Jagannath consciousness has become a widespread phenomenon on the world at large. A unique culture projecting Odia identity, it has cast its impact on the people of the world. Jagannath is considered a form of Vishnu or his incarnation (Buddha or Kalki). He is worshipped as part of a triad on the ‘Ratnavedi’ (jewelled platform) along with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. The word Jagannath itself denotes that ‘God of the Universe’. From ancient times, Odisha has become the cradle of several religious faiths. This land witnessed the growth of various religions like Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktism etc. With the progress of time all these faiths were assimilated in one faith i.e. the Jagannath which is quite unique in the cultural heritage of this land. From time immemorial, Puri has been recognised as Srikshetra and Sankhakshetra and the deity has been called as Jagannath, Purusottam, the supreme consciousness. Periodical rituals have been performed near the deity with dignity and grandeur. It is believed that Jagannath is a super natural being, although the deity itself is made of log (Daru). He is considered as an absolute being who is beyond human thinking. Sanskrit Puranas highlight Lord Jagannath as a Universal God who presents Universal consciousness. The Bamana Purana, Skanda Purana, Shiva Purana, Bruhat Nrusingha Purana, Utkala Mahatmya, Tantra Jamala, Brahma Purana, Kurma Purana, Padma Purana, Narada Purana, Sarala Das Mahabharata etc highly glorify Purushottama Kshetra and Sankha Kshetra.

Many Puranas describe Lord Jagannath as a Universal deity and Srikshetra as a most holy place on the earth. Shiva Purana says, “Purushottam is the only place on earth which can confer liberation from earthly bondage, it is the place where the Supreme God has assumed wooden form”. The Sankha Kshetra or Srikshetra Puri is one of the most important centres of Vaishnavism in India. Hindu devotees across the country visit the Purushottama Kshetra to offer worship. Lord Jagannath has been accepted as the representative of Odishan people, an embodiment of love, a guiding force behind the cultural heritage of this land, a synthesis of all the Hinduite faiths and finally as the God of the Universe. Jagannath is the symbol of unity and integrity of the all religions of the world. He neither represents any religion, division, caste, nor any country. He is above all these boundaries. Jagatguru Aadi Sankaracharya has given privilege to the four holy places of India Known as
‘Chaturdham’. In the east it is Puri, in the west it is Dwarka, in the north it is Badrinath and in the south it is Rameswaram. In the concept of Aadi Sankaracharya, Puri is the prime and the foremost Dham among the four Dhams. The name of this Dham is otherwise known as ‘Mukti Dham’ and ‘Baikuntha Dham’ and it has its own special peculiarities. In this holy place Bhakta Salabega, Dasi Bauri, Bandhu Mohanty, Guru Nanak, Jayadev, Ganapati Bhatta, Adi Sankaracharya and many others had their special emotions. This Dham of God Jagannath at Puri has its own specialities and peculiarities. The special of this Dham is that it has no similarities with any Temple, Church, Mosque etc.6

The significance and uniqueness of God Jagannath is that it is made up of a piece of Neem (Azadirachta Indica) tree, what we called ‘Daru’ or ‘Mahadaru’ and the God is known as ‘Daru Debata’, whereas other deities are made with rock, clay and metals. Except Jagannath Dham in other places the Gods are worshipped with their concerts as Radha-Krishna, Rama-Sita, Laxmi-Narayan, Shiv-Parvati, whereas in this Dham God Jagannath is worshipped with his elder brother ‘Balabhadra’ and younger sister ‘Subhadra’. It represents the universal brotherhood and human unity and integrity and the unting family bond. It is unique that the deities have no specific form. It is believed that Jagannath is the first and the last God to give ‘Moksha’ (salvation) that is why the sacred land Puri is universally popular as the ‘Mukti Dham’. The form signifies that Jagannath is a Universal deity. His arm is called ‘Mahabahu’, His eyes are called ‘Chaka Aakhi’, two round eyes representing the great void of the world. The nine planets immersed in the form of deity. In Ashadhika Dwitiya the deities move to their “Mausi Ghara” by the chariots. The chariots have been pulled by the devotees irrespective of caste, creed and religion.7

Jagannath culture has spread beyond the state into Tibet, Nepal, and Burma etc. Historians and archaeologists have given data about the God Jagannath that many places across India there is a Jagannath culture. Ancient name of Brahma Desh (Burma) was named as Srikshetra. The Peg region of Burma is known as Ussa which is Odisha. Again in Balidwipa Shiva is represented as Jagannath with Shankha Chakra Gada and Padma, Vishnu is treated as Purushottama and Avatar. In Nepal there had been also the spread of Jagannath culture and consciousness. Still now there are many Jagannath temples found in Nepal. A Tibetan historian Lama Taranath said that there was Jagannath culture in Tibet. The rite and ritual of Srikshetra and Rathayatra are being observed there till now. In America there are lot of Jagannath temples, where the triad are being worshipped by American people. Like Srikshetra, they are also observing Rathayatra with great enthusiasm and vigour. There is a saying that Jesus Christ had come to Puri and stayed there for some time. From the Bible, it is known that Jesus was vanished from Jerusalem for about twelve years. It is a fact that Jesus was in the Srikshetra as said by the researcher. During his stay he learned about Sanatana Hindu Dharma and spread it among the
disciples. The book titled, The unknown life of Jesus Christ, Aquarian gospel of Jesus the Christ and The life and work of Jesus in India proved that Jesus was staying in Puri.8

In spite of many cultural invasions by outsiders and cross cultural barriers by few insiders, Odisha is still maintaining its ‘unique culture’ i.e. ‘Jagannath culture’ of “Unity in Diversity”. Odisha’s traditional culture is a combination of varieties, so diversity is found in Jagannath culture. Diversity means difference. It means collective differences; such differences distinguish one group of people from other. These differences may be biological, religious, linguistic etc. The Jagannath culture is a beautiful combination of worldly and cosmic realities. The specialty of this culture is that all the religions of the world have been merged within it to make it flexible, open and generous. Like all other religions it has not been narrowed down itself within certain idealistic values and principles. The culture is based upon high ideals of democracy, humanitarian principle of equality, justice, honesty and integrity, which purely illustrate against the conservative outlook of casteism, sectarianism and any other barriers for attainment of complete universalism. Therefore, Jagannath has been called the God of the whole universe. There is no other religion in the world where a common man sees his God as his own family member who is an inseparable entity. It is based upon the beliefs of Sarbajana Hitaya, Sarbajana Sukhaya which means for the sake of well being of entire humanity of the universe.9

God Jagannath is known as Parambrahma. Brahma is the only universal truth other things are illusion. As Aadi Sankaracharya said ‘Brahman Satya, Jagat Mithya, Brahman Jibeiba Na Parah’. But it is the only truth that Brahma has no shape, no colour, no gender and out of imagination what Jagannath represents for.10 There is a controversy among the scholars and researchers regarding the evolution of Jagannath culture and its antiquity. Many religions of the world had been mingled in the Jagannath culture. It symbolises a highly electric spirit of synthesis of different Indian religions. God Jagannath is the God of all religions. The Jainas see him as Jineswar their beloved God and the Buddhists see him as Buddha. Muslims like Kabir, Haridas, Salabega devoted their entire life before God Jagannath and sang Bhajans and Janana in praise of the God.11 Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Kabir, Sri Chaitanya and Guru Nanak are said to have also visited Nilachal Dham and they were greatly influenced by the assimilated philosophy of Jagannath culture which later moulded and shaped their teaching and preaching to a great extent. Dasia Bauri, an untouchable, Hadi Das, a blacksmith, Jagannath Das, the famous poet of Bhakti movement and Bandhu Mohanty, an ardent devotee of the God are gifted with the divine blessings of the God.12

The Puranic text Purushottama Mahatmya of the Skanda Purana contains the Indradyumna legend and the origin of Jagannath’s wooden idol at Puri. The Puranic texts corroborate that Jagannatha was originally a deity of the aboriginal tribes and was known as Nila Madhava, his image being made of some sort of blue stone. Later on, the God manifested himself in the form of four wooden images, ‘Chaturdha Murti’ which are now being worshipped in the Jagannath Temple at Puri.

Thus, Jagannath is equally claimed by the aboriginal tribes and the Vedic Hindus to be their original deity of worship. With the visit of Sri Chaitanya Vaishnavism became very popular in Odisha. Several festivals associated with Krishna culture like Krishna Janma, Nandotsava, Kaliyadalana, Vakasuravadha, Chandan Yatra etc
were intimately associated with the festival of the temple of God Jagannath. The Sikh Guru Nanak was influenced by God Jagannath for which he visited his temple at Puri. For the Sikh devotees two monasteries had been built by the Sikhs. The devotees come and stay there for sacred Darshan of God Jagannath. Even, the Sikhs have been allowed to perform certain rituals in the Jagannath temple. Santh Kabir and Hari Das two Muslim devotees had come to Puri to get the blessings of God Jagannath. In 1512 A.D. Kabir arrived at Puri and in remembrance of his visit, Kabir Chaura Monastery was built up in the sea shore which is still standing there. Salabega, a Muslim devotee of Jagannath had given importance to him. He had composed many bhajanas for Jagannath. The three images of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra, are the identical representations of Buddha, Sangha and Dharma respectively of Buddhist Triad. Because of the popularity of Jainism in Odisha, Balabhadra, Jagannath, and Subhadra have been regarded as the three cardinal principles of Jainism like Samyak Jnana, Samyak Charitra and Samyak Drishti. The concept of Kalpa tree in Jainism is regarded as the Kalpavala inside the sacred complex of God Jagannath temple at Puri. Kaivalya Mukti, one of the tenets of Jainism is identified with the Kaivalya (Mahaprasada) of God Jagannath.

Even today, God Jagannath is honoured and worshipped by the followers of different religious sects in India. And we Odias are fortunate enough to have a God Who is the ‘God of the Universe’ and Who has given an identity to us in the whole world. With the construction of many Jagannath temples across the world, Jagannath consciousness is becoming a widespread phenomenon. This is creating universal brotherhood which is another great aspect of the Jagannath culture.

References :

4. Ibid.p.84.
7. Ibid. pp.2-5.
14. Damodar Pradhan, op.cit. pp.91-93. See also Shisir Kumar Panda, op.cit.

Dr. Abhijit Sahoo, Lecturer in History, Marshaghai College, Marshaghai, Kendrapara.