

Culture of Odisha

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

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Culture guide · faith, art & everyday life

Culture of Odisha: *Jagannath, Odissi and the living traditions of Utkala*

A guide to the culture of Odisha — the Jagannath tradition, the faiths of the land, the Odia language and its literature, Odissi dance and music, crafts and textiles, festivals, food and tribal heritage — with links to every culture article on this site.

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta**, MA (Gold Medalist) Updated **October 2026** **15 min** read

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- **Odissi** classical dance
- **2014** Odia a classical language
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01 · Overview

What makes Odia culture distinctive?

Odia culture in 60 seconds

- At its centre stands **Lord Jagannath** of Puri, whose worship blends Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, Buddhist, Jain and tribal traditions.
- Odisha has one of India's great **temple-building traditions**, the Kalinga style of Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konark.
- **Odia**, with a written literature going back to Sarala Das, was recognised as a **classical language** in 2014.
- **Odissi** is one of India's classical dances; Chhau, Gotipua and many folk forms flourish alongside it.
- Crafts such as **pattachitra**, **Pipili appliqué**, **silver filigree** and **Sambalpuri ikat** are known worldwide.
- Odisha is home to **62 Scheduled Tribes**, whose languages, arts and festivals are central to the state's identity.

The **culture of Odisha** grew from many roots: the coastal kingdoms of Kalinga and Utkala, the hill and forest communities of the interior, centuries of seafaring trade, and the great religious movements that passed through the region. What binds them together is the Odia language and the cult of Jagannath, the "Lord of the Universe", who belongs to every Odia home.

- Presiding deity **Lord Jagannath, Puri**
- Language **Odia — classical language (2014)**
- Classical dance **Odissi**
- Great festival **Ratha Yatra, Puri**
- Signature crafts **Pattachitra, appliqué, filigree, ikat**
- Temple style **Kalinga style**

Jagannath culture

Lord Jagannath, worshipped at Puri with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra, is the central figure of Odia religious and cultural life. Scholars trace his worship to tribal roots, later absorbed into Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta traditions, so that the cult became a meeting point of almost every faith in Odisha. The temple's daily rituals, its servitors, the *Mahaprasad* shared across caste lines and the annual **Ratha Yatra** make Jagannath a living presence rather than a distant god. Rulers from the Gangas to the Marathas, and the Odia people in every age, have defined themselves through his service.

- [Main guideCult of Jagannatha: History and SignificanceThe full story of Jagannath worship. Read article →](#)
- [OriginsOrigin and Development of the Cult of JagannathHow the cult grew over the centuries.Read article →](#)
- [OriginsTribal Origin of the Cult of JagannathThe Sabara and tribal roots of the deity.Read article →](#)
- [SocietyImpact of the Jagannath Cult on Odishan SocietyHow Jagannath shaped Odia life and identity.Read article →](#)
- [RitualDaily Rituals of Lord JagannathaThe temple's day from dawn to night.Read article →](#)
- [NamesDifferent Names of Lord JagannathaThe many names of the Lord and their meanings.Read article →](#)
- [PilgrimagePanchatirtha of PuriThe five sacred bathing places.Read article →](#)
- [HistoryMaratha Contributions to Jagannath CulturePatronage of the temple under the Marathas.Read article →](#)

03 · Many paths

The faiths of Odisha

Odisha has been a meeting ground of faiths for over two thousand years. **Jainism** flourished under Kharavela at Udayagiri and Khandagiri; **Buddhism** built great monasteries at Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri and Udayagiri; **Shaiva** temples filled Bhubaneswar and **Shakti** shrines such as Biraja, Tarini and the yogini temples spread across the land. In the medieval period the **Bhakti** movement of Sri Chaitanya and the Pancha Sakhas carried devotion into the Odia language, and in the 19th century **Mahima Dharma** rejected image worship and caste. Islam and Christianity added their own threads to Odia life.

- [BhaktiSri Chaitanya Faith in OdishaChaitanya in Puri and the Gajapati court.Read article →](#)
- [BhaktiSri Chaitanya Bhakti in Odisha and its InfluenceHow Chaitanya's devotion shaped Odia culture.Read article →](#)
- [Poet-saintsPancha Sakhas of Medieval OdishaFive poets who carried devotion to every village.Read article →](#)
- [ReformMahima Dharma: History and TeachingsThe faith of Mahima Gosain and Bhima Bhoi.Read article →](#)
- [ShaktiHistory of the Sakti Cult in OdishaGoddess worship from Tarini to Kichakeswari. Read article →](#)
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- [BuddhismA 1,300-Year-Old Buddhist Stupa in JajpurNew evidence from Odisha's Buddhist heartland.Read article →](#)
- [SocietySocio-Cultural Movements in Medieval OdishaThe legacy of Achyutananda Das. Read article →](#)

04 · Stone & sculpture

Temples and sculpture

Odisha's temple builders created the **Kalinga style**, with its curving *rekha* towers and tiered *pidha* halls, and covered their walls with some of India's finest sculpture.

Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konark preserve its whole history. Our full guide explains the types, parts and evolution of the Odishan temple.

- [Main guide](#)[Temple Architecture of Odisha](#)The Kalinga style explained, with every temple article.[Read guide →](#)
- [13th century](#)[Sun Temple at Konark](#)The chariot of the Sun God.[Read article →](#)
- [11th century](#)[Lingaraj Temple](#)The grandest temple of Bhubaneswar.[Read article →](#)
- [Monolith](#)[The Aruna Stambha](#)A single-stone pillar and its journey to Puri.[Read article →](#)

05 · Words

Odia language and literature

Odia developed from eastern Prakrit and appears in inscriptions from around the 10th century. Its literature begins in earnest with **Sarala Das**'s Mahabharata in the 15th century, flowers in the devotional poetry of the Pancha Sakhas and the ornate verse of Upendra Bhanja, and is renewed in the 19th century by **Fakir Mohan Senapati**, **Radhanath Ray** and **Gangadhar Meher**. In 2014 Odia became the sixth Indian language to be declared classical.

- [Language](#)[Evolution of the Odia Language](#)A journey of resilience and excellence.[Read article →](#)
- [Language](#)[Impact of Islam on Odia Language and Literature](#)Persian words and forms in Odia.[Read article →](#)
- [Writer](#)[Fakir Mohan Senapati](#)The father of modern Odia fiction.[Read article →](#)
- [Poet](#)[Gangadhar Meher](#)The poet of nature from Barpali.[Read article →](#)
- [Classic](#)[Chilika — Radhanath Ray](#)The great lake in Odia verse.[Read article →](#)

- [PrintGrowth of Press and Journalism in OdishaHow newspapers shaped modern Odia.Read article →](#)

06 · Performance

Dance, music and theatre

Odissi grew from the temple dance of the *maharis* and the boy dancers called *gotipuas*, and was rebuilt as a classical form in the mid-20th century by gurus such as Kelucharan Mohapatra, Pankaj Charan Das and Deba Prasad Das. It is danced to **Odissi music**, with the songs of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* at its heart. Around them thrives a rich world of folk and martial dance, ballad and village theatre.

- **Odissi** Classical dance Lyrical temple-born dance, recognised as one of India's classical forms.
- **Gotipua** Boy dancers Acrobatic dance by boys dressed as girls, a root of modern Odissi.
- **Chhau** Mayurbhanj Vigorous martial dance of Mayurbhanj, performed at Chaitra Parba; on UNESCO's intangible heritage list.
- **Sambalpuri dance** Western Odisha Folk dances such as Dalkhai, set to the dhol and nisan.
- **Ghumura** Kalahandi Dance with a large earthen drum, once a war dance.
- **Danda Nacha** Ritual dance A month-long ritual performance of devotion to Shiva and Shakti.
- **Prahlada Nataka** Ganjam Traditional musical drama of the Narasimha legend.
- **Jatra** Popular theatre Open-air travelling theatre, still hugely popular in villages.

For the artists behind these traditions — from Kelucharan Mohapatra and Sanjukta Panigrahi to Akshaya Mohanty and Raghunath Panigrahi — see [Personalities of Odisha](#). Odia cinema began with *Sita Bibaha* in 1936.

07 · Hands & looms

Crafts and textiles

Many of Odisha's crafts were born in the service of Jagannath — painting his icons, decorating his chariots, weaving his cloth — and are now made for homes around the world.

- **Pattachitra**Raghurajpur, PuriCloth scroll paintings of Jagannath and the epics, in natural colours.
- **Appliqué**PipiliBright cut-cloth work used for temple canopies, umbrellas and the Ratha Yatra.
- **Silver filigree (tarakasi)**CuttackFine silver-wire jewellery and ornaments.
- **Sambalpuri ikat**Western OdishaTie-and-dye bandha saris with patterns dyed into the threads.
- **Bomkai & Kotpad**Ganjam · KoraputDistinctive handloom saris; Kotpad uses natural dyes.
- **Dhokra**Tribal metalcraftLost-wax cast brass figures made by tribal artisans.
- **Stone carving**Puri & BhubaneswarA living tradition of the temple sculptors.
- **Saura paintings**Saura tribeRitual wall paintings (idital) of the Saura people.

08 · The year in Odisha

Festivals and fairs

Odias joke that there are “thirteen festivals in twelve months” (*baara masa tera parba*). These are among the best known.

- **Ratha Yatra**Puri · June–JulyJagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra ride their great chariots through Puri. See [the sacred timber](#).
- **Raja Parba**Mid-JuneThree-day festival celebrating the earth and womanhood at the start of the monsoon.
- **Nuakhai**Western Odisha · Aug–SeptThanksgiving for the new rice crop, offered first to the deity.
- **Durga Puja**Cuttack · Sept–OctFamous for silver-filigree decorations of the goddess.

- **Bali Jatra**Cuttack · Kartika PurnimaRemembers the voyages of Odia sailors to Bali and Southeast Asia. See [the mariners of Kalinga](#).
- **Dhanu Jatra**Bargarh · Dec-JanA town-wide open-air theatre of the Krishna story.
- **Chaitra Parba**Mayurbhanj · AprilSpring festival and the main season of Chhau dance.
- **Utkala Dibasa**1 AprilOdisha's foundation day. See [Utkal Divas and Odia Paksha](#).

09 · The Odia kitchen

Food of Odisha

Odia food is simple, seasonal and built on rice, lentils, vegetables and fish, with a famous sweet tooth. Its spiritual centre is the **Mahaprasad** of the Jagannath Temple, cooked in earthen pots and shared by all at the Ananda Bazaar.

- **Mahaprasad**Jagannath TempleSacred food offered to Jagannath and shared without distinction of caste.
- **Pakhala**Everyday stapleFermented water rice, the summer meal of Odisha.
- **Dalma**Everyday stapleLentils cooked with vegetables — a temple and home favourite.
- **Chhena Poda**NayagarhBaked cottage-cheese sweet. See [World Chhenapoda Dibasa](#).
- **Rasagola**Puri & SalepurOdisha's famous sweet; "Odisha Rasagola" received a GI tag in 2019.
- **Chhena Jhili**NimapadaFried cottage-cheese sweet soaked in syrup.

10 · First peoples

Tribal heritage

Odisha is home to **62 Scheduled Tribes**, more than any other Indian state, including 13 particularly vulnerable groups. Santal, Kandha, Gond, Saura, Munda, Bonda and Juang communities have their own languages, gods, dances and arts. Their traditions run deep in Odia culture — not least in the tribal roots of Jagannath himself — and their history includes

some of the strongest resistance to colonial rule.

- [Main guide Tribes of Odisha](#) The communities, cultures and history of Odisha's tribes. [Read guide →](#)
- [Faith Tribal Origin of the Cult of Jagannath](#) The Sabara roots of the deity. [Read article →](#)
- [Commemoration Honouring Mata Karma](#) India Post's stamp for the revered devotee. [Read article →](#)

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5. [Mahima Dharma: History and Teachings](#)
6. [History of the Sakti Cult in Odisha](#)
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12 · [FAQ](#)

Frequently asked questions about the culture of Odisha

What is Odisha famous for culturally?

Odisha is famous for the Jagannath Temple and Ratha Yatra at Puri, the Kalinga style of temple architecture seen at Bhubaneswar and Konark, Odissi dance, the Odia language and literature, crafts such as pattachitra, Pipili appliqué and silver filigree, Sambalpuri ikat textiles and a rich tribal heritage.

Who is Lord Jagannath?

Lord Jagannath, the “Lord of the Universe”, is the presiding deity of the temple at Puri, worshipped with Balabhadra and Subhadra. His cult combines Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta and tribal traditions and is central to Odia identity. See [Cult of Jagannatha](#).

What is Odissi?

Odissi is one of India’s classical dance forms, developed from the temple dance of the maharis and the gotipua tradition and rebuilt in the 20th century by gurus such as Kelucharan Mohapatra, Pankaj Charan Das and Deba Prasad Das.

When was Odia declared a classical language?

Odia was declared a classical language of India in 2014, the sixth language to receive the status. See [Evolution of the Odia Language](#).

What are the main festivals of Odisha?

The best-known festivals include the Ratha Yatra at Puri, Raja Parba, Nuakhai in western Odisha, Durga Puja in Cuttack, Bali Jatra, Dhanu Jatra at Bargarh, Chaitra Parba in Mayurbhanj and Utkala Dibasa on 1 April.

What is Mahaprasad?

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

How many tribes live in Odisha?

Odisha has 62 Scheduled Tribes, more than any other Indian state, including 13 particularly vulnerable tribal groups. See [Tribes of Odisha](#).

Sources & further reading

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