



From Festivals to Crafts - The Living Traditions of Jagannath Culture

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Abstract: This article explores the profound cultural significance of Lord Jagannath in Odisha, India. Beyond mere idol worship, Lord Jagannath embodies grace and compassion, shaping rituals, festivals, and social practices in the region. The Jagannath Temple in Puri symbolizes this reverence, fostering inclusivity and egalitarianism. Traditional practices, festivals, culinary traditions, legal and social institutions, and arts and crafts are integral parts of Jagannath culture, reflecting deep-rooted connections to indigenous beliefs. Through an exploration of these aspects, the article highlights Lord Jagannath's enduring influence on various facets of Odia life, promoting social harmony and cultural preservation.

Keywords- Jagannath, culture, rituals, chhatisa nijoga, festivals, crafts

I. Introduction

In Hinduism, particularly in the culturally rich state of Odisha, the reverence for Lord Jagannath transcends mere idol worship. He is regarded as a living deity, embodying grace, compassion, and divine presence in the hearts of devotees. At the heart of this devotion lies the iconic Jagannath Temple in Puri, one of the Char Dham pilgrimage sites, dedicated to Lord Jagannath along with his siblings, Balabhadra and Subhadra ¹. This belief in Lord Jagannath's living presence permeates the religious and cultural fabric of Odisha, shaping the rituals, practices, and collective consciousness of its people.

Lord Jagannath is revered as the Chief among Gods, and His temple, the Bada Deula, stands as the foremost among temples. The pathway in front of His temple is known as Bada Danda, symbolizing its importance. The sea that washes the shores of His sacred Khetra is called Mahodadhi, or the great ocean. The food offered to the Lord is known as Mahaprasad, signifying its sacredness ².

The uniqueness of Lord Jagannath lies in His creation from a sacred Neem tree, known as 'Daru' or 'Mahadaru,' earning Him the revered title of 'Daru Debata.' Scholars have explored the aboriginal tribal origins of the Shree Jagannath Cult, recognizing its deep-rooted connections to indigenous beliefs and practices ³.

Central to the worship in Jagannath Dham is the portrayal of Lord Jagannath alongside His elder brother, Balabhadra, and younger sister, Subhadra, symbolizing universal brotherhood, human unity, and integrity. This representation transcends traditional pairings seen in Hindu mythology, emphasizing inclusivity and egalitarianism within the Shree Jagannath culture.

In the intricate tapestry of Jagannath culture, no task is considered menial or insignificant. This ethos is exemplified by the Gajapati king himself participating in the humble act of sweeping the chariots during festivals, symbolizing the absence of distinctions and hierarchies within the sacred precincts of Jagannath Dham.

Multifaceted Traditions: Socio- cultural, and Religious Significance

Divine Representation and Temple rituals



In Jagannath culture, the perceived gap between humanity and the Divine is bridged, with Lord Jagannath

and his divine siblings considered living deities. The temple rituals intricately mirror the daily activities of a human life, with the Lord engaging in mundane tasks such as brushing teeth, bathing, changing



clothes, and enjoying various festive foods and services.

Social functions such as Deepavali, Payashraddha, and Holi find their place within the sacred confines of the Shree Jagannath Temple, underscoring the intimate relationship between everyday life and divine worship. During the scorching summer months, the Lord is offered a cooling bath with sandalwood paste, adding a touch of earthly comfort to His divine abode.

The unique tradition of 'Nabakalebara' further exemplifies this cultural perspective, wherein Lord Jagannath discards His old body and assumes a new one, with the former body ceremonially cremated in "Koili Baikuntha." This concept envisions God in a human and majestic form, fostering a sense of intimacy and reverence among devotees.

The cultural ethos of Puri finds its essence in Jagannath Culture, intricately woven with various Indian cultural elements and influenced by Vaishnavism. This vibrant cultural tapestry is vividly reflected in the diverse festivals celebrated throughout the city, offering a glimpse into the strong religious character that permeates the entire district of Puri.

Odia individuals actively participate in both individual and communal social functions, drawing inspiration from the festivals of Lord Jagannath. Whether marking the harvest of new produce or celebrating significant life events such as childbirth or marriage, Lord Jagannath occupies a central place in these rituals, symbolizing divine blessings and auspicious beginnings.

The cultural preference in Odisha often includes a desire to pass away in Puri, with the hope of cremation at Swarga Dwara or receiving Baisnabagni from the sacred Rosaghara or sacred Matha for the pyre, underscoring the deep spiritual connection between the individual and the divine, as embodied by Lord Jagannath.

Organizational framework and traditional classes:

The Chhatisa Nijoga introduced by Ananga Bhimadeva stand as pillars within the organizational framework of the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, constituting 36 hereditary service groups entrusted



with specialized responsibilities spanning temple rituals, administration, and community engagement. This intricate system

ensures the smooth functioning of temple affairs, with membership passed down through generations, thereby preserving traditional knowledge and expertise.

These Nijoga further subdivided into 120 categories of services, each assigned specific tasks crucial to the temple's operations. The Gajapati Maharaja holds the esteemed title of Adhyasevaka, recognized as the preeminent servitor of Lord Jagannath. From music and culinary preparations to record-keeping and craftsmanship, each Nijoga fulfills its designated role with precision and dedication. Despite their diverse functions, the Nijogas collaborate closely to ensure the seamless execution of temple activities, particularly during festivals and processions, underscoring their collective commitment to preserving Odisha's cultural heritage. In addition to the Chhatisa Nijogas, traditional classes in Puri encompass Temple Sevayats, Supakars, and an array of skilled artisans including carpenters, painters, potters, stone-carvers, and applique workers. These artisans, each masters of their craft, produce a wide array of handicrafts such as Patta Paintings, Palm-leaf carvings, and Seashell products, showcasing the region's rich artistic heritage ⁴.

Significance of festivals and ceremonies:

Many festivals and ceremonies are conducted at Shri Mandira throughout the year, each holding its own significance. There exists a renowned sloka emphasizing the importance of the twelve primary festivals:

"Mancha snanam rathabaragatih saayanam chayane dwe

Parshwa bruttih sayan nibrutti pabrutteih pusya puja

Dola yatra bidhinigadita dwadasaita Trutiya

Cahikam yatra bidhinigadita dwadasaita Narendra"

The twelve festivals mentioned in the sloka encompass a significant aspect of Hindu cultural and religious observances, including well-known events such as Snana Yatra, Ratha Yatra, and Akshaya Tritiya. However, it is widely acknowledged that beyond these twelve festivals, there is a plethora of celebrations throughout the year, giving rise to the popular saying "thirteen festivals in twelve months" ⁵. Indeed, festivals like Snana Yatra, Dola Yatra, and Akshaya Tritiya cum Chandan Yatra hold particular importance due to their cultural significance, congregation of people, and deeply rooted beliefs associated with them.



The temple's fairs and festivals significantly impact the social fabric of Puri. Key celebrations, such as Chandan Yatra and Rath Yatra held every summer, witness enthusiastic participation from both Sevayats and the general populace. Chandan Yatra sees grand processions from Sahis to the Narendra tank, where Madanmohan, Lord Jagannath's representative, is carried in a palanquin for a boat procession called "Chapa." Rath Yatra, or the Car Festival, attracts pilgrims and residents of Puri alike, involving Daitapatis and Sevayats over nine days. The Bahuda Yatra marks the return of the chariots, accompanied by the joyous consumption of 'Poda Pitha' and 'Rasgola'. Devotees eagerly participate in pulling the chariots along Bada Danda, offering 'Poda Pitha' at Ardhasini Temple, a tradition linked to a legend involving Lord Ram's promise to his mother Kaikeyi.

At the Lord Jagannath temple, Rasagola is presented to mollify goddess Lakshmi on the day of Niladri Bije. This longstanding tradition involves Bhitarchha Mohapatra specifically offering Rasagola during this auspicious occasion. Such cultural celebrations promote vibrant social life, with rituals like 'Adharapana' holding special significance for Chandis and Chamundas eagerly awaiting this annual occasion.

Lord Jagannath finds delight in 'tambula' (betel leaf), symbolizing the carefree essence of a lover. Additionally, Bidia Pana, a concoction served as a mouth freshener after meals, is ceremoniously presented to the Deities after every dhupa throughout the year, comprising ingredients like Betel leaf, Nutmeg, Areca Nut, Cloves, Green and Black Cardamom, Camphor, and Sandalwood paste (instead of lime). Similarly, 'Pana' and 'Poda Pitha' play central roles in the celebrations of the 'Raja' festival, deemed indispensable for the occasion.

The tradition at the Shri Mandira temple, where Lord Jagannath is revered as Sri Rama on Rama Navami eve, is a fascinating one. It involves a sacred ceremony called 'Garbha udaka Vandapana' followed by the offering of Jeuta Bhoga, names after a fruit called 'Jeuta' believed to alleviate childbirth pains. This tradition symbolizes spiritual significance and strengthens the temple's ties to the community, fostering unity and devotion among devotees.

Culinary traditions and offerings

"Chhapan Bhoga" signifies the revered offering of 56 delectable food items presented to Lord Jagannath at the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, India. This offering holds immense significance in

the temple's rituals and traditions, symbolizing devout reverence and auspiciousness. Crafted with meticulous care and deep devotion, each of the 56 food items bears its own sacred importance. The assortment encompasses various grains, pulses, sweets, dairy products, leafy greens, and fermented delicacies, each renowned for its nutritional richness and culinary allure ⁶.

Among the array of offerings, iconic dishes such as Pakhala, Dalma, and an assortment of traditional pancakes like Chakuli pitha, Chitau pitha, Poda pitha, Enduripitham and Manda pitha, alongside the beloved Rasogola, stand as epitomes of Odia gastronomic heritage.

These delicacies not only uphold their historical eminence but also retain their exquisite taste and nutritional value, ingraining themselves as essential components of the Odia diet, whether savored routinely or during special festivities.

Beyond mere sustenance, these traditional delicacies serve as ambassadors of holistic nutrition, transcending barriers of gender, caste, and societal divisions. They hold a revered position in Odia culture, whether consumed as everyday fare or part of grand celebratory banquets. The recent acknowledgment of Rasagola's unique heritage with the esteemed Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2019, designating it as "Odisha Rasagola," underscores the state's dedication to preserving its culinary legacy and safeguarding traditional recipes from imitation.



Cultural influence of the temple

The influence of the temple on Sevayat marriage traditions, particularly the 'Guali' rituals, is deeply ingrained in practices such as those showcased in the 'Rukmani Vivaha' ceremony ⁷. These traditions reflect the symbiotic relationship between the temple and the surrounding community, embodying the fusion of religious and cultural elements in the region.

The world-renowned Odissi Dance stands as a shining gem in Puri's cultural heritage, having evolved into an elegant and refined art form over the years. Originating from the performances of Devadasis within the temple precincts,





Odissi holds a special place as one of the most cherished dance forms associated with Lord Jagannath. Alongside Odissi, various folk dances, influenced by historical forms like Naga dances and Medha dances, also enrich the cultural landscape of Puri.

Among these, the globally acclaimed Gotipua dance traces its origins back to the city of Puri, further enriching its vibrant cultural tapestry. These dance forms serve not only as artistic expressions but also as repositories of cultural heritage, preserving age-old traditions for posterity.

Despite their significance, traditional cultural institutions like the Jagagharas in Puri often remain unnoticed by tourists, both domestic and international. However, these institutions play a vital role in the daily life of the local populace, encompassing activities such as bathing, bodybuilding, wrestling, music, and recreational games⁸.

Initially established by kings for the safeguarding of the pilgrimage site and the Jagannath temple, some Jagagharas hint at their historical role as paramilitary organizations. Today, these Jagagharas serve as hubs of cultural activity, nurturing the flourishing of Odissi songs and Gotipua dance, thus serving as vital cultural centers for the people of Puri. They serve as living embodiments of Puri's rich cultural heritage, connecting the past with the present and ensuring its continuity into the future.

Legal and social institutions

Legal disputes involving religious matters in Odisha are entrusted to the Muktimandap, which serves as the temple's judiciary. Consisting of learned Brahmins closely associated with the Jagannath temple, the decisions rendered by this esteemed assembly, hailing from the sixteen Brahmin Sasana villages (Solasantas), are highly esteemed and dutifully respected by all parties involved⁹. Consequently, the Muktimandap assumes a pivotal role in adjudicating a wide array of social issues within the Hindu community of Odisha. Through its adjudicative function, it not only upholds the sanctity of religious practices but also fosters social harmony and cohesion.

Swargadwar, revered as a cremation ground, holds profound significance as the "gateway to heaven." Exclusively reserved for Hindus, it is believed that cremating an individual's body at Swargadwar ensures the soul's ascent to heaven, liberating it from the cycle of birth and rebirth¹⁰. Particularly noteworthy is the tradition observed within the Sevayat community, wherein the cremation of a deceased Sevayat is conducted at

Swargadwar. Moreover, the fire utilized for this sacred cremation is sourced from the kitchen of the temple of Lord Jagannath, symbolizing a distinct privilege accorded to the Sevayat community. This time-honored tradition remains a prominent social feature of Swargadwar in Puri, serving as a poignant reminder of the spiritual and cultural ethos that pervades the region.

By intertwining religious customs with social practices, Swargadwar encapsulates the deep-rooted traditions and beliefs that characterize Hindu society in Odisha. Its significance extends beyond the realm of mortuary rituals, embodying a sacred space where spiritual aspirations converge with earthly existence, reaffirming the interconnectedness of life, death, and the divine.

Arts, crafts and cultural traditions

The arts, crafts, and cultural traditions prevalent in and around Puri town bear a profound imprint of Jagannath Culture, shaping a vibrant tapestry of heritage and creativity. These traditions, deeply rooted in reverence towards Lord Jagannath, have given rise to a diverse array of traditional crafts, each reflecting the region's rich cultural heritage.

Pottery, an ancient craft, thrives in Puri, a city known for its rich cultural heritage. Skilled artisans in Puri adeptly shape and fire clay into a myriad of vessels and ornamental pieces, carrying on a tradition that has endured for centuries. This craft is not merely a means of livelihood but also a reflection of the region's deep-rooted cultural identity. In the daily rituals of worship at the revered Shree Jagannath Temple, thousands of Deepas are meticulously lit as offerings to the deity. This sacred act symbolizes devotion and reverence, adding to the spiritual ambiance of the temple. Additionally, Koduas, traditional cooking pots, are employed in preparing Mahaprasad, the sacred food offering distributed among devotees. During special occasions such as the Adharapana Niti, a significant ritual conducted during the annual Chariot procession of the trinity of deities, distinctive cylindrical-shaped pots play a pivotal role. These pots, crafted with precision, hold symbolic significance and are integral to the ceremonial proceedings, embodying the sanctity of the occasion.

Pattachitra painting, celebrated for its rich history and ancient roots,





captivates viewers with its striking lines and vibrant hues, often portraying mythological tales and religious narratives. The origins of Pattachitra painting can be traced back to the creation of Anabasara "Patti Dian" using this style on Tassar fabric. Following the tradition of the Jagannath Temple, Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra, and Devi Subhadra are believed to fall ill after the Snana Purnima ritual, leading to a 15-day period of medication known as the Anasara ritual for their recovery. During the Anasara ritual, as per temple customs, devotees and servitors venerate representative deities called Patti Dian. In this practice, Lord Sri Ananta Basudev is worshipped as a stand-in for Lord Balabhadra, while Lord Sri Ananta Narayan and Goddess Bhubaneswari represent Lord Jagannath and Devi Subhadra, respectively.

This painting style evolved from the initial Jatri Patti method, with Anabasara painting representing a refined version. Additionally, this traditional painting method is used to create ganjapa cards, enjoyed by Sola Sasana Brahmins. Raghurajpur, a picturesque village near Puri, serves as a stronghold for Pattachitra artisans, attracting visitors from around the world eager to witness the exceptional craftsmanship firsthand.

Palm leaf engraving, cherished for its intricately inscribed letters and artistic designs, offers another glimpse into Puri's artistic heritage. Mainly used for horoscope making and the temple chronicle (Madala Panji), writing of ancient texts, and documentation of important rituals of the Jagannath temple.

Meanwhile, the intricate applique art, intricately intertwined with the worship of Lord Jagannath, fulfills myriad traditions and rituals



associated with the deity. In every occasion inside and outside of the temple, colorful Chandua, Chhatra, Trasa are mostly used in different festivals of Shree Jagannath temple. During Ratha yatra, Chandan yatra and Dola yatra the chariots of the trinity and Viama are covered by colorful applique.

The Khandua saree, handwoven by skilled artisans in Maniabandha and Nuapatana, embodies



centuries-old weaving traditions. Adorned with intricate weft Ikkat Bandha designs, these sarees find their origins dating back to the 18th century, commissioned by Gajapati Rama Chandra Deva for the deities Lord Balabhadra, Goddess Shubhadra, and Lord Jagannath. From daily-used garments to special ones, infused with verses from the revered "Gita Govinda" poem and adorned with vibrant colors and flawless motifs, these sarees are mostly adorned during the "Badasinghara" Besa at every night. The sarees earned royal patronage and occupy a significant place in handloom history.

Bell metal-ware, a source of pride in Odisha's history, finds its focal points in places like Kantilo and Balakati in Puri, alongside significant numbers in Cuttack, Ganjam, and Sambalpur districts. Crafted by the skilled artisans of the Kansari community, these metalsmiths imbue bell metal items with deep cultural significance, often used in religious rituals and ceremonies of Lord Jagannath.

Moreover, the art of making Tahia, a form of "Sola Karigari," draws inspiration from the meticulous process of crafting headgear for trinity during Pahandi bije rituals of Snana Purnima and Ratha yatra.

The cultural influence of Sri Jagannath extends beyond religious boundaries, impacting the socio-religious, and economic facets of the Odia people. The sanctity and significance attributed to Lord Jagannath and the Srimandir resonate not only among Hindus but also among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. In Odisha, the temple holds immense honor and reverence, functioning as a central focal point governing various aspects of Odia life.

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