Relational Infrastructures of Rural Life: A Relational Ethnography of Weekly Haats in Tribal Koraput, Odisha

K N Aditya

Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad

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ABSTRACT

Weekly rural markets (haats) are commonly understood as spaces of exchange, livelihood generation, and social interaction. While these functions are well documented, existing scholarship often examines them as separate domains, treating the market as a bounded institution within which economic, social, and cultural activities occur. This paper argues instead that the weekly market is better understood as a relational configuration through which these processes are continuously constituted. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between November 2023 and December 2025 in the weekly markets of Guneipoda (Lamtaput) and Onkadelli in Koraput district, Odisha, the study is based on twenty-six market visits, approximately two months of participant observation, 120 semi-structured interviews, and detailed ethnographic fieldnotes. Rather than analysing producers, traders, commodities, or institutions as discrete units, the paper reconstructs the relational configurations through which subsistence production, intermediary trade, mobility, information circulation, and cultural practices become interconnected during recurring market encounters. The findings demonstrate that the haat operates simultaneously as a mechanism of commodity circulation, a site of social reproduction, a point of institutional encounter, and a space where cultural identities are negotiated. These functions do not exist independently; they emerge through repeated interactions linking tribal households, intermediary traders, state agencies, transport networks, and regional commodity chains. By operationalising methodological relationalism through relational ethnography, the paper contributes to sociological debates on informal markets, embedded economies, and rural transformation by demonstrating that the significance of weekly markets lies less in their individual functions than in the relational processes through which rural social life is continually organised.

Keywords: Weekly markets; relational ethnography; methodological relationalism; informal markets; tribal economy; Koraput; embedded exchange.

INTRODUCTION

Weekly markets continue to occupy a central place in the everyday life of rural India despite the expansion of permanent retail establishments, organised agricultural markets, and digital commerce. Across large parts of the country, particularly in tribal and geographically remote regions, the weekly haat remains the primary institution through which households sell agricultural surpluses, exchange forest products, purchase household necessities, access itinerant traders, meet relatives, and obtain information about events occurring beyond their own villages (Geertz, 1978; Harriss-White, 1996). Market day therefore represents far more than a periodic commercial event. It constitutes a recurring social occasion that temporarily reorganises the spatial separation characteristic of dispersed rural settlements.

This role assumes particular significance in Koraput district of southern Odisha. The study focuses on the weekly haats of Guneipoda in Lamtaput Block and Onkadelli in Khairput Block, both located in the tribal-majority Koraput district of Odisha's Eastern Ghats.[1] The region's rugged terrain, scattered settlements, limited transport

1 Guneipoda hosts a Tuesday weekly haat in Lamtaput Block, Koraput district, while Onkadelli hosts a Thursday weekly haat in Khairput Block. These markets serve dispersed tribal villages across southern Koraput and were selected because they differ in scale, ethnic composition, and regional connectivity.

infrastructure, and dependence on rain-fed agriculture mean that interaction between villages remains relatively infrequent outside recurring public events. Every week, however, the haat assembles tribal cultivators, forest collectors, livestock traders, transport operators, merchants, consumers, government officials, and visitors within the same physical space. Agricultural produce harvested only hours earlier is exchanged alongside forest products, household goods, clothing, livestock, and manufactured commodities transported from nearby towns and neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. The market simultaneously enables the circulation of commodities, people, information, and institutional presence before dispersing again until the following week. This cyclical rhythm makes the weekly market one of the most important public institutions in the everyday organisation of rural life.

Previous studies have consistently recognised the economic importance of weekly markets. Research has shown that they provide opportunities for small producers to convert subsistence production into cash income, facilitate the movement of commodities between villages and regional markets, generate informal employment, and improve access to consumer goods in areas where permanent commercial infrastructure remains limited (Breman, 1996; Viswanathan et al., 2012). Anthropological scholarship has likewise demonstrated that marketplaces function as important social arenas where exchange is embedded within trust, bargaining practices, reciprocity, and long-term interpersonal relationships rather than governed exclusively by impersonal price mechanisms (Polanyi, 1944; Geertz, 1978; Granovetter, 1985; Harriss-White, 1996). At the same time, studies of commodities have shown that goods acquire different meanings as they circulate through successive social contexts, linking everyday exchange with broader political and economic processes (Appadurai, 1986; Mintz, 1985).

Although these contributions have substantially improved our understanding of rural markets, they also reveal an important analytical limitation. Economic exchange, social interaction, institutional engagement, and cultural practices are frequently examined as distinct dimensions of market life. Markets become places where multiple activities occur rather than processes through which these activities become interconnected. Consequently, traders, producers, state institutions, transport systems, commodities, and consumers are often treated as separate analytical units whose interactions are subsequently described. Such an approach adequately documents what happens inside weekly markets but is less successful in explaining how these apparently distinct processes are continually organised through recurring market encounters.

This limitation becomes particularly evident in tribal regions such as Koraput. Consider a Gadaba woman selling tamarind during market day. Her presence in the market cannot be understood simply as an act of economic exchange. The quantity of produce she brings reflects household labour arrangements, seasonal forest access, ecological conditions, and transport constraints. Her decision to sell to a familiar Komti trader depends not only on the price offered but also on accumulated trust, previous transactions, expectations of future exchange, and the risks associated with transporting produce to larger markets. The income earned during the day subsequently shapes household consumption, debt repayment, and future livelihood decisions. At the same time, while selling produce she exchanges information with relatives, learns about government programmes, observes changing commodity prices, and encounters traders introducing new manufactured goods into the local economy. What appears as a single transaction is therefore constituted through multiple, overlapping relationships extending well beyond the immediate exchange itself.

Understanding these processes requires moving beyond an analysis of markets as bounded institutions towards an examination of the relations through which markets themselves are constituted. This paper adopts methodological relationalism as a strategy for doing so. Rather than treating individuals, institutions, or commodities as independent units of analysis, methodological relationalism begins from the proposition that social phenomena emerge through configurations of relationships whose organisation produces observable outcomes (Emirbayer, 1997; Powell & Dépelteau, 2013; Hałas, 2023; Nõgisto & Selg, 2023). Applied to weekly markets, this perspective shifts attention away from describing separate market functions towards reconstructing the relational configurations that connect producers, traders, transport systems, institutions, commodities, and consumers through recurring market encounters. The objective is not to demonstrate that markets are simultaneously economic and social, an observation already well established in the literature, but to explain how these domains are continually constituted through the same relational processes.

The analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between November 2023 and December 2025 in the weekly markets of Guneipoda (Lamtaput) and Onkadelli in Koraput district, Odisha. Based on twenty-six market visits, participant observation, 120 semi-structured interviews, and extensive ethnographic fieldnotes, the study reconstructs the recurring configurations through which commodity circulation, intermediary trade, mobility, information exchange, institutional engagement, and cultural practices become interconnected during market day. Rather than conceptualising the haat as merely a marketplace, the paper argues that it functions as a temporary but recurring relational configuration through which rural economic life, social reproduction, and institutional processes are continuously organised.

Accordingly, the paper proceeds in five sections. The next section outlines the relational ethnographic methodology adopted in the study. The following section conceptualises the weekly market as a relational configuration before examining four interconnected empirical configurations: commodity circulation and intermediary exchange; mobility and information networks; institutional encounters within the market; and the negotiation of cultural identities through market participation. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of understanding weekly markets not as isolated sites of exchange but as relational infrastructures through which the organisation of rural society is continually reproduced.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs relational ethnography to examine weekly markets in Koraput district, Odisha. Rather than treating the haat as a bounded marketplace or analysing producers, traders, and institutions as separate units, the study follows the relationships through which economic exchange, mobility, information, and social interaction become organised during recurring market encounters. Guided by methodological relationalism, the analysis focuses on the configurations of relations connecting households, traders, commodities, transport networks, and state institutions, rather than on the attributes of isolated actors (Emirbayer, 1997; Powell & Dépelteau, 2013; Nõgisto & Selg, 2023).

Fieldwork was conducted between November 2023 and December 2025 in the weekly haats of Guneipoda (Lamtaput Block) and Onkadelli (Khairput Block) in Koraput district, Odisha. The author was based in Deulapada village, Lamtaput Block, and undertook repeated visits to both markets throughout the fieldwork period. The empirical material comprises 26 market visits (15 to Guneipoda and 11 to Onkadelli), approximately two months of participant observation, 120 semi-structured interviews, and detailed ethnographic fieldnotes. Interviews were conducted with Gadaba, Paraja, and Bonda participants alongside Komti, Sundhi, and Dom traders and service providers. Participant observation involved moving across different sections of the market, observing transactions, engaging in informal conversations, and documenting the spatial organisation of exchange across different agricultural seasons.

The study combines ethnographic observation with descriptive quantitative data on respondent characteristics, transport, expenditure, and commodity transactions to contextualise observed patterns of market participation. These data are presented to situate the ethnographic findings rather than to establish statistical relationships. Instead of comparing predefined social groups, respondents were selected because they occupied different positions within the market process, allowing the study to capture interactions linking producers, intermediary traders, consumers, and institutions.

The empirical material analysed in this paper constitutes a purposively selected subset of a larger doctoral ethnographic dataset. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they occupied different relational positions within the weekly market like tribal producers, intermediary traders, transport providers, consumers, and institutional actors. This sampling strategy enabled the reconstruction of the configurations of relationships through which market processes were organised.

Analysis proceeded through relational reconstruction. Interviews, field observations, and descriptive data were analysed together to trace how commodity exchange, mobility, information circulation, and institutional encounters became interconnected through recurring market interactions. Rather than coding these processes into independent themes, the analysis reconstructs the configurations through which the weekly haat organises rural economic and social life. This approach enables the market to be understood not simply as a site of exchange but as a recurring relational configuration connecting village livelihoods with wider commercial and institutional networks.

As a researcher, my engagement with the field evolved through repeated participation rather than one-time observation. Living in Deulapada village during the fieldwork period enabled sustained interaction with participants across multiple market cycles, allowing relationships of familiarity to develop over time. My linguistic familiarity with both Telugu and Odia facilitated communication with different communities, particularly among traders and households whose everyday interactions frequently crossed the Odisha-Andhra Pradesh border. At the same time, access remained relational rather than automatic; trust was established gradually through repeated visits, informal conversations, and continued presence within the market rather than through formal interviews alone. This prolonged engagement made it possible to observe not only individual transactions but also the recurring relationships through which market life was organised.

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 120)

Variable	Category	n (%)
Age Group	18–30 years	32 (26.67)
	31–50 years	59 (48.89)
	≥51 years	29 (24.44)
Gender	Male	56 (46.67)
	Female	64 (53.33)
Community	Gadaba	45 (37.50)
	Paraja (Jani)	33 (27.50)
	Bonda (Badanayak)	15 (12.50)
	Komti	13 (10.83)
	Sundhi (Biswal)	8 (6.67)
	Dom (Khillo)	6 (5.00)
Primary Market Role	Tribal sellers (agricultural/forest produce)	91 (75.56)
	Traders/intermediaries	29 (24.44)
Education Level	Illiterate	29 (24.44)
	Primary education	48 (40.00)
	Secondary education	27 (22.22)
	Higher education	16 (13.33)

Note: N = 120. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Source: Primary ethnographic fieldwork (2023–2025) in Guneipoda (Lamtaput) and Onkadelli weekly haats.

Commodity Circulation and Intermediary Exchange

The weekly haat constitutes the primary point through which agricultural produce, forest products, livestock, and manufactured commodities circulate between dispersed tribal villages and regional markets. For most households, participation in the market is not organised around commercial farming but around the sale of small agricultural surpluses and forest produce generated through subsistence livelihoods. Vegetables, millets, pulses, tamarind, mushrooms, jackfruit, fuelwood, and other seasonal products arrive at the market in small quantities, usually carried in bamboo baskets or cloth bundles. These commodities rarely move directly into wider commercial networks. Instead, they pass through intermediary traders who aggregate numerous small consignments before transporting them to larger trading centres such as Jeypore. The weekly market therefore performs a crucial coordinating function, linking fragmented household production with commodity circuits extending beyond the immediate locality.

Field observations indicate that exchange is organised around numerous low-value transactions rather than a few large commercial sales. Vegetables are commonly arranged in small bundles or piles instead of being weighed individually, enabling quick transactions between producers and consumers. Across twenty-six market visits, nearly seventy per cent of observed vegetable sales involved bundles priced below ₹50. Most sellers reported earning between ₹200 and ₹500 during a market day, depending on seasonal availability and demand. These earnings are modest in monetary terms but remain significant for households that rely primarily on subsistence cultivation. The market provides a regular opportunity to convert surplus production into cash without requiring long-distance travel or substantial transport costs. This pattern is reflected in respondents' expenditure profiles, where over half reported weekly spending below ₹600, indicating that the market operates through frequent, low-value exchanges rather than high-volume commercial transactions.

The limited scale of individual production explains the importance of intermediary traders within the market. During one market visit at Guneipoda, a Gadaba farmer selling tamarind explained,

"We sell to the Komti traders every week. The price may be lower, but they buy everything together. If we refuse one trader, the others will also stop buying."

The observation illustrates that price alone does not determine exchange. Tribal households generally bring quantities too small to justify transporting produce to distant markets, while uncertain demand and transport costs increase the risks associated with bypassing local traders. Intermediaries reduce these uncertainties by purchasing dispersed quantities from multiple producers, aggregating them, and transporting them to wholesale markets. For producers, the certainty of an immediate sale frequently outweighs the possibility of obtaining marginally higher prices elsewhere. Exchange is therefore organised around reducing uncertainty rather than maximising profit, consistent with Scott's (1976) observation that peasant economies often prioritise security over speculative gain.

However, these relationships should not be interpreted simply as expressions of mutual trust. The repeated interactions observed between tribal producers and Komti traders certainly generate familiarity and predictability, but they also reproduce unequal bargaining positions. Traders possess greater access to transport, market information, storage facilities, and wider commercial networks, enabling them to determine purchasing conditions unavailable to individual producers. Trust, therefore, emerges within asymmetrical market relations rather than replacing them. Embeddedness does not eliminate inequality; instead, it provides the social conditions through which unequal exchange can be reproduced over time. This observation extends Granovetter's (1985) argument by demonstrating that embedded relations simultaneously reduce transactional uncertainty while stabilising structural differences in market power.

The stability of these relationships should not obscure the unequal distribution of resources within them. Intermediary traders possess greater access to transportation, storage facilities, market information, and regional commercial networks than individual producers, enabling them to exercise considerable influence over prices and purchasing conditions. Tribal cultivators, by contrast, often confront immediate cash requirements, limited storage capacity, and the perishability of agricultural produce, restricting their bargaining options. Consequently, repeated exchange relationships simultaneously reduce market uncertainty while reproducing structural asymmetries in economic power. The relational configuration of the weekly haat therefore incorporates both cooperation and dependency, illustrating that embeddedness is not synonymous with equality but frequently provides the social conditions through which unequal exchange becomes normalised.

The circulation of commodities also reveals the gradual incorporation of weekly markets into wider regional economies. Alongside locally produced vegetables and forest products, increasing numbers of stalls sell plastic household goods, inexpensive clothing, packaged foods, utensils, and other manufactured commodities sourced from nearby towns and neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. These commodities do not displace existing exchange relations. Instead, they become incorporated into the same market networks through which agricultural produce circulates. Tribal households often sell vegetables or forest products before purchasing manufactured goods from itinerant traders during the same visit. Commodity circulation therefore links subsistence production and commercial consumption within a single recurring market encounter. Rather than representing a transition from traditional to modern markets, the haat demonstrates how locally embedded exchange continuously adapts to wider commercial transformations while retaining its role as the principal intermediary between village economies and regional commodity networks.

Information, Mobility, And Social Reproduction

Although the exchange of commodities constitutes the visible function of the weekly haat, market participation extends well beyond buying and selling. Field observations consistently showed that many individuals remained in the market long after completing their transactions, gathering around tea stalls, food vendors, shaded resting areas, and open spaces where conversations continued throughout the day. These interactions reveal that the market functions simultaneously as a site through which information, relationships, and everyday social life are reproduced across dispersed rural settlements.

The geographical context of Koraput makes this function particularly significant. Villages are widely dispersed across hilly terrain, transport facilities remain limited, and opportunities for regular interaction between settlements are relatively infrequent. Under these conditions, the weekly market provides one of the few recurring occasions when people from multiple villages assemble in the same place. Respondents frequently described attending the haat not only to sell produce but also to meet relatives, exchange news, discuss agricultural conditions, learn about employment opportunities, enquire about marriages, and maintain social ties that could not easily be sustained through everyday village life. Market participation therefore serves an important integrative function by periodically reconnecting communities that remain geographically separated during the rest of the week.

These interactions are not peripheral to market activity but are closely intertwined with economic exchange. Conversations held while waiting for customers or resting after transactions often centred on crop failures, changing prices, rainfall, wage rates, government schemes, and local disputes. Such information shaped subsequent economic decisions, including what crops to cultivate, where to sell produce, and which traders were offering better prices. During one visit to Guneipoda, a group of cultivators compared the prices of tamarind offered by different traders before deciding collectively where to sell their produce. Information circulated through informal conversations rather than formal market institutions, illustrating how commercial decisions are embedded within everyday social interaction.

Patterns of transport expenditure provide insight into the logistical organisation of weekly market participation. A substantial proportion of respondents reached the market on foot, while most of the remainder incurred transport costs of ₹100 or less per visit. These patterns indicate that the movement of producers, consumers, and commodities into the weekly haat is supported by relatively low-cost logistical arrangements. Such arrangements facilitate the regular circulation of agricultural produce, forest products, and household necessities between surrounding villages and the market, enabling the haat to function as a recurring node within local networks of exchange. Rather than relying primarily on formal transport infrastructure, market logistics are sustained through routine and affordable patterns of mobility that underpin the continuity of weekly market interactions.

The market also enables relationships that extend beyond kinship and village boundaries. Interactions between tribal cultivators, traders, transport operators, itinerant vendors, and government functionaries create opportunities for new forms of acquaintance and cooperation that would be unlikely within the more socially bounded context of individual villages. Many respondents reported recognising the same traders and fellow participants over several years, producing a familiarity that reduced uncertainty in future interactions. These repeated encounters generate expectations regarding prices, credit, quality of produce, and reciprocal obligations, allowing transactions to occur with relatively limited negotiation. Social familiarity therefore lowers the costs of exchange while simultaneously reproducing the networks upon which future market participation depends.

The significance of these interactions lies not simply in the exchange of information but in the continuous reproduction of the relationships through which rural society is organised. Commodity exchange creates opportunities for social interaction, while those interactions shape subsequent patterns of exchange. Economic activity and social life therefore emerge through the same recurring encounters rather than existing as separate dimensions of the market. The weekly haat is sustained not only because commodities circulate through it, but because the relationships connecting households, traders, and neighbouring communities are renewed every market day. Through this process, the market becomes an enduring social infrastructure that reproduces both livelihoods and the relational networks on which those livelihoods depend.

Institutional Encounters and the Market as Public Space

The weekly haat is not only a site of commercial exchange but also one of the few public spaces where state institutions, civil society organisations, and rural communities interact on a regular basis. During fieldwork, market days frequently coincided with the presence of government officials, health workers, political representatives, self-help groups, and banking correspondents who used the concentration of people to disseminate information, implement programmes, or provide basic services. Rather than requiring households from scattered villages to travel to administrative centres, these institutions temporarily relocated their activities to the market, transforming it into an accessible point of institutional engagement.

This concentration is particularly important in Koraput, where settlements are geographically dispersed and access to public offices often requires considerable time and travel costs. For many respondents, visiting a government office involved losing an entire day's work and incurring transport expenses. Market day therefore became an efficient opportunity to combine multiple activities within a single journey. Households sold agricultural produce, purchased essential commodities, met relatives, and simultaneously enquired about pensions, ration cards, health services, or self-help group activities. Institutional interaction was consequently woven into everyday livelihood practices rather than occurring as a separate administrative process.

Field observations recorded health awareness campaigns, vaccination announcements, banking services, and the distribution of information relating to welfare schemes during several market visits. Women's self-help groups displayed locally produced goods, while political representatives interacted informally with constituents during election periods. These activities did not transform the market into a formal administrative space. Instead, they became embedded within the ongoing rhythm of commercial exchange, where institutional communication occurred alongside bargaining, social interaction, and commodity transactions. The market thus functioned as a shared public arena in which governance was enacted through everyday encounters rather than exclusively through bureaucratic offices.

However, institutional presence within the haat also reflects the uneven geography of state accessibility. The reliance on weekly markets for welfare communication suggests that routine institutional contact remains limited outside market days. Respondents often described obtaining information about new schemes, documentation requirements, or programme implementation through conversations in the market rather than through direct communication from government offices. Information therefore circulated through existing social networks before reaching individual households, making informal relationships an important component of institutional access. The effectiveness of welfare initiatives consequently depended not only on administrative capacity but also on the social networks that connected rural communities to state institutions.

These observations indicate that the market performs an intermediary role extending beyond commodity exchange. It mediates interactions between rural households and public institutions by bringing administrative processes into a socially familiar environment. Institutional encounters are therefore embedded within the same relational configuration that organises economic exchange and information circulation. The weekly haat becomes a recurring public infrastructure where livelihoods, governance, and social relationships intersect, demonstrating that the state's presence in rural society is often realised through existing social spaces rather than through dedicated bureaucratic settings.

The Social Life of the Haat: Identity, Reciprocity, And Cultural Reproduction

The significance of the weekly haat extends beyond its economic and institutional functions. Throughout fieldwork, the market emerged as a social arena where cultural practices, community identities, and interpersonal relationships were routinely enacted alongside commercial exchange. Buying and selling formed only one part of market participation. Equally important were the conversations, shared meals, informal gatherings, and repeated encounters through which social relationships were maintained across villages. These practices illustrate that the market contributes not only to the circulation of commodities but also to the reproduction of the social and cultural life of the region.

Market participation reflected the ethnic diversity of Koraput. Gadaba, Paraja, Bonda, Dom, Komti, Sundhi, Karan, and other communities occupied different positions within the market while sharing the same public space. Tribal women sold vegetables, millets, forest produce, and handmade items, while traders displayed manufactured goods brought from Jeypore, Visakhapatnam, and neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. These interactions did not erase social distinctions; rather, they created a recurring setting in which different communities negotiated exchange despite differences in occupation, ethnicity, and economic position. Market participation also displayed important gendered dimensions. Women constituted the majority of small-scale vendors selling vegetables, forest produce, and minor agricultural surpluses, reflecting their central role in household subsistence production. Their visible presence within the market extended beyond economic contribution, as market participation also facilitated interaction with relatives, self-help groups, and institutional actors. Although household decision-making varied considerably across communities, women frequently exercised direct control over the sale of small agricultural produce while jointly participating in decisions regarding household purchases. The weekly haat therefore constituted an important arena through which women's economic agency became publicly visible within everyday rural life.

Food occupied a particularly important place in these interactions. Temporary stalls selling cooked rice, snacks, tea, meat, and local beverages became gathering points where people rested after completing transactions, met acquaintances, and exchanged news. Meals were rarely hurried. Respondents often remained for extended periods, using these spaces for conversation rather than consumption alone. Hospitality also accompanied market participation, with acquaintances frequently inviting one another to share tea or food. Such practices reinforced existing relationships while creating opportunities for new social connections beyond village boundaries. Consumption within the market thus carried social meanings that exceeded its immediate economic value.

The market also provided opportunities for maintaining kinship and community networks. Many respondents reported arranging meetings with relatives on market day because it offered a predictable and accessible occasion for interaction. Discussions frequently extended beyond commercial matters to include marriages, family events, agricultural conditions, migration, education, and village affairs. For households living in geographically dispersed settlements, the weekly haat reduced the social isolation produced by difficult terrain and limited transport. Regular market participation therefore contributed to the continuity of relationships that could not be sustained through everyday village interactions alone.

At the same time, the market reflected ongoing processes of social change. Alongside traditional agricultural produce and forest products, increasing numbers of stalls sold packaged foods, mobile accessories, inexpensive clothing, plastic household goods, and other manufactured commodities. Younger participants displayed greater engagement with these commodities than older generations, while traders reported increasing demand for goods sourced from urban centres. Rather than replacing local practices, these commodities became incorporated into existing patterns of exchange. Households frequently financed the purchase of manufactured goods through the sale of agricultural produce or forest products during the same market visit. The market therefore became a point where local livelihoods intersected with wider processes of commercial transformation without dissolving the social relationships that continued to organise exchange.

These observations demonstrate that the weekly haat cannot be reduced to an economic institution or a cultural gathering in isolation. Its significance lies precisely in the way these dimensions become mutually constitutive.

Commodity exchange creates opportunities for social interaction, institutional encounters occur within familiar community settings, and cultural practices are reproduced through the same recurring market participation that sustains local livelihoods. The market persists not simply because goods are bought and sold, but because it continually renews the relationships through which economic activity, community life, and cultural identity are organised. In this sense, the haat functions as a recurring relational infrastructure that reproduces rural society through the ordinary practices of market exchange.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this study suggest that the significance of the weekly haat cannot be adequately explained by approaching it as a marketplace in which economic, social, institutional, and cultural activities merely coexist. Such an interpretation, while descriptively accurate, fragments processes that are empirically inseparable. Commodity exchange, information circulation, institutional engagement, and the reproduction of community life are not independent functions performed by the market; they emerge through the same recurring network of relationships that is assembled and renewed every market day. Understanding the haat therefore requires shifting the analytical focus from the market as a physical site to the relational processes through which it is continually constituted.

The empirical findings further demonstrate that the weekly haat occupies an intermediate position within wider regional commodity networks. Agricultural produce sold in small quantities by tribal households frequently entered larger commercial circuits through intermediary traders operating between village markets and urban wholesale centres such as Jeypore and neighbouring towns in Andhra Pradesh. Manufactured commodities simultaneously travelled in the opposite direction, linking regional commercial centres with dispersed rural consumers. The weekly market therefore functioned as a nodal point connecting local subsistence economies with broader regional systems of exchange without dissolving the locally embedded relationships that continued to organise market participation.

This perspective extends existing scholarship on embedded markets. Polanyi (1944) argued that economic exchange remains embedded within social relations, while Granovetter (1985) demonstrated that economic action is structured by interpersonal networks rather than occurring through anonymous market mechanisms. The ethnographic evidence from Koraput supports these observations but also suggests an important refinement. The weekly haat is not simply an embedded market where economic behaviour is influenced by social relationships. Rather, the market itself is constituted through relations linking producers, intermediary traders, consumers, transport systems, institutions, and surrounding villages. These relationships do not merely facilitate exchange; they organise the conditions under which exchange becomes possible. The analytical unit, therefore, is neither the individual actor nor the marketplace itself, but the relational configuration that continuously connects them.

The role of intermediary traders illustrates this point particularly clearly. Their importance cannot be explained solely through market efficiency or price formation. Their position emerges from the interaction between fragmented subsistence production, limited transport infrastructure, the perishability of agricultural produce, uneven access to commercial information, and repeated relationships with producers. Likewise, households' continued participation in weekly markets cannot be understood exclusively through income generation. Market visits simultaneously provide opportunities to obtain information, maintain kinship networks, access institutional services, and participate in public life. These multiple outcomes arise because recurring market encounters assemble economic, social, and institutional relations within the same spatial and temporal setting.

The findings also contribute to discussions on rural transformation. Much contemporary literature interprets expanding commodity circulation and the increasing presence of manufactured goods as evidence of the gradual commercialisation or modernisation of rural economies. The evidence from Koraput suggests a more complex process. Manufactured commodities, welfare institutions, transport services, and regional trade networks have undoubtedly become more prominent within the weekly haat. However, rather than displacing locally embedded forms of exchange, these developments have become incorporated into existing relational arrangements.

Subsistence production continues to finance household consumption, intermediary trade continues to organise commodity movement, and repeated social interactions continue to underpin market participation. Rural transformation therefore occurs through the reorganisation of existing relationships rather than through their replacement.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of relational ethnography for understanding rural markets. Conventional analyses often organise evidence into discrete categories such as trade, transport, institutions, or culture. While useful for descriptive purposes, this approach risks obscuring the processes through which these domains shape one another in practice. By reconstructing recurring interactions rather than isolated themes, relational ethnography makes visible the configurations through which apparently distinct aspects of rural life are continuously connected. The weekly haat emerges not as a collection of separate functions but as a dynamic relational infrastructure that coordinates livelihoods, mobility, governance, and social reproduction across dispersed settlements.

The contribution of this paper therefore extends beyond the case of Koraput. Weekly markets across South Asia, Africa, and other regions characterised by dispersed rural settlements are often analysed primarily as commercial institutions or sites of cultural interaction. The findings presented here suggest that they are more appropriately understood as relational infrastructures that organise multiple dimensions of rural society simultaneously. Viewing markets in this way shifts attention from what markets contain to what they continually produce: the relationships through which economic activity, institutional engagement, and community life are reproduced over time.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the weekly haat is best understood not as a periodic marketplace but as a recurring relational configuration through which rural society is organised. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the weekly markets of Guneipoda and Onkadelli in Koraput district, the study demonstrated that commodity circulation, information exchange, institutional encounters, and cultural practices do not operate as separate functions of the market. Rather, they emerge through the same network of relationships connecting households, traders, transport systems, state institutions, and neighbouring villages.

Approaching the market through methodological relationalism shifts the focus from describing activities occurring within the haat to explaining the processes through which those activities become interconnected. The empirical findings show that intermediary exchange links subsistence production with wider commodity circuits, mobility facilitates the circulation of information alongside goods, institutional engagement depends upon existing social networks, and repeated market participation reproduces community relationships across geographically dispersed settlements. These processes collectively sustain the weekly market as an enduring form of rural public infrastructure.

The study contributes to the sociology of markets by demonstrating that the significance of weekly haats lies not simply in enabling exchange but in organising the relationships through which rural economic and social life is continually reproduced. Rather than representing a residual institution awaiting replacement by modern retail systems, the weekly market remains a dynamic relational infrastructure that adapts to changing economic conditions while continuing to coordinate livelihoods, governance, and community life. Understanding rural transformation therefore requires attention not only to changing commodities or institutions but also to the relational configurations through which these changes are experienced and negotiated in everyday life.

Future research could extend this relational perspective by examining how digital technologies, welfare delivery systems, climate variability, and changing patterns of migration reshape the relationships that sustain weekly markets. Such work would contribute to a broader understanding of rural markets as evolving social infrastructures rather than merely sites of commercial exchange.

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