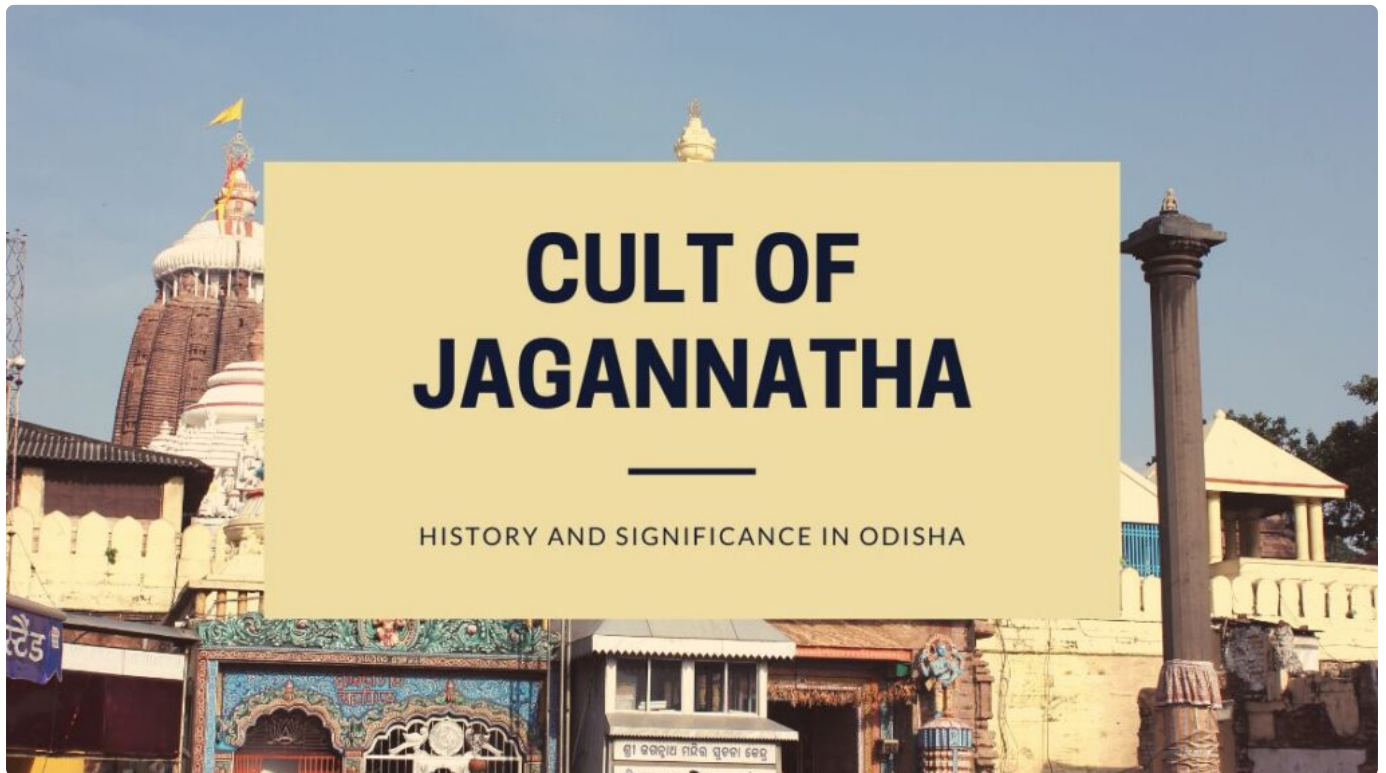


Cult of Jagannatha

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • March 1, 2017 • Updated October 10, 2026 • 11 min read



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Culture guide · Puri, Purushottama Kshetra

Cult of Jagannatha: *history, rituals and significance*

Who Lord Jagannath is, where his worship came from, how it grew from the Ganga kings to today, the temple at Puri, its daily rituals and great festivals, Ratha Yatra and Nabakalebara — and why Jagannath stands at the heart of Odia identity.

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta**, MA (Gold Medalist) Updated **October 2026** 16 min read

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- **12th c.** temple begun
- **c. 65 m** height of the deula
- **3 chariots** built new every year
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01 · Overview

Who is Lord Jagannath?

The cult of Jagannatha in 60 seconds

- **Jagannath** — “Lord of the Universe” — is worshipped at Puri as a form of Vishnu, with his brother **Balabhadra**, sister **Subhadra** and the **Sudarshana** pillar.
- The deities are carved from **neem wood** (*daru*) and are renewed in the **Nabakalebara** ceremony.
- Scholars see roots in **tribal worship**, later joined by Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta and other traditions.
- The present temple was begun by the Ganga king **Anantavarman Chodagangadeva** in the 12th century.
- From the 13th century the kings of Odisha ruled as the god’s deputies — Jagannath became the **sovereign of Odisha**.
- The annual **Ratha Yatra**, when the deities ride three giant chariots through Puri, is one of the world’s great religious festivals.

The **cult of Jagannatha** is the living centre of Odia religion and culture. Its temple at Puri, its rituals and festivals, its food and its art have shaped the identity of the Odia people for more than eight centuries — and Jagannath is honoured as a family deity in homes across

Odisha and far beyond.

- Seat **Puri** — **Purushottama Kshetra / Srikshetra**
- Deities **Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra, Sudarshana**
- Temple **Shree Mandira, 12th century**
- Founder of temple **Anantavarman Chodagangadeva**
- Great festival **Ratha Yatra, Asadha (June-July)**
- Sacred food **Mahaprasad**

02 · Chaturdha Murti

The deities of Puri

The four principal images on the jewelled platform (*Ratna Simhasana*) are known together as the **Chaturdha Murti**. Unlike the stone images of most Hindu temples, they are carved from wood, with large round eyes and stumped arms — a form unique to the Jagannath tradition.

- **Jagannath** Lord of the Universe Dark-faced form of Vishnu-Krishna, at the centre of the cult.
- **Balabhadra** Elder brother White-faced, identified with Balarama and also with Shiva.
- **Subhadra** Sister Yellow-faced, worshipped as a form of Shakti.
- **Sudarshana** The divine wheel Represented as a red wooden pillar, Vishnu's discus.

Smaller images of Madhava, Sridevi and Bhudevi share the platform. Jagannath is known by many names — Purushottama, Nilamadhava, Darubrahma, Patitapabana and more; see [Different Names of Lord Jagannatha](#).

03 · Legend & scholarship

Origins of the Jagannath cult

The legend

According to tradition, preserved in texts such as the *Purushottama Kshetra Mahatmya* of the Skanda Purana, King **Indradyumna** sent the priest Vidyapati to find **Nilamadhava**, a deity secretly worshipped in the forest by the Sabara chief **Viswavasū**. When the god vanished, the king was told to carve a new image from a sacred log (*darū*) washed ashore at Puri. A mysterious old carpenter undertook the work behind closed doors on condition that no one disturb him; when the doors were opened early, he had vanished, leaving the images in their unfinished form.

What historians say

Historians treat the legend as a memory of real processes. Many see the cult's roots in the **tribal worship of a wooden deity** — a view supported by the continuing role of the **Daitapati** servitors, who claim descent from Viswavasū. Over time the deity was absorbed into **Vaishnavism**, while Shaiva, Shakta and Tantric elements, and possibly Buddhist and Jain influences, left their mark. These theories are debated, but together they explain why Jagannath belongs to so many traditions at once.

!

Legend and history: the story of Indradyumna is a sacred tradition, not a dated historical record. The earliest firm historical evidence for the present temple comes from the 12th century, under the Imperial Gangas.

- [Main article](#)[Origin and Development of the Cult of Jagannath](#)[How the cult grew from its beginnings](#).[Read article →](#)
- [Theory](#)[Tribal Origin of the Cult of Jagannath](#)[The Sabara roots of the deity](#).[Read article →](#)

04 · Eight centuries

History of the Jagannath cult

1. 12th century

[Anantavarman Chodagangadeva](#) begins the present temple at Puri; it is completed by his successors.

2. 13th century

[Anangabhimadeva III](#) declares Jagannath the sovereign of Odisha and himself the god's *rauta* (deputy).

3. 15th–16th century

Under the [Gajapatis](#), [Sri Chaitanya](#) settles in Puri and the [Pancha Sakhas](#) sing of Jagannath in Odia.

4. 1568

Afghan general Kalapahada raids Puri after the fall of [Mukunda Deva](#); tradition says the images were hidden to save them.

5. From 1592

Under the Mughals, the [kings of Khurda](#) are recognised as the temple's first servants.

6. 1751–1803

The Marathas [patronise the temple](#); the [Aruna Stambha](#) is brought from Konark.

7. 20th century

Temple administration passes to a statutory body under the [Shree Jagannath Temple Act](#); Ratha Yatra spreads worldwide.

8. 2024

The heritage corridor around the temple is inaugurated and the treasury, the Ratna Bhandar, is reopened.

The Jagannath Temple at Puri

The temple is a masterpiece of the [Kalinga style](#): a curving *rekha* tower about 65 metres high over the sanctum, with three *pidha*-roofed halls in front of it. It stands within two massive walls, among more than a hundred smaller shrines.

- **Deula, Jagamohana, Natamandira, Bhogamandapa** Main buildings The four halls of a complete Odishan temple, on one east-west line.
- **Meghanada Pacheri & Kurma Bheda** Walls The outer and inner enclosure walls of the temple compound.
- **Four gates** Singhadwara & others The Lion Gate (east), Horse Gate (south), Tiger Gate (west) and Elephant Gate (north).
- **Baisi Pahacha** Twenty-two steps The sacred stairway from the Lion Gate into the inner compound.
- **Nilachakra & Patitapabana flag** Crown The eight-metal wheel atop the tower; its flag is changed every day.
- **Rosaghara & Ananda Bazaar** Kitchen & market One of the world's largest temple kitchens, and the market where Mahaprasad is shared.
- [Architecture](#) Architecture of the Jagannath Temple The temple's plan, structures and history in detail. [Read article →](#)
- [Temple](#) Shree Mandir The great temple of Lord Jagannath. [Read article →](#)
- [Pilgrimage](#) Panchatirtha of Puri The five sacred bathing places of Srikshetra. [Read article →](#)

06 · Daily worship

Daily rituals, sevayats and Mahaprasad

The deities are served as living beings, from the **Mangala Alati** at dawn to the **Bada Singhara Besha** and the night's rest. Each service is performed by hereditary families of servitors (**sevayats**), in dozens of groups with distinct duties. The **Daitapatis**, linked by

tradition to the Sabara chief Viswavasu, take charge during the god's illness and renewal. The **Gajapati** of Puri, as first servant, sweeps the chariots in the *Chhera Pahanra* ritual at Ratha Yatra.

The food offered to the deities — cooked in earthen pots over wood fires — becomes **Mahaprasad**, shared at the Ananda Bazaar, traditionally without distinction of caste. Only Hindus may enter the temple; others can see the image of **Patitapabana** at the Lion Gate and see the deities during Ratha Yatra.

- [RitualDaily Rituals of Lord Jagannatha](#)The full order of the day's services.[Read article →](#)
- [SevayatsTraining for the Temple's Sevayats](#)Preparing the servitors of Jagannath.[Read article →](#)
- [DarshanDhadi Darshan](#)The queue system for pilgrims.[Read article →](#)
- [LawThe Shree Jagannath Temple Act](#)How the temple is administered.[Read article →](#)

07 · The ritual year

The festival year of Jagannath

Jagannath's year is filled with festivals (*yatras*) and special dresses (*beshas*). The busiest season runs from late spring to the monsoon.

- **Chandan Yatra**Akshaya Tritiya · Apr-MayTwenty-one days of boat festivals in the Narendra tank; chariot building begins.
- **Snana Purnima**Jyeshtha full moon · JuneThe deities are bathed with 108 pots of water and appear in the elephant dress (Hati Besha).
- **Anasara**Fifteen daysThe deities "fall ill" and rest away from view, tended by the Daitapatis.
- **Ratha Yatra**Asadha · June-JulyThe chariot journey to the Gundicha Temple.
- **Hera Panchami**Fifth dayGoddess Lakshmi visits Gundicha in search of her absent lord.

- **Bahuda & Suna Besha**Return journeyThe return to the temple; the deities appear in golden ornaments on their chariots.
- **Niladri Bije**HomecomingJagannath re-enters the temple after appeasing Lakshmi — with rasagola.
- **Beshas of the year**Special attiresOver the year the deities wear many seasonal and festival dresses.

08 · The Car Festival

Ratha Yatra

On the second day of the bright fortnight of Asadha, the deities leave the temple in a swaying procession (*pahandi*), mount three newly built chariots and are pulled by huge crowds along the Bada Danda, the Grand Road, to the **Gundicha Temple** about three kilometres away. They stay there for about a week before the return journey (*Bahuda*). The chariots are built afresh every year from sacred timber by hereditary carpenters, following measurements fixed by tradition.

The three chariots of Ratha Yatra

Chariot	Deity	Wheels	Colours	Approx. height
Nandighosa	Jagannath	16	Red and yellow	c. 45 ft
Taladhwaja	Balabhadra	14	Red and green	c. 44 ft
Darpadalana	Subhadra	12	Red and black	c. 43 ft

- [ChariotsSacred Timber for the Rath YatraWhere the wood for the chariots comes from.](#)
[Read article →](#)

09 · New bodies

Nabakalebara: the renewal of the deities

Because the images are wooden, they are periodically replaced in the **Nabakalebara** (“new body”) ceremony, held in a year with an extra month of Asadha — usually every 12 or 19 years. Teams of servitors search for sacred neem trees (*daru*) bearing prescribed signs; new images are carved in secret, and the mysterious “life substance” (*Brahma*) is transferred from the old images to the new by the Daitapatis at night. The old images are buried in the Koili Baikuntha garden. Recent Nabakalebaras took place in 1996 and 2015.

10 · Beyond the temple

The influence of the Jagannath cult

- **Kingship** Politics From Anangabhimadeva III onward, Odisha’s kings ruled as Jagannath’s deputies — a model of kingship studied by historians such as Hermann Kulke.
- **Literature** Odia language Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda* was sung in the temple; Jagannatha Das’s 16th-century *Odia Bhagavata* and countless devotional poems followed.
- **Art** Pattachitra & crafts Raghurajpur painters, Pipili appliqué workers and temple carpenters all grew up in Jagannath’s service.
- **Music & dance** Odissi The temple’s dance and music traditions are among the roots of Odissi.
- **Society** Shared worship Mahaprasad and Ratha Yatra bring together people of every background, even as temple service kept its own hierarchy.
- **The world** “Juggernaut” British accounts of the chariots gave English the word “juggernaut”; since the 1960s Ratha Yatras have been held around the world.
- **Society** Impact of the Jagannath Cult on Odishan Society How Jagannath shaped Odia life and identity. [Read article →](#)
- **Bhakti** Sri Chaitanya Bhakti in Odisha Chaitanya’s devotion and its influence. [Read article →](#)
- **Devotees** Honouring Mata Karma The devotee whose khichdi is offered to Jagannath. [Read article →](#)

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Sources

1. [Madala Panji](#)

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12 · [FAQ](#)

Frequently asked questions about Lord Jagannath

Who is Lord Jagannath?

Jagannath, “Lord of the Universe”, is a form of Vishnu worshipped at Puri in Odisha with his brother Balabhadra, sister Subhadra and the Sudarshana pillar. His wooden images and unique rituals make the cult one of the most distinctive in Hinduism.

Who built the Jagannath Temple at Puri?

The present temple was begun in the 12th century by the Eastern Ganga king Anantavarman Chodagangadeva and completed by his successors. See [Architecture of the Jagannath Temple](#).

What is the origin of the Jagannath cult?

Tradition tells of King Indradyumna and the deity Nilamadhava, worshipped by the Sabara chief Viswvasu. Many historians see tribal roots for the cult, later absorbed into Vaishnavism with Shaiva, Shakta and other influences. See [Tribal Origin of the Cult of Jagannath](#).

What are the names of the three Ratha Yatra chariots?

Nandighosa carries Jagannath, Taladhwaja carries Balabhadra and Darpadalana carries Subhadra. All three are built new every year.

What is Nabakalebara?

Nabakalebara is the ritual renewal of the wooden images of the deities, held in a year with an extra month of Asadha, usually every 12 or 19 years. Recent Nabakalebaras took place in 1996 and 2015.

What is Mahaprasad?

Mahaprasad is the food offered to Jagannath and then shared by devotees at the Ananda Bazaar inside the temple, traditionally without distinction of caste.

Where does the word “juggernaut” come from?

The English word “juggernaut” comes from Jagannath. It entered the language through European accounts of the huge Ratha Yatra chariots, and came to mean an unstoppable force.

Sources & further reading

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3. Kulke, Hermann. *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1993.
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