

JAGANNATH CULT

Centuries of myths, legends and history have all blended into a grand composite culture centred round Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe, one of the most revered and ancient of the deities of the Hindu's pantheon. The earliest references of Lord Jagannath are found in the Puranas and ancient literature, though details of His origin and evolution are still shrouded in mystery. Legendary sources suggest that Jagannath was originally worshipped by the tribals, the Sabaras. The most important evidence of this belief is the existence of a class of Sevakas called the Daitas who are considered to be of tribal lineage and who still play a major role in the various services to Lord Jagannatha in the temple.

In course of time, the cult of Jagannath took an Aryanised form. Various major faiths like Saivism, Saktism, Vaishnavism, Jainism and Buddhism were assimilated into the concept of Jagannath as an all-pervasive and all-inclusive philosophy, symbolizing unity in diversity.

Some scholars think that the three main images of Lord Jagannatha, Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra represent the Jaina Trinity of Samyak Jnana, Samyak Charitra and Samyak Drusti. Many others say that the three images represent the Buddhist triad of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. It is widely believed that the soul of Jagannath most secretly ensconced within the image of Lord Jagannath is no other than the tooth Relic of Lord Goutam Buddha. The philosophy of Tantra, which in course of time became an integral part of Buddhism, too has significantly influenced the rites and rituals of the Jagannatha temple.

The philosophy of Lord Jagannath thus defies all definitions and is yet comprehensive enough to perceive unity among beliefs of all sects and castes.

Puri

Puri, the abode of Lord Jagannath, is one of India's four Dhamas, the holiest of the holy places. Situated on the shore of the Bay of Bengal, about 59 kilometers from Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha, for centuries Puri has been an important centre of Hindu worship and is counted among the best holiday resorts of the country.

The Puranas and other ancient Sanskrit texts refer to the holy city as Nilachala, Nilagiri, Niladri Purusottam Kshetra, Srikshetra and Sankha Kshetra.

In Puri, not only is the temple holy, but the whole of its surroundings is treated as grand and splendid. The sea is Mahodadhi (The great ocean). The main road of the city is Bada Danda (The grand road). The offering to the Lord Jagannath is Mahaprasad (The holy food). The cremation ground is Swargadwara (Gateway to Heaven).

At the centre of the Puri town is the temple of Lord Jagannath and all around it are a number of streets, Sahis, spread out somewhat in the shape of a fan with Bada Danda as its handle : Harachandi Sahi on the West, Bali Sahi on the South. Dolamandap Sahi and Chudanga Sahi on the North and so on. Besides the main temple. Puri has a large number of smaller temples—dedicated mostly to Siva, Kali and Hanuman and numerous religious institutions, *mathas*.

Puri has a salubrious climate and attracts tourists from all over the world round the year and particularly during the summer. It has one of the finest beaches of the world and is the home of numerous artisans and craftsmen who produce rare exquisite handicrafts of a large variety.