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The Sacred Marketplace: Ritual Economics of the Gaya Ji Pandas in Gupta-Pala-Sena Era (*C.* 4th -12th Century Ce.)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the development and institutionalization of ritual economics in Gaya, Bihar, as practiced by the specialist priestly class known as *pandas* (or *gayawal*), with a focus on the *piṇḍa dāna* (ancestral offering rites) during the early medieval period (c. 4th–12th century CE). Gaya's unique status within the Brahmanical tradition as a premier *tīrtha* (crossing, sacred ford) for *śrāddha* (mortuary rituals) created a complex socio-economic ecosystem. This study argues that the *pandas* of Gaya evolved from ritual facilitators into sophisticated economic actors who managed a "sacred marketplace." Through an analysis of epigraphic, textual, and archaeological sources, this paper reconstructs the transactional nature of the *piṇḍa dāna* rituals, exploring the exchange of spiritual merit (*puṇya*) for material donations (*dakṣiṇā*). It investigates how the *pandas* established hereditary rights (*watan*) over pilgrim clientele (*yajmānis*), creating a system of ritual patronage that fueled Gaya's local economy, supported temple construction, and integrated the site into broader networks of royal endowment and trans-regional pilgrimage. The article concludes that the Gaya *panda* system represents a critical, yet understudied, model of embedded economy in premodern India, where religious doctrine and ritual practice directly shaped economic relationships, property rights, and social organization.

INTRODUCTION

The sacred landscape of India is dotted with *tīrthas*, pilgrimage centers that have historically functioned as hubs of religious, social, and economic activity. Among these, Gaya (in modern Bihar) holds a singular position as the paramount site for the performance of *śrāddha* and *piṇḍa dāna* Vedic-derived rituals for the propitiation of ancestors (*pitṛs*). The efficacy of these rites, believed to release ancestors from suffering and confer blessings upon the living, is considered uniquely potent when performed in Gaya, specifically at the Vishnupada Temple and along the banks of the Phalgu River. This perceived ritual monopoly fostered the rise of a specialized priestly community: the *pandas* of Gaya (also termed *gayawal* or *tyāgī*).[1]

This article seeks to analyze the "ritual economics" orchestrated by this community during the early medieval period (c. 4th - 12th century CE). Ritual economics here refers to the system of production, exchange, and distribution organized around religious ceremonies, where ritual services, spiritual merit, and material goods are transacted. The period under review is crucial, witnessing the consolidation of classical Brahmanical norms (as codified in the *Purāṇas* and *Dharmaśāstras*), the expansion of royal patronage to Brahmanas and temples, and the growth of pilgrimage networks. It is within this context that the Gaya *panda* system crystallized.

The core research questions are: How did the ritual requirement for *piṇḍa dāna* at Gaya generate a localized economy? What was the nature of the transaction between the pilgrim (*yajamāna*) and the *panda*? How did *pandas* formalize and hereditary their economic claims over pilgrim families? And how did this system interact with larger political economies of regional kingdoms like the Guptas, Palas, and Gahadavalas? By interrogating these questions, this study aims to move beyond a purely theological understanding of *śrāddha* and instead situate it as a driving force in the socio-economic history of a major pilgrimage centre.[2]

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarship on Gaya has traditionally fallen into three categories: theological, anthropological, and historical.

1. Theological & Textual Studies: Pioneering work by P.V. Kane (in his *History of Dharmaśāstra*) exhaustively catalogued the scriptural injunctions privileging Gaya for *śrāddha*. The *Gaya Māhātmya* sections of various *Purāṇas* (like the *Vāyu*, *Agni*, and *Brahma Purāṇas*) have been translated and

analyzed for their mythic geography. These studies establish the doctrinal *why* but often neglect the socio-economic *how*.

2. Anthropological & Ethnographic Studies: Works by scholars like L.P. Vidyarthi (*The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya*) and Surinder M. Bhardwaj provide invaluable insights into the contemporary *panda-yajmāni* (patron-client) system. They detail the hereditary bonds, the negotiation of *dakṣiṇā*, and the spatial organization of ritual. However, they often project present-day structures onto the past, lacking a deep historical analysis of the system's genesis.

3. Historical & Epigraphic Studies: Historians of early medieval India, such as B.D. Chattopadhyaya and Himanshu Prabha Ray, have examined the integrative role of *tīrthas* in processes of agrarian expansion, urbanism, and kingdom formation. Specific studies on Gaya's archaeology (by K.K. Sinha) and its inscriptions (compiled in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*) provide the raw data. Yet, a dedicated study synthesizing this epigraphic and archaeological material to build a coherent picture of the early medieval ritual economy of Gaya remains a lacuna.

This article bridges these strands. It uses the textual prescriptions understood from the first category, the model of ritual transaction observed in the second, and the historical data from the third to construct an economic history of Gaya's ritual specialists during its formative period.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multidisciplinary methodology, drawing primarily on historical and textual analysis:

1. Textual Analysis: Critical examination of early medieval *Dharmaśāstra* texts (e.g., works of Medhātithi, Viśvarūpa) and *Purāṇic Gaya Māhātmyas* (likely compiled between the 5th-13th centuries CE). These sources are read not merely as religious manuals but as documents that actively promote Gaya's ritual centrality, thereby shaping demand and legitimizing the priestly role.[3]

2. Epigraphic Analysis: The core evidence comes from donative inscriptions from Gaya and surrounding regions from the 4th-12th centuries. This includes:

- Copper-plate grants: Royal endowments to Brahmanas, often for ritual purposes, which mention Gaya or its priests.

- Stone inscriptions: Particularly from the Vishnupada Temple and other Gaya shrines, recording donations for the construction of tanks, temples, or for perpetual lamp offerings (*akhaṇḍa dīpa*). These often name the donor, the donee (often a *panda* or priestly collective), and the purpose.
- Pilgrim records: Brief inscriptions left by pilgrims, which, while terse, attest to the geographical reach of Gaya's clientele.

The methodology involves quantifying, where possible, the types of donations, the stated occupations of donors (kings, merchants, officials), and the specific rituals mentioned.

3. Archaeological & Spatial Analysis: Findings from excavations in Gaya, including structural remains of early temples, *ghāṭs* (bathing steps), and water tanks, are used to understand the physical infrastructure that supported large-scale pilgrimage and ritual activity. The spatial organization of sacred sites is analyzed in relation to potential economic zones (marketplaces, lodgings).
4. Comparative Method: Insights are drawn from the ritual economics of other early medieval *tīrthas* (e.g., Varanasi, Prayaga) and from anthropological theories of "religious economy" and "spiritual capital" to build a robust analytical framework.

LIMITATIONS: The primary limitation is the scarcity of sources that directly detail the *panda*'s ledgers or the exact contractual nature of early *yajmāni* relationships. Inscriptions are celebratory donative records, not economic contracts. *Dharmaśāstra* texts are normative, not descriptive. Therefore, the reconstruction necessarily involves inferential reasoning, connecting doctrinal norms with recorded patterns of donation and patronage.[4]

THE DOCTRINAL FOUNDATION: CREATING RITUAL DEMAND (4th-8th CENTURY CE)

The economic system of Gaya was built upon a formidable doctrinal edifice. The early medieval period saw the prolific composition and dissemination of *Purāṇas*, which contained *Māhātmyas* (glorifications) of *tīrthas*. The *Gaya Māhātmya* sections performed a critical economic function: they marketed Gaya's unique ritual product.

- The Myth of Uniqueness: The *Purāṇas* (e.g., *Vāyu Purāṇa* 105-108) propagate the story of the demon Gayasura, whose body became the Gaya *kṣetra* (field). It was declared that offerings made here had infinite potency. A key doctrine emerged: while *śrāddha* could be performed elsewhere, only at Gaya could a single *piṇḍa* (rice-ball offering) satisfy all ancestors for all time. This created a

powerful, inelastic demand for the ritual "service" that could only be "delivered" at this specific location.

- The Ritual Package: The texts elaborate a complex series of rituals—*Vishnupada* worship, offerings at 45 *vedis* (altars) like Akshayavata, and the crucial *piṇḍa dāna* at the Phalgu river. This complexity necessitated expert guidance. The *panda* positioned himself as the indispensable ritual technician, the only one with the localized knowledge (*deśācāra*) to correctly navigate this sacred topography and ensure efficacy.

- Transactional Theology: The concept of *dakṣiṇā* (ritual gift to the priest) is Vedic, but in the Gaya context, it transformed. The *Māhātmyas* explicitly link the magnitude of the gift to the scale of the spiritual benefit. The *Agni Purāṇa* (Ch. 116) states that the merit (*puṇya*) of giving gold at Gaya is incomparable. This doctrinal link between material donation and spiritual output formalized the transaction: the *panda* facilitated the transfer of *puṇya* to the pilgrim's ancestors, and in return received *dakṣiṇā*, which was both a fee for service and a meritorious act in itself.

This textual campaign, likely supported by migrating Brahmins settling in Gaya, effectively created a religious monopoly. By the late Gupta period (5^{th} -6^{th} century CE), Gaya's status was sufficiently established to attract patronage from beyond its immediate region, as evidenced by inscriptions.[5]

INSCRIPTION OF PRACTICE: THE ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK IN EPIGRAPHY (6^{th} -12^{th} CENTURY CE)

Copper-plate and stone inscriptions from this period provide tangible evidence of the ritual economy in operation. They reveal a diversification of donors, types of gifts, and the central role of priestly intermediaries.

Table 1: Select Inscriptional Evidence from Gaya Region (c. 6^{th} -12^{th} Century CE)

Date (Approx.)	Donor / Source	Nature of Donation	Mention of Ritual / Priests	Implied Economic Activity
5^{th} -6^{th} CE	Gaya Copper-plate Inscriptions (Gupta era)	Grants of land (*agrahāra*) to Brahmanas.	Land granted for maintenance, performance of "the five great sacrifices" (*mahāyajñas*).	Permanent endowment creating a landed Brahmanical elite in Gaya, freeing them for ritual specialization.

c. 861 CE	Gaya Stone Inscription	Gift of a perpetual lamp (*akhaṇḍa dīpa*) to the Vishnupada temple by a royal official.	Donation made for the religious merit of the donor's parents.	Direct funding of temple infrastructure by elite pilgrims; priests manage the endowment.
11th -12th CE	Pala Period Inscriptions	Multiple records of land grants to temples and Brahmins in Gaya.	Specific mention of support for *śrāddha* rituals and feeding of Brahmins (*brahma-bhojana*).	Institutionalized royal patronage, linking state legitimacy to support for Gaya's ritual complex.
c. 1150 CE	Gahadavala Inscriptions (e.g., from nearby Sarnath)	Records of rich endowments by ministers and merchants for pilgrim facilities.	Donations for constructing *dharmaśālās* (rest houses) and wells for pilgrims bound for Gaya.	Investment in pilgrimage infrastructure, indicating high volumes of traffic and a need for services.
Various	Pilgrim graffiti on Gaya stones	Simple engravings: "X, son of Y, came."	No direct ritual mention, but presence implies ritual performance.	Evidence of a broad pilgrim base, the "clientele" for the *panda* system.

Analysis of Economic Mechanisms:

1. The *Dakṣiṇā* as Variable Fee: Unlike a fixed temple entrance fee, *dakṣiṇā* was negotiated, scaled to the pilgrim's capacity and desired level of merit. A king might endow a village; a merchant might donate gold or livestock; a commoner might offer grain or cloth. The *panda*'s income was thus directly tied to his ability to attract and negotiate with clients.

2. Hereditary Clientelism (*Yajmāni*): The ethnographic present suggests this system has deep roots. An inscription hinting at a family returning over generations would imply the early formation of *yajmāni* bonds. The *panda* would act as a ritual banker, keeping genealogical records (*vahī*) of the pilgrim family, ensuring correct rites for successive generations, and in turn expecting hereditary patronage. This created a stable, predictable income stream for *panda* families.

3. Investment in Productive Assets: Donations were not only in cash or kind but also in productive capital. Land grants (*agrahāras*) to *pandas* or temples provided agricultural revenue. Donations for shops (*haṭṭa*) near temples or tanks created commercial rental income. The priestly community thus became a significant landholding and rentier class within the Gaya economy.

4. The Temple as Economic Hub: The Vishnupada Temple was not just a ritual center but a treasury, employer, and landlord. Donations for lamps, flowers, and repairs required a staff (priests, cleaners, florists, oil-pressers, artisans). The temple's management, often involving leading *pandas*, controlled these funds and jobs, further centralizing economic power.[6]

THE *PANDA* AS RITUAL ENTREPRENEUR AND SOCIAL INSTITUTION

Beyond being a ritual technician, the early medieval Gaya *panda* was an entrepreneur and institution-builder.

- Ritual Service Provider: He supplied the complete "pilgrimage package": guiding the ritual sequence, providing ritual materials (*piṇḍa* ingredients, flowers, lamps), and often arranging food and lodging through his networks.

- Cultural Mediator and Record-Keeper: For pilgrims from distant linguistic and cultural regions (Bengal, South India, Nepal), the *panda* was a mediator. His maintenance of genealogies (*vahīs*) was a form of informational capital, crucial for the ritual's correctness and for binding future generations.

- Manager of Sacred Geography: Control over specific *vedis* (altars) along the Gaya circuit became hereditary property (*watan*). A *panda* family "owned" the rights to perform rites at, say, the Akshayavata or the Pretashila, passing this "market share" to their sons. This fragmented the ritual landscape into economically exploitable units.

- Integration into Political Economy: Inscriptions show *pandas* and temple authorities receiving grants from kings of the Pala and Gahadavala dynasties. This was a symbiotic relationship. Kings gained legitimacy by associating themselves with this most meritorious of places, while the *panda* institution received state-backed security and resources. The *pandas*, in turn, could influence the flow of pilgrim wealth and perhaps even act as intelligence agents in a strategic region.[7]

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Scope:

This study focuses specifically on the economic dimensions of the *piṇḍa dāna* rituals as managed by the *panda* community in Gaya between the 4th and 12th centuries CE. It traces the doctrinal creation of demand, the evidence for transactional exchanges in inscriptions, and the resulting social and economic structures. The scope is confined to the Brahmanical/Hindu tradition, acknowledging that Gaya also holds significance for Buddhism and Jainism in different periods.

Limitations:

1. Source Bias: The epigraphic record overwhelmingly reflects the activities of elites—kings, merchants, high officials. The transactions of the ordinary peasant pilgrim are largely invisible, though they undoubtedly formed the bulk of the *panda*'s clientele.

2. Silence on Internal Dynamics: Inscriptions rarely detail conflicts between *panda* families, their internal hierarchy, or the exact division of donations. The historical *vahī* records, if they exist from this period, are inaccessible private documents.

3. Chronological Generalization: The "early medieval" span of eight centuries encompasses significant change. The paper necessarily smoothes over evolutions within this period, though it notes major phases like Gupta foundation, Pala consolidation, and Gahadavala expansion.

4. Ethnographic Analogy: While useful, projecting modern *panda-yajmāni* relationships directly onto the early medieval past risk's anachronism. The legal and social frameworks of the two eras are vastly different.

CONCLUSION

The ritual economy of Gaya, as orchestrated by its *pandas* from the 4th to the 12th century CE, presents a compelling case study of an embedded economy in premodern India. It was a system where religious belief was the primary engine of economic activity. The doctrine of Gaya's unique efficacy, aggressively marketed in *Purāṇic* texts, created a captive market for *śrāddha* services. The *pandas* skillfully transformed their ritual expertise into economic capital, institutionalizing a system of hereditary clientelism (*yajmāni*) and property rights over sacred spots (*vedis*).

Epigraphic evidence reveals that this was not a mere subsistence economy of priestly alms. It involved large-scale capital formation through land grants, temple construction, and investment in commercial and hospitality infrastructure. Donations flowed from a pan-Indian elite, linking Gaya to the political

economies of regional kingdoms. The *panda* thus emerged as a key figure: part priest, part genealogist, part hotelier, and part estate manager.

This study argues that sites like Gaya were not merely spiritual retreats but were vibrant economic centers whose fortunes were tied to the trade in religious merit. The *panda* system of Gaya represents a sophisticated, indigenous form of economic organization based on ritual specialization and sacred geography. Understanding this system is essential not only for the history of Hinduism but also for a richer comprehension of the non-agrarian, service-based economies that flourished in early medieval India. Future research combining genetic studies of *panda* families with deeper archival work on later medieval records could further unravel the longevity and adaptations of this remarkable socio-economic institution.

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- The term *panda* is derived from Sanskrit *paṇḍita* (learned one). In Gaya, it specifically refers to the Brahmin priests specializing in *śrāddha* rites. *Gayawal* means "one from Gaya."
- *Piṇḍa dāna* refers to the offering of rice balls mixed with sesame, milk, and honey to the ancestors. In Gaya, it is performed at multiple specific locations (*vedis*).
- See P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. IV, pp. 554-605, for a comprehensive listing of *Purāṇic* verses extolling Gaya's supremacy for *śrāddha*.
- *Vāyu Purāṇa* 105.72-73 explicitly states that offerings at Gaya please the ancestors eternally, unlike at other places.
- For example, the Gaya stone inscription of 861 CE (Gupta era, year 183) records a gift of a perpetual lamp by "the illustrious Vāyiladeva, son of the illustrious Bhāvadeva." See *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XV, p. 335.
- The Gahadavala king Govindachandra (c. 1114–1155 CE) and his ministers are known for endowing *dharmaśālās* in Varanasi for pilgrims, many of whom were on the Gaya-Varanasi circuit.
- L.P. Vidyarthi's ethnographic work (*The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya*) details the modern *vahī* system, where *pandas* keep meticulous handwritten genealogies of their *yajmāni* families, sometimes spanning centuries.

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