

THE GARUDA PURANA¹, ANGST, AND RITUALS: THE MODES OF MATERIAL BENEFIT THROUGH RELIGIOUS HEGEMONY AND POWER

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Abstract

This article examines the *Garuda Purana*, a 4th-century religious text believed to have originated in ancient *India*, which presents dialogue between the god Vishnu² and Garuda³, the king of the birds. The second section of the *Garuda Purana* addresses death, funeral rites, and the metaphysics of reincarnation, focusing on how these elements function as religious tools. Widely regarded as a funeral liturgy by religious leaders and followers and practiced still in Nepal and India, the *Garuda Purana* is used to motivate adherents to make material offerings in hopes of securing a favorable passage to the afterlife through *Sradha*⁴. The article explores the relationship between *dharma* (social duty) and *moksha* (spiritual liberation), emphasizing how social duties to religious leaders are believed to initiate liberation. Through an analysis of the text's rituals, cosmological teachings, and social hierarchies, the article argues that the *Garuda Purana* serves as a means of religious dominance, addressing existential anxieties while facilitating material gain to Brahmins⁵. It demonstrates how the

¹ One of 18 Mahapuranas, a collection of Hindu sacred writings that include myths, legends, and other traditional stories, in Hinduism

² Vishnu is a one among three major deities in Hinduism, revered as the Preserver and Sustainer of the universe.

³ Garuda is a bird-like creature in Hindu and Buddhist mythology, often depicted as a hybrid of an eagle and a human. He is the vehicle of the god Vishnu representing strength, power, and the ability to overcome challenges.

⁴ Ritual performed for deceased ancestors

⁵ Brahmins are a prominent caste within the Hindu varna system, traditionally considered the highest social class known for their role as spiritual leaders, priests, and intellectuals, responsible for maintaining sacred knowledge and performing religious rituals.

text employs both ideological and ritualistic practices to solidify the power of religious institutions, thereby maintaining a cultural order that shapes societal values and individual behavior.

Keywords

Garuda Purana; dharma; moksha; ritual; cultural hegemony

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Garuda Purana*, one of the eighteen Mahapuranas in Hinduism, is a rich and complex text that intertwines cosmological narratives, divine teachings, and religious rituals. While it claims to serve as a spiritual guide offering insights into the afterlife, karma, and the journey of the soul, it also plays a significant role in shaping the religious and social fabric of Hindu society. Prem (2023) claims that, “the supreme objective of *Puranas* is to tell man how to grow and expand in ethical, devotional, spiritual, and intellectual quality of life” (p.1). Through its portrayal of rituals, divine interventions, and the concept of the soul's liberation, *The Garuda Purana* in a subtle way addresses deep existential anxieties, particularly the fear of death and the unknown world. By analyzing the text's portrayal of superstitious divine intervention, ancestral rituals, and social hierarchy, this study argues that *The Garuda Purana* reinforces the power of religious institutions, using ideological cosmological teachings, and ritualistic practices to secure spiritual salvation contributing to the strengthening of both religious authority and material gain, making it a powerful tool of religious hegemony in Hindu society. This results in benefits for a few while generating amoral fear and placing significant obligations upon practitioners.

The *Garuda Purana* is a functional religious system of power, claiming that the teachings are used to guide the practices of persons and societies that leads to liberation. Tooted at its center are death and afterlife rituals, whereby worships to Brahmin priests and observance of some rites are asserted to release the deceased soul and pave a way to heaven. These rituals, though claimed to be of religious significance, are attached to material interest since they justify the power and prestige of religious leaders who prescribe these religious practices. The *Garuda Purana* uses its theological framework to generate a socio-religious order that satisfies the believer's spiritual and material desires. This article examines how religious institutions have historically used the *The Garuda Purana* to maintain their hegemony, legitimize social hierarchies, and generate a hegemonic cultural order through accumulation of worldly materials.

The *Garuda Purana* explores the metaphysics of death, reincarnation, karma, and liberation (*moksha*). “The sage Vedavyasa is credited with writing the *Garuda Purana* ... *Garuda* is its name, derived from the name of the sacred bird that mount Lord Vishnu” (HinduOnline, n.d.).

Time is embedded and disseminated in the Garuda Purana, as its cycles of death, reincarnation, and ritual cannot be fully understood without considering the temporal and cosmological framework the text provides (Tamrakar, 2025). It is believed to provide insights into the rebirth and liberation processes by explaining how the soul moves through several realms. “*The Garuda Purana* describes what happens to a person after he dies, how he goes to paradise or hell depending on his deeds, what is in heaven and hell, and how long the soul lives there until it’s reincarnated into a new body” (Bhat & Surendaran, 2022, p. 1). The purana is a vivid description of a journey of a diseased soul from the earth to *brahma* (liberation) and the ways to achieve salvation after death.

The *Garuda Purana* occupies a distinctive place in Hindu religious literature. It is part of sacred texts that combine mythological narratives with prescriptive guidelines for worship, cosmology, and social behavior. Believed to have been compiled between the 4th and 11th centuries CE—with textual layers emerging at different times—*The Garuda Purana* is attributed to a dialogue between Vishnu and his vehicle Garuda⁶. While the first half of the text deals with *Vaishnava* theology, cosmological myths, and ethical duties, it is the second half—focused on death rituals, the afterlife, and punishment in *Naraka* (hell)—that has had the most profound impact on Hindu funeral practices and continues to shape socio-religious attitudes toward death and spiritual liberation.

The second section, often referred to as the *Pretakalpa*, is recited during the mourning period following a person’s death. In Hindu tradition, the death of a family member brings with it not only grief but also a set of highly codified responsibilities for the living, particularly the male kin of the deceased. The *Garuda Purana* lays out the metaphysical consequences of failing to fulfill these duties, painting graphic descriptions of suffering in the afterlife, which can only be alleviated through *sraddha*, *daana*, *upabhas*⁷, and *pujan*⁸. The Brahmin priest acts as both the ritual authority mediator, who guides the family through these practices, receiving material and monetary gifts in exchange for superstitious spiritual intercession on behalf of the departed soul.

The *Garuda Purana* has historically been used as a funerary text, read aloud to the relatives of the deceased during the mourning period for 13 days. Hindu Brahminic death rituals create a liminal and sacred space that enables both the deceased and the living to move from a state of uncertainty and disorder toward spiritual and social reintegration (Tripathi, 2022). At its core, the *Garuda Purana* offers a vivid and often unsettling portrayal of the soul’s journey through Yama Loka (the realm of the god of death) and outlines the sufferings one may endure in the afterlife journey to the liberation of the soul from the hell unless specific rites are performed and offerings made to the Brahmins by the offspring

⁷ fasting, which is a religious and spiritual practice involving abstaining from food and/or water. It is a way to connect with the divine and to experience spiritual growth

⁸ worship or adoration, encompassing various rituals and practices to honor deities, spirits, or sacred objects honoring or showing respect to individuals or objects.

(especially sons) and closeknit relatives of the deceased. "The projection of Hell's suffering was a controlling mechanism to ensure that rules are followed in society, and that violation of these norms has painful consequences" (Hull & Bold, 1994, p. 6). While its stated purpose is to guide the soul toward liberation, the text serves a more complex sociocultural function forced by hegemony derived out of fear of the unknown. It provides a religious structure that not only addresses the existential anxiety of death but also consolidates the material and symbolic power of religious elites, the Brahmins.

Contemporary sociology of religion increasingly views religion as a dynamic social institution whose forms and functions are continually contested and renegotiated (Beyer, 2020). Rather than treating religious texts solely as repositories of theological doctrines, scholars have emphasized their role in shaping social relationships, cultural practices, and institutional authority. Viewed from this perspective, the *Garuda Purana* can be examined not only as a guide to death and the afterlife but also as a text that participates in the organization of social and religious life.

This essay explores how the *Garuda Purana*, in its multifaceted cosmology and procedural directions, is religious hegemony designed for material benefit as it associates spiritual liberation with social duty (dharma) and material gift (daana⁹). Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of "Cultural Hegemony" from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Max Weber's *sociology of religion*, and interpretation of Hinduism's dual emphasis on renunciation and duty, this article argues that the *Garuda Purana* institutionalizes the rituals in which fear, faith, and social hierarchy combine for the benefit of socio-religious elites. Here, religious leaders become spiritual middlemen who function as mediators between this and the other world and economic gainers through "Dakshina¹⁰". The *Garuda Purana* is not a religious text by itself but a socio-political document that is being utilized to strengthen cultural hegemony and redistribute wealth in the name of godly duty. The *Garuda Purana* actively shapes social values, influences economic behavior, and reinforces a hegemonic cultural order rooted in religious authority, ultimately benefiting Brahmins by subtly coercing the public into participating in rituals and offerings.

2. METHODOLOGY

To investigate how religious discourse serves as a tool for material exchange and ideological control, this study uses a qualitative interpretive, and textual analysis of the *Garuda Purana* with a focus on its Pretakalpa section which addresses death rituals, postmortem journeys, ancestral obligation, and prescribed offerings. The analysis is based on close reading of

⁹ any form of giving, not just financial donations

¹⁰ a customary offering of gifts or money given to Brahmins, priests, or gurus in Hindu traditions as a form of gratitude and acknowledgment of their knowledge, blessings, or services. It is a way of repaying for spiritual guidance, ritual performance, or teaching.

passages that explicitly discuss (1) funeral rites (*Sradha*), (2) donations (*dana*), (3) the role of Brahmins as ritual mediators, and (4) descriptions of postmortem rewards and punishments.

The study carefully examines important passages selected through purposive sampling as they directly connect ritual practice with spiritual outcomes and material offerings. The analysis about death rites, afterlife stories, and prescribed offerings combines hermeneutic interpretation with rhetorical criticism placing them within larger sociocultural practices in Nepal and India to examine how narrative descriptions, ritual prescriptions, and moral exhortations construct relationships among authority, obligation, and salvation.

The study does not claim to provide ethnographic evidence regarding contemporary practitioners. The references to contemporary funeral practices in Nepal and India are used only as contextual illustrations drawn from secondary scholarship. The primary object of analysis remains the text itself. Broader sociocultural implications are presented as interpretive possibilities grounded in textual evidence rather than empirically verified social outcomes. The study's interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to link textual recommendations with social behavior, emphasizing the ways in which ritual obligation, economic transactions, and existential anxiety interact to uphold hegemonic structures and maintain Brahminical authority.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and Weber's sociology of religion serve as analytical frameworks which enables an investigation of the ways in which religious authority is created, absorbed, and perpetuated through ritualistic practices. These theoretical perspectives are not merely descriptive references, but they guide the examination of how religious authority becomes normalized through ritual practices and how spiritual obligations intersect with material exchange.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL ANGUISH AND THEORETICAL TEACHINGS

At a surface level, the *Garuda Purana* offers theological teachings on karma¹¹, dharma¹², and moksha. "The goal of life in Nyāya, as in Hindu Vedic teaching, is moksha, or liberation for the cycles of birth and death" (Poudel, 2023, p. 177). These teachings are embedded within a framework of social obligations. "The most elementary forms of religiously or magically motivated action are oriented to this world" (Weber, 1963, A.1.b). The emphasis on ritual acts such as *shraddha* (ancestral offerings), *pinda daana* (ritual food offerings), and the donation of valuable items like cows, beds, gold, and umbrellas creates an economy of religious transactions. These acts are seen not only as duties but as necessities to protect the soul and ensure its safe passage through the cosmic bureaucracies of *Yama's* realm. "'For Hindus, death is nobly referred to as mahaaprashtaana, 'the great journey'" (Dokras, 2020, p. 1). The

¹¹ an action, work, or deed, and its effect or consequences.

¹² living in accordance with the natural order of things, aligning one's actions with ethical principles, and ultimately striving for liberation from suffering.

journey afterlife faces multiple spaces of vulnerability, and the deceased have to go through rivers of blood, rains of stone, lands of poisonous animals and many more (*Garudapurana*). The souls, therefore, according to *Garuda Purana* need protection through karma and dharma for moksha.

It is within this transactional spiritual economy that the *Garuda Purana* reveals its complex social and religious functions. On one hand, the text seeks to alleviate the psychological anguish associated with death by providing metaphysical explanations for suffering, rebirth, and the fate of the soul. Recent scholarship has similarly emphasized the psychological dimensions of the *Garuda Purana*. Adhikary (2025) argues that the death rituals prescribed in the text help bereaved families cope with grief, reduce existential anxiety, maintain emotional stability, and foster communal support during periods of mourning. From this perspective, the ritual system serves not only religious and social functions but also important psychological ones. The detailed prescriptions surrounding *sraddha*, *pinda dana*, and other funerary rites offer mourners a structured framework through which loss can be understood and managed.

These rituals are also embedded within a hierarchical religious structure that assigns Brahmins “to be the mediator between “this” physical world and “that” spiritual world” (Tripathi, 2022, 509). The *Garuda Purana* repeatedly presents priestly mediation as essential for ensuring the successful passage of the deceased soul through the afterlife. By linking spiritual well-being to ritual performance and material offerings, the text situates religious authority within a broader system of social obligation and exchange. Brahmins are represented as uniquely qualified to perform these sacred functions as “the spirit endows them with its distinctive power” (Weber, 1963, A.1.e). As Paudel (2023) notes, in a varna-based social order one's duties and social position are often understood through inherited roles and responsibilities. Similarly, Hacker and Davis (2006) observe that a central aspect of Brahmin *dharma* involves learning, teaching, and performing religious services for others. While the present study acknowledges the psychological and communal benefits of these rituals, it focuses on how the text simultaneously contributes to the normalization of religious authority, material exchange, and hegemonic social structures.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony provides more than vocabulary for describing religious authority; it offers an explanation of how authority becomes normalized, “... in which the ideas, symbols, and categories of the powerful gain a universal currency, and are unknowingly by willingly adopted to the powerless, against whose interests they work” (Dubois, 2005, p. 114) Gramsci argued that dominant groups maintain power not merely through coercion but through the “spontaneous consent” of the governed, secured through cultural institutions, moral leadership, and ideological saturation. Rather than relying upon coercion, the *Garuda Purana* presents ritual obligations as moral necessities. Through repeated narratives of postmortem suffering and salvation, the text encourages individuals to internalize these obligations as expressions of virtue. In Gramscian terms, religious authority is reproduced through consent generated by cultural and moral leadership rather

than through direct force. "In practice, this problem is the correspondence "spontaneously and freely accepted" ... which society set itself as necessary ... and is spontaneous and free (more strictly ethical) in those zones in which "coercion" is not state affair but is affected by public opinion, moral climate, etc." (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 195-96). The *Garuda Purana* plays precisely this role: it embeds its rituals and cosmologies deeply into the fabric of social life that obedience appears not only necessary but virtuous. The fear of post-mortem suffering is internalized, not only through prescriptions in *puranas* but also by oral traditions of storytelling, by believers. The acts of donation and ritual are a voluntary expression of moral duty, under whatever circumstances—even though they serve to concentrate power and wealth within religious institutions.

Through these ritual prescriptions, the text connects spiritual obligations with institutional authority. Its ritual prescriptions and cultural observance serve as instruments of what Gramsci calls "ethical coercion"—moral imperatives presented as spiritual truths that reinforce social conformity and hierarchical authority. By institutionalizing the notion that spiritual liberation is contingent upon material offerings and priestly mediation, the *Garuda Purana* establishes a template for how religion mediates between the sacred and the socio-economic. As Max Weber observed in his *Sociology of Religion*, religious traditions develop complex mechanisms to reconcile the spiritual and the material. "... belief in spirits, like all certain persons possessing charismatic "magical" powers that were held by those with special qualifications" (Weber, 1963, p. 3).

Thus, the *Garuda Purana* emerges as both a theological document and a manual of religious governance. Its emphasis on moral duty, cosmic justice, and ritual precision establishes a framework in which religious leaders wield control with "the promise of such a salvation to their participants then meets with the most extensive utilitarian expectations, which we are accustomed to call "salvation"" (Weber, 1963, G.2). This framework becomes self-reinforcing: the more people engage with its rituals, the more embedded the text becomes in daily life, further entrenching the hegemonic authority of the religious elite.

One of the most powerful functions of the *Garuda Purana* lies in its ability to evoke and manage existential angst—particularly the "... fear of death and what lies beyond which indicates that intrinsically religious individuals are associated with a strong belief in an afterlife" (Falkenhain & Handal, 2003, p. 73). It addresses this fear not only with comforting narratives of cosmic order and divine justice but also through a detailed account of terrifying punishments meted out in the afterlife. The Pretakalpa section includes elaborate descriptions of what happens to the soul after death: its disorientation, its suffering in Yama Loka, and the trials it faces on the way to Pitrloka (the world of ancestors) or Swarga (heaven). "We find doctrines on the fate of the soul after death, karman, rebirth and release from birth, on desire as the cause of samsara, on omens of death, the path of Yama, the fate of the pretas, the torments of the hells, and the pretas as causing evil omens and dreams" (Hazra, p. 70). In the thirteenth stanza of the first Chapter of the *Garuda Purana*, the blessed lord says, "... I will describe the way of Yama, terrible even to hear about, by which

those who are sinful go in hell" (Naunidhirāma et al., 1974, p. 3). These vivid hypothetical distresses are not merely symbolic; they function as emotional devices that compel the bereaved to act-through ritual, donation, and submission to religious authority. Those bereaved face the loss of the family and the burden of rituals: an intensive ritual obligation for substantial clinch through existential angst.

4. ECONOMY OF FEAR

The text often directs the listener, the relatives of the deceased, to imagine that their own ancestors, or even themselves, could be caught in this state of suffering unless appropriate rituals are performed, and gifts are offered. This emotional manipulation—rooted in the belief that a soul can remain earthbound, restless, or tormented if proper rites are not conducted—forms what can be called an "economy of fear". The "economy of fear" strategically use fear to influence economic and political outcomes. The *Garuda Purana* mobilizes fear as a rhetorical resource to gain profit to the Brahmins. "Emotional manipulation is the capability of individuals to manipulate the emotions of others within a self-serving framework" (Grieve & Mahar, 2010, p. 945). Through the recitation, religious anxieties are manipulated to get into the religious action of Danas of material goods.

Weber's sociology of religion helps explain how ritual obligations become embedded within broader systems of social action. Rather than treating donations merely as acts of piety, Weber's framework reveals how religious ideas shape economic behavior by assigning spiritual significance to material exchange. Religious leaders, as Weber postulates, often institutionalize fear—especially fear of spiritual consequences—to encourage compliance and promote specific behaviors. He critiques the quote, "After the development of notions of the soul, the body had to be removed or restrained in the grave... or its goodwill had to be secured in other ways if the survivors were to live in peace" (Weber, 1963, p. 105). This critique should be echoed in the *Garuda Purana*, where securing the goodwill of the deceased soul becomes the family's primary responsibility—one that can be fulfilled through ritual offerings to Brahmins. Within the *Garuda Purana*, offerings are represented as religiously meaningful acts whose effectiveness depends upon priestly mediation. This arrangement illustrates how religious authority can become institutionalized through recurring ritual transactions. In the 12th verse of seventh chapter, the *Garuda Purana* explicates that the sinful deceased "with the help of sons, grandsons, and great grandsons he goes from the worlds and obtain heaven" (Naunidhirāma et al., 1974, p. 53). Here starts the manipulation of the relatives to act with the thought that it is their duty to help travel the deceased through all the odds on his way to heaven. If the "sons, grandsons, brothers, kinsmen, and friends who do not make gifts on behalf of a dying man are without doubt slayers of Brahman" (p. 75). In the Hindu religion the greatest sin is "Brahmahatya", the slaying of Brahmin. Moral, ethical, psychological, religious, and emotional fear is at once ingrained in the listener with the verses like these. In the 14th stanza The *Garuda Purana* explains that "they alone, by making Sraddha-gifts are the

means of their fathers' attaining heaven" (p. 53). For thirteen days, the bereaved are encouraged through detailed descriptions of postmortem suffering to participate in ritual practices and offerings intended to benefit the deceased. The bereaved are occupied in rituals, making them unable to involve into their daily chore: loss of income and loss of savings (burden of loan for those economically fragile) as dana.

Common offerings prescribed in the text include cows (considered sacred and associated with salvation), gold coins, land, beds and beddings, umbrellas, and even intricately crafted miniature boats meant to symbolically ferry the soul across the *Vaitarani*¹³ river of death. These offerings are made to Brahmins, who serve as both interpreters of the sacred and executors of ritual efficacy. The belief is that these material goods assist the soul in its journey, helping it avoid hellish realms and reach moksha. A complex relationship between the spiritual and material realms is formalized as a spiritual salvation through material donation.

Although these rituals are not legally mandated, they are socially reinforced through cultural expectations and religious traditions, making participation appear both voluntary and morally necessary. Gramsci emphasizes that domination is most effective when it appears natural—when individuals believe they are acting freely even as they participate in systems of control (Gramsci, 1971, p. 196). In Gramscian terms, this is the triumph of "spontaneous consent" (p. 197)—a form of ideological dominance that operates not through force but through internalized beliefs and communal norms.

Families grieving the death of a loved one presumes the state of vulnerability. "Grief and vulnerability are potentially transformative, contemplative states that reconnect us with human and nonhuman others, and with our own painful history of losses and failures" (Sideris, 2020, p. 2020). The *Garuda Purana* intensifies this vulnerability by presenting the soul's afterlife journey as perilous and uncertain. "Fear of death may motivate one's basic religious commitment" (Kahoe, p. 379). Furthermore, the fear of possibility of similar horrifying journey of self in defiance of dharma after life inculcates fear in kins.

This dual function—managing existential angst while institutionalizing material exchange—is central to the hegemonic role of the *Garuda Purana*. It ensures that religious institutions are not only revered but materially sustained. By linking the fate of the soul to physical acts of giving, the text creates a system where salvation is effectively monetized and religious authority is continuously reproduced.

Hindu philosophical and religious thought emphasizes two key concepts: *dharma* (duty, righteousness, social obligation) and *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). The *Garuda Purana* demands the performance of *dharma*, particularly in the form of post-death rituals and donations, essential for attaining *moksha*. The *Garuda Purana* does not

¹³ The Vaitarani (also spelled Baitarani) is a river that souls must cross after death to reach Yama's kingdom (the afterlife). It is described as a river of blood, pus, urine, and filth, and it represents the trials and tribulations of the afterlife.

simply advocate ethical living; it defines ethical living in ways that channel power and material wealth toward religious elites, especially the Brahmin priesthood. David R. Kinsley's assertion in *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* that Hinduism is defined by the tension between world-affirmation and world-renunciation. While ascetic practices and detachment are celebrated paths to liberation, the *Garuda Purana* focuses instead on a deeply rooted form of world-affirmation—where fulfilling one's social and familial responsibilities is seen as equally essential to spiritual progress. Rituals associated with death, therefore, are not simply acts of grief or remembrance; they are spiritual transactions in the name of dharma, performed in full recognition of their material and metaphysical consequences.

5. SHRADDHA RITES FOR THE DECEASED

These responsibilities manifest in ritual acts. Sons and male heirs are expected to perform *shraddha* rites and make significant material offerings to Brahmins on behalf of the deceased. A feminist reading finds it gendered, as the contribution of female members recedes in such a religious performance. Even, to date, it is customary in Brahmin families that female members do not interrupt men's actions, and such gendered behavior is unlikely to be deprogrammed from the consciousness of people (Sherma, 2025) as the *Garuda Purana* endorses patriarchal descentance. According to the *Garuda Purana*, these acts are vital in guaranteeing the soul's proceeding through the afterlife. "Beliefs about the unknown fate of the dead illustrate the function of myth... projecting ritual procedure to the plane of the ideal situation" (Fiske, 1969, p. 249). The text repeats the verses like, "If you have made the gift of a cow, then the boat will come to you, otherwise not", (Naunidhirāma et al., 1974, p. 18) in verse 66-7, "That great man, in a resplendent body, with shining garments and garlands, possessed of gold and diamond, by virtue of gifts attains heaven, and is honored by the holy ones" (p. 82). Verses resembling similar demands are scattered every next sentence in the text. The only solution to all the torments of life, is to carry out the rites of *sraddha* offering multiple gifts on every *Saraddha*. These rituals are performed every day till the 13th day and then every month till the end of first year followed by recurring *pinda*¹⁴ *dana* every year on the date of deceased. Failure to perform them not only jeopardizes the deceased's journey but casts a moral shadow over the family, suggesting a failure in one's fundamental social duty. Dharma continues as an intergenerational contract where moral action is linked with economic exchange. One does not simply act ethically; one *gives* ethically. As Weber (1963) explains, the ethical imperatives embedded in religious systems often serve to legitimize and organize economic practices. "... religious or magical action or thinking must not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive action, particularly since the elementary ends of the

¹⁴ Sanctified food balls (typically rice, wheat flour) offered to the souls of deceased in the Pinda Daan (*sraddha*) ritual.

religious and magical actions are predominantly economic” (Weber, 1963, p. 111). In the case of the *Garuda Purana*, the religious obligation to perform rituals for the dead—rituals that are both time-consuming and expensive—becomes a culturally sanctioned chance for the accumulation of wealth toward religious functionaries. This turns out to be misery for many while a time of abundance for some.

These transactions are not optional; they are morally mandated, culturally reinforced, and spiritually loaded contributing to the perpetuation of a hierarchical religious order in which Brahmins maintain authority over both the metaphysical and material realms. Gramsci (1971) postulates that “every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (p. 5). This submission appears voluntary, yet it is deeply structured by the ideological systems that frame it as necessary for salvation. The donation of wealth to religious leaders is not seen as swindling and payments but as duty with “optimistic beliefs that the afterlife entails union with God, reunion with family, or eternal reward” (Flannelly et al., 2012, p. 654). This dynamic is particularly visible in the symbolism of the offerings prescribed by the *Garuda Purana*. Objects like cows, beds, gold ornaments, and symbolic boats are not just ritual goods—they are representations of worldly wealth being transformed into spiritual currency. The act of giving these items is meant to liberate the karmic burden of the deceased and ensure a smooth crossing of the afterlife. While doing so, they materially enrich the recipients: the priests, whose participation in the ritual legitimates the efficacy of the rituals. These are both religious offerings and social payments, symbols of religiousness and instruments of wealth accumulation. The *Garuda Purana* frames this materialization of religious duty as divinely ordained. The rituals are believed to be suggested by the god, Bishnu. The Brahmin priest becomes not just a facilitator but a stand-in for divine forces, elevating his social role as the only legitimate mediator between the earthly and the eternal.

By spreading the belief that moksha is only achievable through dharma—and that *dharma* includes material giving—the *Garuda Purana* creates a contentious system of control: fear of spiritual failure leads to ritual performance; ritual performance leads to donation; donation fortifies the authority of the Brahmins; and the authority of the Brahmins ensure continued faith in the offerings. Thus, the *Garuda Purana* is a prescription, an outline, for religious hegemony through the illusion of *dharma* and *moksha*. It presents religious liberation as a socially mediated and economically structured process that propagates hierarchical power. Thus, the text is a guidebook for the preservation of institutional control under the pretense of divine duty than the medium for the liberation of the deceased soul. In Gramscian terms, they function as vehicles of “consensual coercion” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12) deeply embedded in culture as consensus which is indistinguishable from reality. People become subjects of hegemonic society when they accept that Brahminic authority is inborn

and the offerings are essential for salvation, failure to perform the rites prescribed by them will doom their loved ones.

Religious ideas shape and stabilize social systems and help us read these narratives not merely as theological myths, but as mechanisms of control. Weber observes how religious institutions often “rationalize” suffering and inequality by projecting them into a divine order. In the *Garuda Purana*, the fear of divine punishment serves to rationalize both social stratification and the economic burdens of ritual obligation. As Gramsci (1971) notes, hegemonic systems are most successful when they reproduce themselves invisibly, through custom, tradition, and everyday belief. “In practice, this problem is the correspondence “spontaneously and freely accepted” ... as necessary -a correspondence which is coercive in the sphere of positive law technically understood, and is spontaneous and free (more strictly ethical) in those zones in which “coercion” is not a state affair but is affected by public opinion, moral climate, etc. The *Garuda Purana* achieves this invisible coercion by embedding its ideology into rituals. Birth, marriage, and especially death become stages where religious ideology is performed and reinforced. Salvation is not abstract or egalitarian—it is administered, monitored, and gatekept by those believed to be equipped with ritual knowledge. The sacred becomes political, and the religious becomes ideological. Brahmins present themselves as the “*intellectual class*”—those who produce and maintain hegemonic narratives. In Gramscian narrative, religious elites function not only as spiritual leaders but also as intellectual agents who shape social consciousness. Civil societies “operate without sanctions or compulsory obligations but nevertheless exerts a collective pressure and obtains objective results in the form of an evolution of customs, ways of thinking and acting, morally, etc.” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 242). The Brahmins who perform these rituals are more than ritual specialists—they are custodians of metaphysical knowledge and moral gatekeepers. They interpret the text, direct the ceremonies, and even determine and demand the appropriate offerings. Their authority is maintained not through visible coercion, but through deeply ingrained belief in their indispensability. This ideological control is most efficiently performed under the appearance of religious duty. Families often feel not just obligated but honored to perform costly rituals validating the Brahminic intellectuality. Its authority is reaffirmed every time a family invites a priest to recite the *Garuda Purana*, offers him gifts, and places the fate of a loved one's soul in his hands.

6. THE CONCEPT OF THEODICIES

Weber (1963) also emphasized the idea that religion often creates “theodicies of suffering”—narratives that make suffering meaningfully created and spread over humans and therefore tolerable. The *Garuda Purana* does this with terrifying strictness. The suffering of the soul after death, the horrors of hell, the punishments imposed by Yama—all are rendered morally coherent through the idea that proper rituals can mitigate or even erase these consequences.

But these rituals require wealth, and that wealth must be transferred to religious agents. Thus, theodicy becomes a means of both spiritual and economic management. The economic burden of funerary rites is often heavy, especially for lower-income families, yet the expenditure is justified by the perceived value of the soul's liberation. The Brahmins, in turn, receive not only material goods but also spiritual and social prestige giving them the titles "Guru", "Guruba" and "BaaJe" meaning the teacher, teacher father, and grandfather.

Max Weber's discussion of authority, especially traditional authority, is instructive here. Weber categorized traditional authority as power that derives its legitimacy from longstanding customs and inherited beliefs. Even more strongly ethical is the Hindu impersonal power (*rita*) of the fixed order of religious ceremonial, of the cosmos, and hence of human activity in general (Weber, 1963). In the context of the *Garuda Purana*, the authority of Brahmins is traditional in precisely this sense. It is not enforced by the state, nor necessarily by economic might, but by the cultural expectation that Brahmins possess sacred knowledge passed down from antiquity. The legitimacy of this knowledge is rarely questioned, because it is enveloped in the moral and emotional fabric of family, duty, and death.

Furthermore, the economics of ritual do not end with the individual. The *Garuda Purana's* insistence on intergenerational responsibility—where the actions of children affect the fate of their parents' souls—ensures that this system is reproduced across generations. "... *Sradha* are performed either regularly (e.g., each month) or on auspicious occasions, such as births or weddings, when ancestors should be worshiped" (Ondračka, 2022, p. 407). Sons are expected to perform these rites not only out of love or grief, but because their family's spiritual status depends on it maintaining hegemonic order over time through repetitions.

The *Garuda Purana* is also complicit in what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic violence—the imposition of a cultural arbitrarily misrecognized as natural or sacred. When a family makes offerings of cows and gold to a Brahmin, they do not see this as exploitation, but as fulfillment of *dharma*. The economic transaction is overdetermined in a sacred sense. This false recognition is the essence of symbolic power: it hides domination in the guise of virtue. Religious ceremonies are therefore not just ceremonies; they are ideological buttressing exercises.

Another form of cultural reproduction occurs through language and recitation. "Language can certainly communicate emotions, but growing research suggests that language also helps constitute emotion by cohering sensations into specific perceptions of "anger," "disgust," "fear," and other emotion categories" (Lindquist et.al., 2015, p. 99). The *Garuda Purana* is recited aloud, often changing tones and tempos that sensationalize during the mourning period. These recitations said to be recited are not just for the deceased—they are also tutorials for the living. Stories of Yama's judgment, the torments of hell, and the virtues of ritual duty are fearfully narrated especially at evenings at sunset. These stories, rich in moral instruction, shape collective memory and inform future behavior, inculcating fear generated by text, tone, and the time of narration. The act of listening becomes an act of learning, belief is continually renewed, and the fear spontaneously ingrained. The

performance of rituals reinforces belief in their necessity. The belief in their necessity compels their repetition. And their repetition, in turn, reinforces the authority of those who prescribe them. Religious hegemony sustains as the “spontaneous consent” of the involved. The communal nature of mourning turns private loss into public ritual, and personal fear into shared affirmation of belief. Through collective listening, the emotional authority of the text is amplified. Belief is not only felt—it is witnessed and reaffirmed through social participation. Power is exercised through emotional manipulation.

Rather than operating through a single mechanism, the *Garuda Purana* links fear, obligation, ritual performance, and social authority into a mutually reinforcing structure. Descriptions of postmortem suffering create concern regarding the fate of the deceased, ritual prescriptions provide solutions to that concern, and priestly mediation offers the institutional means through which those solutions are enacted. Through this process, existential anxiety is transformed into ritual action, while ritual action simultaneously reinforces religious authority and social hierarchy. Salvation, hence, becomes commodified—a commodity that religious leaders dispense in exchange for economic resources. Even for lower castes, salvation is afar, mediated in terms of expenditure on rituals using economic resources to which they may not have ready access. As such, the text reinforces the structure where the attainment of salvation becomes easier through individuals who hold economic resources at their disposal and so reinforces an equation where religious merit and economics go together.

6. LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is restricted because it only looks at the textual analysis of the *Garuda Purana*; it doesn't use any ethnographic or empirical data from current practitioners. The references to funeral practices in Nepal and India only provide context – we can't use them as proof of what's happening today. Also, the study uses theories from Gramsci and Weber, which focus on authority, ideology, and material exchange.

For future research, someone could look at how modern Hindu communities actually interpret and perform the rituals in the *Garuda Purana* through fieldwork. Furthermore, comparing other Hindu funerary texts and researching how castes, classes, and genders affect death rituals would help us understand more about how religion ties into authority and social practices.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the *Garuda Purana* as a religious text that operates at the intersection of belief, ritual, authority, and material exchange. Through the analytical lenses of Gramsci's cultural hegemony and Weber's sociology of religion, the study argues that the

text links spiritual liberation (*moksha*) to ritual obligation (*dharma*), priestly mediation, and material offerings. While the *Garuda Purana* provides psychological comfort and a framework for coping with grief and death, it also reinforces religious authority by presenting ritual practices and donations as necessary for the soul's well-being. In doing so, the text transforms existential anxiety into ritual action and embeds religious authority within everyday social life. Rather than viewing the *Garuda Purana* solely as a sacred guide or an instrument of domination, this study highlights its dual role in addressing human concerns about mortality while simultaneously sustaining systems of belief, authority, and social hierarchy.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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