
**BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS AND ASPIRATIONAL IDENTITIES: A
SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF WESTERN ODISHA'S MIDDLE CLASS**

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ABSTRACT

This research paper looks at how people in Western Odisha's middle class use birthday parties to show off their dreams of a better life. It builds on ideas from Bourdieu about habitus shaped by society and Appadurai on how cultures mix and spread. For a few months, the researcher did fieldwork in wes Odisha ;visiting 45 homes, talking to 60 people and observing 20 parties. These events mix old Odia customs with modern Western touches like cakes, fancy themes and social media shares to help folks stand out as they shift from farm life to city ways. The results show how men and women handle new ideas of progress differently. Money from family abroad and jobs create a mixed set of habits, but there's still conflict between keeping local roots and copying global trends. On the theory side, this sharpens our view of middle-class life outside big cities in India, stressing how buying things builds who we are. This paper also recommends ways to make culture fair for all and suggests more research on ambitions from out-of-the-way places

KEY WORDS: Celebration, Rituals, Middle Class, Identities, Birthday.**INTRODUCTION****Background and Rationale**

In today's India, birthday parties have changed a lot. They used to be small family events, but now middle-class folks turn them into big shows to signal their status. Few places in western Odisha like Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Bargarh and Balangir are a great spot to see this shift.

These areas were once ignored compared to big cities on the coast like Bhubaneswar. But since India's economy opened up in 1991, the middle class here has grown faster. Families making ₹5–15 lakhs a year now throw parties with caterers, cakes, balloons and photo setups. They mix in local Sambalpuri traditions too, copying city trends. These aren't just fun events they show people's dreams of moving up in life, blending Western shopping habits with hometown pride (Bourdieu, 1984; Liechty, 2003). This study explores how these birthday celebrations help middle-class families in Western Odisha manage their class-related anxieties in a region far from major urban centers.

Research Questions

- How do middle-class families in Western Odisha use birthday parties to show their dreams of moving up in society?
- What special items (like cakes, balloons and photo shoots) do they pick and how do these mix worldwide trends with local Sambalpuri touches?
- How do ideas about men and women affect these parties for example, who organizes them or how boys and girls are highlighted?
- How does Western Odisha's local culture shape party habits differently from those in coastal cities?
- What do these parties tell us about struggles with class and everyday habits ?

Reserch Objective

- To observe and describe birthday party practices among middle-class families in Western Odisha.
- To examine how symbolic items in these parties blend global consumerism with local Sambalpuri culture.
- To explore the role of gender in planning and featuring participants in these celebrations.
- To compare how regional identities in Western Odisha shape parties differently from coastal urban areas.
- To analyze what these events reveal about class tensions and the formation of everyday habits (habitus) in peripheral India.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Theoretical Frameworks: Aspirational Identities and Consumption

This study leans heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction*. He talks about "habitus" . Basically, the habits and tastes one pick up from it's class background that show up in what it

like and how it act. Birthdays turn into these battlegrounds where middle-class folks build up "symbolic capital." That's a fancy way of saying they show off to separate themselves from their farming family roots. Then there's Arjun Appadurai with his "scapes" idea. Think of it as global stuff like fancy imported cakes flowing in and letting people dream big about better lives. Mark Liechty in 2003 applied this to South Asia. He saw young people in Kathmandu using fun outings, like birthdays to act modern. In India, Craig Jeffrey's 2010 work on Uttar Pradesh students nails it too, they buy trendy things to feel hopeful even when jobs are shaky.

Birthday Celebrations as Cultural Rituals in India

The practice of cake-cutting at birthdays came from British missionaries way back (Banerjee, 2008). But it really took off after the 1990s with TV ads and big malls everywhere (Miller, 2001). Now, it's a mix of old and new. Rich folks in urban areas mix prayers and family stuff with over-the-top cakes and parties (Osella & Osella, 2006). These events keep families close and show who's who (Uberoi, 2006). Social media cranks it up, everyone posts perfect pics to get likes and make others jealous (Miller et al., 2016). It's all about looking good online.

Middle-Class Aspirations in Post-Liberalization Odisha

Odisha's middle class blew up; grew 300% from 1993 to 2011, thanks to money sent home by workers away (NSSO data; Dash, 2018). In Bhubaneswar, people now hit malls more than temples to chase dreams (Panda, 2020). But out west in Sambalpur, it's slower. Local shop owners copy the big-city vibe during festivals (Mohanty, 2015).

Gaps in Existing Literature

Most studies stick to big cities like Mumbai or Delhi (Fernandes, 2006). Places like non-urban Odisha get ignored, especially everyday stuff like birthdays. This paper fills that gap by digging into local habits and how they fuel middle-class wishes in overlooked spots.

METHODOLOGY

This PhD study uses a hands-on ethnographic approach to look closely at how people in western Odisha celebrate birthdays. It focuses on 45 middle-class families who earn between 5 and 15 lakh rupees a year. These folks are right in the middle of India's changing consumer habits mixed with local ways. Data were collected by spending extensive time in the field. That time catches the busy post-rainy season for parties. 60 detailed interviews were done, each 10 to 15 minutes long, mostly with parents aged 30 to 50. They spoke in Odia or English, sharing stories about their family traditions and choices. The researcher also joined

20 birthday events in person to collect real time data . At these, the researcher watched rituals like cutting cakes with music , buying gifts (branded stuff or local sweets) and how people talked and mixed. More than 200 public social media posts with #SambalpurBirthday were checked from 2023 to 2025. These showed off pictures of showing status and dreams online. To pick people, snowball sampling was used. This got a good mix: different castes like OBC, SC and others; family gender setups; and folks who moved from villages to the city.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF WESTERN ODISHA'S MIDDLE CLASS

In Western Odisha, the middle class makes up about 15-20% of the area's 10 million people, based on the 2023 Odisha Economic Survey. This group grew out of farming backgrounds, thanks to changes after India's 1991 economic reforms, money sent home from the Gulf (around ₹5,000 crore each year just to Sambalpur district, per RBI 2024 data) and various new jobs .Sambalpur used to be a princely state centered on rice farming. Over time, it moved into coal mining and small factories which created a mix of jobs. From researcher's field survey of 45 families, about 40% work in government sector, 30% are traders, 20% have relatives who migrated for work and rest 10% are gig workers. People here are better educated too. 70% have college degrees or more, compared to the state's 40% average from NFHS-5. That means more kids go to English-medium schools and head to cities for opportunities. Smartphones are everywhere (85% of folks have them) and buses like OSRTC , AMA bus etc connect villages straight to shopping malls, fueling big dreams. Still, challenges remain such as castes like OBCs lead the pack,and women mostly handle home life.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION AS SITES OF ASPIRATION

Evolution of Celebratory Practices in Western Odisha

Back before 2000, folks in Western Odisha kept birthdays simple and close to home. Families would make prasad,basic sweets and snacks at the house and share it with relatives and neighbors. They'd sing old Sambalpuri folk tunes to liven things up. It was all about family ties and sticking to traditions, nothing fancy.But things changed a lot. From talking to 50 families in the study, it was found that now , about 8 out of 10 hold parties outside, like in big halls, eateries or resorts. It's gone from quiet home get-togethers to showy public events. India's big economic changes in the 1990s sped this up. City-style shopping hit small towns and villages with stuff like Domino's pizzas and store-bought cakes. Then COVID hit, and apps such as Swiggy and Zomato made it easy to get food delivered. Even people in far-off

spots like could order full fancy meals without any trouble. Now birthdays feel like a way to act modern and climb up in life.

Themes of Westernization: Cakes, Parties and Events

Cakes are now the main star at almost every birthday party these days. In the fieldwork, it was seen them at 95% of the events. People generally get them from local bakeries . These shops copy popular styles from around the world like Black Forest, Red Velvet or chocolate truffle. They top them with fancy icing from outside and even LED lights. These aren't just treats anymore; they stand for luxury and big-city vibes. They've mostly replaced old-school sweets like modak or sandesh. Parties have turned into full themes too. Boys get Super Mario or Avengers setups, while girls have princess or Barbie ones. Think backdrops, toys everywhere and hired photographers. Each setup runs from 10,000 to 30,000 rupees. It's a big way to show off status, way different from the plain old village parties of before. Families use these parties to come across as more urban and upscale, linking their kids' special days to the allure of city living. This creates a competitive race among middle-class households to match one another.

Gendered Dimensions and Family Roles

Gender roles play a big part in how these birthday parties happen. Mothers handle the planning for about 90% of them. They pick themes, haggle with vendors and even manage the social media posts. They boost their work by sharing Instagram videos with tags like #MomLife or #BirthdayQueen. Online friends like it which makes mothers feel good about their hard work and planning skills. This kind of showy role sticks to old ways but also gives them a bit of power in a male-led setup. What starts at home turns into public praise. Fathers mostly just pay for everything. Teens, especially kids that age, try to look cool with planned dances to Bollywood hits or foreign pop songs. It's a mix of pushing back and going along. These moves help them deal with parents' rules, show who they are , handle family pressure and friends expectation all hyped up by social media.

Intersections with Caste, Religion, and Regional Identity

Birthdays in Western Odisha mix caste, religion and local pride in interesting ways. Global trends blend right in with home traditions. For most Hindu families the researcher talked to, they cut the cake but also do the Odia aarti. They pray to gods like Lakshmi and Ganesh while blowing out candles. It keeps old roots alive but adds new fun ;a way to chase dreams without losing the past. Christian groups, usually from scheduled castes, sing hymns and say

prayers during the party. This adds a serious spiritual touch to the fun stuff, helping them hold onto their community feel. In 60% of the photos people share, we can see Sambalpuri clothes like bright bandha weaves or stitched designs. It shows they're not ditching their culture completely. Picking and choosing like this turns parties into places to balance identities. Caste hierarchies, religious diversity and regional loyalty act as buffers, resisting the complete dominance of external influences.

Findings: Negotiating Aspirational Identities

Symbolic Capital through Consumption

People in India follow ideas from thinker Bourdieu about "symbolic capital." Families spend 15-25% of their monthly earnings on kids' birthdays. That's about ₹15,000 on average per party. It's a big chunk for regular middle-class folks in places like semi-city area of western Odisha. They focus on things everyone notices. For example, 40% buy fancy branded gifts to give back, like toys from other countries or special stuff ordered from Amazon. 75% bring in pro photographers. These pros take sharp photos and quick videos that make the party look extra special and share them widely. Doing this builds their social image. It lifts them up in friends' and neighbors' eyes. It even sparks jealousy and copying in the community.

Tensions Between Tradition and Modernity

People trying to build their dream lives often mix old local ways with new worldwide shopping habits. This shows the push-pull between old traditions and today's modern life in India right now. From what we saw in surveys, 85% of birthday parties mix Western stuff like slicing a fancy layered cake with classic Odia customs. Think prayers and offerings to gods like Lakshmi or Ganesh during puja. This mix lets families look all worldly and classy but still hold onto their roots. It sums up how folks blend fancy foreign styles with homegrown beliefs to sort out who they are. But it stirs up family rifts based on class. Village relatives call it too much wasting money on flash instead of simple farm life. These fights point to bigger changes. It sparks arguments across generations that dig in the gaps even deeper.

Social Media as a Mirror of Aspiration

Social media acts like a mirror online. It boosts and shapes stories. These take real-life parties and spread them into virtual spaces for likes and nods. Out of 20 parties were checked, 17 had live videos on Instagram or Facebook. That let far-off family join in real time. Each post got 200-500 likes, way more than usual family pics. Folks use pretty filters and edit tricks to hide plain spots. A basic neighborhood hall turns into a fancy scene with soft lights and

digital glows. They paint pictures of getting ahead, full of plenty, happiness and family wins. This setup pulls in approval from the crowd. This setup builds a show-off version of themselves for folks. Bottom line, these posts act as dream keepsakes. They spark copying in online circles and tie personal goals to the wider digital scene.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The fieldwork shows that people in Western Odisha's middle class use birthday parties to build dreams of a better life. They mix fancy Western stuff with local ways. Families spend a lot around ₹15,000 per party on things like special cakes and music DJs. This helps them stand out from village relatives. Most parties (85%) combine cutting cake with traditional Odia prayers like having a modern face but an Indian heart. Mothers mostly plan everything while kids show off the new styles. Social media boosts it all. 85% of parties get over 200 likes on social media photos. In the end, these parties serve as stages for chasing big dreams, fueled by money from jobs and buses linking remote spots, despite being far from major cities.

RECOMMENDATION

- Fund Local Event Spaces :- Governments need to subsidize community halls and bakeries to ease middle-class party costs and promote inclusive aspirations.
- Empower Women Planners :- Offer workshops blending Sambalpuri crafts with modern event skills, boosting women's roles.
- School Media Literacy :- Programs need to be launched to teach balanced social media use, reducing performance anxiety.
- Enhance Mobility Links :- Upgrade bus networks and gig apps to support remittance flows, paired with spending education for ritual funding.
- Expand Regional Research :- Launch comparative Odisha studies (coastal vs. western) with surveys to track habitus shifts over time.

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