

The Evaluation of Consciousness: A Study of Mediaeval Seers and Sages in Indigenous Society in Odisha

¹*Anil Kumar Pradhan*

*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Psychology, School of Tribal Heritage and Tribal Indology, KISS-DU,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha,*

Email: anilkumarpradhan687@gmail.com

²*Dr. Nilamani Maharana*

*Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, School of Tribal Heritage and Tribal Indology, KISS-DU,
Bhubaneswar, Odisha,*

Email: nilamani.maharana@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the idea of consciousness in the traditions of mediaeval seers and sages in the Indigenous tribal societies of Odisha. It shows that consciousness in these communities is not understood only as a mental activity inside the brain. Instead, it is seen as a wider and deeper experience connected with the body, mind, spirit, nature, ancestors, and community. The study focuses on tribal groups such as the Saura, Kandha, Gond, and Bonda, whose spiritual life is preserved through oral traditions, rituals, songs, dances, dreams, and trance practices. Their seers, known by different names in different communities, play an important role as healers, dream interpreters, spiritual guides, and keepers of cultural knowledge. The research argues that these Indigenous traditions offer a rich and meaningful model of consciousness. In this model, altered states such as trance, possession, visions, and mystical experiences are not seen as illnesses or abnormal conditions. Rather, they are accepted as purposeful and socially valued ways of gaining wisdom, healing, and guidance. The study also shows that tribal communities understand time in a cyclic way, where dreams, myths, and daily life are closely linked. This makes their view of consciousness different from modern psychological ideas, which often focus only on the individual mind. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study examines interviews, observations, rituals, oral stories, and archival sources. It develops a conceptual framework called the Odisha Indigenous Consciousness Model, which includes sensory awareness, ancestral awareness, ritual awareness, visionary awareness, and cosmic unity. These levels show how consciousness is experienced in a gradual and connected way within tribal life. The study also highlights that oral traditions and ritual performances help preserve deep knowledge across generations. The findings suggest that Indigenous models of consciousness can contribute to mental health, education, ecology, and interfaith understanding. They support more respectful and culturally sensitive approaches to healing and learning. Overall, the study affirms that the spiritual knowledge of Odisha's tribal seers is not primitive or outdated, but a valuable system of wisdom that can enrich contemporary thought.

Keywords: *Indigenous consciousness, Odisha tribes, seers and sages, trance, oral traditions, spirituality, ethnography.*

Introduction

The concept of consciousness, as understood in contemporary psychological and neurological contexts, is often divorced from its spiritual, ecological, and communal dimensions. In cognitive science and clinical psychology, consciousness is typically framed as an individual, internal phenomenon: a matter of neural processes,

information integration, attentional states, or self-referential awareness. Such models emphasize the brain as the primary locus of consciousness and treat experiences of mysticism, trance, or spiritual insight as epiphenomenal, disrupted, or pathological unless they can be mapped onto standard cognitive or affective variables. While these approaches have yielded valuable insights into perception, memory, and selfhood, they frequently marginalize or erase alternative ways of knowing that have sustained human communities for millennia. In contrast, Indigenous societies, particularly those in Odisha, view consciousness as a holistic phenomenon encompassing the body, mind, spirit, nature, and the ancestral world. Here, consciousness is not confined to the interior of a single organism but is distributed across relationships with land, forest, water, animals, ancestors, and divine forces. It is simultaneously personal and collective, temporal and timeless, sensory and transcendent.

Odisha, located on the eastern coast of India, is home to more than sixty-four tribal communities, each with distinct languages, myths, cosmologies, and spiritual practices. Groups such as the Kandha, Saura, Gond, and Bonda have kept complex philosophical ideas alive through oral storytelling, sacred groves, ritual dances, and trance ceremonies. Their seers, known by various names such as Dehuri, Disari, Jhankar, Jani, Ojha, Bhagat, or Kalo, function as spiritual mediators between the seen and unseen worlds. These figures are not merely ritual performers; they are custodians of knowledge, interpreters of dreams, healers of (body-mind), and guides in moral and ecological matters. Through practices of meditation, dream interpretation, ritual participation, and visionary insight, they have developed rich spiritual systems for self-realization and collective guidance. In their worldview, consciousness is a layered field that can be accessed, refined, and expanded through disciplined practice, communal ceremony, and communion with nature. These practices treat altered states such as trance, possession, or mystical union not as disorders but as meaningful experiences, deviations from normal functioning but as purposive, structured, and socially meaningful modes of being.

The term “mediaeval” in this study is used not to denote a rigid chronological period but to indicate a long historical continuum of tribal spiritual traditions that predate colonial modernity and continue to inform contemporary practices. Many of the roles, rituals, and cosmological narratives associated with Odisha’s tribal seers show deep historical roots, often embedded in oral traditions that stretch back centuries. While textual records from these communities are scarce or absent, anthropological field reports, mythological collections, and comparative studies suggest that these spiritual systems have remained remarkably resilient despite colonization, displacement, and modernization. The seers and sages of these Indigenous societies articulated models of consciousness that integrated ethical, ecological, and spiritual concerns in ways that parallel, yet significantly differ from, both classical Indian philosophies and Western psychological theories. Their understandings of awareness, self-realization, and transcendence are embedded in lived practices rather than abstract metaphysics, and they are transmitted through performance, ritual, and narrative rather than through canonical texts.

This research aims to document and analyse these Indigenous experiences of consciousness to bring their relevance into current academic and applied discourses. By integrating cultural anthropology, Indigenous knowledge systems, and philosophical inquiry, the study examines the layered dimensions of awareness, mystical states, and spiritual insights developed through centuries of tradition. It seeks to move beyond the limitations of narrowly individualistic or eurocentric models of consciousness and to articulate a conceptual framework for Indigenous consciousness rooted in the cultural context of Odisha’s tribal communities. This framework doesn’t try to replace modern psychology or neuroscience; it adds different perspectives to complement them on altered states, trauma, healing, and ecological ethics. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on the pluralism of consciousness models, the decolonization of knowledge, and the integration of Indigenous wisdom into contemporary fields such as mental health, education, and spiritual development.

The significance of this inquiry lies not only in its theoretical contributions but also in its practical implications. As global discourses on mental health increasingly recognize the role of culture, community, and meaning-

making in well-being, the consciousness models of Odisha's tribal seers offer valuable insights for culturally sensitive interventions. Their practices of trance, dream work, and ritual healing suggest non-pathological understandings of altered states that can inform trauma therapy, grief processing, and community-based healing. Similarly, their ecological and relational view of consciousness can deepen approaches to environmental education, sustainability, and interfaith dialogue. By critically engaging with these Indigenous epistemologies, this study seeks to affirm the validity of tribal philosophical systems and to foreground their potential contributions to the evolving understanding of consciousness in the twenty-first century.

Background

Odisha is home to more than 64 tribal communities, each with distinct languages, myths, cosmologies, and spiritual practices. These groups, such as the Kandha, Santal, Munda, Gond, Saura, Bonda, Bhatra, and many more, have preserved their philosophical frameworks through oral storytelling, sacred groves, ritual dances, and trance ceremonies. Oral traditions function as living repositories of knowledge, transmitting ecological wisdom, ethical norms, and spiritual insights from elders to younger generations across centuries (Tribes of Odisha).

Within these communities, seers known by names such as Dehuri, Disari, Jhankar, Jani, Ojha, Bhagat, or Kalo acted as spiritual mediators between the seen and unseen worlds. These figures were not merely ritual performers; they served as healers, interpreters of dreams, guides in moral matters, and custodians of cultural memory. Their authority was rooted in long training, lineage connections, and proven capacity to access altered states of consciousness during rituals, vision quests, or communal ceremonies. In their practice, the boundary between the material and spiritual realms was fluid, and they operated as facilitators of communication with ancestors, deities, and natural forces (Bhuyan, 2024).

These medieval Indigenous figures conceptualized consciousness not as an individual mental state but as a shared spiritual field, often accessed during vision quests, nature communion, or ancestral possession. Consciousness in this worldview was distributed across body, mind, spirit, land, and community. It was not confined to the brain but extended through relationships with forests, rivers, mountains, and the ancestral world. Altered states such as trance, possession, or visionary insight were understood as purposeful and socially structured, rather than pathological. These states were part of rituals that gave them meaning, purpose, and moral guidance (Majhi & Mahalik, 2026).

Despite colonization and modernization, remnants of these systems persist and offer valuable insights into humanity's spiritual evolution. Many tribal communities in Odisha continue to maintain sacred groves, perform traditional rituals, and consult seers for healing and guidance, even as they engage with contemporary education, markets, and governance. These enduring practices demonstrate that Indigenous models of consciousness remain viable and meaningful in the present. They challenge narrower, individualistic understandings of awareness and invite contemporary scholars to consider consciousness as ecological, collective, and sacred. By engaging with these systems, researchers can develop more inclusive frameworks for psychology, mental health, education, and policy that respect the plural traditions of human experience.

Literature Review

1. Western Theories of Consciousness

Mashour et al, 2026: Western philosophical and psychological accounts of consciousness have evolved from metaphysical dualism to sophisticated neurocognitive models. Descartes' dualism posited mind and body as distinct substances, with the non-physical mind interacting with the bodily machine through the pineal gland. Freud's psychoanalytic model introduced the id, ego, and superego, framing consciousness as a negotiated space among unconscious drives, rational mediation, and moral constraints. Jung expanded this by proposing a collective unconscious, a shared reservoir of archetypes and symbols that transcends individual experience.

Contemporary scientific theories move beyond pure metaphysics: Global Workspace Theory (Baars) suggests consciousness arises when information gains access to a central “workspace” in the brain and is broadcast to unconscious systems; Integrated Information Theory (Tononi) proposes that consciousness reflects a system’s capacity to integrate information in a way that cannot be reduced to independent parts, quantified by a measure called. These models emphasize cognitive access, information integration, and neural mechanisms, yet often leave little room for spiritual, ecological, or communal dimensions of awareness.

2. Eastern Spiritual Models

Eastern traditions offer multidimensional models of consciousness that integrate ethical, meditative, and metaphysical insights. In Vedanta, consciousness is understood through four levels: waking (gross experience), dreaming (mental imagery), deep sleep (unmanifest potential), and Turiya (pure, non-dual awareness beyond all states). Buddhist traditions emphasize mindfulness (Sati), cultivating sustained attention to present-moment experience to reveal the impermanent and non-self nature of phenomena. Zen Buddhism explores states of direct, non-conceptual awareness, often described as “sudden awakening” or “seeing one’s true nature.” Yogic traditions describe Samadhi as the highest meditative state, in which the distinction between subject and object dissolves, and consciousness rests in its own essence. Unlike Western models that often locate consciousness in the brain, these frameworks treat it as a field that can be refined through disciplined practice, ethical living, and insight. They emphasize that consciousness is not merely a cognitive function but a dimension of being that includes ethical, relational, and transcendent aspects.

3. Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous epistemologies propose that knowledge, consciousness, and spirituality are inseparable. Vine Deloria Jr. (2006) argues that Indigenous epistemology is fundamentally a spiritual experience, grounded in lived relationships with land, community, and the sacred. Cajete (2000) describes Indigenous science as relational and sacred, emphasizing interdependence, reciprocity, and reverence for nature rather than mere instrumental control. Smith (1999) critiques Western research practices and advocates decolonizing methodologies that respect Indigenous voices, prioritize community benefit, and recognize Indigenous knowledge as valid and sophisticated. These perspectives challenge the assumption that scientific or psychological models are the only legitimate ways of understanding consciousness. Instead, they propose that consciousness emerges from embedded relationships with the natural world, ancestors, and communal practices. Indigenous knowledge systems thus offer alternative frameworks for understanding awareness, altered states, healing, and ethics, foregrounding the sacred and the relational in ways that complement and critique dominant Western paradigms.

4. Tribal Odisha Context

Research on tribal communities in Odisha highlights the richness of their spiritual and philosophical traditions. Mahapatra (1987) describes the sacred complex of tribal Orissa, showing how rituals, myths, and sacred spaces structure community life and mediate relationships with deities and ancestors. Nayak (2004) examines Saura cosmology and ritual, revealing how symbolic narratives, dances, and trance practices encode complex understandings of consciousness, time, and the spiritual world. Mishra (1999) documents tribal religion and mythology in Odisha, emphasizing the role of seers, ritual specialists, and oral traditions in sustaining ethical and cosmological frameworks. These studies illustrate that consciousness in tribal Odisha is not an individual mental state but a collective, ecological, and sacred phenomenon accessed through ritual, vision, and communal participation. They provide empirical grounding for the claim that Indigenous models of consciousness in Odisha offer sophisticated, coherent, and meaningful frameworks that can inform contemporary psychological, educational, and policy discourses.

Objectives

1. To document and analyze the spiritual teachings and practices of mediaeval Indigenous seers in Odisha.
2. To identify their perceptions of consciousness, altered states, and self-realization.
3. To create a conceptual model of Indigenous consciousness rooted in Odisha's cultural context.
4. To examine the contemporary relevance of these ancient perspectives in mental health, spirituality, and education.

Gaps in Current Research

1. Few academic studies integrate Odisha's Indigenous philosophies into consciousness discourse.
2. Neglect of non-textual, oral, and performative traditions in cognitive or spiritual research.
3. Absence of Indigenous models in global comparative consciousness studies.
4. Lack of field-based analysis of spiritual practices among tribal Odisha communities.

Hypotheses

H1: Mediaeval Indigenous seers in Odisha developed complex models of consciousness integrated with nature and spirit.

H2: Rituals, trance, and symbolic storytelling were primary means of accessing altered states. H3: Indigenous tribal models differ from modern psychological ones but offer complementary insights.

H4: Their spiritual knowledge remains relevant for mental health, ecological ethics, and community well-being.

The Odisha Indigenous Consciousness Model

The conceptual framework derived from the study's hypotheses is presented as the Odisha Indigenous Consciousness Model. This model organizes Indigenous experiences of consciousness into five interrelated levels, each specifying a domain of awareness, characteristic access methods, and intended purposes. Unlike linear stage models common in Western psychology, this framework is cyclical and layered, reflecting the tribal worldview and the notion of cyclic time.

Table: The Odisha Indigenous Consciousness Model

Level	Domain	Access Method	Purpose
1. Sensory Awareness	Body-nature interface	Observation, presence	Basic grounding, embodied attentiveness
2. Ancestral Awareness	Connection to lineage and spirits	Dreams, chanting	Daily survival, harmony with ancestors
3. Ritual Awareness	Symbolic-spiritual participation	Dance, offerings, possession	Guidance, protection, communal cohesion
4. Visionary Awareness	Transcendent spiritual states	Isolation, fasting, trance	Healing, divination, personal transformation

Level	Domain	Access Method	Purpose
5. Cosmic Unity	Union with the divine and nature	Silence, death rituals	Revelation, prophecy, Liberation (Mukti)

Each level both presupposes and feeds into the others, forming a spiral or concentric pattern rather than a fixed hierarchy. Movement between levels occurs through ritual practice, personal discipline, life transitions, and communal ceremonies, allowing consciousness to be continually reconfigured within the web of ecological, ancestral, and spiritual relationships.

Sample

The study utilizes a purposive sample designed to capture the richness of Indigenous consciousness practices among selected tribal communities in Odisha. The sampling strategy is guided by the research objectives, which focus on documenting the spiritual teachings, practices, and models of consciousness developed by medieval seers and sages within Indigenous societies.

Tribal Selection

The sample includes four tribal communities: Saura (Savara), Kandha, Goada, and Bonda. These groups were selected for their distinct linguistic, cultural, and spiritual traditions, as well as their documented presence in anthropological and ethnographic literature on Odisha. Each tribe has unique cosmologies, ritual systems, and roles for seers and ritual specialists, providing diverse perspectives on consciousness, altered states, and spiritual realization.

Key Informants

From each of the four tribes, the study selects 10 key informants, resulting in a total of 40 participants. These informants are chosen based on their recognized roles and expertise within the community. The categories of key informants include:

1. **Seers:** (Dehuri, Disari, Jhankar, Jani, Ojha, Bhagat, Kalo) who act as mediators between the human and spiritual worlds.
2. **Ritualists:** who lead or participate in major ceremonies, trance practices, and offerings.
3. **Oral historians:** who preserve and transmit myths, stories, and cosmological narratives.
4. **Elderly spiritual custodians:** who embody long-standing traditions and serve as repositories of communal memory and ethical wisdom.

These participants are expected to provide deep insights into the lived practices, symbolic systems, and experiential dimensions of Indigenous consciousness.

Geographic Scope

Data collection is conducted across four districts in Odisha: Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, and Kandhamal. These districts are known for significant tribal populations and active preservation of traditional spiritual practices. Koraput, Rayagada, and Malkangiri are in southern Odisha and are home to large Gonda, Saura, and Bonda communities. Kandhamal, located in central Odisha, has a notable Kandha population and is recognized for its rich traditions of ritual dance, trance, and oral mythology. By combining tribal diversity, specialized roles, and strategic geographic coverage, the sample aims to provide a comprehensive and contextually grounded

understanding of Indigenous consciousness in Odisha, aligned with the study's conceptual model and research objectives.

Tools

The study uses a set of practical tools to collect rich, meaningful information about Indigenous consciousness among tribal communities in Odisha. Each tool is designed to capture different aspects of spiritual life, practices, and interpretations.

1. Online Interviews

The researcher conducts open-ended interviews with seers and ritual leaders through online platforms. These interviews are not fixed or rigid; instead, they allow participants to share their experiences, stories, and teachings in their own words. The focus is on understanding how seers perceive consciousness, altered states, dreams, visions, and their role as spiritual mediators. Online interviews make it possible to connect with key informants who may be located in remote areas or face travel difficulties.

2. Participant Observation

The researcher practices participant observation, which means actively attending and observing ceremonies and rituals while being part of the community setting. Examples include the Saura Etani festival and the Kandha Sadar and Forest Hill festival. During these events, the researcher observes how rituals are performed, how participants behave, and how spiritual meanings are expressed through actions, symbols, and group interactions. This helps capture the lived experience of consciousness in communal and ritual contexts

3. Audio-Visual Documentation

The study includes audio-visual documentation of important cultural expressions. This involves recording:

1. **Ritual chants** that carry spiritual meanings and invoke deities or ancestors.
2. **Dances** that express myths, cosmologies, and emotional states.
3. **Oral stories** shared by elders and oral historians.

These recordings preserve the sounds, movements, and narratives that are central to Indigenous ways of knowing and experiencing consciousness. They also serve as valuable material for later analysis and reflection.

4. Textual Archives

The researcher accesses textual archives, including:

1. **Odia-language tribal mythology:** collected in books, manuscripts, or local publications.
2. **Anthropological field reports:** written by scholars and researchers who have studied tribal communities in Odisha.

These texts provide background information, historical context, and comparative insights. They help the researcher understand broader patterns in tribal religion, cosmology, and ritual, and support the interpretation of field data.

5. Interpretive Journaling

The researcher keeps an interpretive journal, which includes:

1. **Field notes:** written during or shortly after interviews, observations, and rituals.
2. **Reflective writing:** that captures personal thoughts, feelings, and responses while immersed in the community setting.

This journal helps the researcher track how their understanding evolves, notice important themes, and remain aware of their own biases and assumptions. It supports deeper interpretation and ensures that the analysis remains grounded in both data and reflective insight. Together, these tools provide a comprehensive and balanced approach to understanding Indigenous consciousness, combining direct interaction, observation, documentation, textual study, and reflective writing.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach that is specifically grounded in Indigenous methodologies. This means that the research is not carried out as an external observation of tribal communities but as a collaborative, respectful engagement that honors Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating. The ethnographic approach involves prolonged immersion in the field, close attention to everyday life, rituals, and social interactions, and a commitment to understanding the world from the standpoint of the community members themselves. By using Indigenous methodologies, the study prioritizes community voices, shared decision-making, and the co-creation of knowledge rather than treating participants as mere subjects of observation.

To understand mystical and spiritual experiences, the study uses phenomenological interpretation. Phenomenology focuses on describing experiences as they are lived and felt by individuals, rather than reducing them to external categories or theories. In this context, it means that the researcher seeks to capture the meaning, structure, and depth of experiences such as trance, visions, possession, and divine union as described by seers and ritualists. The goal is to present these experiences in their own terms, respecting their spiritual significance and the ways they are understood within the tribal worldview.

For analyzing the content of rituals, chants, and symbols, the study employs grounded theory analysis. Grounded theory is a method of generating theories or conceptual frameworks directly from the data, rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. In this research, the researcher systematically examines recordings, transcripts, field notes, and textual materials related to rituals, chants, and symbolic practices. Through careful coding and comparison, patterns emerge that help construct a model of Indigenous consciousness, such as the Odisha Indigenous Consciousness Model presented earlier. This approach allows the theory to remain closely tied to the actual practices and meanings found in the field.

Finally, the study emphasizes ethical collaboration with tribal communities for validation and consent. This means that the research is conducted in partnership with community leaders, seers, and other stakeholders. Before data collection begins, the researcher obtains informed consent, explaining the purpose, procedures, and potential impacts of the study. Throughout the research process, the community is involved in reviewing interpretations, validating findings, and ensuring that the presentation of their traditions is accurate and respectful. This ethical stance not only protects the rights and dignity of participants but also strengthens the credibility and relevance of the research by ensuring that it reflects the community's own perspectives and priorities.

Research Design

The study is structured into six phases that together form a coherent research design. Each phase has a specific purpose and set of activities, moving from initial conceptual work to the final production and sharing of findings. The phases are grouped into two stages: the first three phases belong to the data-gathering stage, while the last three belong to the analysis and dissemination stage.

Table: Research Design

Phase	Stage	Description
Phase 1	Literature and Planning	Literature survey and hypothesis formation
Phase 2	Data Gathering	Online interview and rapport building
Phase 3	Data Gathering	Data collection: Interview, Observation Rituals
Phase 4	Data Gathering	Coding and thematic analysis
Phase 5	Analysis and Synthesis	Model construction and hypothesis validation
Phase 6	Dissemination	Final report writing and sharing findings

Phase 1: Literature Survey and Hypothesis Formation

In the first phase, the researcher conducts a comprehensive literature survey covering Western theories of consciousness, Eastern spiritual models, Indigenous knowledge systems, and specific studies on tribal Odisha. This review helps to identify existing gaps, clarify key concepts, and situate the study within broader academic debates. Based on this survey, the researcher formulates the research hypotheses, which guide the direction of the study. These hypotheses include assumptions about the complexity of Indigenous models of consciousness, the role of rituals and trance, the differences from modern psychological models, and the contemporary relevance of these traditions.

Phase 2: Online Interview and Rapport Building

Phase 2 focuses on establishing trust and rapport with key informants from the selected tribal communities. The researcher conducts online interviews with seers, ritualists, oral historians, and elderly spiritual custodians. These initial conversations serve multiple purposes: they help the researcher understand the participants' perspectives, clarify expectations, and negotiate the scope and methods of participation. Building rapport is essential in Indigenous research contexts, where relationships, respect, and mutual trust are central. This phase ensures that participants feel comfortable and confident in sharing their knowledge and experiences.

Phase 3: Data Collection: Interviews, Observations, Rituals

In Phase 3, the main data collection activities are carried out. This includes:

- In-depth interviews** with seers and ritual leaders, focusing on their teachings, practices, and experiences of altered states.
- Participant observation** during ceremonies and rituals, such as the Saura Etani festival and Kondh Meria festival, to capture the lived dimensions of consciousness.
- Direct engagement** with ritual practices, attending to chants, dances, offerings, and trance states as they unfold in real time.

Data is recorded through audio-visual documentation, field notes, and reflective journals. This phase provides the empirical foundation for the study, generating rich, contextualized material about Indigenous consciousness.

Phase 4: Coding and Thematic Analysis

Phase 4 involves organizing and analyzing the collected data. The researcher uses coding to identify recurring ideas, practices, symbols, and meanings across interviews, observations, and ritual recordings. Through thematic analysis, these coded elements are grouped into broader themes, such as sensory awareness, ancestral connection, ritual participation, visionary states, and cosmic unity. This process helps to move from raw data to structured patterns, preparing the material for the construction of a conceptual model. The analysis is iterative, meaning that the researcher repeatedly reviews and refines the themes as understanding deepens.

Phase 5: Model Construction and Hypothesis Validation

In Phase 5, the researcher constructs the Odisha Indigenous Consciousness Model based on the themes and patterns identified in Phase 4. This model presents consciousness as a multi-level, cyclical, and layered phenomenon, integrating sensory, ancestral, ritual, visionary, and cosmic dimensions. At the same time, the researcher validates the hypotheses by checking whether the model supports or modifies the initial assumptions. For example, the study looks at whether seers developed detailed models linking nature and spirit, and whether rituals and trance are key to accessing altered states, and whether Indigenous models differ from but complement modern psychological frameworks. This phase turns data into theory and ensures that the model is grounded in empirical evidence.

Phase 6: Write final report and share findings

The final phase involves writing the final report, integrating literature, methodology, findings, and the conceptual model into a coherent narrative. The researcher also prepares the dissemination of findings through academic publications, presentations, or community feedback sessions. Ethical considerations are maintained by ensuring that the community's voices are accurately represented and that the research benefits both scholars and tribal communities. Dissemination may include sharing summaries with community leaders, presenting at conferences, or submitting articles to journals. This phase ensures that the knowledge generated during the study reaches wider audiences and contributes to ongoing discussions on Indigenous consciousness, mental health, education, and policy.

Key Findings

The study yields five central findings that highlight the nature of Indigenous consciousness in Odisha and its relevance to contemporary academic and applied fields.

1. Orality Preserves Complex Cognitive-Spiritual Insights

One of the most significant findings is that orality, the use of spoken language, storytelling, chanting, and performance, functions as a sophisticated medium for preserving and transmitting complex cognitive and spiritual insights. In the absence of written texts, tribal communities rely on metaphor, rhythm, and dance to encode deep philosophical meanings. Myths, songs, and ritual narratives are not merely entertainment; they are carefully structured vehicles for teaching about the nature of consciousness, the relationship between humans and the divine, and the ethical dimensions of life. The rhythmic and performative qualities of oral traditions engage multiple senses and memory systems, making them powerful tools for spiritual education and communal bonding.

2. Consciousness is shared, connected to the environment, and treated as sacred

The research reveals that in tribal Odisha, consciousness is not an individual mental state but a collective, ecological, and sacred phenomenon. It is deeply connected to the land, ancestors, and animals, forming a web of relationships that defines personal and communal identity. Individuals do not experience themselves as isolated beings but as part of a larger living system that includes the natural environment, the spiritual realm,

and the ancestral world. This interconnected view of consciousness challenges Western models that focus primarily on the individual mind or brain. Instead, it suggests that awareness emerges from and is sustained by ongoing relationships with the broader ecological and spiritual community.

3. Trance States During Rituals Are Purposeful and Socially Structured

A crucial finding is that trance states experienced during rituals are purposeful and socially structured, rather than pathological or random. In many Western psychological frameworks, altered states such as trance, possession, or visions may be interpreted as symptoms of mental disturbance. However, in the context of tribal Odisha, these states are embedded in ritual frameworks that give them meaning, direction, and ethical orientation. They are induced through specific practices such as chanting, dancing, fasting, and isolation, and they serve specific functions such as healing, divination, or communal guidance. The community recognizes and supports these states as valid and meaningful, integrating them into the social and spiritual life of the group.

4. Sages Perceive Time Cyclically, Linking Dream, Myth, and Waking States

The study also finds that sages and seers perceive time cyclically, rather than as a linear progression from past to future. In this worldview, dreams, myths, and waking states are interconnected dimensions of a single, continuous reality. Events in myths are not seen as distant historical occurrences but as ongoing realities that can be accessed through dreams, rituals, and visionary experiences. This cyclic perception of time allows for a fluid movement between different modes of consciousness, where the boundaries between the ordinary and the sacred, the past and the present, are porous. Such a perspective offers an alternative to linear, chronological models of time and suggests that consciousness can encompass multiple temporal dimensions simultaneously.

5. Dreams and Visions Are Diagnostic and Directive

Finally, the research demonstrates that dreams and visions are regarded as diagnostic and directive, offering both spiritual and social guidance. Seers and ritualists interpret dreams as messages from ancestors, deities, or the natural world, providing insights into health, relationships, and community matters. Visions accessed through trance or meditation are seen as sources of wisdom that can guide decisions, resolve conflicts, and heal individuals or the community. This understanding of dreams and visions as meaningful and actionable contrasts with approaches that treat them as mere byproducts of brain activity or psychological processes. Instead, in tribal Odisha, they are integral to the ecosystem of knowledge and guidance that sustains the spiritual and social life of the community.

Conclusions

The consciousness models articulated by medieval seers in Odisha's tribal societies offer a powerful challenge to dominant Western paradigms of mind and awareness. In mainstream psychology and neuroscience, consciousness is typically understood as an internal, individual phenomenon rooted in brain processes. By contrast, the Indigenous frameworks uncovered in this study present consciousness as expanded through ritual, ecology, and spirit. It is not confined to the interior of a single organism but is distributed across relationships with land, community, ancestors, and the sacred. This relational and ecological view of awareness suggests that human experience cannot be fully understood without considering the broader web of connections in which individuals are embedded.

These findings affirm that the Indigenous knowledge systems of Odisha are sophisticated and valid, both as historical traditions and as contemporary resources for understanding consciousness. They are not primitive or incomplete versions of Western science but parallel, coherent systems that encode complex insights about the nature of mind, self, and the cosmos. Recognizing their validity requires a shift from a single-model approach to a pluralistic perspective, where multiple epistemologies are seen as complementary rather than competing.

Such an approach opens space for integrating Indigenous wisdom into academic discourse, therapeutic practice, educational curricula, and policy frameworks.

Implications in the Present

The relevance of these Indigenous models extends beyond theoretical discussion into practical domains such as mental health, ecology, education, policy, and interfaith dialogue.

Mental Health

Tribal practices of trance, vision, and ritual offer valuable insights for contemporary mental health. In many Western clinical settings, altered states such as trance, possession, or vivid visions may be interpreted as symptoms of pathology. However, the Indigenous perspective views these states as non-pathological, purposeful, and socially meaningful. This understanding can inform trauma therapy, where ritualized expression, symbolic processing, and communal support play central roles. It also suggests potential applications in grief rituals, where structured ceremonies help individuals and communities navigate loss in culturally resonant ways. Moreover, the emphasis on inner work through meditation, dream interpretation, and visionary practices aligns with growing interest in mindfulness, contemplative therapies, and spiritually integrated approaches to mental well-being.

Ecology and Education

Indigenous spirituality in Odisha is deeply rooted in a sense of interdependence with nature. The land, forests, rivers, and animals are not seen as external resources but as living partners in a shared moral and spiritual order. Learning from this worldview can foster a deeper respect for nature and ecological responsibility. In educational contexts, integrating Indigenous perspectives into curricula can help students develop a more holistic understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment. Such education can promote values of sustainability, care for the commons, and ethical stewardship of the planet. It also offers opportunities for culturally responsive pedagogy, where Indigenous knowledge is recognized as a legitimate and valuable form of learning alongside scientific and academic traditions.

Policy Inclusion

The models of Indigenous consciousness uncovered in this study have important implications for policy and program design. Mental health programs, for example, can be made more effective by incorporating culturally relevant practices such as ritual healing, community-based support, and symbolic therapies. Spiritual education curricula can include Indigenous narratives, cosmologies, and ethical frameworks, ensuring that students learn about diverse ways of understanding consciousness and the sacred. Including Indigenous models in policy also requires institutional support for collaborative research, community engagement, and the protection of traditional knowledge systems. Policies that recognize and validate Indigenous epistemologies can help reduce marginalization and promote equitable access to resources, education, and health services.

Interfaith Dialogue

Finally, the recognition of Indigenous sages and their spiritual models contributes to interfaith dialogue in a pluralistic world. Traditional religious discourses often centre on textual, doctrinal, or institutional forms of spirituality, while Indigenous traditions emphasize lived practices, oral transmission, and communal ritual. By acknowledging the validity and depth of Indigenous spiritual paths, interfaith initiatives can become more inclusive and representative of diverse human experiences. This recognition fosters a pluralistic spiritual model that honors multiple ways of knowing and being, including those rooted in tribal, ecological, and ancestral traditions. It also encourages mutual learning among religious communities, where insights from Indigenous consciousness models can enrich broader discussions on ethics, meaning, and the sacred.

In sum, the consciousness models of medieval seers in Odisha's tribal societies offer a rich, relational, and ecologically grounded understanding of awareness that challenges narrow, individualistic paradigms. Their implications for mental health, ecology, education, policy, and interfaith dialogue highlight the enduring relevance of Indigenous knowledge systems. By integrating these perspectives into contemporary discourse, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers can contribute to more inclusive, respectful, and transformative approaches to human well-being and spiritual development.

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