

# COWRIES AS CURRENCY IN ODISHA: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL STUDY FROM THE EARLY HISTORIC TO COLONIAL PERIOD

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## **ABSTRACT:-**

This paper examines the evolution and multifaceted role of cowries as currency in Odisha from the early historic to the colonial period, highlighting their economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Originating as marine shells introduced through Indian Ocean trade routes, cowries became a vital component of Odisha's inland and maritime exchange systems. Drawing on archaeological evidence, inscriptional records, vernacular literature, and colonial administrative documents, the study traces how cowries transitioned from objects of exchange to markers of social value. During the early and medieval periods, cowries circulated widely in rural markets, temple economies, and agrarian payments, serving as an accessible form of low-denomination currency.

They were also deeply embedded in the religious and cultural life of Odisha, symbolizing fertility, prosperity, and divine favor in ritual practices, goddess worship, and folk traditions. The colonial period marked a significant transformation, as British monetary reforms replaced cowries with metallic coinage; yet, their continued use in domestic rituals, tribal trade, and ornamentation reflected their enduring cultural relevance. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining economic history, archaeology, and ethnographic insight, this paper situated Odisha within the larger framework of eastern Indian and Indian Ocean cowrie economies. It argues that cowries in Odisha functioned not merely as instruments of trade but as cultural artefacts that linked material exchange with spiritual symbolism, thereby illuminating the complex interconnections between economy, belief, and identity in the region's historical development.

## **KEYWORD:-**

Cowrie Currency; Odisha; Indian Ocean Trade; Socio-Economic History; Cultural Anthropology; Colonial Economy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The use of cowries as a medium of exchange, ornament, and ritual object constitutes one of the most enduring economic and cultural practices in South and Southeast Asia. Among the various regions of the Indian subcontinent, Odisha—ancient Kalinga—holds a distinctive position in the history of cowrie utilization due to its strategic coastal location and active participation in the Indian Ocean trade network. Cowries, primarily derived from the species *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus*, were small marine shells originally sourced from the Maldives and the coasts of the Indo-Pacific. Their circulation across vast trade routes transformed them into one of the earliest forms of proto-currency in premodern Asia and Africa (Chakrabarti, 1992; Gupta, 1998). In Odisha, the introduction, adaptation, and continued use of cowries reveal a complex interplay between maritime commerce, agrarian exchange, and ritual symbolism.

Odisha's geography made it an ideal conduit for maritime and riverine trade. Bordered by the Bay of Bengal and traversed by numerous rivers such as the Mahanadi, Rushikulya, Bansadhara, and Vamsadhara, the region connected inland production zones with coastal ports like Tamralipti, Palur, and Manikapatna (Behera, 2013). These routes linked Kalinga with Sri Lanka, Bengal, Southeast Asia, and the Maldives—regions deeply embedded in the cowrie trade. Archaeological excavations at sites such as Sisupalgarh, Manikapatna, and Radhanagar have yielded evidence of extensive overseas contact, including imported ceramics, glass beads, and Roman goods (Ghosh, 2004). Though direct finds of cowries remain rare, the contextual evidence of maritime commerce strongly supports their circulation in early Odisha as trade commodities, ritual items, and small-denomination currency.

The evolution of cowrie use in Odisha can be traced across three major phases—early historic, medieval, and late historic/colonial. In the early historic period (3rd century BCE–3rd century CE), cowries likely entered the region as part of long-distance maritime exchanges and gradually became incorporated into local markets as accessible substitutes for metallic coinage (Patnaik, 2002). By the medieval era (8th–16th century CE), cowries had gained wide acceptance in the temple-centered economy, functioning as the smallest units of exchange within religious, agrarian, and craft production systems (Behera, 2013). The Madalā Panji and other temple records from Puri document cowries in donations and payments, reflecting their institutional and ritual importance. Even during the early colonial period, cowries continued to circulate as minor currency in rural Odisha, long after metallic coinage had become dominant elsewhere (Mohanty, 2017).

Beyond their economic significance, cowries occupied a vital position in Odishan cultural and religious life. They symbolized wealth, fertility, and divine protection and were frequently used in ritual offerings, household shrines, and the adornment of deities—particularly within the Jagannath and Shakti cults. This dual role—economic and spiritual—demonstrates the enduring capacity of cowries to traverse the boundaries between material and sacred value systems.

### **EARLY HISTORY OF COWRIE USE IN ODISHA**

The early history of cowrie use in Odisha is deeply intertwined with the region's participation in Indian Ocean trade networks and its evolving systems of exchange from the early historic period (circa 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE). During this era, ancient Kalinga—modern-day Odisha—occupied a strategic position along the eastern seaboard of India. Archaeological and literary evidence attests to the existence of coastal and riverine settlements such as Tamralipti, Palur, Manikapatna, and Kalingapatna, which served as major nodes linking Odisha with Sri Lanka, Bengal, and Southeast Asia (Behera, 2013; Patnaik, 2002). These maritime connections facilitated the movement of various commodities, including textiles, beads, and marine shells like *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus*, which were central to the cowrie currency systems of the Indian Ocean world.

Cowries, originating primarily from the Maldives, reached the eastern coast of India through long-distance trade managed by Indian, Arab, and later Southeast Asian merchants. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (1st century CE) and Chinese travel accounts record the circulation of shells and other luxury goods across the Bay of Bengal (Chakrabarti, 1992; Gupta, 1998). Excavations at early historic sites in Odisha—such as Manikapatna and Sisupalgarh—have yielded artefacts including Roman glass, ceramics, and semi-precious stones, suggesting the region's integration into transoceanic exchange systems (Ghosh, 2004). Although direct archaeological evidence of cowries from these sites remains limited, the broader trade patterns indicate that cowries were likely imported and incorporated into local economic practices.

In the absence of a fully developed metallic coinage network, cowries offered an accessible and divisible medium of exchange for small-scale transactions. Their use likely complemented the circulation of punch-marked and cast coins found in early historic Odisha (Bose, 1952). Cowries' portability and abundance made them suitable for rural markets and agrarian communities, facilitating trade in grain, fish, salt, and crafts. This integration of cowries into Odisha's local economies marked a critical step in the monetization of exchange and the diversification of value systems beyond state-issued currency.

The adoption of cowries was not solely an economic phenomenon. Their natural luster and distinctive form endowed them with symbolic and aesthetic significance. In early Indian contexts, cowries were often associated with fertility, prosperity, and protection—motifs that became central to Odishan religious traditions in later centuries (Mohanty, 2017). This dual role both as currency and as amulet or ornament—suggests that cowries entered Odishan culture as objects of exchange that quickly acquired layers of ritual and social meaning.

By the early centuries of the Common Era, the use of cowries had become embedded within Odisha's economic and cultural frameworks. The region's maritime links ensured a steady inflow of shells, while local adaptations integrated them into agrarian, artisanal, and temple-based economies.

## **COWRIES IN THE MEDIEVAL ECONOMY**

The medieval period (circa 8th–16th century CE) marked a significant phase in the evolution of Odisha's monetary and socio-economic systems, during which cowries emerged as an essential medium of exchange. This era witnessed the consolidation of powerful regional dynasties the Bhaumakaras, Somavamsis, Eastern Gangas, and Gajapatis who fostered a prosperous agrarian base supported by temple-centered redistribution and maritime commerce (Chakrabarti, 1992; Patnaik, 2002). Within this framework, cowries gained widespread use as small-denomination currency, circulating alongside metallic coins and serving as a vital link between rural production and ritual economies.

Temple institutions played a central role in sustaining the cowrie-based economy of medieval Odisha. Temples were not only centers of worship but also key economic entities managing extensive landholdings, labor, and trade networks. The Madalā Panji, the temple chronicle of Jagannath at Puri, refers to the use of cowries in donations, payments, and purchases (Madalā Panji, 18th century). As these institutions received offerings in both kind and cash, cowries became indispensable for small payments such as remunerating artisans, servants, and ritual specialists where higher-value metallic currency was impractical (Behera, 2013). The temple's bhandāra (treasury) often recorded cowrie transactions, indicating their importance in the economic management of religious establishments.

In the agrarian and village context, cowries facilitated daily market exchanges. Weekly village markets (hātas) functioned as hubs where peasants, fishermen, potters, and weavers engaged in small-scale trade using cowries as a convenient and divisible currency. Transactions involving essential goods such as grains, salt, vegetables, and textiles—relied heavily on cowries, reflecting their accessibility to the lower strata of society (Gupta, 1998). This circulation contributed to the gradual monetization of the rural economy and enhanced local participation in market-oriented production.

Odisha's active maritime connections during the medieval period also ensured a steady inflow of cowries. Ports such as Chelitalo, Manikapatna, and Kalingapatna were integral to coastal trade linking Odisha with Bengal, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, from where cowries were periodically imported (Patnaik, 2002). River systems like the Rushikulya, Vamsadhara, and Bansadhara facilitated inland distribution, connecting the coastal trade to interior markets (Behera, 2013). Merchants often served as

intermediaries between temple treasuries, royal administrations, and rural markets, ensuring a balanced flow of goods and currency across the region.

Beyond their economic utility, cowries continued to hold deep symbolic and social value during the medieval period. They were used as ritual offerings, ornaments, and in ceremonial practices. Cowries symbolized wealth and divine favor, appearing in goddess worship and in the adornment of deities (Mohanty, 2017). Their ritual use reinforced their legitimacy as a form of currency, blurring the boundary between sacred and economic domains.

## **COWRIES IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

The colonial period (18th–20th century CE) marked the final phase of cowrie circulation in Odisha, representing a period of both persistence and transformation. Despite the growing dominance of metallic and paper currency under British administration, cowries continued to serve as an essential medium of small-scale exchange, especially in rural and tribal economies. Their endurance well into the 19th century illustrates the resilience of indigenous economic systems and the deep cultural embeddedness of cowries in Odisha's everyday life (Mohanty, 2017).

British records and revenue documents frequently mention the use of cowries in local markets and temple transactions. The East India Company's early surveys of the Odisha coast in the late 18th century noted that peasants and fishermen still conducted minor trade using cowries, particularly in coastal districts such as Puri, Ganjam, and Balasore (Behera, 2013). In these regions, cowries functioned as the smallest divisible currency, useful for purchasing food, household items, and craft goods. They also remained common in temple offerings and religious festivals, reflecting their continuing ritual significance even as metallic coins became more prevalent.

Colonial administrators initially tolerated the circulation of cowries, viewing them as a practical means for minor rural transactions. However, with the expansion of British fiscal control, efforts were made to standardize currency through the introduction of silver rupees and copper coins. The transition was gradual and uneven. In many rural markets, conversion rates between cowries and metallic coins were established to facilitate trade. Contemporary reports indicate that 2,560 to 3,200 cowries equaled one paisa, depending on regional variations and market conditions (Gupta, 1998). This complex conversion system reflected both the flexibility and the limitations of the cowrie economy in a monetized colonial framework.

The persistence of cowries also highlights patterns of socio-economic inequality under colonial rule. While urban centers and administrative towns rapidly adopted official coinage, rural and tribal populations often marginalized from formal markets continued to rely on cowries. Among the Kondh, Saora, and other indigenous communities of southern Odisha, cowries retained symbolic and practical value in bride price, ritual exchanges, and community-level trade (Patnaik, 2002). In such contexts, cowries were not merely a remnant of a precolonial economy but a living element of local cultural identity and social cohesion.

By the late 19th century, the colonial administration actively discouraged the use of cowries, associating them with "primitive" trade and inefficiency. The establishment of fixed monetary systems, the growth of cash taxation, and the spread of railways accelerated their decline. Yet, cowries never disappeared entirely. They continued to appear in domestic rituals, folk games, and temple inventories, maintaining a residual symbolic presence even after their economic function had diminished (Mohanty, 2017).

## CULTURAL AND RITUAL IMPORTANCE OF COWRIES

The cultural and ritual significance of cowries in Odisha extended far beyond their role as a medium of economic exchange. Their distinctive shape, glossy surface, and natural resemblance to feminine forms imbued them with symbolic meanings associated with fertility, prosperity, and divine protection. In Odishan society, as in many parts of South and Southeast Asia, the cowrie was perceived not merely as an object of trade but as a vessel of sacred power—an embodiment of wealth and auspiciousness that connected the material and spiritual realms of human life.

From early times, cowries occupied a central place in the religious and domestic rituals of Odisha. They were intimately linked with goddess worship, especially with deities such as Lakshmi, Mangala, Manasa, and Tarini, who were venerated as bestowers of prosperity and well-being. Cowries were often used as ritual offerings during household pujas, harvest celebrations, and temple ceremonies, symbolizing the devotee's wish for abundance. In folk traditions, cowries were also strung into garlands and worn as ornaments during festivals or rites of passage, believed to attract fortune and ward off evil influences. Their frequent use in rituals related to fertility and childbirth further reinforced their association with feminine energy and creation.

The integration of cowries into Odishan ritual life is also evident in traditional games, divination practices, and social customs. In rural households, cowries were used as counters in *pasa* (a board game resembling dice play), which carried both recreational and ritual connotations. Diviners and healers employed cowries in fortune-telling practices, where their arrangement or fall was interpreted to predict future events or diagnose ailments. Such uses demonstrate that cowries were not only items of exchange but also instruments of communication with the divine and the unseen world.

In the sphere of marriage and domestic rituals, cowries held deep cultural value. They were used to adorn bridal costumes and ornaments, reflecting both beauty and the hope for material stability. In some regions, strings of cowries were tied to cradles or worn by infants as protective charms, safeguarding them from malevolent spirits. The persistence of such practices in rural Odisha well into the modern period highlights the enduring belief in the spiritual potency of cowries.

Moreover, the symbolism of cowries found expression in Odia literature and folklore. References in local songs, proverbs, and myths portray them as tokens of luck and prosperity, often linked to the household economy and moral virtues of thrift and diligence. Their dual identity as currency and sacred emblem illustrates a worldview in which economic value was inseparable from spiritual significance.

### CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of cowries in Odisha demonstrates their dual role as both a medium of exchange and a cultural symbol over two millennia. From their introduction through maritime trade in the early historic period to their widespread use in medieval rural and temple economies, cowries facilitated everyday transactions where metallic coinage was scarce, making them an indispensable component of Odisha's economic life. Their circulation was closely linked to regional trade networks, riverine connectivity, and the agrarian economy, highlighting the adaptability of local monetary practices in response to changing socio-economic conditions.

Beyond their economic utility, cowries were deeply embedded in the cultural and ritual fabric of Odishan society. Associated with fertility, prosperity, and divine protection, they were employed in religious offerings, domestic rituals, bridal adornments, divination, and folk games. This symbolic significance persisted even as British colonial reforms introduced standardized coinage, gradually reducing their role

as formal currency. Despite demonetization, cowries continued to circulate in rural and tribal areas, while retaining their spiritual and decorative functions, demonstrating the resilience of local customs and material culture.

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