

Beyond Rath Yatra: The Deeper Dimensions of Lord Jagannath's Worship

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14254029>

Abstract:

Myths and mythological narratives have shaped civilisations for generations, often rooted in oral traditions and religious texts. One such legend is about Lord Jagannath, a prominent deity in Hinduism and is profoundly celebrated within the eastern states of India, especially Odisha. The mythology encompassing Lord Jagannath, which translates to "Lord of the Universe," is rich and multifaceted. He is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver of the universe. The most iconic aspect of Lord Jagannath's mythology is the yearly Rath Yatra, translated as a Chariot Celebration. In this grand procession, Lord Jagannath, along with his brother Balaram, and his sister Subhadra are pulled through the streets in intricately beautified chariots. This festival could be a significant cultural occasion and an affirmation of individuals' deep devotion and faith in Lord Jagannath. The mythology tales of Lord Jagannath include stories of his creation, his divine

powers, and his interactions with legendary characters. The Puri temple, dedicated to Jagannath, is one of the major pilgrimage sites for Hindu worshipers and is believed to have immense spiritual significance. The Jagannath Puri Temple is often only associated with the Rath Yatra festival, leading to limited knowledge about its other aspects. However, the temple holds numerous mysteries that continue to amaze visitors. This paper aims to uncover these lesser-known facts and explore the temple's symbolic and spiritual significance for humanity today. Finally, through its exploration, the paper attempts to illuminate the enduring power of myths to inspire, shape, and connect people.

Keywords: Mithya, Lord Jagannath, Rath Yatra, Neela-Madhav, Nabakalevara, Daru Brahman, Maha-prasadam

Myths are a fundamental part of human culture and have been used centuries to shape beliefs, values, and behaviours. They continue to influence literature, art, music, and other forms of cultural expression today. The term comes from the Greek 'mythos,' referring to a narrative shared by people, a fictional work, a tale, or a legend. In literature, a myth is a traditional story that generally seeks to clarify a natural or social occurrence, typically involving supernatural beings tracing back to the early periods of various civilizations. Mythology is a collection of myths and their legends. Throughout history, different cultures have cultivated their own mythology, encompassing the tales of their past, their beliefs, their accounts of how the universe was formed,

and their celebrated figures. These narratives hold significant symbolic value, which may account for their longevity, often lasting thousands of years.

However, conventionally, myths have been viewed in a negative light as being untrue, false or misleading, something that contradicts their fundamental truth. In response to this, Devdutt Pattanaik expresses, “There are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective. Some logical, some intuitive. Some cultural, some universal. Some are based on evidence; others depend on faith. Myth is a truth that is subjective, intuitive, cultural, and grounded in faith.” (Myth=Mithya, XV).

Sarvasara Upanishad refers to two concepts: Mithya and Maya. It defines Mithya as an illusion and calls it one of three kinds of substances, along with Sat (Be-ness, True) and Asat (not-Be-ness, False). Maya, Sarvasara Upanishad is defined as everything that is not Atman. Maya has no beginning but has an end. Maya, declares Sarvasara, is anything that can be studied and subjected to proof and disproof, anything with Guṇas. In the human search for self-knowledge, Maya obscures, confuses, and distracts an individual. ("Maya")

Pattanaik further explains it: “Ancient Hindu seers knew myth as mithya. They distinguished mithya from sat. Mithya was truth seen through a frame of reference. Sat was truth independent of any frame of reference. Mithya gave a limited, distorted view of reality; sat a limitless, correct view of things. Mithya was delusional, and open to correction. Sat was truth, absolute and perfect in every way.” (Myth=Mithya, XV)

Myths are frequently rooted in spiritual beliefs, especially those concerning gods and heroic figures, providing narratives for natural or historical events. They may have a basis in reality or be entirely imaginary. Typically, these stories revolve around the adventures of extraordinary entities, including deities, and occur in a time distinct from everyday human existence.

One such miraculous tale in Indian mythology is the story of Lord Jagannath, who resides in the temple at Puri, Odisha. It is widely recognised that he is worshipped as a contemporary avatar of Lord Vishnu, embodying elements of all his ten incarnations. He is honoured alongside his elder brother Lord Balabhadra, his younger sister Subhadra, and the formidable Sudarshan Chakra (disk). Across India and other regions of the globe, Lord Jagannath is celebrated during a yearly festival known as Rath Yatra, which translates to “*Chariot Festival*.” The English word *juggernaut*, with its connotation of a force crushing whatever is in its path, is derived from this festival. The festival takes place in June and July, specifically on the second day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of Ashadha. During this magnificent procession, Lord Jagannath, along with his brother Balaram and sister Subhadra, is accompanied by devotees in three beautifully carved chariots, each representing one of the deities. Devotees pull these enormous chariots through the streets of Puri. Before the Rath Yatra, the deities have to go through a ceremonial bathing ritual known as Snana Yatra. Afterwards, the deities make their way to their Maasi Maa’s (maternal aunt's) home, located about 3 kilometres away, called the *Gundicha temple*. After nine days, the deities return to the Jagannath Temple in a procession referred to as the *Bahuda*

Yatra, or Dakshinabhimukhi Yatra, meaning the movement of the chariot towards the south. The concluding phase of the yatra, called *Suna Besha*, sees the deities adorned with gold ornaments in front of the Lion's Gate on the Shukla Ekadashi tithi, and finally, on the 13th day, the deities return to their original location. In Hindu tradition, the month of Asadha is regarded as sacred since Lord Vishnu is said to enter a state of slumber on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight of this month.

While many are familiar with the Chariot Festival, a significant portion of the population knows little about the legend of Lord Jagannatha and the secrets that the Puri Temple encompasses. In this paper, we aim to explore the different dimensions of Lord Jagannatha and seek to comprehend his importance beyond the Rath Yatra celebration.

Numerous narratives are entwined with the history and features of Lord Jagannath and the temple, all presenting similar depictions with slight variations. The most prevalent legend among the locals and inhabitants of Puri is centred around King Indradyumna's divine vision, who governed the Malava Country during the Satya Yuga, an era of Truth. Many Puranas within Hindu scriptures, especially the Skanda Purana and Brahma Purana, reference Mahaprabhu Jagannath. It is believed that five millennia ago, Lord Krishna, accompanied by His older brother Balarama and younger sister Subhadra, arrived at Kurukshetra in a chariot during a solar eclipse. This incident later inspired the emergence of the deities Jagannatha, Balarama, and Subhadra.

Pattanaik retells this backstory in one of his articles. It is during the later periods of the Mahabharata war, after thirty-six years when lord Krishna was fatally wounded by the arrow of a

hunter called Jara. Arjuna rushed from Hastinapur to save his dear friend and cousin, but it was too late. By the time he arrived, Krishna had left his mortal body and ascended to Vaikuntha, his heavenly abode. His beautiful body lay in the shade of a Banyan tree, surrounded by birds, animals and termites spellbound by his beauty. What was left behind, despite its beauty, was with great reluctance cremated. The fire consumed everything except Krishna's heart which was cast into the sea. (Hands of Jagannath, 15)

After about two thousand years of the great Mahabharata war, King Indradyumna of Orissa, being a great devotee of Lord Vishnu, desired to establish a temple in Puri with deities representing this divine journey, when he heard a divine will in his dream. Lord Jagannath was formerly worshipped as Shri Neela-Madhava by a Savar king, the tribal chief, named Viswvasu.

It all starts with King Indradyumna learning about an incarnation of Lord Vishnu called *Neela-Madhava*. Eager to see this divine figure, the King dispatched several Brahmanas to locate Neela-Madhava. All returned empty-handed except for Vidyapati, who, after travelling to a faraway town, lived with the Savara tribe. After spending some time searching for the deity, Vidyapati succeeded in persuading Lalita to marry him, the daughter of Viswvasu, who was secretly devoted to Neela-Madhava. Vidyapati persistently asked to get a glimpse of Neela-Madhava, and after considerable persuasion, Viswvasu agreed to take him under the condition that he would be blindfolded for the entire journey to the cave where Lord Neela-Madhava was worshipped. Cleverly, Vidyapati dropped mustard seeds along the path while walking with Viswvasu. The

seeds sprouted after a few days, marking the route to the cave. Overjoyed, Vidyapati informed King Indradyumna. The King immediately travelled to *Odra Desha*, now known as Odisha. However, by the time he arrived, the deity had already vanished. Indradyumna decided to undertake a fasting ritual until he could see the Lord. He practised austerities on Mount Neela until a celestial voice echoed, proclaiming, ‘*You will see him.*’ Later, he performed one thousand Ashwamedha Yajnas (sacrifices) and constructed a grand temple for Vishnu. Following this, in a dream, the Lord assured him that ‘He’ would make an appearance as Daru-brahman, a divine wooden log marked with symbols of a conch, disc, club, and lotus. It was discovered floating in the ocean and was subsequently brought ashore. Numerous skilled artisans were approached to sculpt the Deity from Daru-brahman, but none succeeded. Ultimately, Visvakarma, the architect of the demigods, came disguised as an old craftsman named Ananta Maharana and vowed to carve the Deities within three weeks if allowed to work behind closed doors for 21 days. However, after 14 days, the queen Gundicha grew restless and urged the king to open the doors early, exposing the incomplete figures of Jagannatha, Balarama, and Subhadra, while the carpenter had vanished. Even though the Deities were unfinished, the Lord revealed to the King that this form was intended for worship during Kali-yuga. The King was assured that these forms were perfect and that devotees would always perceive Lord Jagannatha in His complete divine splendour.

Hence, Lord Jagannath is also known as “*Darubrahma*”. In the 28th Chapter of Skanda-Purana Purushottama-kshetra Mahatmya, Lord Brahma Himself reveals the true identity of Lord Shri Jagannath when He instructs King Indradyumna with these words:

“Thinking it is a wooden image, O pre-eminent King, let there not be the idea in you that this is a mere image; this is verily the form of Supreme Brahman (Supreme Omnipresent God). As Param-Brahman takes away all sorrows and confers eternal bliss, He is known as Daru. According to the four Vedas therefore, the Lord is manifest in the form of Daru (sacred wood). He is the Creator of the entire Universe. He has also created Himself.” (Chapter 28, verses 39-41).

Gita:

नैव किञ्चित्करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित्।

पश्यञ्शृण्वन्स्पृशञ्जिघ्रन्नश्नन्च्छन्स्वपञ्चसन् ॥ 5, 8 ॥

“I do nothing at all, thus would the harmonised knower of Truth think – seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, sleeping, breathing...I appear as Parmatma but am always Sakshi.” (Chapter 5, Verse 8)

Svetasvatara Upanishad:

अपाणिपादो जवनो महीता पश्यत्यचक्षुः स शृणोत्यकर्णः ।

स वेत्ति वेद्यं न च तस्यास्ति वेत्ता तमाहुरग्र्यं पुरुषं महान्तम् ॥ 19 ॥

“He (The Supreme Divine Being) is without hands, feet (and yet) moves and grasps; He sees (though) without eyes; He hears (though) without ears. He knows whatever is to be known, and of Him, there is no knower. They speak of Him as the First, the Purusha and the Great.” (Chapter 3, verse 19).

Kaivalyo Upanishad:

अपाणिपादोऽहमचिन्त्यशक्तिः पश्याम्यचक्षुः स शृणोम्यकर्णः ।

अहं विजानामि विविक्तरूपो न चास्ति वेत्ता मम चित्सदाऽहम् ॥ 21 ॥

“I am without hands and legs, of incomprehensible power. I see without eyes and hear without ears. Devoid of all forms, I am knowing (everything) and none knows me. I am ever Pure-Knowledge.” [Verse 21]

Since then, these figures, although seemingly unfinished, have been revered with immense devotion, particularly during the grand Ratha-Yatra festival, where the Lord travels through the streets on enormous chariots, allowing everyone to witness His divine presence. The temple of Lord Jagannath, built by King Indradyumna, is recorded as the tallest structure in the world at 1,000 cubits tall and is considered the most beautiful temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu.

But what does the incomplete deity represent in a symbolic sense? Unlike other Hindu deities, these idols are crafted from Neem wood and hand-painted, portrayed in their unfinished states,

missing limbs and facial features. The large, round face signifies Anadi, the one without beginning and Ananta, the one without end. The two large, circular eyes lack eyelids, symbolizing the Moon and the Sun. Although the legs, neck, and ears are absent, two additional stumps on either side of the main stump serve as the Lord's hands. A Vaishnav-U mark on his forehead and his dark complexion gives an impression of Lord Krishna. These elements reflect human incompleteness, inviting devotees to project their wishes, fears, and hopes onto the deities, thus nurturing a profound personal connection. Moreover, the rational approach displayed during the Ratha Yatra of Lord Jagannath provides everyone, regardless of their caste, creed, or faith, the chance to have a darshan with the Lords. During this occasion, the king of Puri even takes on the role of a sweeper, erasing the ego from the minds of ordinary individuals. This ceremony is known as "*Chhera Panhara*," introduced in the 12th century during the reign of Anangabhima Deva when Jagannath was recognized as a state deity and the King as His servant. The Ratha Yatra symbolises equality among all beings. It does not differentiate between any social class, whether Brahmin or Chandala. Shri Jagannath transcends space and time, embodying universal love and brotherhood. Consequently, these deities are distinct and hold significant symbolic meanings for every individual on earth.

Lord Jagannath and the Puri temple are shrouded in numerous mysteries and facts, which continue to be speculated upon by historians, philosophers, and religious leaders to this day. Every 14 to 19 years, Lord Jagannath experiences death and subsequently revival. His siblings, sister Subhadra

and brother Balaram undergo the same phenomenon, referred to as the sacred "*Nabakalebara*," which means a new embodiment. The festival is a ritual to renew the wooden idols of the deities, who are considered to decay like humans and take on new bodies. The celebration of Nabakalebara is held with the same fervour as Rath Yatra and carries immense importance for the devotees. During this event, the idols of Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balabhadra are replaced with new ones after a designated period. The old idols' remains are discreetly buried near Koili Baikuntha on the night of Amavasya. Just as old garments are discarded and new ones donned, Lord Jagannath is rejuvenated into a new idol. This age-old tradition has been practised for the past 400 years. The occurrence of Nabakalebara coincides with the month of Joda Asaad, which takes place roughly every 8, 12, or 19 years. The last Nabakalebara occurred in 2015 after a gap of 19 years, and the upcoming one is scheduled for 2034. Sacred neem trees that fulfil specific criteria are meticulously selected for this purpose. If locating such a tree becomes challenging, *Daitapati* organises independent teams to seek one out. A Daitapati is a descendant of the tribal leader Viswvasu. When a suitable tree is discovered, it is transported to Puri, where the idols are crafted under established rituals.

To facilitate the transformation of Brahman within the idols, the Odisha government declares a lights-off night in the city. Certain high priests are blindfolded with red cloth around their eyes and hands, and they take out a mysterious object from the old idol and place it into the new one; this

enigmatic item is referred to as "*Brahma Padarth*." 'Brahma' represents the essence of life. Just as every individual possesses a soul, Lord Jagannath also harbours Brahma within his form.

Numerous theories have emerged regarding this mystery, but the most notable suggests that when Shri Krishna was cremated, all but his heart was consumed by flames, which were later submerged in the ocean. This holy heart washed ashore as Daru Brahma. Following divine guidance, King Indradyumna commanded that the log be carved into the idols and subsequently installed in his temple at Puri. It is challenging to assert any theory as definitive. Historians state that the Jagannath Puri temple has endured 18 attacks, yet it persevered and flourished. The deity transitions from one form to another yet remains eternal. Devotees find solace in believing that the very heart of Shri Krishna—Brahma Padarath—continues to thrive today. The ritual symbolises the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth. The replacement of the old deities with new ones mirrors the human experience of mortality and the eternal cycle of existence. It signifies the impermanence of material forms and the enduring nature of the divine spirit.

The Sudarshan Chakra and the flag on top of the Jagannath temple have intrigued both experts and visitors for many years. Known as Neela-chakra, its design is such that it looks identical from every angle. Conversely, this enigmatic flag flutters contrary to the direction of the wind. Skilled priests ascend the temple structure daily to replace the large triangular flag that spans 20 feet. Experts continue to speculate about these occurrences, but no scientific explanation has surfaced to date. One phenomenon that challenges our understanding is the lack of shadows. Regardless of

the time of day, the temple remains shadowless, prompting questions about whether it is an architectural wonder or a celestial miracle. Upon entering through the Lions Gate entrance, the sound of ocean waves ceases entirely, often felt in the evening. This silence within the temple's premises is said to embody Subhadra's desire for tranquillity. Apart from that, no birds or planes can be seen flying overhead at this sacred location.

One of the most astonishing aspects is that hundreds of priests gather to prepare the divine repast within the temple. They pile seven clay pots, one over the other, and cook the meal over wood flames. What is remarkable is that the food in the topmost pot cooks first, followed by the lower ones. About two thousand to two lakh people come to the temple daily and every single bit of the *Maha-Prasadam* is consumed. No scientific explanation can explain these mysteries, leaving visitors in wonder at the unseen powers that influence the temple's surroundings.

The endeavours of King Indradyumna, Vidyapati, and Viswasu exemplify the strength of devotion. Their steadfast faith and commitment resulted in the appearance of the Supreme Lord as Jagannatha. The legend of Lord Jagannatha's emergence teaches us that the divine will always reveal itself, even if it doesn't correspond with our expectations or wishes. King Indradyumna's eagerness caused the early unveiling of the Deities, but the Lord comforted him by confirming that all was unfolding as it should. Lord Jagannatha manifesting as Daru-brahma, a wooden incarnation, along with His worship in Puri, illustrates that the divine is accessible to everyone. His magnificent presence during Ratha-Yatra signifies His compassion and inclusivity, as He

comes forth to greet His devotees, irrespective of their social or spiritual status. This narrative serves as a reminder that the Lord's form and divine activities transcend our material comprehension. The seemingly unfinished forms of Jagannatha, Balarama, and Subhadra are, in a spiritual sense, perfect and complete, catering to the unique needs of the present age, Kali-yuga.

To embody all the races on Earth, Shri Jagannath has a black complexion, symbolising inscrutability. Shri Balabhadra is depicted in white, representing enlightenment. Mata Subhadra is portrayed in turmeric yellow, signifying virtue. Meanwhile, the Sudarshan chakra is red, symbolising righteousness and justice. The term "Jagannath" results from combining "Jagat" and "Natha." Here, "Jagat" translates to "The World," while "Natha" means "Lord/Master." Hence, the name Jagannath essentially means "Lord of the Universe."

Puri is referred to as "Jagannath Dham" or "Jagannath Puri" because it is the abode of Lord Jagannath. The Puranas state that anyone who sees the Lord on the Ratha will attain 'Vaikuntha Bhuvana' of Hari. Thus, the Chariot festival represents a metaphorical journey through the cycles of life, death, and rebirth. This serves to remind devotees to accept change, aspire for renewal, and remain steadfast in challenging times. Ultimately, Lord Jagannath and the Rath Yatra convey a profound message of love, compassion, and spiritual advancement. They encourage devotees to connect with the divine, rise above worldly constraints, and appreciate the richness and diversity of human life.



Indian mythology is an expansive and complex web of narratives, symbols, and beliefs that have developed over thousands of years. Central to Hindu mythology is the exploration of existence, human experiences, and the divine. The concept of reincarnation plays a pivotal role in Hindu beliefs, indicating that the soul, or Atman, is everlasting and goes through a cycle of life, death, and rebirth until it achieves liberation (Moksha). Hindu mythology is filled with tales of deities who incarnate on Earth in human form (avatars) to restore cosmic order (dharma) and guide humanity. These incarnations, including Rama, Krishna, and Vishnu, represent different facets of the divine. Throughout the years, these legendary beings and the myths surrounding them have formed the foundation of human civilisation, influencing cultures, beliefs, and values across generations. They provide deep insights into the human mind, the natural world, and the divine. These enduring narratives not only entertain but also teach, inspire, and offer comfort.

While myths often carry positive and inspiring messages, some myths have been used to perpetuate negative stereotypes, justify discrimination, or promote harmful ideologies. But why shouldn't we acknowledge its positive aspects? We are unaware of how these mythologies came to be and whether there is any truth behind them. Yet, we must recognize the teachings of morality, humanity, and brotherhood within these legendary stories and learn from them how to live righteously. Whether it's the tale of Lord Shiva, Lord Ram, or Lord Jagannath, we can't comprehend the extent of its truth, but if these narratives inspire us to become better individuals and guide us on the right path, then we must embrace them. In that case, what does it matter if

these events truly took place or not? Indeed, there are some less favourable elements in some mythological stories, but we all must aspire to discern what we should incorporate into our lives while discarding the negative aspects of it. By examining the depths of human experience, mythologies maintain their relevance for individuals from all backgrounds. As we explore these ancient narratives, we uncover universal truths that surpass both time and space, reminding us of our common humanity and our connection to the universe.

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