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## Abhaya Yatra: A Glimpse through the Lens of Folk Religion and Healing Tradition of Western Odisha

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### Abstract

This research article explores the origins, historical significance, ritual practices, and socio-cultural importance of Maa Abhaya, a local folk deity worshipped in Kutasingha village, Balangir district, Odisha, India. The veneration of Maa Abhaya is deeply rooted in the collective memory of the community and is linked to a miraculous healing event during an ancient cholera epidemic. Notably, the cult distinguishes itself within the landscape of Odishan folk religion by its unwavering commitment to non-violent offerings primarily coconuts in sharp contrast to the widespread practice of animal sacrifice among village deities in the region. The annual festival, celebrated during the auspicious month of Jyeshtha (Jyoshtha Masa), serves as a significant unifying occasion for the community. Drawing from oral traditions, ethnographic observation, and comparative religious analysis, this article contends that the cult of Maa Abhaya represents a rare embodiment of ahimsa (non-violence) within an ancient folk religious context. This unique tradition merits scholarly attention and cultural preservation for its exceptional commitment to non-violence and its enduring role in local religious identity.

**Keywords:** Bali tradition, Cholera healing, Haija, Kutasingha, Maa Abhaya

### 1. Introduction

Odisha's religious landscape is remarkably diverse and multi-layered, featuring monumental temple traditions like that of Lord Jagannath in Puri, as well as an extensive network of local folk deities enshrined in village shrines, sacred groves, boundary markers, and simple earthen altars throughout the state. These gram devatas (village deities) form the spiritual bedrock of rural life, often with origins that precede the advent of Brahmanical or Vaishnavite influences by centuries. Despite their foundational significance, many of these deities remain understudied or entirely undocumented, their stories and rituals preserved primarily through the oral traditions and devotions of the communities that worship them (Barik 2009).

This study centers on Maa Abhaya, the principal folk goddess of Kutasingha village in Balangir district, Odisha. The name "*Abhaya*" from Sanskrit, meaning "fearlessness" or "she who grants refuge from fear" underscores the goddess's protective and healing role as perceived by the villagers. The use of "Maa" (mother) situates the deity within the feminine, maternal tradition, aligning with the broader Shakta practices prevalent in western Odisha.

*Maa Abhaya's* cult stands out for two key reasons. First, oral tradition attributes to her the miraculous protection of the village during a severe outbreak of haija (cholera or acute diarrhea), highlighting her role as a healer and guardian. Second, the worship of *Maa Abhaya*

is uniquely characterized by the exclusive offering of coconuts, eschewing the animal sacrifice that is common in many analogous regional traditions. This article aims to document, analyze, and interpret these distinctive practices within the broader frameworks of folk religion, medical anthropology, and ritual ethics (Barik 2009).

## **2. Geographical and Community Context**

### **2.1 Cultural Heritage of Balangir District**

Balangir district is located in western Odisha, formerly part of the historic Sambalpur region and the princely state of Patna. The district's population is largely tribal and agrarian, with major communities including the Gonds, Kuruks, Binjhals, Dharuas, and various OBC groups living alongside upper-caste populations. Western Odisha is notable for its distinct dialect, Sambalpuri (or Kosali), and a rich cultural heritage that features the renowned Sambalpuri weave, the Dalkhai folk dance, and a syncretic religious landscape (Biswas 2015). This region's spiritual tradition harmoniously blends Shaivite, Shakta, Vaishnava, and animist elements, reflecting the area's cultural diversity and historical depth.

The region is particularly known for its deep-rooted tradition of shakti (female) deity worship. Village goddesses often regarded as local forms of Durga, Kali, Chamunda, or other indigenous manifestations are venerated as protectors against disease, drought, and misfortune. The rituals and upkeep of these shrines are usually overseen by a hereditary pujari (priest) belonging to designated communities. Annual festivals dedicated to these goddesses serve as important occasions for communal devotion, social cohesion, and the vibrant expression of local culture.

### **2.2 Cultural Landscape of Kutasingha Village**

Kutasingha is a rural village in Balangir district, home to a diverse mix of caste groups whose livelihoods are centered on agriculture and related activities. The village's social and spatial organization revolves around its fields, wells, and sacred sites most notably the shrine of *Maa Abhaya*, which holds a prominent position in the spiritual landscape of the community. The annual festival dedicated to *Maa Abhaya* is a key event in the village calendar, serving not only as a religious observance but also as a major communal gathering that strengthens kinship ties, fosters neighbourly relations, and reinforces a shared sense of identity among residents.

## **3. Methodology of the Present Study**

This research article is grounded primarily in oral testimony obtained from elderly residents of Kutasingha village, including hereditary worshippers (pujaris), village elders, and long-time community members who have participated in the *Maa Abhaya* festival over many years. These oral accounts were collected through conversational interviews conducted in Odia and Sambalpuri, and were supplemented by direct observation of the festival and shrine.

The study also references secondary sources on Odishan folk religion, the anthropology of illness-healing cults, the history of cholera in South Asia, and comparative analyses of non-violent traditions in Indian religious practice. In cases where oral tradition diverges from or cannot be corroborated by written historical records, both perspectives are presented, with oral

testimony recognized as a valid form of historical evidence in accordance with contemporary oral history methodologies.

It should be emphasized that this article serves as a preliminary documentation rather than a comprehensive study. A thorough ethnographic investigation of the Maa Abhaya tradition would require extended fieldwork across multiple festival cycles, systematic documentation of all variant oral traditions, genealogical research into the hereditary pujari lineage, and archaeological or archival study of the shrine and related historical materials.

#### **4. Aims and Objectives**

1. To highlight the religious practices of Kutasingha village.
2. To narrate the origin and historical profile of Abhaya Yatra.
3. To examine the ritualistic practices of Abhaya Yatra.
4. To highlight the modes of worship associated with these rituals.
5. To establish an identity for the tradition in the context of tourism.
6. To compare the Abhaya Yatra tradition with Buddhism and broader religious developments within Odisha's religious landscape.

#### **5. Myths About Abhaya Deity**

##### **5.1 The Legend of the Haija Epidemic**

The worship of Maa Abhaya in Kutasingha is rooted in oral tradition, which attributes its origin to an event in the distant past an exact date is unattainable, though villagers believe it occurred several centuries ago. According to the principal oral account, Kutasingha was devastated by a severe outbreak of haija (the local term for cholera or acute diarrheal disease), resulting in significant loss of life and widespread suffering within the community.

During this period of crisis, oral tradition recounts that a divine presence a female deity manifested to the people of Kutasingha. This manifestation occurred either as a dream vision experienced by a respected elder or as a direct miracle witnessed by the community. The deity revealed herself as Abhaya, "the one who removes fear," and provided guidance on how to control the epidemic. After the villagers followed her instructions, the disease subsided, lives were saved, and the community was spared further devastation. In gratitude, the villagers established a shrine in her honor and pledged to worship Maa Abhaya annually for as long as their village existed (Das 1995).



Figure 1: The sacred shrine of Maa Abhaya at Kutasingha village, adorned with red flags (*pataka*) around a peepal tree, Balangir, Odisha

## 5.2 Haija in the Historical Context of Rural Odisha

Cholera epidemics were a recurring and devastating aspect of pre-modern rural life throughout South Asia. In Odisha, major outbreaks occurred periodically, often linked to contaminated water sources, flooding, and increased movement of people during famines and pilgrimages. Colonial-era records from the 19th century detail severe cholera epidemics in Sambalpur, Balangir, and neighboring districts. In the absence of modern medical solutions, communities frequently relied on ritual, prayer, and the veneration of deities as their main strategies for coping with such crises.

Historically, the emergence or elevation of local deity cults in response to disease outbreaks is well documented across India. In these cases, a deity often assumes the role of the community's medical patron credited with halting the epidemic and subsequently venerated as a lasting protector against future threats. The origin tradition of Maa Abhaya aligns closely with this broader historical pattern, indicating that her worship likely originated from a real epidemic event, which was later enshrined in communal memory and ritual practice(Mahapatra1986).

## 5.3 The Name 'Abhaya' and Its Significance

The name Abhaya holds significant meaning within Hindu philosophical and iconographic traditions. In Sanskrit, *Abhaya* translates to “fearlessness” and, more specifically, to “the

granting of safety from fear.” The *Abhaya* mudra an open palm raised in a gesture of reassurance is a common motif in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain art, symbolizing the deity’s pledge of protection to devotees. By naming their village goddess Abhaya, the community embedded this promise of protection and fearlessness into her very identity: she is revered as the one who dispelled their fear in times of death and disease and remains their guardian against future threats.

The use of the prefix 'Maa' (mother) is deeply meaningful. Feminizing protective divine power is central to Shakta traditions in Odisha, where the divine is often envisioned as a nurturing mother safeguarding her children. This reflects the intimate, familial character of folk deity worship. Maa Abhaya is not seen as a remote or transcendent goddess, but as a local, ever-present maternal figure who belongs uniquely to Kutasingha and is intimately invested in the village’s well-being and destiny .

## **6. Ritualistic Practices**

### **6.1 The Auspiciousness of Jyeshtha Masa**

The annual festival of Maa Abhaya is celebrated during Jyeshtha Masa the third month of the Hindu lunar calendar, which typically falls in May and June. Jyeshtha is a significant period for deity worship throughout Odisha and the wider Hindu world. It coincides with the peak of summer in eastern India, just before the arrival of the monsoon a season marked by agricultural anticipation, water scarcity, and a heightened sense of environmental fragility. Historically, this was also the period when outbreaks of cholera and heat-related illnesses were most common, making the timing of Maa Abhaya’s festival especially meaningful given her role as a protector against disease.



Figure 2: The decorated inner sanctum of Maa Abhaya during the annual Jyeshtha Masa festival, showing the deity adorned with flowers, diyas, and coconut offerings

Within the Odishan religious calendar, Jyeshtha features several major observances, including Savitri Amavasya (Vat Savitri) and other community festivals. The selection of Jyeshtha for Maa Abhaya's worship likely represents a conscious alignment with a season of historical vulnerability transforming a time of anxiety and risk into an occasion for communal faith, gratitude, and celebration.

## 6.2 Community Participation and Social Unity

A key feature of the Maa Abhaya festival is its role as a unifying force for the entire village of Kutasingha. Preparations for the festival such as cleaning and decorating the shrine, gathering offerings, organizing communal meals, and arranging devotional singing bring together households from all caste and economic backgrounds. In a society where caste differences can often create divisions, the shared worship of the village deity acts as a powerful means of fostering community cohesion.

Typical festival rituals include the ceremonial bathing and adornment of the deity's image or symbol, collective prayers and devotional singing (bhajan, kirtan), the offering of coconuts and

other approved items, a communal feast or distribution of prasada, and the retelling of the origin legend. This storytelling not only renews the community's collective memory of their gratitude to the deity but also reinforces shared identity. Village elders play a crucial role in passing down this oral tradition, ensuring that the cult's historical consciousness endures across generations (Furer- Haimendorf 1982).

### **6.3 The Evening Procession: Seven Nights of Ritual Circumambulation**

One of the most distinctive and visually striking elements of the Maa Abhaya festival is the ritual of village circumambulation, carried out each evening for seven consecutive days. At dusk, devotees assemble and form a ceremonial procession that weaves through all the lanes and pathways of Kutasingha. This practice is locally regarded as an act of divine protection, symbolically extending the goddess's presence and blessings to every corner of the village. The repetition of this ritual over seven nights holds profound numerological and ritual significance, as the number seven is considered highly auspicious in Odishan and broader Hindu traditions.

A particularly notable aspect of the procession is the ritual offering of burning distilled wine (mahua or local arrack) at designated points along the route. As the procession winds through the village, these offerings serve as acts of propitiation welcoming the deity to accompany her devotees and ceremonially purify the village pathways. The use of distilled liquor as a sacred offering is widespread among folk deity traditions in tribal and agrarian Odisha, where it is viewed as a potent, primordial substance capable of attracting the deity's presence and favor. Rather than contradicting the spirit of devotion, this practice is fully integrated into the ritual framework, reflecting an ancient and culturally accepted form of divine communication.

The procession is accompanied by live performances on traditional local musical instruments, creating a vibrant and immersive sonic environment that both signals the deity's presence and draws the entire community into a state of collective spiritual focus. The principal instruments include the mridangam (a two-headed barrel drum central to Odisha's devotional music), the Jhanj (large bronze hand cymbals with a resonant clash), the Gini (small finger cymbals for marking rhythmic cycles), and the taal (flat brass cymbals that provide rhythmic punctuation). Together, these instruments generate the distinctive soundscape of western Odishan folk worship urgent, rhythmic, and evocative of the region's devotional traditions.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, these instruments are not merely decorative but serve essential ritual functions. Across South Asian folk religious contexts, percussion is believed to possess apotropaic power the capacity to ward off evil spirits, purify the environment, and establish a protective boundary of sacred sound around the community. In the context of Maa Abhaya's festival, seven consecutive evenings of drumming and cymbal playing as the procession moves through Kutasingha can be seen as a repeated ritual renewal of the goddess's protective presence. Thus, the music acts simultaneously as an offering of devotion, a communal celebration, and a form of ritual safeguarding demonstrating the seamless integration of aesthetic, social, and spiritual values in Odishan folk religious practice (Mahapatra 1986).

#### **6.4 The Offering of Coconut: A Non-Violent Exception**

Perhaps the most anthropologically distinctive aspect of Maa Abhaya's worship is the exclusive use of the coconut as the primary offering. The coconut called narikel or narikela in Odia has profound ritual meaning in Hindu traditions, symbolizing purity and wholeness. Its tough outer shell represents the ego and the material world, the water inside is seen as sacred and life-giving, and the white kernel is equated with the pure self or atman. Thus, offering a coconut is often interpreted as a gesture of complete self-surrender to the deity.

In the specific context of western Odisha and Balangir district, this practice of offering only coconuts to Maa Abhaya takes on heightened significance because it intentionally contrasts with the widespread custom of Bali ritual animal sacrifice prevalent in the propitiation of many other local deities. Animal sacrifice, involving goats, chickens, or sometimes buffaloes, is a deeply embedded feature of Shakta and tribal religious traditions across Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and neighboring regions. Deities associated with power, protection, and epidemic control are often offered blood sacrifices, following the theological belief that the animal's life-force (prana) energizes and appeases the deity.

In this context, the non-violent worship of Maa Abhaya stands out as a remarkable and historically significant exception. The community of Kutasingha has upheld a tradition of ahimsa non-violence in one of its most significant religious events: the annual village festival honouring a powerful protective deity. This is particularly noteworthy, as such occasions typically involve animal sacrifice in similar regional traditions (Mishra 2003). The exclusive use of coconut offerings suggests either that the deity's cult was originally founded on principles of non-violence, or that a significant reform occurred in the past to eliminate blood sacrifice a change that may now be preserved within the community's foundational legend of Maa Abhaya .

### **7. Theological and Philosophical Dimensions**

#### **7.1 Ahimsa as a Religious Value in Folk Tradition**

The principle of ahimsa (non-violence or non-harming) is most famously associated with Jainism, where it is the highest ethical ideal, and with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance. However, ahimsa is also an important value within Hindu thought, affirmed in texts such as Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, the Bhagavata Purana, and various Vaishnava traditions. The Bhagavata Purana, for example, explicitly denounces animal sacrifice as incompatible with true devotion.

What is especially notable in the case of Maa Abhaya is that the principle of ahimsa has been maintained not through the influence of reformist movements, philosophical treatises, or elite religious leadership, but through the enduring autonomous tradition of a rural community. The people of Kutasingha did not require outside intervention or doctrinal reform to forgo animal sacrifice; their own foundational legend and religious practice already enshrined this value, and they have continued to honor it across generations. This stands as a compelling example of "grassroots ahimsa" a tradition of non-violence that arises organically from the lived religious

experience and collective memory of the community, rather than from top-down doctrinal mandates.

### **7.2 The Coconut as Symbol of Complete Offering**

The exclusive use of the coconut as an offering to Maa Abhaya is deeply meaningful from a theological perspective. In Odishan and broader Indian religious traditions, the coconut (narikela) is regarded as sridhanya an auspicious fruit linked to fertility, completeness, and divine blessing. Breaking a coconut before the deity is a common ritual symbolizing the shattering of ego and the surrender of the self. The coconut's three 'eyes' are sometimes interpreted as representing the three eyes of Shiva or the threefold aspects of the divine.

In the context of Maa Abhaya's worship, the coconut carries added significance as a symbol of purity and health. Coconut water is traditionally believed to be cooling, hydrating, and beneficial for medicinal use, particularly in treating dehydration. Given Maa Abhaya's association with the healing of haija (cholera/diarrhea) an illness marked by dangerous dehydration the coconut becomes a particularly resonant and coherent offering. By presenting the coconut, the community returns to the deity the very substance (pure water and healing) associated with her miraculous protection, reinforcing a powerful link between ritual, memory, and meaning.

### **7.3 The Deity as Healing Agent: Medical Anthropology Perspective**

From a medical anthropological perspective, the cult of Maa Abhaya exemplifies the "illness-healing cult" a religious tradition that arises out of a crisis of disease and continues as a form of both symbolic and preventive medicine. In this tradition, the deity serves multiple roles: as a historical healer (credited with curing past illness), an ongoing protector (worshipped to prevent future outbreaks), and a community therapist (with the festival itself providing psychological comfort and social cohesion). The collective faith in Maa Abhaya's protective power likely plays a significant role in fostering mental well-being and resilience within the community (Mohanty 2011).

Scholars such as Veena Das have explored extensively the connections between suffering, community, and religious practice in South Asia. Within this framework, the annual festival of Maa Abhaya can be seen as an act of collective memory an annual communal ritual that commemorates survival, acknowledges shared vulnerability, and renews faith in divine protection. The festival thus operates as historical remembrance, religious devotion, and a form of communal therapy, reinforcing both cultural identity and social solidarity.

## **8. Comparative Perspective: Maa Abhaya in the Context of Odishan Folk Religion**

Odisha's folk religious landscape is populated by hundreds of village deities, each typically honoured through annual festivals and often believed to have originated from miraculous interventions during historical crises. (Panda 2001) Deities such as Sitala (goddess of smallpox and cooling illnesses), Mangala (auspicious mother goddess), and Ugratara (fierce mother deity) are widely worshipped across Odisha and Bengal, sharing with Maa Abhaya the qualities of protective, maternal divinity and associations with illness and healing.

However, most of these deities including Sitala, who is specifically invoked to prevent and cure diseases like smallpox and cholera are traditionally worshipped with animal sacrifice as an integral part of major festivals in many communities. What sets the Maa Abhaya tradition of Kutasingha apart is its unwavering and apparently ancient commitment to non-violent offerings, making it a rare exception in the region's religious landscape.

Some Vaishnava-influenced village deity traditions in Odisha have also historically eschewed animal sacrifice, and certain reform movements particularly those linked to the Panchasakha saints of medieval Odisha explicitly promoted non-violent forms of worship. While it is possible that the Maa Abhaya tradition was shaped by such reformist influences, there is no clear memory of this in the community's oral tradition. Alternatively, the commitment to non-violence may be an original feature of the cult itself, reflecting the founding religious sensibilities of the Kutasingha community.

### **9. Possible Buddhist Connections: Ahimsa, the Abhaya Mudra, and the Legacy of Ashoka in Odisha**

The non-violent ritual tradition associated with Maa Abhaya raises an intriguing possibility: might this practice reflect traces of Buddhist influence? Historically, this is a plausible hypothesis. Odisha ancient Kalinga was the site of the pivotal Kalinga War around 261 BCE, after which Emperor Ashoka famously embraced Buddhism. In the aftermath, Ashoka issued edicts throughout his empire prohibiting unnecessary animal slaughter and promoting compassion for all living beings, deeply embedding Buddhist values into the region's moral and ritual landscape. For centuries following Ashoka's conversion, Buddhism flourished in Kalinga, leaving enduring archaeological, philosophical, and cultural marks on present-day Odisha.

The very name Abhaya is closely linked to Buddhist iconography. The abhaya mudra an open-palmed gesture signalling fearlessness and protection is among the most widely recognized gestures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas in all Buddhist traditions. A goddess named Abhaya, revered as a bestower of refuge from fear and disease, closely parallels the Buddhist notion of a compassionate divine protector who alleviates suffering. It is conceivable that as Buddhism gradually integrated with or was absorbed into local folk traditions in Odisha, its core values especially ahimsa and its iconographic language were quietly incorporated into village deity cults. These influences may have persisted even after the decline of Buddhism, subtly embedded in the living rituals of communities like Kutasingha.

The unique practice of offering only coconuts to Maa Abhaya, in marked contrast to the animal sacrifice common elsewhere, may thus represent one of Odisha's most enduring and under-recognized Buddhist cultural legacies( Mishra 2003).

### **10. Cultural Significance and Contemporary Relevance**

#### **10.1 Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

The worship of Maa Abhaya represents an important form of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing oral narratives, ritual practices, community organization, and distinct religious philosophy. According to UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible

Cultural Heritage, elements such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events are recognized as intangible heritage deserving of documentation and protection. The cult of Maa Abhaya in Kutasingha clearly fulfils several of these criteria and warrants formal recognition and documentation by state cultural authorities.

The rich oral tradition associated with Maa Abhaya including the legend of the haija epidemic, the origins of the festival, and the practice of non-violent offerings is increasingly at risk as younger generations migrate to urban areas and the chain of traditional knowledge transmission grows weaker. Academic documentation, such as this article, plays a vital role both in safeguarding the tradition for the scholarly record and in raising awareness about its cultural importance within the local community and beyond.

### **10.2 Relevance to Contemporary Values**

The Maa Abhaya tradition embodies values that are especially relevant to contemporary society. Its commitment to ahimsa (non-violence) aligns with the rising global emphasis on animal welfare, ethical consumption, and the re-evaluation of customs that involve animal harm. Remarkably, this principle has been preserved through the internal dynamics of Kutasingha's religious tradition, without external reform or modern intervention, giving the practice a unique authenticity and moral authority that merits broader recognition.

Additionally, the tradition's focus on fostering community unity across caste boundaries reflects modern aspirations for social harmony and inclusivity. The annual Maa Abhaya festival serves as a "levelling" event, suspending everyday social hierarchies in favor of shared devotion and collective celebration. This integrative social function is of particular importance in contemporary India, where caste divisions frequently undermine community solidarity .

### **10.3 Potential for Eco-Spiritual Tourism**

Balangir district, along with the broader region of western Odisha, is gaining recognition as a destination for cultural and heritage tourism. Documenting and promoting folk traditions like the worship of Maa Abhaya can support responsible, community-based tourism initiatives that provide economic benefits to villages such as Kutasingha, while also fostering the preservation of living cultural practices. The tradition's unique blend of historical legend, non-violent ritual, and vibrant community festival presents a compelling narrative that has the potential to attract researchers, journalists, and culturally interested visitors alike .(UNESCO 2003)

## **11. Conclusion**

Maa Abhaya of Kutasingha, Balangir district, Odisha, is a folk deity of notable historical, anthropological, and cultural importance. Her cult originated from a miraculous episode of healing during a cholera (haija) epidemic, preserving in ritual the community's collective memory of crisis, survival, and gratitude. The annual festival held in Jyeshtha Masa functions as a vital instrument of community solidarity, reinforcing collective memory and devotion while uniting the village across social boundaries.

What distinguishes the Maa Abhaya tradition most is its steadfast commitment to non-violent worship a rarity in western Odisha, where animal sacrifice is commonly practiced in similar

deity cults. The exclusive offering of coconuts is not a modern adaptation or the result of external reform, but an ancient and foundational aspect of the cult, embodying a principle of ahimsa that the community has upheld across generations.

This unique tradition merits broader academic recognition, formal documentation by cultural heritage authorities, and the continued support of the community to ensure its transmission to future generations. At a time when values such as non-violence, communal unity, and cultural rootedness face mounting challenges, the living tradition of Maa Abhaya in Kutasingha stands as a quietly powerful testament to the enduring strength of local wisdom, shared faith, and human gratitude.

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