



## Sri Jagannath Temple - A Study of its Cosmic Symbolism

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The temple is a sacred place, a place for worship, a tirtha, a meeting of divine and earthly life and a community center. Temple means body or embodiment. Temples enable devotee to sacred and blissful experience that the yogi has attained through rigorous and painstaking sadhans. These experiences are often displayed on the temple walls.

The idea of temple originated centuries ago in the universal ancient conception of god in human form. Such form required a habitation; a shelter and this need resulted in a structural shrine. It is often believed that the temple form is derived from the "vedic" altar the earliest known sacred structure (vedi), which had the square as its essential form. Its origin goes back to the pre-Christian era, and its evolution into a monument of the great architectural merit is marked by conscious efforts on the part of several ruling dynasties from the 4th to 17th centuries A.D. Religion in India, has been a powerful ideological space for worship of the divine, served as super ordinate institution of social organisation. In the medieval periods of Indian history, the role of the temple as the institutional focus of development is understood by the temples social and economic out reach as a land owner, organizer of rural and urban activities, provider

of educational and medical help, and above all, as the center of: cultural activities, such as the arts, paintings and sculpture, apart from architecture, music and dance and more significantly as symbol of political power.

It can well be glimpsed through the temple towns of India. The culture that revolved the temples can be felt even today in temple cities like Banaras, Ujain, Kanchipuram, Tanjore, Madurai, Dwaraka, Tirupati, Rameswaram, or Puri, etc. Here the God is chalachala, the rituals, festivals, are living today. The culture that once developed with the community such as rituals and festivals and the idea of pilgrims has thus, created network of temple-centers and sacred geography, continue to emphasize the integrative role of the temple in the sub continent.

Again the temple in particular symbolizes as an object of devotion like an image. Hence, the temple is visualized as human body. Accordingly various parts of the temple are termed after the names of various limbs of human body with architectural connotations.

The Hindu temple is also considered as the image of Mahapurusa. The medieval



architectural texts like the Agni Purana and the Isanasivagarudeva Paddhati and others elaborate this symbolism in a realistic manner. In this way the entire temple becomes the manifested form of divinity, containing all levels of existences, all substances, tattva and bhuttas from the earth to ether and its structure gains the absolute supreme changeless essence.

In India the temple as cosmic symbolism can be best seen from the royal temples of famous Brahadisvara temple at Tanjore and Jagannath temple at Puri. The Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur (Tanjore) was completed in 1010 A.D. by Rajaraja I of Chola dynasty. This temple for next 1000 years was the cradle of Bharatnatyam through the successive dynasties. This temple again marked a watershed in the history of art and architecture of India. Like other monuments of 'Political architecture' in India, this temple symbolized the new royal power of its founder. The extensive donative inscriptions at the walls of the temple at Tanjore reveal an even more explicit political function of this temple. Hundreds of Brahmins and temple servants were brought to Tanjore, among them 400 dancing girls, about 200 dancing masters, musicians, drummers, goldsmiths etc. Some of these servants had to be maintained by regular duties in form of rice sent from their own villages. For other servants and the maintenance of the Brahmins, villages were donated to the temple all over the empire, even in Sri Lanka. Rajaraja and several members of his family furthermore donated immense treasure of gold and jewels to the temple, which at once made the temple one of the richest in India.

It was during 11th-12th century A.D. that the temple town Puri might have assumed the

greatest prominence under the dynastic rule of the imperial Gangas. The present magnificent temple of Purusottama-Jagannath was constructed during this period. Several copper plate inscriptions of this period credit "Gangesvara" as the builder of the temple and this "Gangesvara" has rightly been identified with Anantavarmana Chodaganga Deva (1078-1147 A.D.). It is known from the inscriptions that Chodaganga might have invited some selected Brahmana Pandits or Vaisnavas, belonged to Kanchi and settled near Sri Purusottama Kshetra for propagation of Dvaitya philosophy. It is also known from inscriptions that towards 11.5 A.D. several Pandits, Brahmanas and Sadhus (sages) did settle in different parts of the empire. It is also known that king Chodaganga Deva patronized Vaisnavism under the influence of the great Vaisnava saint Ramanuja (1056-1136 A.D.) who advocated the Visistadaitya philosophy of Vedanta. It is also believed that Ramanuja might have visited Puri during the time of Chodaganga and was closely associated with the rituals of the temple. For the next 800 years this temple of Purusottama-Jagannath is the center of art, cult and culture of Orissa. In 1230 A.D. the Ganga King Anangabhima ritually dedicated his kingdom to the God Purusottama-Jagannath and acknowledged the divinity of Puri both as the sole state deity of Orissa and as his divine over Lord.

Thus like that of Chola king Rajaraja, King Chodaganga Deva and later Anangabhima Deva of Ganga dynasty had made all possible efforts to make Purusottama-Jagannath as state deity and sovereign Lord. Accordingly the temple was certainly built for the Lord Vishnu as the iconographical feature denote. Of course, there are layers of cultural assimilations and synthesis.



Sri Jagannath Temple at Puri is a matured Kalingan style, consisting of four structures called (i) Vimana (Sanctum-Sanctorum) (ii) Jagamohana or Mukhasala (the porch) (iii) the Natamandira (dancing hall) (iv) Bhogamandapa (the hall of offering), built in a row in one axial alignment facing east.

The main temple as discussed above based on Vastu Purusa mandala is of the Pancharatha type having a curvilinear tower rising above all other monuments. It is evident that the temple is based on prescribed architectural design Sri Bachha Khandasala. This is one of the thirty six different examples prescribed for Rekha temple in Vastusastra meant for pancharatha type. Vastu sastra texts, conventionally attributed to the divine architect of the universe, Visvakarman, but composed at various points of time from 5th to 17th centuries, represent a growing tradition.

Sri Jagannath temple referred as Prasada in the inscriptions. The temple is variously known in Sanskrit as the prasada, vimana, devagriha, devalaya etc. Prasada and Vimana are the most commonly used terms to refer to the main and integral part of the Hindu temple. Prasada, the other name of the main building, is synonymous with Vimana. According to the Silparatna (a Vastu Sastra text), "Prasada please by their beauty, the minds of Gods and Men."

The main shrine (Vimana) symbolizes by means of its architectures, the universe, its manifestation and integration. It incorporate in its structure all the images. This is true in every respect in the architecture of Sri Jagannath temple as the temple has vertical divisions i.e. the pitha (pedestal), the bada (wall), the gandi (body) and the mastaka (the head). Each component signifies the divine aspect of celestial world.

The pitha (pedestal) on which the temple stands signifies a square base. Based on the square, the structure of the temple also rises from the square Vastupurusamandala. The pitha on which the Sri Jagannath Temple stands commences from the existing plinth of 5'.2" in height. But the major portion of the pedestal is buried. The square is arch type, and the pattern of order in the Indian tradition, as laid down in the Brahat Samhita. Based on the square, the structure of the temple arises in the mid-world (antariksha) of air. The square as the fundamental figure of vedic sacrificial symbolism and temple architecture lends itself to many variations and still retains its symbolism.

Above the pedestal, the original temple structure stands with Pabhaga. The Pabhaga again has panchanga divisions of Orissan temple style like khura, kumbha, pata, kani and vasanta in ascending order. All these components have decorated with rich carvings like vanalata, scroll motifs, procession of various animals mostly war animals, procession of foot soldiers, etc. in the horizontal surface of Pata is carved with Giri-Govardhanadhari Krishna playing with Gopis, Dhenukasuravadha, proceeding towards Mathura on chariot etc.

Above the Pabhaga, the next division is Tala-Jangha (lower jangha) having miniature temple replicas with Khakara-Mundis in the Kanika and raha and anuraha pagas. The front phase of these miniature Khakaramundi niches of Kanika paga are depicted with astadikapala or guardian deities in their respective directions. Again the miniature Khakharamundi shrines (niches) of anurahapaga depicts the King's court, priests giving sermons to the devotees, teachers (acharya)



teaching their disciples. The two sides of each miniature shrine exhibits the image of Vishnu, Shrikrishna, and Radha, with the hoard of cows, or playing with veerna etc. The corner space in between the two khakaramundi shrines within the Tala-Jhanga portion is occupied by the giant figures of Gaja Simha, Gaja vidal trampling over 'apsamarapurusa' or a demon. These are typical Orissan art motifs all whom depict fertility and celestial world.

The bandhana consists of three moldings connected at places by vertical bands decorated with standing figures of kanyas (maidens representing celestial beauties).

The upper Jhangha has pidha-mundis (miniature temple of pidha-order), which contains deities including avataras of Vishnu. In the south-east corner, Varaha and Narasimha are found intact. In the south-west corner Balarama, north-west corner Kalki and Buddha are found in tact. These icons show the perfect shape and size with serenity in their faces and represent the mature iconographic features of Vaishnava cult.

The recesses in between the two pagae of upper Jhanga is occupied by life-size sculptures of maidens and surasundaris (kanyas) in different actions representing female power and piousness. Orissan architectural text Silpaprakas has shown sixteen postures for there maidens (kanyas). The baranda over the upper jhanga is made or ten curved moldings, which are almost, equal size.

On the front side of each rahapaga above the baranda level contains a small niche, inside it a beautiful figure of Vishnu is exhibited and above that the chaitya window motif with two purusa figures (demons) on either side having

beaded boarders, popularly known as "Bhoo motif' of Orissan art is carved. Further, above the projecting Gaja-Simha motifs are found in all cardinal directions.

In the Gandi level, bhumi-amalas form offsets partially running all around the temple surface, decorated with creepers and floral designs. The niches provided on three cardinal directions below the baranda level contain life size images of Varaha, Narasimha and Trivikrama-the parsadevatas.

The most remarkable feature of Sri Jagannath Temple is that on the both sides of each parsvadevata, shrines, in the outer wall figures of Vishnu, four on either side are carved with depicting twenty four forms of Vishnu. These twenty four forms manifestations are alike in their iconographic features. They are all standing figures with no band in the body possessing four arms and adorned with Kirita Mukuta (crown) and other usual ornaments. The difference between any two of there images has to be made out by the way in which the Sankha (conch), the Chakra (wheel) the Gada (mice/club) and the Padma (lotus) are found distributed among their four hands. "Rupamandana" furnishes the twenty-four names of Vishnu and the corresponding arrangements of the four ayudhas in the four hands in each case. These twenty four forms of Vishnu which have been listed in the Silpasastras are found nowhere in any temple sculpture except in this Sri Jagannath Temple.

The next division gandi or body of the temple proper has ten bhumis or storeys. In architectural features and decorative details, the bada shows unmistakable affinity with those of Lingaraja Temple. But here in Jagannath Temple we find advanced stage of development in the architectural style.



The towering division mastaka consists of usual elements of Beki (neck), amalaka, khapuri, kalasa and ayudha (chakra) attached with flag. As the symbol of the world mountain (Sri Jagannath Temple termed as meru), the prasada carries all the worlds strata along its axis, which is the central pillar of the temple visible above its curvilinear superstructure, in the form of beki (neck). The amalaka (ribbed myrobalan) and the Kalasa (finial) are the shapes and symbols of the vertical axis of the temple where it emerges into visibility. Thus, the finial extends into mid-space. The finial rises above the high temple. The amalaka above the beki, the highest point, marks the limit between the unmanifest and the manifest. The hierarchy of divine manifestation is thus accommodated in the monument, located within its vertical axis, the cosmic pillar.

Thus, Sri Jagannath Temple and the iconographic manifestations symbolizes the universe with Vishnu as cosmic divine. Of course, layers of other cultural traits, amalgamations and synthesis are marked in the Jagannath cult. But the outer surface of the main temple signifies the various forms of the deity Vishnu-Krishna in what are called the avarna kosthas (surrounding niches). Thus, the rite of (pradkhina) by the devotee is more a communion by movement with the images in the niches of the walls, than a visual recognition

of their identity . As we have seen the temple is mean to be a monument for the manifestation of the divinity whose image or symbol is enshrined in the garbhagriha.

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