaborated in those of the Adi-Bhanjas. It has been suggested that the pea-fowl had totemistic significance for this family. The event of the miraculous birth of the progenitor of the Adi-Bhanja lineage was situated in a brahmanically respectable locale a hermitage where Ganadanda was reared by the sage Vasistha. The version of the Adi-Bhanja origin myth contained in the Kesari plate of Satrubhanja, although difficult to interpret precisely, adds to the details of the above episode by introducing the 88,000 sons of Virabhadra, and the latter being made adhipati of 88,000 villages by Ramadeva. It is likely that the Ramadeva of this account is Rimacandra of the great epic; his introduction into the Adi-Bhanja origin myth indicates the further brahmanization of the story. Thus, the origin myths of Adi-Bhanjas reflect mélange of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical elements.

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