Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe is one of the most revered and ancient deities of the Hindu pantheon. His origin and worship has been shrouded with myths, legends and traditions. The earliest references of the Lord are found in the Puranas and ancient literature. As His origin being traced to the king Indradyumna of Upanishad period, a hoary antiquity has been assigned to Him in Puranic and local traditions.

From the legendary sources it is stated that Lord Jagannath was originally worshipped by tribals and Savaras. In the Buddhist records we find that Oddiyana was one of the centres of Buddhism and Tantricism. This Oddiyana is indentified with the Gopalpur (Ganjam) on sea coast which is contiguous with the split formed by Chilika-Puri island during the time of Taranatha. 1 The Savaras and Patara Savaras mentioned in the tantric literature used to live there alongwith the fishermen. Important evidence of this belief is the existen those who are believed to be of tribal origin and play a major role in performing different sevas to Lord Jagannath.

In the remote corners of Orissa, tribals of Koraput district are performing Daru (wood) worship from the primitive period. Such type of worship was seen at Bata-Kuhudi, a village in K o r a p u t district. The deities were worshipped on the road side on Sunki-Jagdalpur National Highway No.43 at a distance of three kms from Kotapad. Here two wooden posts (shown in figure) of 1.30 meters in height above the ground level and 26 cms apart from each other were seen during February 1997. It is learnt that the concretion ceremony of these two posts were seen vertical to the ground with 26 cms apart. But during the year 1997, top of the two posts came so close (shown in figure) that they might have touched each other within three to four succeeding years. After they touch each other, the Navakalevar of the deities was to be performed
This function is generally organized in the month of Chaitra or Baisakha (March-April-May). This Navakalevar ceremony is called 'Bali-Yatra' which starts from 6 P.M to 12 P.M in every night for a period of three months.

'Daru Devata' written by Dr. Benimadhava Padhee has traced the origin of Jagannath to the Daru worship by the savaras in pre-historic times. Tree-worship is a very ancient cult. Even people of Kashmir was worshiping wooden idol before 10th century AD. Historian Al-Biruni (973-1048 AD) wrote, "In inner Kashmir about two or three days journey from the capital in the direction towards the mountains of Bolor, there is a wooden idol called Sarada, which is much venerated frequented by pilgrims." So the tree or wood (Daru) worship was prevalent in India all through from early time.

Now-a-days tribals of Ganjam and Koraput worship tree and log of wood (Daru) as their Lord. It is to be pointed out that a popular tradition among savars speaks of two early progenitors of their race called Rama and Bhima lived in Mahendra mountain where they used to worship Gods or 'kitungs' in the wooden posts like the posts shown in figure. Rama Chandra Dikshitar says that the aboriginals call their deities Puradeva and Murugan. This Puradeva was converted to Purusadeva (Purusottama deva) and Bhima devata in the formay Siva of Murugan culture. So the Savaras were the earliest worshipped of Purusottama Jagannath.

Navakalevar rituals of Batakuhudi in Koraput district were performed before the function of Navakalevar of Lord Jagannath was started. During Navakalevar at Puri, Anasara rituals of Lord Jagannath was performed just like a tribal function. His worship in Hindu rituals also have been done for eleven months in a lunar year. During Snana Purnima to Vyasa Purnima, Daita-Patis are incharge of the deities. During this period called 'Anasara', the deities remain secluded in 'Anasara-gumuti', where special rituals are performed. This Savar or tribal rituals are particularly marked prominently during Anasara, Navakalevar and car-festival. Most of the rites during this period are confidential, which is known to the Sevakas only. The Daitas who are hereditary servitors of Lord Jagannath claim their descent from the Savars. They observe the funeral rites of Lord Jagannath during Navakalevar. Scholar like Anncharlott Eschmann opined that the Navakalevar ritual i.e. the ceremony of periodical renewal of the deity, is a tribal custom. Such practices of renewal of wooden deity are to be found among the primitive tribes like Saoras and Khands.

In course of time, the worship of Jagannath took the Aryansed form and major faith like Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism, Saktism, Saurism and Vaishnavism had some influence on the faith. All these faiths were assimilated into the concept of Jagannath to form a unitary grand composite culture of Lord Jagannath.

From the history and archaeology we came to know some of the kings were professing the Bhagavat cult or Narayan cult after the southern expedition of Samudra Gupta to South India in the fourth century A.D. Bhagavatism influenced Matharas when their dominion was extended from the river Krishna in the south up to the Mahanadi in the north. Chandivarman, Pravanjan Varman, Anantasakti Vaman of Mathara dynasty used the title of 'Parama-Bhagavata' in about 5th century A.D. After the Mathara dynasty, the early Ganga king Hasti-varman adopted Narayana cult though their principal deity was Gokarneswar (Lord Siva) of Mahendragiri, where Narayana was adored alongwith Siva.
Narayana cult changed into cult of Madhaba in 7th century A.D. The earliest king of Sailodbhava dynasty was Madhavaraja. From 7th to 9th century A.D, the Madhava cult was popular in Kangoda under Sailodbhava when their dominion was extended from Mahendragiri in the south upto Mahanadi in the north. The earliest king of Sailodbhava dynasty was Madhavaraja. From 7th to 9th century A.D, the Madhava cult was popular in Kangoda under Sailodbhava when their dominion was extended from Mahendragiri in the south upto Mahanadi in the north.

Narayana cult and Madhava cult again changed to Buddhism by Bhaumakara king who invaded Tosali and Kangoda after 736 A.D. During this period the great philosopher Sankaracharya (788 A.D to 820 A.D) visited Puri to save the Hindu religion and culture from decay. He protected the Purusottam kshetra by making it one of the four important religious centres of Hindu tirthas and established Govardhan Matha at Puri to propagate the Advaitavada. At that time the feudatories of Bhaumakaras such as Swetaka Gangas of Chikiti and Bhanjas of Kinhili Mandala were followers of Madhava cult. The Bhaumakaras during 9th century A.D changed to Saivism from Buddhism and supported Vedic rituals. Some of the queens of that family also embraced Bhagavatism. Towards the 10th century A.D Puri became an important centre of pilgrimage and centre of Vaisnavism. The name Nilamadhava was changed to Purusottama. Maharaja Yajati Keshari of Soma dynasty had constructed the great Lingaraj temple at Bhubaneswar and Madhava (Purusottam) temple at Puri.

In 1112 A.D Ganga king Anantavarman Chodagangadeva of Mukhalinga defeated Yajati's successor, Karnadeva and annexed the Utkal with Kalinga by extending his dominion from Godavari in the south to the Ganga in the north. After defeating Chalukyas of Vengi in south and Pala king of Banga he started construction of the great temple of Lord Purusottam Jagannath at Puri, Chodagangadeva was a follower of Saivism but latter on he accepted "Bhagavatism'. For the first time in Korniplates dated Saka year 1034 (1112 A.D) he adopted a title like 'Parama Maheswar', Parama Vaisnava' and 'Parama Brahmanya'. The first epigraphic evidence to the construction of Jagannath temple by Chodagangadeva is found in Dasgoba copper plate grant of his grandson Rajaraja Deva-III.

Besides Vedic and Mahabharata sources, the glory and sanctity of Jagannatha and the Kshetra find mention in many Puranas like Matsya, Brahma, Narada, Padma and the Utkal Khanda of the Skanda Purana. In 717 AD, the Uddiyana King Indrabhuti wrote in his work Jnanasiddhi - "Pranipatyagovindam Sarvajinavar chitam Sarva Buddhamayan Siddhi vyapino Gaganopanam. He described Jagannath as Buddha. In other tantric works written in around 950 AD like Kalika Purana, Rudrayamala, Brahmayamala and Tantryamala, Jagannath is described as the famous deity in Odradesha (Utkal). During 7th-8th century Buddha was considered as an Avatara of Vishnu, but gradually Buddhism lost itself in Jagannathism. Some scholars are exponent of Jaina origin of Jagannath. They say that Nilamadhava of the epic period is the famous Kalinga Jina of history. 'Daru Brahmagita' of Jagannatha Dasa (16th century) and 'Deulatola' of Nilambar Dasa (17th century) also advocates savara worship of Jagannath.

During famous Navakalevar ceremony, the Daitas a leading role in the expedition team for procurement of sacred 'Daru' (log of Neem tree). They first stay in a Sarvarpalli (name of camp) near the temple of Goddess Mangala. It is evident that the tribal custom of worship of Goddess Mangala before procurement of 'Daru' has linked Lord Jagannath with Goddess Mangala. Culturally, this type of customs and temple tradition are also found to be the result of the integration of tribal and Aryan cultures. Historians
admit that deformed uncouth figure of Jagannath owes a lot to its Savar origin. They traces the influence of Krishna Vasudeva worship of Bhagavata cult on Jagannath during the Gupta rule. From the plate Chandravarman, the Mathar king of Kalinga which was found from Bobbili (Ex-state of Paralakhemundi) in present Vizagapatam district we know that he was devout worshipper of Bhagavata or Vishnu in the 5th century AD during the period of Gupta Emperor Chandra Gupta and his successors. Sankarsana and Vasudeva came to be known as Balarama and Jagannath under the influence of Bhagavata Cult. Ekanamsa came to be worshipped as Subhadra in the 6th century AD. Jagannath is regarded as 'Daru Brahma' manifested in the wooden image. The worship of Daru as Brahma is traced to the Vedic sources and to the Bhagavat Gita.

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