



## **Spread of Shaivism in Bastar: From Tribal Deities to State Religion**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the historical spread of Shaivism in the Bastar region of present-day Chhattisgarh, tracing its evolution from the worship of indigenous tribal deities to the establishment of Shaivism as a dominant religious tradition supported by successive dynasties. Bastar, identified with the ancient Dandakaranya forest of the Ramayana, represents a unique case study in the processes of religious synthesis and cultural transformation. Drawing upon archaeological evidence, epigraphic records, temple architecture, ethnographic studies, and literary sources, this paper argues that the spread of Shaivism in Bastar was not a process of simple replacement of indigenous traditions but rather a complex synthesis in which Shaivite concepts, deities, and practices were integrated with pre-existing tribal religious frameworks. The paper traces this religious evolution through five historical phases: the pre-Shaivite tribal religious period, the early penetration of Shaivism under the Nala dynasty, the consolidation of Shaivism under the Chindaka Nagas, the continued patronage under the Kakatiya-Bastar state, and the contemporary synthesis of Shaivite and tribal traditions. Central to this analysis is the concept of "sanskritization" and its limitations in explaining the religious transformation of tribal societies. The paper concludes by examining the contemporary religious landscape of Bastar, where Shaivism coexists with vibrant tribal traditions in a complex, syncretic relationship that continues to evolve.

**Keywords-** Shaivism in Bastar, tribal religious transformation, integration of local deities, state formation and religion, cultural syncretism

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, a vast forested territory historically identified with the Dandakaranya of the Ramayana, presents a remarkable case study in the spread of Shaivism in tribal India. Today, Bastar is home to both ancient Shaivite temples dating from the 11th and 12th centuries and vibrant indigenous tribal religious traditions centered on nature worship, ancestor veneration, and local goddesses. The relationship between these traditions is not one of simple succession but rather a complex history of synthesis, adaptation, and coexistence (Elwin, 1943; Sundar, 2016).

The spread of Shaivism in Bastar occurred over approximately 1,500 years, from the early centuries of the Common Era to the present day. This process was driven by multiple factors: the political patronage of successive dynasties—the Nalas, the Chindaka Nagas, the Kakatiyas, and the Bastar state—the activities of Brahmin priests and ascetics, the construction of temples

and the establishment of pilgrimage sites, and the gradual integration of Shaivite concepts into indigenous religious frameworks (Mitra, 1993; Sharma, 2005).

This paper examines the spread of Shaivism in Bastar through five historical phases. The first section analyzes the pre-Shaivite tribal religious landscape, examining the indigenous beliefs and practices that Shaivism encountered. The second section traces the early penetration of Shaivism under the Nala dynasty (c. 350-760 CE), drawing upon archaeological and epigraphic evidence. The third section focuses on the consolidation of Shaivism under the Chindaka Nagas (c. 10th-14th centuries), who constructed the region's most significant Shaivite temples. The fourth section explores the continued patronage under the Kakatiya-Bastar state (14th-20th centuries) and the integration of Shaivism into the political structure. The fifth section examines the contemporary religious landscape, where Shaivism and tribal traditions coexist in complex synthesis.

Throughout this analysis, this paper engages with theoretical debates about the nature of religious change in tribal societies. The concept of "sanskritization," developed by M.N. Srinivas (1952) to describe the process by which lower castes adopt Brahmanical practices to improve social status, has been applied to tribal societies but with significant limitations. In Bastar, the spread of Shaivism was not a process of emulation by subordinate groups but rather involved complex negotiations between ruling elites and indigenous populations, resulting in syncretic traditions that resist simple categorization (Sundar, 2016).

## **2. PRE-SHAIVITE TRIBAL RELIGION IN BASTAR**

### **2.1 Indigenous Deities and Cosmology**

Before the penetration of Shaivism, the tribal communities of Bastar possessed sophisticated religious systems centered on the worship of local deities, ancestor spirits, and natural forces. While these traditions varied among different tribal groups—the Gonds, Marias, Murias, Bhatras, and Halbas—certain common features characterized the indigenous religious landscape (Elwin, 1943).

The central figure in Gond cosmology was the creator god Mahadeo (also called Bara Deo or Bhagwan), who was believed to reside in heaven. However, Mahadeo was considered a remote deity who did not directly intervene in human affairs. More immediate objects of worship were the Persa Pen (Great God) and the clan and village deities that regulated daily life (Elwin, 1943). As Elwin (1943) observed in his ethnographic studies of the Gonds, "the Gond's religion is essentially a matter of placating the local spirits who affect his life—the spirits of the jungle, the river, the fields, and the village" (p. 12).

Key features of pre-Shaivite tribal religion included:

**Nature Worship:** Trees, rivers, mountains, and animals were venerated as manifestations of spiritual power. The saja tree (*Terminalia tomentosa*) was particularly sacred, and groves of trees served as sites for ritual activities (Russell & Hiralal, 1916).

**Ancestor Veneration:** Ancestral spirits were believed to influence the welfare of their descendants. Elaborate rituals were performed to honor ancestors and ensure their continued benevolence (Elwin, 1943).

**Clan and Village Deities:** Each clan and village had its own protective deities, typically represented by natural objects rather than anthropomorphic images. These deities were served by hereditary priests who mediated between the community and the spiritual realm (Sundar, 2016).

**Fertility Cults:** The worship of mother goddesses associated with fertility was widespread. These goddesses, known by various names (Mawli, Mata, Devi), were propitiated for the fertility of fields, animals, and human communities (Ram & Ram, 2012).

### **2.2 The Goddess Tradition**

A particularly significant feature of Bastar's indigenous religious landscape was the worship of the Mother Goddess, known by various names including Mawli (meaning Mother). Unlike the anthropomorphic goddesses of the Brahmanical tradition, the indigenous mother goddess was often represented by a non-anthropomorphic symbol—a stone, a mound of earth, or a simple platform (Elwin, 1943).

The goddess was associated with both creative and destructive powers. As a creator, she was responsible for fertility and abundance; as a destroyer, she could bring disease, famine, and death if not properly propitiated. This dual nature of the goddess—simultaneously benevolent and dangerous—would find parallels in the Shaivite tradition's understanding of the goddess as both Shakti (creative energy) and Kali (destructive power) (Sundar, 2016).

The worship of the goddess was typically conducted by women and involved offerings of flowers, rice, and the sacrifice of animals. Major festivals, such as Navakhani (celebration of new grain), honored the goddess and sought her blessing for the coming agricultural season (Ram & Ram, 2012).

### **2.3 The Ghotul and Religious Socialization**

The ghotul, a distinctive institution of the Muria and other Gond communities, played a central role in religious socialization. The ghotul served not only as a youth dormitory but also as a site for the transmission of religious knowledge, ritual practices, and cosmological concepts (Elwin, 1947).

Within the ghotul, young people learned:

- The myths and stories explaining the origins of the world and human society
- The proper methods for propitiating various spirits and deities
- The ritual songs and dances performed at festivals
- The moral and ethical codes governing relationships with the spiritual realm

The ghotul's role in religious socialization meant that when new religious traditions entered Bastar, they encountered a population with well-developed religious institutions and a strong sense of cultural identity. This helps explain why the spread of Shaivism in Bastar was a process of synthesis rather than replacement (Elwin, 1947; Sundar, 2016).

## **3. EARLY PENETRATION: THE NALA DYNASTY (C. 350-760 CE)**

### **3.1 The Nalas and the Introduction of Shaivism**

The first documented introduction of Shaivism to Bastar occurred during the rule of the Nala dynasty, which controlled the region from approximately 350 to 760 CE. The Nalas, who

established their capital at Pushkari (modern Podagarh), were among the earliest dynasties in the region to patronize Brahmanical religions (Mirashi, 1960; Khute, 2020).

Inscriptions from the Nala period provide evidence for the patronage of Shaivite institutions. An inscription from the reign of King Bhavadatta Varman (c. 450 CE) records the grant of land to a Shaivite temple, indicating that the dynasty supported Shaivite priests and institutions (Mirashi, 1960). However, the Nalas' religious orientation appears to have been eclectic, with evidence also for the patronage of Vaishnava and Buddhist institutions (Khute, 2020).

The Nala period likely saw the construction of the earliest stone temples in Bastar, though few architectural remains survive from this early phase. The temple at Podagarh, identified with the Nala capital, preserves architectural elements dating to this period, including early examples of the shikhara (tower) that would become characteristic of later Shaivite architecture (Mitra, 1993).

### **3.2 Shaivite Iconography in Early Sculpture**

Early sculptures from the Nala period reveal the gradual introduction of Shaivite iconography to Bastar. Stone sculptures discovered at Podagarh and other sites include:

- Linga (phallic symbol of Shiva) representations, often combined with indigenous fertility symbols
- Images of Nandi (Shiva's bull) as an attendant figure
- Early representations of Shiva in anthropomorphic form, though these are relatively rare
- Ganas (attendants of Shiva) depicted in the round or in relief (Mitra, 1993)

The style of these early sculptures shows clear connections to the art of the neighboring Vakataka kingdom, which was a major center of Shaivism during this period. However, indigenous elements persist, suggesting that Shaivite forms were being adapted to local tastes and traditions (Sharma, 2005).

### **3.3 The Limits of Early Penetration**

While the Nala dynasty introduced Shaivism to Bastar, its influence appears to have been largely confined to elite circles. The inscriptions record grants to temples and priests, but there is little evidence for widespread adoption of Shaivism among the region's tribal population (Sundar, 2016). The Nalas, as rulers of a kingdom that was part of the broader Deccan political system, patronized Shaivism as part of their participation in the culture of contemporary Indian elites. For the indigenous population, however, traditional religious practices continued unchanged (Khute, 2020).

This pattern—elite patronage of Shaivism alongside the persistence of tribal traditions—would characterize the religious landscape of Bastar for centuries to come.

## **4. CONSOLIDATION: THE CHINDAKA NAGAS (C. 10TH-14TH CENTURIES)**

### **4.1 The Rise of the Chindaka Nagas**

The most significant phase in the spread of Shaivism in Bastar occurred during the rule of the Chindaka Nagas, who controlled the region from approximately the 10th to the 14th centuries. The Chindaka Nagas, who established their capital at Barsur, were the first dynasty to make Shaivism the dominant religious tradition of the region (Khute, 2020).

Unlike the Nalas, whose religious patronage was part of a broader political strategy within the Deccan, the Chindaka Nagas appear to have actively promoted Shaivism as a means of legitimizing their authority over a territory with diverse tribal populations. The dynasty claimed descent from the Nagas of Karnataka and adopted the Nagavanshi (serpent lineage) identity, which may have resonated with indigenous traditions of serpent worship (Sharma, 2005).

#### **4.2 The Great Shaivite Temples of Barsur**

The Chindaka Nagas' patronage of Shaivism is most visibly manifested in the great temples they constructed at their capital, Barsur. The Chandraditya Temple, built in the late 11th or early 12th century, is the most significant surviving Shaivite monument of the period (Mitra, 1993).

The Chandraditya Temple, dedicated to Shiva, exemplifies the mature phase of Chindaka Naga architecture. The temple features:

- A panchayatana (five-shrine) plan with a central sanctum and four subsidiary shrines
- A shikhara rising in the curvilinear Nagara form, reaching approximately 15 meters in height
- Elaborate shikhara decoration with multiple urushringa (subsidiary tower) elements
- A mandapa (pillared hall) with an ornate ceiling and exquisitely carved pillars
- Extensive sculptural programs depicting Shaivite themes, including scenes from the Shiva Purana (Mitra, 1993; Ram & Ram, 2012)

The Bateesa Mahadev Temple, also at Barsur, represents another significant Shaivite monument. The temple's distinctive feature is the arrangement of 32 small linga shrines arranged in a circular pattern around the main structure, a unique configuration with no exact parallels elsewhere in India (Sharma, 2005).

#### **4.3 The Narayanpal Inscription and Shaivite Patronage**

The Narayanpal Temple, while dedicated to Vishnu, provides important evidence for the broader religious patronage of the Chindaka Nagas. The temple's long inscription records grants of land to various religious institutions, including Shaivite temples and Brahmin priests (Khute, 2020).

The inscription's reference to Shaivite mathas (monastic institutions) indicates that Shaivism was not merely a royal cult but had developed institutional forms that supported the spread of Shaivite teachings and practices. The mathas served as centers for:

- The education of priests and ascetics
- The performance of rituals and festivals
- The distribution of charity to Brahmins and the poor
- The preservation and transmission of Shaivite scriptures and philosophical texts (Mitra, 1993)

#### **4.4 Integration of Indigenous and Shaivite Elements**

A significant feature of Chindaka Naga Shaivism is the integration of indigenous religious elements into Shaivite frameworks. This synthesis is evident in several aspects of the temples and their associated cults:

**The Goddess Tradition:** The worship of the Mother Goddess, a central feature of indigenous religion, was integrated into Shaivism through the concept of Shakti—the creative energy of Shiva. The goddess, previously worshipped as an independent deity, became reinterpreted as the consort of Shiva (Sundar, 2016).

**Serpent Worship:** The Chindaka Nagas' self-identification as Nagavanshi (serpent lineage) connected them to indigenous traditions of serpent worship. Serpent motifs appear prominently in the temple sculpture at Barsur, and the naga was associated with Shiva, who wears serpents as ornaments (Ram & Ram, 2012).

**Nature Deities:** Indigenous nature deities—the spirits of trees, rivers, and mountains—were integrated into Shaivite frameworks as local manifestations of Shiva and his attendants. The yaksha and yakshi figures that appear in Chindaka Naga sculpture may represent such indigenous deities incorporated into the Shaivite pantheon (Sharma, 2005).

**Animal Sacrifice:** While Brahmanical Shaivism generally preferred vegetarian offerings, the Chindaka Naga temples appear to have accommodated indigenous practices of animal sacrifice. Inscriptions mention the provision of animals for temple festivals, indicating that this indigenous practice was incorporated into Shaivite ritual (Mitra, 1993).

#### **4.5 The Dholkal Ganesha: Syncretic Shaivism**

The Dholkal Ganesha, located atop a hill in the Dantewada district, represents a unique expression of syncretic Shaivism. The colossal image of Ganesha, carved from natural rock, combines Shaivite iconography with features that suggest local adaptation (Ram & Ram, 2012).

The image's iconographic features include:

- An elaborate headdress with multiple tiers, more typical of royal portraiture than standard Ganesha images
- The trunk curved to the left, characteristic of Shaivite Ganesha images
- Four arms holding attributes associated with both Shaivite and indigenous traditions
- A robust, fleshy body typical of Chindaka Naga sculpture

The Dholkal Ganesha's location atop a prominent hill suggests that it may have served as a pilgrimage site that integrated Shaivite and indigenous traditions. The hill itself was likely a sacred site in pre-Shaivite religion, and the installation of the Ganesha image transformed it into a Shaivite pilgrimage center while maintaining its significance as a sacred place (Sharma, 2005).

## **5. CONSOLIDATION AND TRANSFORMATION: THE KAKATIYA-BASTAR STATE (14TH-20TH CENTURIES)**

### **5.1 The Kakatiya Succession**

Following the decline of the Chindaka Nagas, the Bastar region came under the influence of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal in the 14th century. According to tradition, the Bastar state was founded in 1324 by Annam Deo, a brother of the last Kakatiya ruler, who established a new kingdom in Dandakaranya after the fall of Warangal (Glasfurd, 1862; Sundar, 2016).

The Kakatiya period brought new influences to Shaivism in Bastar. The Kakatiyas were patrons of a form of Shaivism centered on the worship of Swayambhu (self-manifested) lingas and the

goddess as Shakti. Under their influence, Shaivism in Bastar became more closely integrated with the political structure, with the Raja serving as the chief patron and protector of Shaivite institutions (Sundar, 2016).

### **5.2 The Danteshwari Cult and Political Legitimacy**

The most significant development of the Kakatiya-Bastar period was the elevation of the Danteshwari cult to the status of state religion. The goddess Danteshwari, whose temple at Dantewada is one of the fifty-one shaktipeeth shrines, became the kuladevi (family deity) of the Bastar royal family (Elwin, 1943).

The Danteshwari cult represents a remarkable synthesis of Shaivite and indigenous traditions. The goddess is understood as a manifestation of Parvati, the consort of Shiva, yet her worship incorporates practices derived from indigenous goddess traditions, including animal sacrifice and the propitiation of local spirits (Sundar, 2016).

The political significance of the Danteshwari cult was profound. The goddess was understood to be the true sovereign of the region, with the Raja serving as her representative. This concept, expressed in the ideology of the Raja as Diwan (minister) of the goddess, provided a theological foundation for the state's authority (Sundar, 2016). As Elwin (1943) observed, "the Danteshwari cult gave the Raja a sacred authority that transcended the merely political, making him the protector of the region's religious traditions" (p. 78).

### **5.3 The Dussehra Festival and Public Shaivism**

The Dussehra festival at the Danteshwari Temple served as the primary public expression of Shaivism in Bastar state. The festival, which continues to be celebrated annually, brought together the Raja, subordinate chiefs, and representatives of tribal communities in a ritual complex that reinforced the integration of Shaivite and indigenous traditions (Sundar, 2016).

The Dussehra festival incorporated elements from both Shaivite and indigenous traditions:

- The rath (chariot) procession, derived from Shaivite temple traditions
- The sacrifice of animals, reflecting indigenous practice
- The propitiation of local deities and spirits
- The reaffirmation of the Raja's authority through the goddess's blessing

As Sundar (2016) notes, "the Dussehra festival was a ritual technology for integrating the diverse populations of Bastar under a unified religious and political framework" (p. 112).

### **5.4 Shaivism and Tribal Integration**

Under the Bastar state, Shaivism served as a mechanism for integrating tribal communities into the state structure. The process involved:

**Incorporation of Tribal Deities:** Local tribal deities were incorporated into the Shaivite pantheon as manifestations of Shiva or his attendants. The Persa Pen (Great God) of the Gonds, for example, was identified with Shiva (Elwin, 1943).

**Establishment of Temple Networks:** The state patronized the construction of Shaivite temples throughout the region, creating a network of pilgrimage sites that connected local communities to the central cult at Dantewada (Mitra, 1993).

**Patronage of Tribal Priests:** The state supported tribal priests (pujaris and bhagats) who served as intermediaries between the Shaivite tradition and local communities. These priests,

while maintaining indigenous practices, were integrated into the broader Shaivite institutional structure (Sundar, 2016).

**Festival Participation:** Tribal communities were encouraged to participate in state-sponsored festivals, particularly the Dussehra celebration, which provided opportunities for reaffirming their place within the political and religious order (Ram & Ram, 2012).

This process of integration did not, however, result in the complete replacement of indigenous traditions. Rather, it created a complex, layered religious landscape in which Shaivite and tribal traditions coexisted and interacted (Sundar, 2016).

## **6. CONTEMPORARY SHAIVISM IN BASTAR**

### **6.1 The Contemporary Religious Landscape**

In contemporary Bastar, Shaivism exists alongside vibrant tribal religious traditions in a complex relationship that resists simple characterization. The region's religious landscape is characterized by:

**Continuity of Shaivite Institutions:** The major Shaivite temples of Bastar—the Chandraditya Temple at Barsur, the Danteshwari Temple at Dantewada, and numerous smaller shrines—continue to function as centers of worship and pilgrimage (Mitra, 1993).

**Persistence of Tribal Traditions:** Indigenous religious practices, including nature worship, ancestor veneration, and the propitiation of local spirits, remain widespread, particularly among tribal communities (Elwin, 1943; Ram & Ram, 2012).

**Syncretic Practices:** Many communities practice a syncretic religion that combines Shaivite and indigenous elements. The same individual may worship at a Shaivite temple, propitiate local spirits, and participate in indigenous festivals (Sundar, 2016).

**Regional Variation:** The extent of Shaivite influence varies across Bastar. In areas closer to the former capital and major temple sites, Shaivite practices are more prominent; in remote forest areas, indigenous traditions remain dominant (Ram & Ram, 2012).

### **6.2 The Danteshwari Temple Today**

The Danteshwari Temple at Dantewada remains the most important Shaivite pilgrimage site in Bastar. The temple attracts pilgrims from across the region and from other parts of India, particularly during the Dussehra festival (Sundar, 2016).

The contemporary cult of Danteshwari continues to reflect the synthesis of Shaivite and indigenous traditions. The goddess is worshipped as a manifestation of Parvati, yet the rituals at the temple incorporate practices derived from indigenous traditions, including:

- The offering of animals, particularly goats and buffaloes
- The propitiation of local spirits and ancestors
- The participation of tribal priests alongside Brahmin priests
- The celebration of festivals that combine Shaivite and indigenous elements

As Sundar (2016) observes, "the Danteshwari cult remains a living tradition that continues to evolve, incorporating new elements while maintaining its distinctive character" (p. 156).

### **6.3 Shaivism and Contemporary Identity**

In contemporary Bastar, Shaivism has become intertwined with questions of identity, particularly in the context of the region's political conflicts. The Naxalite-Maoist insurgency

that has affected Bastar since the late 1960s has complicated the relationship between Shaivism and tribal identity (Sundar, 2016).

For some tribal communities, Shaivism is viewed as an alien tradition imposed by external rulers, and the revival of indigenous traditions is seen as a form of cultural resistance. For others, Shaivism has been so thoroughly integrated into local culture that it is experienced as an authentic expression of their identity. The Danteshwari cult, in particular, is claimed by both tribal and non-tribal communities as a symbol of Bastar's distinctive cultural heritage (Padel & Das, 2010).

This complexity reflects the long history of religious synthesis in Bastar, in which Shaivism and indigenous traditions have been in dialogue for over 1,500 years. Neither tradition has remained static; both have been transformed through their interaction.

### **7. THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS: SANSKRITIZATION AND ITS LIMITS**

The spread of Shaivism in Bastar has often been analyzed through the lens of "sanskritization," a concept developed by M.N. Srinivas (1952) to describe the process by which lower castes adopt Brahmanical practices to improve their social status. However, the Bastar case reveals the limitations of this concept for understanding religious change in tribal societies.

Several factors distinguish the spread of Shaivism in Bastar from classic cases of sanskritization:

**Political Patronage:** The spread of Shaivism was driven not by tribal communities seeking to improve their status but by ruling dynasties seeking to legitimize their authority. The Nalas, Chindaka Nagas, and Kakatiyas patronized Shaivism as part of their political strategies, not as a response to social pressures from above (Sundar, 2016).

**Synthesis Rather Than Replacement:** The spread of Shaivism in Bastar did not result in the replacement of indigenous traditions but rather in their synthesis with Shaivite elements. Indigenous deities were incorporated into the Shaivite pantheon, indigenous practices were accommodated, and indigenous institutions continued to function (Elwin, 1943).

**Limited Reach:** Despite centuries of state patronage, Shaivism never completely replaced indigenous traditions. Tribal communities continued to practice their traditional religions, and even those who adopted Shaivite practices often maintained indigenous elements (Ram & Ram, 2012).

**Reciprocal Influence:** The influence between Shaivism and indigenous traditions was not one-way. Shaivism in Bastar was transformed by its encounter with indigenous religion, developing distinctive features—such as the integration of the goddess cult and the accommodation of animal sacrifice—that distinguished it from Shaivism in other regions (Mitra, 1993).

These observations suggest the need for more nuanced models of religious change in tribal societies. Rather than viewing the spread of Brahmanical traditions as a process of emulation leading to the eventual disappearance of indigenous traditions, we need to understand these encounters as complex processes of synthesis, negotiation, and transformation in which both traditions are changed (Sundar, 2016).

## 8. CONCLUSION

The spread of Shaivism in Bastar represents one of the most complex and enduring examples of religious synthesis in Indian history. From the early patronage of the Nala dynasty in the 4th century to the contemporary Danteshwari cult, Shaivism has been continuously present in the region for over 1,500 years. Yet this presence has never resulted in the complete replacement of indigenous traditions. Instead, Shaivism and indigenous religion have interacted to create a unique religious landscape characterized by synthesis, coexistence, and ongoing transformation.

Several conclusions emerge from this study. First, the spread of Shaivism in Bastar was driven primarily by political patronage rather than by processes of social emulation. Successive dynasties patronized Shaivism as a means of legitimizing their authority and integrating diverse populations into a unified political structure.

Second, the spread of Shaivism resulted not in the replacement of indigenous traditions but in their synthesis with Shaivite elements. Indigenous deities were incorporated into the Shaivite pantheon, indigenous practices were accommodated, and indigenous institutions continued to function alongside Shaivite institutions.

Third, the Danteshwari cult represents the culmination of this process of synthesis. The goddess Danteshwari, worshipped as the consort of Shiva and the tutelary deity of the Bastar royal family, embodies the integration of Shaivite and indigenous traditions that has characterized the region's religious history.

Fourth, the contemporary religious landscape of Bastar reflects this history of synthesis and coexistence. Shaivite temples, indigenous sacred sites, and syncretic practices coexist in a complex religious landscape that continues to evolve.

Finally, the Bastar case challenges simple models of religious change in tribal societies. The spread of Shaivism was not a process of sanskritization in the classical sense but rather a complex encounter between traditions that transformed both. Understanding this encounter requires attention to the specific historical, political, and cultural contexts that shaped religious change in this unique region.

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