On the high pavilion of the sanctum sanctorum of the great temple four prominent wood-made images of Shree Balabhadra, Shree Subhadra, Shree Jagannath, and Shree Sudarshan along with another miniature wooden replica of Shree Jagannath called as Madhab attract the notice of the devotees. Besides these, there are two female images of Shreedevi (wood-made image with gold-coating in the front side) and Bhudevi (image made of silver) on both the sides of Lord Jagannath. When so many deities are worshipped together why the nomenclature of the temple is Shreemandir? Such nomenclature cannot be justified without recounting the reminiscences of its deep past. Scriptures describe that from long long ago it was famous as Shreekshetra, Shreedhama and Shreetirtha and subsequently the first temple of the place was widely known as Shreemandir, the deluxe divine abode of Shree, the goddess of wealth, luxury and lustre. That ancient temple is not the present-day’s edifice of Lord Jagannath, which has been subsequently transformed and modified to present shape in course of time. On the Ratnabedi in between Shree Balabhadra and Shree Jagannath, in the middle is sitting Maa Subhadra, devotee touching and bowing head on the backside of Garuda pillar can see Devi Subhadra in full shape and one hand each of Balabhadra and Jagannath. The great Gurus and Preceptors have accepted Her as the Prime-mother and Her temple is the Shreemandir. The above-stated four wooden deities are worshipped jointly as Param Brahma, the absolute Supreme Being.

Worship of the formless Brahma — (The initial phase)

The Self hidden in the heart of all the beings was not revealed to all. Sages possessed
of keen intelligence alone could see it with the help of their sharp and acute reason, and through direct knowledge of embodiment of Sat, Cit and Ananda. ‘Hiranyagarbha Samabartatagre’ [Yajurh -23-1]. ‘Hiranyagarbha’ is infinite effulgence without any definite shape. ‘Na tasya pratima asti yasya nama Mahadasya Hiranyagarbha’, initially He had no image. It has been propounded in the Upanisad that there was only one and one unique Parambrahma, without a second, in the beginning – ‘Sadeva somyedamagra asidekamevadhvitiyam’.[Chandogya -6-2-1] Only that Primordial Supreme God became diversified into many – ‘Tadaiksata bahu syam prajayeyeti’ [Chandogya -6-2-3], He resolved – ‘Would that I were many! Let Me procreate Myself!’ ‘Eko basi sarabhabhutantaratma, ekam rupam bahudha yah karoti’ – The one controller, the inner Soul of all the things, makes His one form manifold. [Katha -2-2-12] Despite being diversified into many, He remained one alone, manifoldness could not occur in Him – ‘ekopi san bahudha yo bibhati’ – He manifests Himself as many, though He is one. ‘Sarbam khalwidam Brahma’ [Chandogya -3-14-1]- Hence, this whole universe is Brahma.

‘Sarbam hi etat Brahma ayam atma brahma sah ayamatma chatuspat’. [Mandukyua -2] This means – All this is surely Brahman. This self is Brahman, The Self, such as it is, is possessed of four phases. Then, what are these four phases? Those are – ‘Jagaritasthanah’ (Shree Jagannath), ‘Swapnasthanah’ (Mother Subhadra), ‘Sushuptisthanah’ (Shree Jagannath), ‘Prabhava-apayayau’ the place of origin and dissolution of ‘bhutam’ –Turiyasthanam (Shree Sudarshan).

Shree Jagannath is the symbolic of Supreme, Devi Subhadra represents to Maya the illusion, Shree Balabhadra is Jiva the Mortal soul. When the Supreme Soul Brahma is enlivened by the illusory energy Maya, the Universe is created. Therefore from the unification of the Param with the Maya the Jiva is thriving in the sphere of creation. Therefore the joint worship of the above deities is the worship of the Supreme, the Brahman.

A brief, as regards the chronology of evolution of iconography in Shreekshetra, phase by phase in course of time from the Vedic period to-date is being discussed as below.

(1) From time immemorial Shree Devi was worshipped in Shreekshetra by its founder preceptor Bhargaba Parasuram. (so the Kshetra is still surrounded by the river Bhargbi in memory of Bhrugu Rishi, who was the Guru and Grandfather of Parasuram) Parasuram’s disciple sage Medhas worshipped Shree Devi continuously for many years and this holy place was Medhas’s hermitage at that time. In course of time king Surath of Chedi dynasty (the predecessor of Kharabela, the powerful king of Kalinga of 2nd century B.C.), being defeated by the enemies, went away alone into a deep forest and took shelter of Maharshi Medhas. King Surath as per direction of Maharshi, in association with
Samadhi Baisya who lost his business, adored Mahamaya (Shree Devi), after construction of Her image in bare sands, at the outlet of the river Malini and by the side of the sea-shore (at present the place is known as Banki Muhana near Chakratirtha), continuously for three years and due to Her grace got back his Kingdom. Then the rulers of the then Kalinga came to know the Goddess, built a temple which was reputedly recognized as Shreemandir. Shree Devi was decorated by two elephants on the top of both of Her sides and was reverentially attributed as Gaja-Lakshmi. A similar image of Gaja-Lakshmi was carved within the Hatigumpha inscription of Samrat Kharabela on the Dhabalagiri hill during 2nd century B.C.

(2) During the period of worship of Shree Devi, the worship of Madhab was initiated in Brahmabana (the prior name of Shreekshetra). Madhab is Gana-devata, Mangalayatan Murti and Agrpujuya in the culture of Odisha. “Madhabo Madhabo Vishnuh Madhabo Madhabo Harih, Smaranti Sadhabo nityam sarbakaryeshu Madhabam”. His name has been uttered five times, the meaning of “Maa” is “Laxmi”, Her other names are – ‘Padmalaya’, ‘Kamala’, ‘Shree’, ‘Haripriya’, ‘Indira’, ‘Lokamata’, ‘Khirabdhitanaya’ and ‘Rama’ (Amara Kosha – Prathama Kanda/14), Their husband is Madhab (the predominant Father). Madhaba is usually a Chaturbhuja Vishnu image. The Mahabarhara puts forth – ‘Maunadhyanasca yogasca biddhi bharat Madhabh’, on accounts of His silence (mauna), prayer (dhyana) and Yoga He is the epithet of Madhab. At a later period, ‘Brahmababarta Purana’ described Madhab as the husband of all the Saktis.

Maa ca Brahmaswarupa ya Mulaprakutiriswhari, 
Narayani iti bikhyata Vishnumaya Sanatani// 
Mahalaxmi swarupa ca Bedamata Saraswati, 
Radha Basundhara Ganga tasam swami ca 
Madhabh//

In Mahabarhara there is mention of a “vedi” within the ‘Brahmabana’ near the sea coast of Kalinga which was crossed by the Pandabs with Pachali in course of the Agnyata Banabasa as per the direction of the sage Lomasha. (Mahabarhara –Bana-parba- 114 – 16 to 28) This Vedi (altar) uprose from within the sea-water, was the creation of Agni and Surya, it was the “Shree-nivas”. The Bhumi was created out of Yagnyagni (fire sacrifice made by Brahma) and Shree Vishnu (Madhab) was the Yagnya-purush. Hence the worship of Madhab was initiated in this khetra on or before the period of Mahabarhara all along with the upasana of ‘Shree’.

Since Shree Devi, the main goddess was worshipped in Her own temple; a separate temple along with a descent platform was constructed for Madhab in course of time. Instances of worship of Madhab images by the side of the river Prachi, around the then ‘Mahavijaya Prasad’, the state capital of Samrat Kharabela, at Niali (Madhabananda), Chaurashi (Lalitmadhab), Mundala (Mudgala Madhab) etc are ample in the history of Odisha. The same Madhab consecrated during the time of Mahabarhara in
Shreekshetra, has been worshipped at different stages as Shree Nilamadhab by Biswabasu, Shree Nrusimha in course of arrival of Maharaja Indrayumna and Shree Purusottam by Acharya Sankara respectively.

3) When Shree Devi and Madhab were worshipped in separate temples within the campus of Shreemandir the influence of Brahmanism was reduced in the-then Kalinga and the Buddhist-tantra’s influence captured the entire state. They initiated the worship of Tara and Bhairabi along with Shree Devi. The elephant and the lotus were their national symbols, so they easily accepted Shree Devi (Gajalaxmi) as their goddess. Hence all the three deities Shree Devi, Tara and Bhairabi were worshipped together for quite a longer period.

4) Gradually in course of time the Buddhist influence was humbled in Odisha, their three images – Tara, Shree Devi, Bhairabi were again accepted by the Brahminic followers and were worshipped as Dakshinakali, Mahalaxmi and Bimala respectively. All these three goddesses were being worshipped, in those times, within a south-facing temple, on which the present day Ratna Bhandar (Treasure-house) of Shreemandir stands. From that time the Buddhist-Tantric monolatry system of worship discontinued and the worship of a series of gods and goddesses was initiated in Shreekshetra.

5) Thereafter Brahmanic culture made up their mind to initiate the worship of conjugal or multiple deities. As a result of which the worship of Durga- Madhab, Shiva-Parbati, Laxmi-Nrusimh etc were emphasized. This trend ultimately resulted in worship of seven deities on the Ratna Simhasan one after another in course of time.

6) Because of the Buddhist influence male and female images were treated as brothers and sisters. Under such analogy Jagannath and Devi Subhadra are worshipped as brother and sister on the Ratna Simhasan. Similarly during the Gupta-Gundicha festival in the month of Aswina, Durga and Madhab are also worshipped as brother and sister. In olden days the images were made of stone or metal, subsequently in course of time this system was also modified. Previously the images were subjected to direct worshipping system in their bathing and brushing of teeth etc. unlike the present day’s system of reflections on metallic mirrors.

7) Acharya Sankar, the spokesman of Adweta Darshan, consequent on his arrival in Shreekshetra initially desired to worship the unique Purusottam image as Shiva but subsequently modified his opinion and decided to accept Him as Vishnu. His mission was to revive the Vedic system of worship and to eliminate the Buddhist influence on Hindu rituals. In his Gita-bhasya he has got justified that the Madhab or the Nilamadhab worshipped earlier in Shreekshetra was Gita’s Purusottam – ‘Atoasmi loke vedeca prathitah Purusottamah’.

After Acharya Sankar, Acharya Ramanuj, the spokesman of Bishistadweta, arrived in
Shreekshetra, he had directed to worship Jagannath and Devi Subhadra as Narayan and His consort Laxmi. Thereafter Madhavacharya, the spokesman of Dwetamata, Acharya Nimbarka, the spokesman of Dwetadwetabada and Acharya Vishnuswami of Rudra Sampradaya, spokesman of Shuddhdwetabada arrived in Shreekshetra one after another and tried to influence the system of worship of Shreekshetra in their own direction.

During the middle period of Acharya Sankar and Acharya Ramanuja the presently seen temple has been constructed, the previous temple where Shree Purusottam was worshipped has been re-designated as Shree Nrusimah’s temple (East-facing temple in front of the present Muktimandop). In Nrusimah’s temple Shree Balabhadra, Shree Subhadra and Shree Jagannath were worshipped as a joint unique image known as Shree Purusottam. In course of time the joint image was initially divided to three entities and subsequently Their number has increased to seven on the Ratna Simhasan.

(8) In the beginning the wood-made deities were enlivened and worshipped in the Gundicha temple for quite a long period, thereafter they were brought to the present-day temple, Shreemandir, after the completion of its construction. Mahalaxmi and Bimala were shifted into their new temples constructed afresh within the premises of Shreemandir and Mahakali was shifted to a new temple constructed outside the western side of Shreemandir, which is at present known as Dakshinakalika temple at Kalikadevi Sahi.

(9) As a result of accomplishment of rigorous spiritual endeavour of innumerable sages, saints and Acharyas, Shree Subhadra, Shree Jagannath and Shree Balabhadra, Trinity, in Shreemandir are worshipped as Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar representing the Srusti (the creation), Sthiti (the existence) and Pralaya (the total destruction) respectively.

**Conclusion —** The prevailing worshipping rituals of the holy trinity are the idealistic specimen for the people of Odisha. The Puja-laws in other temples of India may be different as per Shaiva, Shaktia and Vaishnavite variation, but the Acarya in Shreemandir is all-in-one – Shaiva, Shaktia and Vaishnava. He primarily worships the Vedic Mother, so he is Shaktia. In course of time he attains the wisdom of realization that he himself is Shiva, hence he is Shaktia. Indoctrinated in Vedic and Tantric Mantra by Perfect Guru he becomes a Vaishnava. Being Vaishnavite, he offers Naibeda to Subhadra (Brahma), Jagannath (Vishnu) and Balabhadra (Maheswar) with Tulasi leaves. This Rajbidya and Rajguhya of both Nirguna and Saguna aspects of the Trinity, is a sovereign science, a sovereign secret, supremely holy, most excellent, attended with virtue, very easy to practice and imperishable. Hence we conclude in brief, Odisha is Jagannath and Shree Jagannath is Odisha. Truly speaking, Shree Jagannath is the Lord of the Universe.

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