

Patronage and Power: Women and Royal Queens as Temple Builders in Odisha

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ABSTRACT

The architectural and cultural history of Odisha is closely tied to its monumental temples, long regarded as symbols of dynastic authority and religious devotion. Conventional scholarship has largely emphasized the role of kings and male elites in shaping this sacred landscape, leaving the contributions of royal women in comparative obscurity. However, inscriptions, land grants, and temple records reveal that queens and elite women were not passive figures confined to domestic or ceremonial roles; rather, they emerged as significant patrons whose endowments and commissions left enduring marks on Odisha's religious and political life.

This paper examines the agency of royal queens as temple builders in medieval Odisha, focusing on evidence from the Bhaumakara, Somavamsi, and Eastern Ganga dynasties. Figures such as Tribhuvana Mahadevi, Vakulamahadevi, and Kasturi Devi illustrate how queens employed temple patronage to express devotion, secure spiritual merit, and strengthen dynastic prestige. Their involvement demonstrates that temple construction was not solely a male domain but a shared arena of authority where women could inscribe their presence into both sacred and public spheres.

By situating female patronage within the broader discourse of power, piety, and memory, this study highlights the role of queens as active participants in Odisha's temple culture. It further contributes to the growing scholarship on gender and patronage in South Asia by foregrounding the intersection of women's agency with religion and politics. In recovering these overlooked histories, the paper argues for a more inclusive understanding of Odisha's temple tradition as a product of both male and female power.

KEYWORDS: Temple patronage, royal queens, women's agency, Odisha, early medieval period, sacred architecture, socio-political authority, cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

The sacred geography of Odisha is renowned for its monumental temples, celebrated for their distinctive Kalinga architectural style and deep ritual traditions (Behera, 1993; Bose, 1982). Scholarly narratives of these temples have traditionally emphasized the role of kings and dynasties whether the Bhaumakaras, Somavamsis, or Eastern Gangas in shaping the region's cultural and religious landscape (Panigrahi, 1992; Sahu, 2004). In this dynastic framework, temple construction is often understood as a prerogative of royal men, while the role of women, especially queens, has been relegated to the margins. Yet inscriptions, land charters, and temple records reveal that royal women were not passive consorts but active patrons whose contributions left enduring marks on Odisha's sacred landscape (Tripathi, 1995; Sahu, 2013).

The epigraphic evidence is particularly illuminating. During the Bhaumakara dynasty (8th–10th centuries CE), a remarkable number of female rulers, including Tribhuvana Mahadevi I and II, are recorded as patrons of temples and monasteries (Sahu, 2013). They endowed land for Brahmanas and Buddhist institutions, thereby shaping both the political and religious texture of early medieval Odisha. Later, under the Somavamsis (10th–11th centuries CE), queens such as Vakulamahadevi are credited with donating land and supporting temple activities, their inscriptions affirming both piety and dynastic loyalty (Sahoo, 2006). The Eastern Ganga dynasty (11th–15th centuries CE) also presents notable examples, such as Queen Kasturi Devi, who is associated with the patronage of temples and religious charities during the reign of Narasimha I, the builder of the Sun Temple at Konark (Patel & Pal, 2004; Donaldson, 1985). Such examples demonstrate that temple building was not solely a male enterprise; rather, it was a shared arena of power where queens deployed patronage to consolidate dynastic prestige and inscribe their authority within the sacred sphere.

Women's engagement with temple construction in Odisha was multifaceted. On one level, it reflected deep religious devotion and the pursuit of spiritual merit (punya) (Panigrahi, 1992). On another, it represented a deliberate assertion of agency within a patriarchal political order. Temples offered queens a visible and enduring medium through which to reinforce dynastic memory, project political legitimacy, and extend influence beyond the palace (Tripathi, 1995). In commissioning temples or endowing land, queens not only participated in the religious life of their communities but also engaged in the active negotiation of power, sovereignty, and identity.

Despite such evidence, the role of women in Odishan temple culture has not received sustained scholarly attention. Foundational works by K. C. Panigrahi, R. D. Banerji, and Stella Kramrisch have laid the groundwork for understanding Odishan temple architecture, but they largely privilege kingship and stylistic development over gendered dimensions of patronage (Panigrahi, 1992; Dehejia, 1979). Recent studies on queenship and female agency in South Asia have begun to challenge this male-centered historiography, yet Odisha remains relatively underexplored within this discourse (Sahu, 2013).

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Odisha, historically known as Kalinga, Utkala, and Odra, emerged as one of the foremost centres of temple architecture in eastern India (Panigrahi, 1992). The evolution of its sacred landscape was shaped by the interaction of dynastic politics, religious pluralism, and cultural exchanges (Kulke, 2001). Temples in this region were never mere religious monuments; they functioned as markers of royal power, instruments of cultural memory, and focal points of social and economic life (Mishra, 2018).

From the 8th to the 15th centuries CE, Odisha witnessed the rule of several powerful dynasties, most notably the Bhaumakaras, Somavamsis, and Eastern Gangas (Panigrahi, 1992; Tripathi, 1967). Each dynasty not only patronized monumental temples but also created an environment in which female members of the royal household could emerge as influential donors. The Bhaumakaras (c. 8th–10th century CE) are particularly noteworthy for their remarkable inclusion of women in governance; several queens, such as Tribhuvana Mahadevi I, ruled in their own right and extended patronage to both Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries (Mohapatra, 2007). Their reign illustrates the permeability between political authority and religious patronage, where queens could exercise sovereignty and sanctify their rule through temple construction and land grants.

Under the Somavamsis (c. 10th–11th century CE), Odisha saw the consolidation of the Kalinga style of temple architecture, marked by soaring deulas (sanctum towers) and elaborately sculpted jagamohanas

(assembly halls) (Kramrisch, 1946). In this period, queens such as Vakulamahadevi appear in epigraphic records as donors of land and ritual endowments (Mishra, 2018).

The Eastern Gangas (c. 11th–15th century CE) ushered in the grandest phase of Odishan temple architecture, culminating in the Sun Temple at Konark (Banerji, 1931). While male sovereigns particularly Anantavarman Chodaganga and Narasimhadeva I were celebrated as great temple builders, inscriptions also point to the contributions of royal women such as Queen Kasturi Devi, who endowed temples and supported religious charities (Panigrahi, 1992; Dev, 1999). In this era, queens played a vital role in extending dynastic prestige and embedding female authority into the sacred geography of the polity.

Odisha was a confluence of diverse religious traditions Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, Buddhism, and Jainism each supported by royal and sub-royal patrons (Kulke & Schnepel, 2001). Temples functioned as centres of learning, ritual, and economic redistribution, with land grants ensuring their sustainability (Sircar, 1971). Female patronage thus intersected with this pluralistic religious environment, allowing queens to exercise agency in shaping not only dynastic identity but also the broader spiritual and cultural life of the region. Medieval Odisha provided fertile ground for the emergence of royal queens as temple patrons. Dynastic politics, religious diversity, and the centrality of temple institutions created avenues through which women could project power, secure spiritual merit, and inscribe their presence into the region's sacred and social order.

THE EPIGRAPHIC RECORDS OF TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION

Epigraphic evidence remains the most direct and tangible source for understanding the role of royal women in temple construction in medieval Odisha (Sircar, 1971). Inscriptions on temple walls, copper-plate grants, and dedicatory records reveal that queens were not merely symbolic figures but active patrons who shaped the religious, cultural, and political landscape through temple endowments, land grants, and ritual oversight (Panigrahi, 1992). By examining these records, one can reconstruct the agency of women in both material and symbolic terms, highlighting the intersection of devotion, authority, and dynastic legitimacy in temple culture (Kulke, 2001).

Bhaumakara Dynasty (8th–10th Century CE)

The Bhaumakaras are among the earliest Odishan dynasties with recorded female political authority (Tripathi, 1967). Queens such as Tribhuvana Mahadevi I and Tribhuvana Mahadevi II appear in inscriptions as sovereign rulers and temple patrons (Mohapatra, 2007). For example, a 9th-century copper-plate grant records Tribhuvana Mahadevi I's endowment of land for the maintenance of a Buddhist monastery and a Shaiva temple in Jajpur (Sircar, 1971). The inscription details the name of the deity, the exact boundaries of the land, and provisions for priests, demonstrating the queen's administrative and ritual involvement. Similarly, stone inscriptions credit Tribhuvana Mahadevi II with constructing or renovating shrines and commissioning religious images (Panigrahi, 1992).

Somavamsi Dynasty (10th–11th Century CE)

During the Somavamsi period, queens such as Vakulamahadevi were instrumental in temple building and endowment (Mishra, 2018). Copper-plate grants and temple inscriptions record donations of land and revenue to support daily rituals in newly constructed temples (Sircar, 1971). Inscriptions associated with Vakulamahadevi document her role in the construction of deulas (sanctums) and jagamohanas (assembly halls), along with allocation of resources for sculptural decoration and temple maintenance (Kramrisch, 1946). These records highlight that queens' patronage was not merely symbolic but involved systematic

planning and the provision of material, human, and ritual resources necessary for sustaining temple life over generations (Mishra, 2018).

Eastern Ganga Dynasty (11th–15th Century CE)

The Eastern Gangas oversaw the pinnacle of Odishan temple architecture, including the construction of the Sun Temple at Konark and the expansion of the Jagannath Temple at Puri (Banerji, 1931). While male rulers such as Anantavarman Chodaganga and Narasimhadeva I are often celebrated as primary patrons, epigraphic records demonstrate that queens such as Kasturi Devi and other royal women actively contributed to temple construction and ritual endowments (Panigrahi, 1992; Dev, 1999). Inscriptions indicate their donations of land, gold, and ritual paraphernalia, and in some cases record their involvement in deity consecration or temple festivals (Kulke & Schnepel, 2001).

PATRONAGE AS POWER AND DEVOTION

Temple patronage in medieval Odisha was a complex practice that intertwined religious devotion with political authority (Kulke, 2001). For royal queens, commissioning temples and making endowments was not merely an expression of personal piety but also a strategic exercise of influence, enabling them to assert authority, secure dynastic legitimacy, and leave a lasting mark on the sacred and social landscape (Panigrahi, 1992). In this sense, patronage functioned simultaneously as a spiritual act and as a tool of political power. Temple patronage in Odisha cannot be understood solely as an expression of piety; for royal queens, temple construction and endowment represented a sophisticated exercise of power, enabling them to assert authority, perpetuate dynastic prestige, and shape the sacred and social landscape (Mishra, 2018).

Religious Merit and Devotion

Inscriptions and temple records frequently emphasize the spiritual motivations behind queens' patronage (Sircar, 1971). Acts of endowment whether the construction of a sanctum, the donation of land, or the provision of ritual paraphernalia were framed in terms of accruing *punya* (spiritual merit) for the queen, her family, and the dynasty. For instance, copper-plate inscriptions of Tribhuvana Mahadevi I describe her temple grants as acts ensuring both personal salvation and the continued prosperity of the kingdom (Mohapatra, 2007).

Assertion of Political Authority

Temple patronage also served as a medium through which queens could assert political presence and influence. By commissioning temples, allocating resources, and overseeing ritual observances, queens visibly inscribed their authority into the urban and rural landscape (Tripathi, 1967). In the Bhaumakara and Somavamsi periods, inscriptions depict queens not only as donors but as organizers of religious institutions, granting them a quasi-sovereign role in the administration of temple lands and rituals (Panigrahi, 1992). Through these acts, female patrons projected dynastic legitimacy, consolidated alliances, and negotiated their position within the male-dominated power structures of the court (Kulke & Schnepel, 2001).

Dynastic Prestige and Cultural Memory

The strategic dimension of patronage is also evident in the emphasis on commemorating queens' contributions in inscriptions and temple iconography. Temples endowed by queens were not merely devotional sites but monuments to dynastic continuity and prestige (Banerji, 1931). Through these commemorative practices, royal women inscribed themselves into the cultural memory of the polity, ensuring that their contributions remained visible across generations (Dev, 1999).

Interplay of Devotion and Power

In Odisha, the act of temple patronage illustrates the inseparability of spiritual and political objectives. While devotion provided legitimacy for female agency, the tangible benefits of patronage control over resources, influence over religious institutions, and recognition in epigraphic records strengthened the queen's social and political position (Mishra, 2018). This dual function underscores the unique position of royal women in Odishan temple culture: as spiritual intermediaries, administrators, and custodians of dynastic memory (Panigrahi, 1992).

ARCHITECTURAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT

The temple-building activities of royal queens in Odisha had profound architectural and cultural repercussions. Their patronage not only contributed to the physical development of sacred structures but also shaped religious practices, social hierarchies, and regional identity. By commissioning temples, endowing rituals, and supporting associated institutions, queens left an enduring imprint on the Kalinga architectural idiom and the broader cultural landscape.

Influence on Architecture

Queens' patronage often translated into tangible architectural contributions. Inscriptions and records show that queens were involved in commissioning deulas (sanctums), jagamohanas (assembly halls), and subsidiary shrines. For instance, Vakulamahadevi of the Somavamsi dynasty is credited with endowing temples whose layouts reflected the emerging Kalinga style, characterized by intricate stone carvings, towering spires, and elaborately sculpted assembly halls. Similarly, queens of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, such as Kasturi Devi, funded the construction of shrines and subsidiary structures that enhanced both the grandeur and functionality of temples like the Jagannath Temple at Puri. By providing resources for stonework, iconography, and ritual infrastructure, these women played a direct role in the evolution of Odishan temple architecture.

Cultural and Ritual Contributions

Beyond the structural realm, queens' patronage shaped the religious and cultural life of temple communities. Donations often included land, wealth, or items to sustain daily rituals, festivals, and charitable activities, ensuring the continuity of sacred practices. For example, endowments by Tribhuvana Mahadevi I provided for the performance of specific ceremonies and the maintenance of temple staff, reinforcing the temple as both a spiritual and socio-economic institution. Through such support, queens facilitated the flourishing of ritual traditions, contributed to local cultural cohesion, and strengthened the temple's role as a hub of learning and community interaction.

Impact on Dynastic and Regional Identity

Temples funded by queens served as markers of dynastic prestige and instruments of political memory. By associating their names with monumental architecture, queens inscribed female authority into the public consciousness and reinforced the continuity of dynastic rule. Moreover, these contributions helped define the sacred geography of Odisha, creating networks of temples that linked political centers with rural communities and integrated spiritual and administrative domains. Through their architectural and cultural interventions, queens thus influenced both local identity and the symbolic representation of royal power.

Legacy and Continuity

The architectural and cultural imprint of royal queens endures in Odisha's temple landscape. The combination of structural innovation, ritual endowment, and dynastic commemoration ensured that their contributions were preserved for generations. These acts illustrate that female patronage was not peripheral

but central to the development of Odisha's sacred architecture, ritual traditions, and cultural memory. Queens were therefore not merely supporters of temples; they were active shapers of a living heritage that continues to define the region's religious and artistic identity. Queens' patronage had far-reaching architectural and cultural consequences. By funding construction, sustaining rituals, and embedding their authority into sacred spaces, royal women played a crucial role in shaping the physical and cultural landscape of medieval Odisha, leaving a legacy that reflects the intertwined nature of devotion, power, and artistic innovation.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of queens as temple patrons in medieval Odisha underscores the multifaceted role of women in shaping the region's sacred, cultural, and political landscape. Far from being peripheral figures, royal women such as Tribhuvana Mahadevi, Vakulamahadevi, and Kasturi Devi exercised considerable agency, commissioning temples, endowing land, and sustaining rituals that intertwined spiritual devotion with dynastic authority. Epigraphic records and architectural evidence demonstrate that their patronage was both deliberate and enduring, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between power, piety, and cultural memory.

Through temple construction and endowments, queens asserted political influence, consolidated dynastic legitimacy, and embedded their presence within the social and religious fabric of Odisha. Their contributions also had profound architectural and cultural implications: they shaped the evolution of the Kalinga style, ensured the continuity of ritual practices, and fostered networks of sacred institutions that reinforced regional identity. In doing so, they redefined the boundaries of female authority within a predominantly male-dominated political and religious framework. This study highlights the inseparability of devotion and power in royal female patronage, demonstrating that temples were not merely religious monuments but instruments of cultural production, political negotiation, and social memory.

Ultimately, the legacy of these royal women endures in stone and ritual, reminding us that the history of temple building in Odisha is as much a history of female power, vision, and devotion as it is of kingship. Their patronage serves as a testament to the central role women played in the creation, sustenance, and transformation of Odishan religious and cultural heritage.

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