

Making of Jagannath Centric Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of Oriya identity from a cultural and theological perspective, highlighting how the multifaceted Jagannath cult shaped the region's socio-political consciousness. Evolving from indigenous tribal (Savara) tree worship to successfully assimilate Dravidian, Aryan, Buddhist, Jain, and diverse Hindu frameworks, this comprehensive dharma fostered an egalitarian culture of "Unity in Diversity" that bridged deep social divisions. Shared cultural institutions like the Bhagabata Ghara, medieval Odia literature, and the casteless Ratha Yatra provided a unifying foundation that enforced a sense of collective belonging. The necessity for regional cohesion triggered Odia nationalists to deeply embrace and assert these specific religious and cultural markers as the pure embodiment of "Odianness". Spanning the critical period from the 1866 Na-anka famine and emerging linguistic debates to the 1936 formation of a distinct province, this study investigates how Oriya identity was constructed and understood. By examining historical newspapers, manuscripts, temple chronicles, and the works of prominent Odia writers, the research outlines how these shared cultural markers were deliberately invoked to represent the region. Ultimately, this study highlights how the embrace of these deeply ingrained cultural markers provided the essential emotional and cultural cohesion necessary for political mobilization, positioning the Jagannath-centric cultural framework not merely as a religious tradition, but as a decisive and unifying force in the successful advocacy for a separate Orissa province and an enduring symbol of universalism.

Keywords: Jagannath cult; Odia Identity; Tribal Origins; Rath Yatra; Daru Brahma; Bhagabata Ghara; Nila Madhava;

Introduction

Religion serves as a ubiquitous institution in human civilization, acting as a system of values, signs, and customs that binds adherents into a socioreligious society based on the concept of the holy. As communities develop, their identity is determined by shared characteristics—such as geography, history, folklore, and religion—which unite members and draw cultural boundaries to set them apart from others. In the context of Odisha, India, this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the traditions, rituals, and socio-religious fabric centered around the Jagannath cult. The worship of Lord Jagannath in Puri has been the hub of a rich cultural history, influencing everything from the region's art and architecture to its socio-political structures and ethnic values

While frequently referred to as a religious cult, the Jagannath tradition transcends standard definitions and is more appropriately understood as a "Dharma," or a

comprehensive way of life. Unlike traditional religious cults that strictly adhere to a single guiding idea, prophet, or clear scripture, the Jagannath tradition lacks these rigid features and instead embraces a wide variety of religious activities and Catholic philosophies without prejudice. Over time, this evolutionary process allowed the Dharma to peacefully absorb all systems of thought that were part of Orissan civilization, creating a uniquely syncretic tradition. Consequently, understanding this Jagannath-centric Dharma is impossible without referencing Odisha's broader sociocultural past.

Historically, the academic discourse surrounding Oriya identity has been predominantly framed through an administrative and political lens. Scholars such as S.C. Patra and Nivedita Mohanty have extensively researched the political struggles and factors between 1866 and 1936 that culminated in the creation of an independent Orissa province. However, these political accounts have largely overlooked the cultural and theological foundations of Oriya nationalism, specifically neglecting the vital roles of Oriya literature and the Jagannath cult in their analyses. While the integration of Oriya-speaking areas realized political dreams, it did not fully address the historical considerations of the cultural identity that played a major role in these political processes.

To bridge this scholarly gap, this study tackles the concept of Oriya identity from a distinctly cultural and theological perspective, spanning the critical years from the 1866 Na-anka famine and linguistic debate to the 1936 formation of the distinct province. By examining historical newspapers, manuscripts, temple chronicles, and the works of prominent Oriya writers, this research investigates how shared markers like folklore, customs, and the natural world were invoked to represent Odianess. Ultimately, the primary focus is to explore how Odia nationalists during the colonial era embraced and rebuilt their regional identity through cultural activities and the enduring, multifaceted consciousness of the Jagannath cult.

A Historical Study of Jagannath Worship

The historical and architectural foundation of Jagannath worship in Puri represents one of the most remarkable syncretisms of ancient Indian cultures. The current majestic temple edifice, standing roughly twenty feet above its surroundings, was constructed in 1174 A.D. during the reign of the Kalinga ruler Ananga Bhima Dev. However, the true cultural consolidation is attributed to Anantavarmana Codogangadeva, who transported the original wooden deity from Odra and installed it at Purusottama Ksetra. This monumental relocation was not merely a geographic shift, but a profound assimilation of aboriginal, Dravidian, and Aryan traditions. To this day, the peaceful integration of these diverse societies is commemorated by the locals of Savar-Narayana village, where the deity was originally worshipped, highlighting the inclusive roots of the Jagannath culture.

Long before taking its definitive Brahminical form, the deity was deeply intertwined with esoteric Buddhist traditions. The earliest textual reference to Jagannath appears in the fourth-century *Jnanasiddhi* by Indrabhuti, the founder of Vajrayana Buddhism, who revered Jagannath as a manifestation of the Buddha. This strong Buddhist influence prevailed until the spiritual conquest of Adi Sankaracharya (788–820 A.D.), who visited Puri and established the Bhogavardhan Pitha. Through persuasive theological debate,

Sankaracharya integrated the revered Buddhist deity into the Brahminical pantheon by declaring Jagannath identical to the great God Purushottama of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This seamless religious transition catalyzed a renaissance of Sanskrit scholarship in Odisha and cemented the deity's supreme status within the broader Hindu tradition.

The unique physical manifestation of Lord Jagannath as a wooden log, or *Daru*, is deeply anchored in tribal Savara folklore, most famously detailed in Sarala Das's fifteenth-century *Mahabharata*. The legend tells of a tribal leader, Vasu Sabara, who secretly worshipped a stone deity named Nilamadhava until the devout King Indradyumna sought it out. Following divine guidance, Indradyumna discovered the half-burned body of Lord Krishna—who had been struck by the arrow of Jara Sabara—floating in the sea as a sacred wooden log. When the king's vast army failed to retrieve the *Daru* from Rohini Kunda, he was instructed to enlist the help of both the Brahmin Vasu and the tribal Jara. Their miraculous success in lifting the heavy wood symbolized an essential unity between Aryan and non-Aryan societies, while the famously abstract, limb-less forms of the deities were later carved by a mysterious artisan who vanished when his work was impatiently interrupted by the king.

The evolution of the single shapeless *Daru* into a distinct triad of deities was significantly shaped by Dravidian linguistic and philosophical concepts. The Dravidians, who practiced *Jinasanadharma*, worshipped the deity under the name Nilamadhava, a composite term where *Nila* signifies *Sunya* (the void), *Ma* represents the Mother principle (*Sakti*), and *Dhava* indicates illumination (*Prakasha*). As this philosophy merged with Aryan and tribal traditions, the single log was conceptually expanded to represent the three dominant sects of the time: Shaivism (Balabhadra), Shaktism (Subhadra), and Vaishnavism (Jagannath). Yet, despite the presence of three distinct idols, the underlying theology remains profoundly monotheistic; Jagannath and Balabhadra embody the void and illumination, while Subhadra acts as their vital energy, meaning all three figures collectively represent one Supreme Being.

Beyond its theological evolution, the Jagannath cult became the absolute bedrock of Oriya cultural and political identity, a role that became especially vital between the devastating Na-anka famine of 1866 and the formal creation of the Odisha province in 1936. This deep spiritual and cultural resonance is vividly captured in centuries of Odia literature. Following the sixteenth-century arrival of Sri Chaitanya, who popularized the view of Jagannath as an incarnation of Krishna, a golden age of devotional poetry emerged. Literary giants such as Jagannath Dasa, Salabega, Dinakrushna Dash, and Upendra Bhanja poured their devotion into works that portrayed Lord Jagannath not merely as a remote cosmic entity, but as a deeply personal savior. Through this rich literary tradition, the ancient syncretic deity transcended formal religion to become the enduring soul and unifying cultural anchor of the Odia people.

Legends on Jagannath Origin

The Jagannath cult dates back millennia. Countless people have travelled from all across the country to catch a glimpse of that dark face, saucer-like eyes, and chubby shapeless

form. A tribal deity. The Jain Tirthankar. The Buddhist Trinity includes Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Tantricism. He hugs everyone with those stump-like outstretched arms, symbolising a great synthesis. Legends adorn Jagannath like fragrant garlands on his large bust.

Most scholars, including B.M. Padhi, S.N. Rajguru, K.S. Behera, Brij Kishore Ghosh, Surya Narayan Dash, Yaspal Jain, W.H. Lee, Surendra Mohanty, Kedaranath Mohapatra, and Mayadhara Manasingh, have shown interest in the origin and antiquity of Lord Jagannath." They have worked hard to identify the origins of Jagannath among the Sabara tribes in the South Odisha mountain range of Mahendragiri. In the Dhenkanal area of Odisha, K.C. Mishra and A. Eschmann presented strange evidence of parallels between the spiritual activities of the Kandhas (adivasi tribes) and the Jagannath cult. Jagannath worship originated in Western Odisha, according to renowned archaeologist Jitendra P. Sing Deo. The writings of the aforementioned forebears are important historical analyses. The works of G.N. Dash on Kanchi Kaberi, Deula Tola, Daita, and Suddha Saura of Puri, and Kailash Chandra Dash on the history of the worship of Jagannath, both rely on pictorial analyses of manuscripts related to Lord Jagannath. The Kalinga Jaina is associated with an older form of Jagannath, according to Nilakantha Das (1884-1969), a distinguished literary architect from Odisha. Puri was a well-known Jaina religious hub, according to renowned archaeologist and palm leaf manuscript expert Kedarnath Mohapatra. This was explicitly ascribed by S.K. Chatterjee (1890-1977) to a kind of 'Protestant Hinduism' that was influenced by Buddhism. The origin of Sri Jagannath has been linked to Saivism by the German scholar Stietencorn. Gauri Sankar Bhattacharya attempted to emphasise the social significance of the grand celebration in his book "The Jagannath Car Festival at Puri in March of India" (1956), while Professor P. K. Mukherjee wrote about the splendour of the Car Festival during the British era in his book "Car Festival under East India Company in Bharat" (1969). The majority of the initiatives are focused on understanding the Indian mind and the development of Jagannath consciousness and worship, from primal god to state deity, as can be seen from a critical analysis of the scholastic literary works.

Jagannath in the Skanda Purana

The Utkala Khanda of the Skanda Purana details the narrative of Lord Jagannath's origin. Following the Great Deluge, Vishnu appeared in the form of a boar to save the Earth Goddess, after which Brahma created the entire cosmos. When Brahma inquired about how living beings might achieve salvation, Vishnu replied that He Himself would dwell at Purushottam (Puri) in the form of Nila Madhava, and that whoever obtained His *darshan* (divine sight) would reach paradise. However, the immense sacredness of this location began to impede the activities of Yama, the God of Death. Yama turned to Vishnu for a resolution, and the deity vowed that while He (Nila Madhava) would eventually disappear from sight, Yama's influence would remain restricted in that holy place.

Atop the Nilgiri—the elevated ground upon which the current Jagannath temple stands—sits the great Kalpa Vriksha (the wish-fulfilling tree). To the west of this tree lies the Rohini Kunda, a water cistern that still exists today. To the north, the tribal leader Saora

Viswavasu secretly revered Nila Madhava. At that time, the true splendor of this pilgrimage site remained hidden from humanity, though celestial beings visited daily to offer their adoration to Nila Madhava.

During the Satya Yuga, King Indradyumna, a fifth-generation descendant of Brahma from the Surya dynasty, ruled the kingdom of Avanti. A deeply learned Vaishnavite, he convened an assembly of scholars to ask, "Where can I truly see Vishnu with my own eyes?" A mendicant pilgrim informed him that Lord Purushottam Himself resided at the holy site of Purushottam in Utkal. Desperate for this divine vision, Indradyumna dispatched his royal priest, Vidyapati, to Odisha. Vidyapati arrived and stayed in a Saora hamlet west of Nilgiri. He introduced himself to Viswavasu and explained his urgent mission, noting that King Indradyumna would remain fasting until his return and begging the tribal chief to let him see Nila Madhava.

Moved by his plea, Viswavasu took Vidyapati by the hand, led him up a narrow trail to the summit of Nilgiri, and revealed Nila Madhava. After the Brahmin returned to Avanti with the news, Nila Madhava concealed Himself beneath a heap of sand, fulfilling His prior promise to Yama. Guided by the celestial sage Narada, Indradyumna set off for Purushottam. After being greeted by the Orissan king at the Utkal border, Indradyumna crossed the Mahanadi River, traveled through Bhubaneswar, and visited the deities Kapoteswara and Nilakantheswar. He was devastated to learn from Narada that Nila Madhava had vanished. To console the grieving king, Narada revealed that God would instead grant him *darshan* in the form of four wooden deities. Narada then advised Indradyumna to construct a temple for Lord Narasimha nearby, personally performing the consecration rites and installing the image on the fifth day.

Following this, Indradyumna organized a grand thousand-horse sacrifice. During the preparations, Madhava appeared in the king's dream. A bathhouse had been erected on the seashore near the Beleshwara temple for ceremonial ablutions. Servants soon reported a miraculous sight: a massive, red-hued tree with four branches, bearing the mark of a conch shell and glowing like the rising sun, was floating towards the shore. Narada explained that the tree was formed from a hair that had fallen from Vishnu's body. He instructed the king to bring this sacred *Daru* (wood) to the Mahavedi (Great Altar) to carve the idols. As they discussed the carving, a heavenly voice announced that Vishnu Himself would arrive to craft the images, but the pavilion must remain completely sealed for 15 days. The king was instructed to place an elderly carpenter inside with his tools and lock the doors. To prevent anyone from hearing the sounds of the carving—which the voice warned would cause blindness, tragedy, and doom—loud musical instruments were to be played outside continuously. Vishnu then appeared in the guise of this elderly artisan.

The king escorted the elderly man inside and sealed the pavilion. Exactly 15 days later, the majestic wooden images of Balarama, Subhadra, Jagannath, and Sudarshana were revealed. The supernatural voice instructed Indradyumna to dress the deities in silk and construct a magnificent temple of specific proportions for them. The king obeyed, lavishing gifts upon the Brahmins. The milling hooves of the thousands of cows donated

during these ceremonies created a deep depression, which filled with the water used for ritual hand-washing and became the holy Indradyumna Tank. Rulers from all over India assisted in building the grand temple. Before its completion, Narada advised Indradyumna to travel to Brahmaloak (heaven) to invite Brahma to consecrate it. However, Brahma was engrossed in a music festival. By the time the music stopped and Brahma spoke to him, an entire generation had passed on Earth due to the dilation of celestial time. Brahma urged Indradyumna to return immediately to secure the temple, promising to follow. Indradyumna rushed back to Earth, relieved to find the temple intact, and prepared three magnificent chariots to transport the deities from the Mahavedi.

During Indradyumna's extended absence in heaven, a ruler named King Gala had taken control of the empty temple and installed his own image of Madhava. Upon his return, Indradyumna moved Gala's image to a smaller shrine. Enraged, Gala marched on Purushottam with his army. However, upon witnessing Indradyumna's divine preparations and the presence of celestial beings, Gala realized his error, repented, and assisted Indradyumna instead. Brahma then descended to earth, formally dedicated the grand temple, and installed the four wooden deities. His life's purpose fulfilled, Indradyumna entrusted the care of the temple to King Gala and ascended to Brahmaloak.

Other ancient texts, such as the Brahma Purana, Narada Purana, and Padma Purana, contain versions of this legend but lack the profound detail found in the Skanda Purana. The Brahma and Narada Puranas mention only three deities—Balabhadra, Subhadra, and Jagannath—and state that Brahma and Vishnu created them jointly. The Brahma Purana also uniquely claims that stone from the Vindhya mountains was imported for the temple's construction. However, it is the Skanda Purana that introduces the intricate details of the four-armed forms of Balabhadra and Jagannath, the creation of Sudarshana, and the historical interlude involving King Gala's temporary takeover of the shrine.

Jagannath in Sarala Das's Mahabharat:

According to the Utkala Khanda of the Skanda Purana, the origin of Lord Jagannath begins after the Great Deluge, when Vishnu promised Brahma that He would dwell at Purushottam (Puri) as **Nila Madhava** to grant humanity salvation. To appease Yama, the God of Death, whose duties were impeded by the site's immense sacredness, Vishnu vowed that this physical form would eventually vanish. During the Satya Yuga, the devout King Indradyumna of Avanti sought a direct vision of Vishnu and dispatched his royal priest, Vidyapati, to Utkal. There, Vidyapati met the tribal Saora leader Viswvasu, who secretly worshipped Nila Madhava atop the Nilgiri hill near the Kalpa Vriksha and Rohini Kunda. Though Viswvasu allowed the priest to see the deity, Nila Madhava buried Himself beneath the sand shortly after Vidyapati returned to Avanti, fulfilling Vishnu's prior promise to Yama.

Guided by the celestial sage Narada, a devastated King Indradyumna arrived at Purushottam to find the deity gone, but was consoled by a divine prophecy that God would instead manifest as four wooden figures. After the king organized a grand thousand-horse sacrifice, a miraculous, glowing red tree (**Daru**) bearing a conch shell

mark—formed from a strand of Vishnu's hair—washed ashore. A heavenly voice instructed Indradyumna to bring the sacred wood to the Mahavedi and seal it inside a pavilion for fifteen days with a mysterious elderly carpenter, who was actually Vishnu in disguise. To prevent anyone from hearing the carving process, which the voice warned would bring severe doom, loud musical instruments were played continuously outside; exactly fifteen days later, the majestic wooden images of **Balarama, Subhadra, Jagannath, and Sudarshana** were revealed.

Following the revelation of the idols, Indradyumna constructed a magnificent temple and traveled to Brahmaloak to invite Lord Brahma to consecrate it. Because Brahma was deeply engrossed in a celestial music festival, an entire earthly generation passed due to the dilation of time, allowing a local ruler named King Gala to seize the empty temple and install his own idol. When Indradyumna hurried back to Earth, an initially hostile Gala witnessed the king's divine preparations, repented, and assisted him before Brahma descended to formally consecrate the grand temple and install the four wooden deities. This comprehensive narrative remains uniquely detailed in the Skanda Purana, whereas other ancient texts like the Brahma and Narada Puranas only mention three deities and omit crucial events like the creation of Sudarshana and King Gala's temporary takeover.

Lord Jagannath in Deula Tola

The traditional Odia narrative poem "Deula Tola" (Temple Construction), authored by Krishna Dasa, offers a profound perspective on the origins of Lord Jagannath, blending themes of devotion, humility, and cultural synthesis. The legend commences with King Indradyumna of Malwa, who dispatched his Brahmin priest, Vidyapati, on a quest to locate the deity Nila Madhava. Deep within the eastern jungles, Vidyapati discovered that a tribal Saora chief named Viswvasu secretly worshipped the deity. After marrying the chief's daughter, Lalita, the priest was granted a vision of Nila Madhava, who declared his intention to abandon his current form—which accepted only wild fruits—to manifest as *Daru Brahma* (a wooden deity) and receive elaborate cooked offerings. Cleverly dropping a trail of sesame seeds, Vidyapati mapped the secret route and returned to inform his king.

Empowered by this knowledge, King Indradyumna led a massive imperial army into the sacred tribal territory to claim the deity. However, enraged by the king's sheer arrogance and display of military might, Nila Madhava vanished from the site. In his frustration, Indradyumna unjustly accused the tribal Saoras of hiding the idol and besieged their village. It was only through the fervent prayers of Viswvasu that a divine voice manifested, reprimanding the king. The voice commanded Indradyumna to release the indigenous people and instructed him to construct a magnificent temple atop Niladri Hill, promising that the Lord would return only after the monumental task was completed with true devotion.

Following the divine mandate, Indradyumna erected an awe-inspiring temple and subsequently traveled to Brahmaloak (heaven) to personally invite Lord Brahma to consecrate it. However, the celestial realm operated on a vastly different scale of time;

while Brahma merely finished a brief meditation, entire aeons passed on Earth. During the king's prolonged absence, massive sandstorms swept across the Nilgiri region, completely burying the grand temple beneath towering dunes. Generations later, a local ruler named King Gala Madhava accidentally struck the hidden temple's spire with his horse's hoof while on a hunting expedition. Astonished by the pristine structure hidden beneath the sand, Gala Madhava excavated it and opportunistically claimed the monumental architectural triumph as his own creation.

When King Indradyumna finally returned to Earth accompanied by Lord Brahma, a fierce dispute immediately erupted between him and Gala Madhava over the temple's true ownership. To resolve the conflict equitably, Brahma demanded that the rival kings produce a credible witness to testify to the temple's original construction. The truth was miraculously unveiled by a colony of ancient turtles residing in the nearby Indradyumna tank. The turtles recounted how they had suffered great losses carrying the heavy stones for Indradyumna's original construction, explicitly confirming that Gala Madhava had merely cleared away the accumulated sand. Consequently, Gala Madhava received partial credit for the excavation but was severely cursed by Brahma for his deceit, losing his right to be worshipped or revered in the modern age.

With the temple's ownership rightfully restored but the inner sanctum still devoid of an idol, Indradyumna undertook a severe fast until Jagannath appeared in a dream, guiding him to a sacred wooden log (*Daru*) floating in the sea. Despite the king's deployment of royal elephants and vast armies, the log remained entirely immovable. It was only when the tribal chief Viswvasu and the Brahmin Vidyapati carried it together—symbolizing the essential union of their distinct cultures—that the sacred wood could be transported. Subsequently, a mysterious elderly carpenter, who was Lord Jagannath in disguise, agreed to carve the idols on the strict condition that he be locked inside the temple for twenty-one days. When an anxious Queen Gundicha forced the doors open on the fifteenth day, the divine artisan vanished, leaving behind the iconic, limb-less wooden figures and decreeing that the descendants of the Saoras and Vidyapati would forever serve as the temple's priests and cooks.

In a final, ultimate act of selfless devotion, Lord Jagannath offered Indradyumna any boon he desired as a reward for his unwavering dedication. After establishing a rigorous daily schedule of rituals and offerings for the temple, the righteous king made a shocking request: he asked that his entire royal lineage be permanently extinguished to ensure that no future descendant could ever selfishly claim ownership of the sacred shrine. This intricate mythological narrative of "Deula Tola" beautifully mirrors the actual historical evolution of the Jagannath cult. What originated as an indigenous tribal tradition rooted deeply among the Savara people gradually merged with mainstream Vaishnavism under the profound influence of spiritual luminaries like Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanuja, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a cultural synthesis that was ultimately institutionalized when the Ganga dynasty constructed the monumental Puri temple in the twelfth century.

Lord Jagannath in Kanchi Kaberi Legend:

Another intriguing narrative has Jagannath and Balabhadra becoming wayward knights to help a devotee. Purushottam Deva, the Raja of Puri, was set to marry Padmavati, the daughter of the Raja of Kanchi. Once, his future father-in-law came to see the Rath Yatra. He was startled to discover his daughter's betrothed cleaning the ground in front of the chariots with a golden broom. He works as a sweeper; this Orissan king has no caste, he reasoned, and resolved not to marry his daughter to such a despicable person. How could he have known that this ritual sweeping represented the equality of all men in God's eyes? Purushottam, enraged by the insult, declared war on the Raja of Kanchi, but was defeated. He prayed to Jagannath for assistance before setting out again towards the south with his troops. This time, without his knowledge, his army was headed by Jagannath on a black horse and his brother Balabhadra on a snow-white horse. The two brothers were quite thirsty during their journey. So they pawned a ring, purchased curds from Manika, the cowherd woman, and drank their fill. Purushottom was successful this time and came home with Padmavati as a gift. But he had decided against marrying her. He had pledged to marry her to a sweeper. But when Rath Yatra returned and he was sweeping the floor around the chariots, his clever minister summoned Padmavati and gave her over to the Raja, telling him that because he was now a sweeper, he should marry her and thereby honour his pledge. And everyone was delighted. To this day, the Raja of Puri performs the ceremonial sweeping of the chariot platforms.

Lord Jagannath in the Lakshmi Purana

The sixteenth-century Odia narrative poem *Lakshmi Purana*, composed by Balarama Dasa, beautifully humanizes the divine by portraying Lord Jagannath and his family with relatable earthly imperfections. The text chronicles a pivotal domestic dispute that begins when Lakshmi, Jagannath's wife, visits the home of an outcast woman. When she attempts to return to the grand temple, an orthodox Balabhadra convinces his younger brother Jagannath to block her entry until she purifies herself. Insulted by this rigid adherence to social hierarchy, Lakshmi defends her honor, casts off her divine jewelry at her husband's feet, and leaves the temple. Before departing, she issues a powerful curse: the royal brothers will be deprived of food entirely until they are forced to accept a meal served directly from her, the very woman they rejected as untouchable.

Through her divine wiles, Lakshmi ensures her curse comes to pass, reducing the proud deities to starving, destitute beggars. After enduring immense humiliation and hunger, Jagannath and Balabhadra are ultimately forced to eat food prepared and served by Lakshmi. When a humbled Jagannath silently accepts her vehement scolding and begs for her return, Lakshmi establishes a revolutionary, non-negotiable condition for her forgiveness. She demands that the temple's sacred food must forever transcend all social divisions, requiring that devotees of every caste—from high-ranking Brahmins to marginalized sweepers—partake in the holy meals together without prejudice. Recognizing their hubris, the brothers agree to this egalitarian mandate, and the divine couple returns to the temple side by side, cementing the casteless tradition of Jagannath's sacred food.

Beyond this mythological narrative advocating for social equality, historical and anthropological analyses further emphasize the deity's deeply inclusive tribal roots. Historian William Hunter observed that primitive forest tribes originally worshipped a Blue Stone as the Dravidian God Nilamadhava, offering him raw food, a practice that eventually merged with Aryan traditions of offering cooked food. Additionally, indigenous groups like the Saura or Savara tribes continue to worship trees as "Kitung" or the Nature God, believing the divine spirit resides within the wood. This tribal deity is also referred to as *Jagant*, which locals associate with the tenth incarnation of Vishnu. This suggests that the name "Jagannath" does not stem from classical Pali or Sanskrit, but is actually derived from the ancient Austric word *Jagant*, reflecting the profound aboriginal foundations of the modern Hindu cult.

Jagannath and the Spirit of Unity in Diversity

The profound culture of Lord Jagannath in Odisha stands as a monumental testament to the enduring philosophy of "Unity in Diversity." Despite enduring numerous external cultural invasions and internal cross-cultural barriers throughout its history, the region has fiercely preserved this cohesive identity. Odisha is a vibrant tapestry of multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, and multireligious communities, yet every follower finds a common, unifying platform in "Jagannath Dhama" or Puri. This uniquely inclusive culture actively discourages communalism, casteism, and fundamentalism by upholding the inherent dignity of every individual, regardless of caste, color, or creed. By embracing a wide spectrum of traditions and beliefs, Jagannath culture proves that true unity does not demand strict uniformity, but rather thrives on the harmonious integration of distinct, diverse elements into an integrated whole.

This remarkable diversity is deeply rooted in the region's geographical and linguistic evolution. The modern state of Odisha is a consolidation of several ancient territories, including Odra, Utkal, Kalinga, Kangoda, Dakshina Kosala, and Trikalinga. Correspondingly, the contemporary Odia script and rich literary traditions evolved from the ancient Odramagadhi script utilized across these diverse tracts. As a result, the widespread worship of Lord Jagannath transcends specific physical boundaries, taking root from Puri in the east to Gajapati and Aska in the west, north, and south. Within these varied landscapes, countless castes and tribal communities continue to celebrate the deity's festivals and perform sacred rituals strictly in accordance with their own unique regional customs, geographically sustaining the expansive reach of the Jagannath faith.

Historically and theologically, the Jagannath cult represents an unparalleled synthesis of indigenous tribal traditions and mainstream Indian religions. According to ancient lore and Puranic texts, Lord Jagannath was originally worshipped by the aboriginal Sabar tribes as Nila Madhava, a blue stone deity, before Aryan influences transitioned the worship to the current wooden figures (*Daru Brahma*). The continued prominent role of the Daitapatis—priests descended from these hill tribes—in executing temple rites highlights this seamless aboriginal-Hindu integration. Furthermore, the temple's deepest chambers and daily rituals (*Vidhis*) reflect a profound absorption of diverse spiritual doctrines. The triad of deities is often linked to Jainism's *Triratha* (Samyak Darshan,

Samyak Jnana, and Samyak Charita), alongside vivid echoes of Buddhism from Emperor Ashoka's era, ultimately seamlessly blending with Hindu Saivism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism.

The very name "Jagannath"—meaning "Jagatara Natha" or "Lord of the Universe"—embodies a universal essence that cannot be confined to a single race, religion, or language. While traditional society often faces divisions based on biological distinctions, linguistic differences, or religious rivalries, the culture of Shrikshetra completely absorbs and transcends these traditional boundaries. It establishes an emotional and spiritual unification that binds the multi-hued society of Odisha together with a profound "we-feeling." The global appeal of this culture lies precisely in its vibrant multiplicity; it does not paint the world in monolithic black or white, but rather draws its strength, allure, and enduring potency from the diverse array of human experiences and faiths that coalesce in devotion to the supreme deity.

This inclusive philosophy is most magnificently showcased during the world-renowned Car Festival (Rath Yatra), which begins its meticulous preparations on Vaisakha Sukla Tritiya. The festival features three colossal, uniquely designed chariots that transport the deities to the Gundicha Temple. Lord Jagannath rides the towering **Nandighosh**, which stands 33 cubits and 5 inches tall, rolls on 16 massive wheels, and is draped in vibrant red and yellow cloth with Garuda as its charioteer. Goddess Subhadra travels in the **Darpadalana**, a 31-cubit-tall chariot with 12 wheels, covered in red and black. Finally, Lord Balabhadra's chariot, the **Taladhvaja**, reaches 32 cubits and 10 inches in height, utilizes 14 wheels, and is adorned in red and blue. Constructed from thousands of precisely crafted wooden components, these spectacular moving temples serve as a grand, mobile platform where the divine steps out of the sanctum to grace people of all backgrounds.

The absolute pinnacle of social equality and ultimate justice in the Jagannath tradition is beautifully demonstrated during the festival through the sacred ritual of *Chherapahanra*. On the day the deities are ceremoniously placed upon their magnificent chariots, the Raja of Puri—acknowledged as the descendant of sovereign emperors and the chief administrator of the temple—steps forward to humbly sweep the floors of the chariots with a golden broom. Watched with rapt devotion by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, this deeply symbolic act vividly demonstrates that in the eyes of the Supreme Lord, the highest political ruler is no different from the most marginalized sweeper. By obliterating social hierarchies and human pride, this profound practice immortalizes the egalitarian spirit of Jagannath culture, offering humanity an eternal blueprint for true unity in diversity.

Tribal Connections in Jagannath Worship

The profound connection between Lord Jagannath and indigenous tribal traditions forms the very bedrock of his worship, a narrative extensively corroborated by Puranic texts, medieval Odia literature, and vibrant local folklore. According to the foundational legend detailed in the Skanda Purana and later echoed in Sarala Das's fifteenth-century

Mahabharata, the deity was originally worshipped secretly in the dense forests as a blue stone image named **Nila Madhava** by a Sabara tribal chieftain named **Viswavas**. When King Indradyumna of Avanti dispatched his priest, Vidyapati, to find the Lord, Vidyapati gained access to the shrine only through the grace of the tribal chief. Though Nila Madhava vanished before the king could arrive with his massive army, the grieving monarch was instructed through a divine vision to recover a sacred floating log, or *Daru*, from the sea. A divine carpenter—often identified as Vishwakarma—agreed to carve the idols from this wood on the condition of absolute privacy. When Queen Gundicha impatiently forced the doors open before the agreed fifteen days, the artisan vanished, leaving behind the abstract, limb-less wooden figures of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra that perfectly mirror the unrefined, deeply symbolic artistic expressions of indigenous cultures.

This mythological transition from a tribal forest deity to a grand temple idol represents a masterful synthesis of aboriginal and Aryan traditions. Literary masterpieces like Sarala Das's *Mahabharata* highlight this integration by depicting the tribal fowler, Jara Sabara, and the Aryan priest, Vasu, working together to lift the sacred *Daru* when the king's massive armies failed. This powerful act symbolizes the immense prestige granted to the tribal people of Odisha and establishes a unique, casteless devotion at the core of the cult. Furthermore, British historian William Hunter noted that while primitive inhabitants initially offered the Blue Stone raw, uncooked food, later Aryan influences introduced elaborate Brahminical rituals and cooked offerings. Remarkably, rather than erasing the tribal past, the Jagannath shrine seamlessly accommodates the coexistence of both indigenous and Vedic worship practices to this day.

The linguistic and anthropological roots of the deity further cement this aboriginal heritage. Historians point out that ancient Odishan regions like Kosala and Odra were renowned for their vibrant Sabara culture, which centered around tree worship and venerating wooden logs known as *Daru Devata*. The Sabara people worshipped a supreme Nature God called **Kitung**, whose ultimate manifestation was known as **Jagant**—a striking phonetic precursor to the name Jagannath. In this tradition, the worship of trees represents a foundational feminine life force from which the cosmos evolved. This deep reverence for nature explains one of the most distinctive anomalies of Jagannath worship: while traditional Hindu deities are almost exclusively crafted from stone or metal, the idols of the Puri triad are distinctly made of wood, preserving the ancient, vital connection between humanity, nature, and the divine spirit.

As the worship of Nila Madhava evolved, it absorbed elements from major religious movements—including Shaivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Jainism—eventually leading to the conceptualization of the triad, where each wooden figure represents a dominant spiritual sect. Yet, despite this extensive Hinduization and philosophical expansion, the absolute core of the temple's most intimate rituals remains strictly in the hands of the tribal people. The descendants of the original Sabara worshippers, known today as the **Daitapatis** or *Daitas*, hold exclusive, hereditary privileges as temple servitors.

These indigenous priests are indispensable during the temple's most crucial and sacred events. During the Snana Yatra (bathing festival) and the world-famous Rath Yatra (vehicle festival), the deities are entrusted entirely to their care. Most profoundly, during the highly secretive **Navakalebara** ceremony—which occurs every 12 to 18 years when the old wooden idols are ritually buried and replaced with newly carved ones—the Daitapatis are the sole individuals permitted to perform the intimate bodily transfer of the divine spirit (Brahma Padartha). By maintaining these exclusive tribal rights within one of the largest orthodox Hindu temples in the world, the Jagannath tradition beautifully and eternally honors its aboriginal origins.

Jain Influences on Lord Jagannath: A Historical Perspective

Aside from these three sectarian ideas, various "otherisms" have found a place within the framework of Jagannath Consciousness. The goal of Jainism is to raise the Individual Soul's (Purusa) identification with the ineffable Jagat-Purusa. Known by Jainas such as Rishabhanatha and Parshvanatha, this Jagat-Purusa is Jagannath, the idolatrous incarnation of Cosmic Consciousness, signifying a Purusa to be worshipped. Together, Lord Balabhadra, Goddess Subhadra, and Lord Jagannath represent the Jaina Trinity (triratna). They stand for the qualities of Samyak-janana (perfect knowledge), Samyak-caritra (perfect conduct), and Samyak-dristi (perfect vision).

Buddhist Influences on Lord Jagannath

Buddhism played a foundational role in the conceptualization and widespread diffusion of Jagannath consciousness, embedding profound historical, moral, and iconographic intersections into the ancient cult. Unlike traditional Hindu deities, Lord Jagannath's uniquely abstract form—specifically his glaringly prominent round eyes—is deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy, symbolizing *Sambodhi* (complete awakening), *Prajna* (the highest knowledge), and *Samyak Dristi* (the correct perspective). Expanding on this conceptual alignment, Western scholar General Cunningham theorized that the central triad of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra directly corresponds to the Buddhist *Triratnas* (Three Jewels): Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. This connection is further amplified by the deities resting upon the *Ratnavedi* (jeweled pedestal), mirroring the Buddhist pursuit of salvation from the illusionary world, while enduring legends suggest that Lord Buddha's sacred tooth relic is actually preserved within the wooden image of Jagannath itself. Many of the temple's most famous traditions heavily echo Buddhist customs; historians like W. W. Hunter have drawn striking parallels between the Ratha Yatra (Car Festival) and ancient Buddhist tooth relic processions, while the annual Snana Yatra (bathing festival) and the radically egalitarian sharing of *Kaivalya* (sacred food) across all castes reflect core Buddhist social tenets of equality. Historically, during the seventh and eighth centuries, Vajrayana Buddhists revered Lord Jagannath as a unifying spiritual force that successfully harmonized the diverse religious beliefs of indigenous tribes like the Odras and Nagas. This deep-rooted syncretism is thoroughly substantiated by centuries of literary and cultural evidence: the name "Jagannath" is used synonymously with Buddha in Tibet, and the twelfth-century Vaishnava poet Jayadeva

famously recognized Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, seamlessly linking the two divine figures. Furthermore, the fifteenth-century Odia poet Sarala Das explicitly portrayed Jagannath as a Buddha-like savior in his *Mahabharata*, declaring that the Lord manifested as Buddha to save humanity, a sentiment beautifully echoed in the *Daru Brahma Gita*, which states that the Lord deliberately relinquished his hands and legs to assume this profound, abstract form.

Brahminical origin of Lord Jagannath

Sects including Vaishnavism, Saktism, and Saivism have made a bigger contribution to the robust development of Jagannath culture. Saivism holds that the greatest principle is Lord Siva. With the ability to create, act, and destroy, he is the universe's ruler. According to Saivist theory, Lord Jagannath in the Grand Temple is regarded as Vairava. As Kalagni Rudra and Maharudra (the world-destroying facets of Siva), Lord Balabhadra is revered in the Utkal Khanda of the Skandha Purana. The goddess Subhadra, who represents the highest energy, is revered as Durga Maheswari. In Jagannath tradition, motherhood has been understood as Sakti. The manifestation of Saktism in Jagannath culture is the worship of Vimala as Mahasaraswati, Mahalaksmi, and Mohakali. Furthermore, there are three energetic facets to the cosmic power. These are symbolised by Balabhadra, Jagannath, and Subhadra, respectively, and are Icchasakti (will power), Jnanasakti (wise power), and Kriyasakti (working power).

- Unlike other Hindu deities, **Jagannath does not adhere to conventional iconography**. His unique, abstract form is said to represent inclusivity, embracing **tribal, Buddhist, Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava traditions**.
- The **Rath Yatra (Chariot Festival)** is a prime example of Jagannath's all-encompassing nature, where people from all castes, communities, and backgrounds participate.

The Cultural Tapestry of Lord Jagannath Worship

"Culture" represents the complex, deeply ingrained way of life and beliefs developed by a community over centuries, and within the vast, multifaceted tapestry of Indian traditions, "Jagannath Culture" stands out as a profoundly unifying spiritual force for the people of Odisha. This monumental institution encompasses an extraordinary scale of devotion, physically represented by 931 temples across the state—including 429 single-god shrines—and sustained through a rich corpus of mythic literature, over 50 intricate festivals, and 92 distinct types of *sevakas* (servants) responsible for the Puri temple's intricate daily operations. However, the true magnificence of Sri Jagannath is intertwined with the deep historical and aboriginal roots of Odisha, which are most visibly preserved today by the *Daitas*. These hereditary temple servants, who proudly trace their lineage to the indigenous Sarava tribes, are granted exclusive care of the deities during major public events like the *Snana Yatra* (bathing festival) and *Rath Yatra* (vehicle festival). Furthermore, they play an indispensable, deeply sacred role in the *Navakalebara* ceremony, performing the intimate burial rites and bodily transformation of the wooden idols every 12 to 18 years, thereby seamlessly weaving ancient tribal heritage into the living, breathing spiritual history of the region.

The Nabakalebara Ceremony

The philosophical foundation of the Nabakalebara ceremony is deeply rooted in the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation, illustrating that while the physical body is mortal, the indwelling soul (*Atman*) remains imperishable. Drawing directly from the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna explains that just as a person discards old, worn-out clothes for new ones, the soul seamlessly transitions from an old body to a new one. Following this universal law, the supreme Lord Jagannath—revered as the ultimate *Purusottama* who transcends the perishable material world and gender binaries—undergoes a literal physical renewal every 11 to 19 years. Through this extraordinary ritual, the Lord communicates a profound spiritual truth to humanity: everything in the physical realm is entirely mortal, with the sole exception of the divine, immortal soul.

Literally translating to "new embodiment" (from the Odia words *Naba* for new and *Kalebara* for body), the Nabakalebara is a highly intricate and entirely unique rite exclusive to the Jagannath Temple in Puri, recognized as *Martya Vaikuntha* (the divine abode on earth). Established historically by Maharaja Indradyumna, this grand *Brahamotsava* serves as a massive, deeply solemn expansion of the annual Car Festival. The absolute climax of this event is the highly secretive *Ghata Paribartan*, where the *Brahma-Padartha* (the imperishable divine life substance) is carefully transferred from the decaying wooden frames of Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra, and Sudarshan into their newly carved forms, perfectly mirroring the continuous human cycle of death and rebirth.

The necessity of this physical replacement is strictly dictated by ancient scriptural mandates regarding the lifespan of worship materials. According to texts like the *Bruhat Samhita* and *Srimad Bhagabat Mahapurana*, while stone idols can last ten thousand years and metal ones a thousand, sacred wooden images (*Daru Bigraha*) have an inherent durability of roughly 8 to 19 years before internal decay sets in. Furthermore, the physical bodies (*Sri Angas*) of the deities endure immense structural stress from being regularly pulled, dragged, hoisted, and poked during the rigorous *Pahandi* rituals of the annual Snana Yatra and Rath Yatra. To prevent the sacred wood from deteriorating completely, the physical vessels must be renewed while the ultimate divine substance inside them remains entirely intact.

The material chosen for these new physical forms is not arbitrary; the idols must be meticulously crafted from the sacred Neem tree, which holds immense scientific, religious, and ethical importance. Scientifically, neem naturally purifies its environment and remains highly resistant to destructive insects. In Hindu tradition, the Neem tree is revered as a *Dev-Brikhya* (divine tree), elevating it to the sacred status of the Peepal or Ashvattha tree, with its roots symbolizing Brahma, its trunk Vishnu, and its leaves Shiva. Etymologically, the root word *Da* in *Daru* means "to take away," signifying that worshipping these sacred wooden forms eradicates human suffering while successfully granting the devotee's four ultimate desires: *Ayu* (longevity), *Sri* (wealth), *Bala* (strength), and *Vijaya* (victory).

To manage the various circumstances under which the deities might require physical intervention, the temple classifies the Nabakalebara into three distinct categories. The *Purnanga Nabakalebara* (Complete Renewal) is the most elaborate, encompassing the sacred search for the perfect Neem trees, elaborate fire sacrifices (*Yajna*), carving new idols, and the final transfer of the *Brahma*. The *Ansika-Nabakalebara* (Partial Renewal), also known as *Sri Angafita*, involves minor but essential structural repairs conducted secretly during the *Anasara* period to preserve the integrity of the wood. Finally, the *Special Nabakalebara* is a historically vital emergency rite performed after the temple faced external invasions; to protect the deities, they were often buried underground (*Patali*), requiring a specialized renewal ceremony to purify and restore them before they could be triumphantly reinstalled upon the *Ratnavedi*.

Car Festival:

As the crown jewel of the Vaishnavite religion, the Sri Jagannath Temple in Puri hosts an astonishing 108 festivals annually, but none is more globally renowned than the Rathayatra, or Car Festival, celebrated every year during the rainy month of Asadha (June–July). The timing of this grand event is profoundly symbolic; the word for year, "barsa," is derived directly from the word for rain, which brings vital life and rejuvenation to humanity. Metaphorically, the rainy season encapsulates the essence of all the earth's seasons—its easterly breezes mimic spring, its fluctuating temperatures reflect the extremes of summer and winter, and its sudden downpours create an autumnal atmosphere. This makes the season a perfect microcosmic backdrop for a festival built on ultimate cultural synthesis. During this sacred period, the deities emerge from the Shri Mandir to embark on a three-kilometer journey down the Grand Road (Bada Danda) to the Gundicha garden house. They travel upon magnificent, towering wooden chariots, each carrying deep philosophical significance. Lord Jagannath rides the "Nandighosha" (the Call of Bliss), giving the event the alternate name "Ghosa Yatra," which announces *Ananda*—the perpetual, unalloyed joy of attaining Brahmanhood, a concept affirmed by both the Bhagavad Gita and the Chhandogya Upanishad. He is accompanied by Lord Balabhadra on the "Taladwaja" (the Splendour of Wholeness) and Goddess Subhadra, alongside Lord Sudarshan, on the "Darpadalana" (the Removal of Vanity), creating a breathtaking, mobile spectacle of divine grace.

Beyond its immense religious and philosophical grandeur, the Car Festival stands as a monumental symbol of universal brotherhood, social equality, and seamless international integration. As hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from across the globe converge in Puri, individual identities, racial divisions, and cultural differences dissolve completely into a vast, unified ocean of humanity. This deeply egalitarian ethos is most powerfully demonstrated through the festival's most humbling ritual, wherein the Maharaja of Puri ceremonially sweeps the floors of the three immense chariots, vividly illustrating that in the eyes of the Supreme Lord, the highest sovereign and the humblest citizen are absolute equals. Throughout the Rathayatra, all orthodox social barriers are dismantled; devotees of every conceivable caste, creed, and religion are warmly welcomed to approach, embrace, and pull the sacred chariots. Furthermore, the divine food offerings—including

dry rice, Nirmalaya, and Mahaprasad—are shared and consumed collectively by everyone without a trace of hierarchical prejudice. By actively promoting community peace, harmony, and a strictly casteless society, the Rathayatra transcends traditional religious boundaries, offering a beautiful, living manifestation of true cultural inclusivity.

Cultural Transformation in Odisha: Challenges and Changes

A. Arts and Architecture

Odisha is globally renowned for its sacred shrines, architectural prowess, and rich sculptural embellishments. From the eighth to the thirteenth century A.D., Bhubaneswar—the "Temple City"—served as a testing ground for daring architectural innovations, with landmarks like the Mukteswar, Rajarani, and Lingaraj temples. However, Kalinga architecture reaches its absolute zenith in the Jagannath Temple in Puri, profoundly influencing temple-building styles across eastern India.

The Jagannath Temple is built atop a 20-foot-tall mound known as Nilagiri. The complex is enclosed by the Meghanada Prachira (outer walls), measuring 665 by 644 feet, built of dressed laterite stones reaching heights of 20 to 24 feet. These walls, likely erected during Purusottama Deva's reign to thwart foreign aggression, feature four main gates: the Simhadvara (Lion Gate) to the east, the Hastidvara (Elephant Gate) to the north, the Asvadvara (Horse Gate) to the south, and the Khanjaduara (service gate) to the west. Guarding the eastern entrance is the stunning Aruna Stambha, a 33-foot, 8-inch monolithic black chlorite pillar topped by Garuda, which was relocated from Konark by the Marathas.

Entering through the east, one climbs the famous *Baisi Pahacha* (twenty-two steps) flanked by double walls to reach the 420 by 315-foot inner enclosure. The main temple, or Vimana, rises from an 80-foot-square pedestal to a towering height of 192 feet. Its rich sculptures were covered with a thick layer of lime mortar ("plastered and whitewashed") during the reign of Surya Vamsi King Prataparudra to protect the structure. Alongside the architecture, Jagannath culture heavily influenced regional arts, including traditional Pattachitra paintings that depict temple lore, and Odissi dance and music, which evolved as devotional offerings to the deity.

The Jagamohana

The porch, known as the Jagamohana, sits on an 80-foot plinth. Its walls rise vertically to 31 feet 6 inches before giving way to an overhanging cornice that protrudes over five feet. While originally unsupported, historical damage required reinforcements using wrought iron architraves and mild steel rails. Inside, sturdy square pillars divide the space into a central nave and two aisles, with the walls reaching an immense thickness of 18 feet. It is accessible through four distinct doors leading to the sanctum and other halls.

The Natamandapa

Significantly older than the main temple and porch, the Natamandapa (Dancing Hall) measures 69 by 67 feet internally and is divided into a central nave and aisles by four rows of simple, square pillars. While the hall is generally devoid of heavy sculptural ornamentation, its eastern side walls have recently been decorated with intricate Pattachitra-style murals.

The Bhogamandapa

The Bhogamandapa (Hall of Offerings) was originally part of the Konark temple complex before being dismantled and reconstructed in Puri by the Marathas in the eighteenth century. Standing on a highly ornamented 7-foot, 6-inch plinth, the red sandstone structure is adorned with an abundance of exquisite carvings. Its green chlorite door frames are lavishly decorated, featuring a Navagraha architrave supported by two pillars. A covered corridor safely connects the Bhogamandapa to the temple kitchens, ensuring the sacred offerings are protected from contamination during transit.

B. Language and Literature

The state identity of Odisha is inextricably tied to the Jagannath cult, which played a pivotal role in the development and flourishing of the Odia language. Medieval Odia poets, most notably Balarama Dasa and Jagannath Dasa, composed vast bodies of devotional poetry dedicated to the Lord. Furthermore, classical Sanskrit works like Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* were fully incorporated into the temple's daily rituals, bridging classical and regional literary traditions.

C. Socio-Political Identity

The cultural transformation of Odisha was deeply theocratic. The rulers of Odisha, from the powerful Ganga dynasty to the Gajapati kings, did not declare absolute sovereignty. Instead, they positioned themselves strictly as "Rauta" (deputies or servants) of Lord Jagannath. This solidified a unique regional consciousness where Lord Jagannath is recognized as the true sovereign and "Lord of the Odia people."

D. Religious Syncretism

The Jagannath tradition is the ultimate embodiment of religious inclusivity, harmoniously merging elements from several distinct spiritual sects:

- **Tribal Worship:** Represented by the *Daru Brahma* concept, where the supreme deity is worshipped in the form of wooden logs.
- **Buddhist Influence:** Reflected in the triad's distinct resemblance to the three Buddhist refuges (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha).
- **Shaivism:** Integrated through connections linking Lord Jagannath and Balabhadra to Shiva and Bhairava worship.
- **Vaishnavism:** Culminating in the mainstream identification of the triad as Krishna, Balarama, and Subhadra.

Dainandina Niti (Daily Rituals) and Temple Administration

The operational heartbeat of the temple is its complex system of *nitis* (religious ceremonies). To manage these intricate, multifaceted rites, the 13th-century Ganga ruler Raja Anangabhima Deva established a highly organized administrative structure known as the *Chhattisa nijoga*, initially consisting of 36 distinct associations of hereditary servitors (*sevakas*). Over the centuries, this expanded significantly; the 1952 Record of Rights documents 119 different types of *sevakas*, ranging from Pujapandas (priests) and Suarabadus (cooks) to Rupakaras (artisans) and Chitrakaras (painters).

At the apex of this administration is the Gajapati Maharaja of Puri, who serves as the *Adya sevaka* (first servitor) and traditional superintendent. On any given day, an average of 70 to 80 *sevakas* perform the ceremonial services. Though they do not receive a standard salary from the Temple Administration, they are compensated with *Khei* (a designated share of the royal food offerings) and *Purashkar* (daily monetary incentives or festival bonuses). The temple's schedule revolves around three types of *nitis*: daily rituals running from 5:00 AM to midnight, occasional rituals for specific astrological or lunar events (like Ekadasi or eclipses), and massive festive rituals taking place outside the main temple, such as the Snana Yatra and Rath Yatra.

Lord Jagannath in India and Beyond: Theological Evolution and Socio-Cultural Integration

The Sri Jagannath Temple in Puri holds profound national and historical significance, serving as the ultimate unifying symbol of the Orissan kingdom. Under the Imperial Gangas, whose empire expanded from Tamralipti in the north to Rajahmundry in the south, the deity was established as the true sovereign of the state, with the human king acting merely as his royal deputy. The immense wealth and religious prominence of the temple inevitably attracted the attention of medieval Muslim monarchs and their court chroniclers. Persian historical accounts, such as Shams-i-Siraj Afif's *Tarikh-I-Firuz Shahi*, detail how rulers like Sultan Firuz Shah invaded the prosperous region of Jajnapur (Cuttack), looted the capital, and captured the sacred idol, highlighting how the political and military history of ancient Odisha was inextricably entwined with the defense and veneration of Lord Jagannath.

The theological evolution of the Jagannath cult is rooted in a complex historical friction between introspective spiritual movements and orthodox Brahminism. Following the Mahabharata War, the rising popularity of the Bhagabat religion, alongside Jainism and Buddhism, shifted societal focus away from traditional Vedic sun worship and animal sacrifices (*yagna*). To counter this ideological shift, proponents of a state-sponsored Brahminical resurgence—particularly heavily supported during the Gupta dynasty—systematically attempted to assimilate these popular faiths. Through newly authored Puranic literature, they actively propagated the narrative that foundational figures like Vasudeva Krishna, Gautam Buddha, and ultimately Lord Jagannath were merely traditional incarnations or manifestations of the Vedic Sun-god or Lord Vishnu, thereby securing the survival of orthodox Brahminical authority.

Despite these historical attempts to categorically define him as a traditional Vaishnavite incarnation, Lord Jagannath remains a conceptually transcendent and unique phenomenon. While he is frequently adorned with the prefix "Purushottama" (The Perfect Man) or linked to avatars like Srikrishna and Nrusingha, 17th-century Odia poet Dibakar Das argued that Jagannath defies such limiting qualitative definitions. Unlike orthodox deities bound by specific attributes, Jagannath is *Gunatita*—a supreme, all-encompassing being who transcends rational boundaries and traditional qualitative explanations. This deeply syncretic nature propelled the cult's influence far beyond the borders of Odisha into Bengal, Assam, Manipur, and South India, eventually achieving a massive global presence in the modern era through the ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) movement.

The historical narrative surrounding the Jagannath Temple is also marked by the harsh realities of medieval political greed, which often transcended religious affiliations. While Persian chronicles frequently highlighted the iconoclastic expeditions of Muslim conquerors, the temple's staggering wealth made it a universal target for plunderers of all denominations. Notably, historical records indicate that one of the most devastating acts of temple desecration and betrayal was orchestrated not by a foreign invader, but by a Hindu prince named Kesodas Maro. This stark historical fact illustrates that in the medieval pursuit of riches, neither shared religious identity nor the immense reverence for the Supreme Lord could entirely shield the sacred institution from the avarice of opportunistic rulers.

Parallel to the temple's theological and political dominance, a revolutionary socio-cultural institution emerged during the medieval era: the *Bhagabata Ghara* (or *Bhagabata Tungi*). Established after Jagannath Das translated the *Bhagavata* into Odia during the reign of Suryavamsi King Prataparudra Deva, these grassroots centers spread widely across rural Odisha, becoming particularly concentrated in the Mahanadi river valleys and western districts like Sambalpur and Kalahandi. Functioning simultaneously as community libraries, night schools, and forums for moral and religious discourse, the *Bhagabata Gharas* provided the rural populace with vital ethical direction and education. By teaching people how to live a civilized and spiritually grounded life, these institutions served as the primary hubs of Odia culture, maintaining their vital educational role well into the colonial era.

The *Bhagabata Ghara* was also the vibrant epicenter for elaborate communal rituals that forged a powerful, shared cultural identity among the Odia people. During the *Bhagabata Sapta*—a sacred seven-day recitation of the scriptures—rural communities would meticulously prepare a decorated space featuring the *Trimurti* (Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra) or *Patitapabana* resting upon a *Vimana* (chariot) or *Khatuli* (cot). Palm-leaf manuscripts were reverently adorned with Chandan and Tulasi flowers, while a sacrificial pit (*Yajnakunda*) was crafted from sand. The profound ceremony culminated with a *Sankirtana* party and a priest ritually bathing the *Salagramachandra* before placing it alongside the deities, mirroring the sanctity of the mythical Naimisaranya.

Ultimately, the enduring strength of the Jagannath cult lies in this seamless translation of grand theology into accessible, everyday rural practices. By listening to the nightly recitations of the Odia *Bhagavata* at the local *Tungis*, villagers were inspired to bring these spiritual variations into their own homes, effectively democratizing religious learning that was once confined to elite Brahminical circles. The vibrant *Melana* festivals—where radiant images of Radha-Krishna from neighboring villages were brought together in a central communal gathering—served as dynamic cultural backdrops that fostered unity and artistic expression. Through these deeply localized institutions and vibrant communal celebrations, the overarching consciousness of Lord Jagannath permeated every layer of society, forever securing his position not merely as a distant sovereign deity, but as the intimate, guiding soul of the Odia people.

Conclusion

Human civilization in Odisha is fundamentally anchored in the organizational system of Jagannath culture, whose profound "cultural uniqueness" is best understood through the analogy of the human body: just as diverse organs are harmoniously united by a single soul, this culture meticulously arranges disparate elements into an integrated whole. Rooted in the rich traditions, language, religion, and folkways of the region, this cosmic consciousness originates in "Jagannath Dham, Puri" in the east and disperses dynamically across the geographic expanse of the state, reaching areas like Aska and Gajapati in the west, north, and south. While the regional coexistence of diverse castes, tribes, and linguistic groups carries the inherent threat of conflicts driven by communality, casteism, linguism, and regionalism, the overarching Jagannath culture successfully transcends these societal limitations. It binds various subcultural and sublinguistic groups within Hinduism under a shared ethos that teaches love, care, and respect for all people. Ultimately, this deep sociocultural integration elevates Lord Jagannath's cosmic consciousness into a powerful ray of hope for universalism and cosmopolitanism; its meaningful, long-lasting system of humanitarian values provides an ethical antidote for a modern world currently being torn apart by terrorism, regional conflicts, religious intolerance, the breakdown of traditional society, and aggressive materialism.

Historically, the sheer religious sacredness and cultural character of Puri have long amazed observers, establishing the town as a formidable Hindu bastion well before the establishment of Muslim control in northern India. Officially designated as "Jagannatha Dhama" of Eastern India during the reign of Anangabhim Deva-III (1212–1238 AD), the sacred town maintained its title through the Muslim era until the British annexation in 1803, when colonial records listed it as "Jugarnath-poore"—the phonetic precursor to its modern name, Puri. Rejecting claims of it being a Buddhist shrine due to insufficient evidence, scholars and archaeological sources instead confirm its ancient origins as a prominent *Shaktapitha* prior to the rise of Vaishnavism. Over centuries, its cultural significance was exponentially enhanced by the construction of numerous *mathas* and modest but highly sacred temples spanning all major Hindu sects. Alongside old Shaiva temples built by the Somavamsi monarchs, the town houses myriad Vaishnavite shrines (including Narasimha, Nilamadhava, Narayana, Sakhi-Gopinatha, Yajna-Narayana, Gopinath, and BenuMadhava) as well as temples dedicated to Gundica, Surya Narayana,

Siddha Mahavira, Daria Mahavira, and Ganesha. The true devotion of the Daitas, Daitapatis, and priests is vividly showcased during the *Navakalevara*—a pan-Indian event that acts as the symbolic meeting point of Brahminical and tribal ceremonies—and the densely packed, globally renowned Ratha Yatra in the month of Ashadha (June/July), where the "Lord of the world" draws massive crowds. As one of India's most culturally important and revered religious sites, this historically rich environment, anchored by its visible early medieval structures, continues to captivate researchers, archaeologists, historians, and pilgrims from all over the globe.

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