



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology  
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 06, June 2026)

## Puri: The Land of Myths

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**Abstract--** In Hinduism, a place of pilgrimage is a tirtha or tirthastana, a pilgrimage is also a tirtha or tirthayatra and a pilgrim is a tirthayatri. For a Hindu a tirthastana is a sacred space and they believe that the place is charged with divine power and purity. A tirtha is resonant with three elements that makes it so sacred----it is suchi (pure); it brings punya (merit) and goodness and it is subha (auspicious).

Bestowed with the blessings and holiness of a sacred space, Puri the abode of Lord Jagannatha in Orissa, eastern India, is the most auspicious land which is visited by numerous pilgrims, tourists as well as pilgrim tourists from all round the world. Jagannatha, the incarnation of Lord Visnu, belongs to the tribal cult having a fascinating tribal look, adorning the throne with his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra, both having a similar tribal (Adivasi) look. The holy trinity of Lord Jagannatha is surrounded by various mythic events which are very much interesting as well as historically and religiously significant. The present paper is an attempt to highlight some of the exciting myths surrounding the Jagannatha cult and traditions, which are truly aesthetic and exciting and upholds the sanctity of Puri as a tirtha in general, and Lord Jagannatha in particular.

**Keywords--**Jagannatha, myth, sacred space, cult

### I. INTRODUCTION

The vision of a temple in India evokes among Hindus a feeling of reverence, sanctity and spirituality as it symbolizes an abode of God and a place of worship. The Jagannatha temple has its origin to the pre-Christian era, and its evolution into a monument of great architectural merit is marked by conspicuous efforts on the part of several ruling dynasties from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to make it an institution of enduring importance in the social, economic and political integration of the subcontinent. Religion in India has been a powerful ideological force, and hence the temple is regarded as the institution of social organization. As a centre of worship, the temple is mainly a product and instrument of the Puranic traditions. Hindu myths, legends and beliefs are compiled in texts collectively called the Puranas. The Hindu pantheon of Gods which have originated from the texts of two Brahminical sects, the Vaisnava and the Shaiva, are a part of the Puranic tradition which is known as Hinduism. Here, the deity (Jagannatha) dwelling in the temple symbolizes the king of kings and is considerably offered regal honour, consistent with the concept of God as the Supreme ruler of the universe.

Significantly enough, "prasada" means both a palace and a temple. The deity is provided with the royal paraphernalia of a throne umbrella and fly-whisk and the worship of the deity is attended by regal pageantry, together with music, dance and lighting of lamps. Just as the royal palace has a throne-room, a private audience hall and a public audience hall, the temple has a sanctum, an inner hall, and at times an outer – hall. In course of time, the temple came to possess many subsidiaries for the various temple rites and ceremonies. In Orissa, we find the addition of a hall of dance (Natamandapa), while in South India the enclosures of the larger temple is complete with necessary structures and thus resemble a fortified palace. The Hindu shrine is primarily a place for individual self-realization. The sanctum is customarily a dark chamber. This suggests the mystery that envelops the universe and the divine spirit that shines behind the veil of mystery and pervades and illuminates the universe.

The temple of Jagannatha is an imposing structure in the rekha style of architecture. It's grand curvilinear spire, the sikhara, rising to a height of 39mts, and adorned by a flag and a disc, catches the eye from a distance. True to the meaning of the word sikhara, the "temple peak resembles a series of "foothills", the smaller sikharas massing, riding upon one another, towards their final culmination in the disc, the crowning cogged ring—stone at the very top of the temple.

### II. JAGANNATHA IN TRADITION: THE VARIOUS MYTHS

It is a difficult task to determine the antiquity of Jagannatha. Though some legends and tradition throw light on the problem, but a critical examination of the evidences furnished by them is essential for any reasonable hypothesis to be made. It is necessary to turn to Sanskrit texts both Vedic and Puranic for that purpose.

In the Rig Veda we find a reference to "Daru" (the wood). Sayana Acharya (1300-1380 AD) says that, "there exists on sea shore in a far off place the image of a deity of the name Purusottama which is made of wood floating as it were, in the sea. By worshipping that wood, one can attain the supreme place of the Vaisnavite.

The second interpretation means that the evil spirits has used the Daru (wood) as boat for crossing the sea and going over to the far off island. This verse also occurs in the Atarva Veda with slight variations

It is difficult to treat this explanation of the same verse in the two Vedas as unmeaning. This may lead some to suppose that the worship of the deity Purusottama or Darubrahma might have been in vogue even in the remote past; but the supposition on the basis of this single verse of cryptic nature may not be universally accepted.

P.V. Kane does not accept Sayana's interpretation. He is of opinion that the second interpretation fits more with the context. However, when he wrote this he was not aware of the Atarva Veda extract. An acquaintance with the latter might have lead him to accept Sayana's interpretation. At the time of Sayana the popularity of Darubrahma conception in Utkal was great, and the wooden image of Purusottama singularly attracted the attention of Vedic and other scholars in India. In Purusottama Tattva (Jiv Vol II, p 563), Raghunandana explains the same verse from both Rig Veda and Atarva Veda with reference to Purusottama- Jagannatha of Puri.

According to Sayana, there are three suktas in the Rig Veda, which suggest that Daru was regarded as the symbol of Brahman. The immutable aspect of Brahman as different from the mutable aspect is compared with a tree containing many branches which in its aspect of unity is the absolute, the motionless and the eternal one. In these suktas (chapters) the seer inquires "what can be that tree and what can be that forest in which it stands out and out of which the earth and heaven came to be designed by the Gods."

Large trees are often worshipped as divinities. Even today in rural India, trees such as Banyan are worshipped as Gods. There seems to have been therefore very ancient connection between Daru and God. There is also evidence of Daru in the Bhagavad Gita.

Valmiki mentions Jagannatha in the Uttarakhanda of the Ramayana where Rama is described as exhorting Bibhisana to devote himself to the worship of Jagannatha, the family deity of the Ikshvaku Vamsa (solar dynasty). It is astonishing that there is actually a ritual even today in the temple of Lord Jagannatha called Bibhisana Bandapana (worship of Bibhisana). Tradition has associated the worship of the deity Purusottama with the name of Indradyumna. In the Mahabharata we find mention of a legendary king named Indradyumna. The king has been described there as one who performed a thousand sacrifices. It is said that the cows brought for the sacrifices made a pond with their hooves, which was named after the king.

The epic story Indradyumna appear to have helped to develop the traditional association of king Indradyumna and Indradyumna tank with Purusottama Jagannatha. In Mahabharata, we find mention of Vedi which is identified by some with antarvedi (inner throne) where Lord Jagannatha is enshrined. Manamohon Ganguly and other scholars like late Pandit Sadashiva Mishra were inclined to believe that this Vedi of the Mahabharata is the same as the Antarvedi, mentioned in the Skanda Purana, which was the place of worship of Lord Jagannatha. If we turn our attention to the Puranas we find references of Purusottamasetra and Jagannatha. The Matsya Purana, which is considered as one of the oldest of the Puranas mention Purusottamasetra in two places. But, it contains no reference to the deity Jagannatha or the king Indradyumna. Among the later Puranas, namely Visnu, Agni, Padma, Narada, Brahma and Skanda, we get more references to Jagannatha, the deity and the place of his installation.

The story as given in the Padma Purana in connection with the sanctity of the place of worship of Purusottama and the magnitude of his glory may be noted. References to Lord Purusottama at the Nilgiri are made in the Padma Purana. The story says "Satrughna, who kept guard of the sacrificial horse of Ramachandra, came to Nilgiri which was situated at the Purusottamasetra. This was beyond the confluence of the Gangasagara. Satrughna was told by one Sumati (girl) that Lord Purusottama was being worshipped at the sacred Nilgiris. Sumati added—"one day a Brahmin who came there on a pilgrimage found all the beings with four hands and asked for the reason. The villagers present, narrated a story—"one day a boy named Prtuka ascended the hill top and observed a wonderful temple. He entered into it and found a four armed Hari (Visnu) holding the conch, the discus, the club and the lotus in His four arms. The offering made by the Gods was scattered all around. As soon as Prtuka picked up a little grain, he turned to a four armed being. The other villager's followed him and they also became four armed. Hearing this, the Brahmin bathed in the confluence of the Gangasagara and visited Lord Purusottama at Nilgiri. He too became four armed. This Brahmin was seen by Ratnagriva, a pious king of Kanchi, first in a dream and then in his court. An enquiry about his four arms led the Brahmin to narrate the story of the greatness of Purusottama to Ratnagriva, as heard from the Sabaras. Ratnagriva was inspired and set out with his forces on a pilgrimage to Nilgiri. To his despair, Nilgiri was not visible when Ratnagriva looked at it after a bath in the confluence of the Gangasagara. In deep regret the king kept on meditating upon Hari who appeared after 5days in the guise of a monk.

The king felt prostrate at the feet of the monk who graciously declared that the four armed Blue Lord would be visible at the following day at noon. The king waited patiently till he had the sight of Lord Purusottama in the Blue Mountain. He then made his way to Baikuntha.”

The Brahma Purana mentions the tradition of Jagannatha in the following way. King Indradyumna arrived at Purusottamasetra and made the three images of Samkarsana, Subhadra and Jagannatha which were installed in the shrine built by him. It is important to note that the Brahma Purana, for the first time mentions the number of the deities and their respective names; it also uses the term “Purusesa” or “Purusottama” to indicate Daru that came floating on the sea and was dreamt by King Indradyumna. It should be noted that the names “ Nilmadhava,” “Sanatana”,,” Vata Raja” are also mentioned in the course of his story. The anecdote of Indradyumna as narrated here is almost identical with that of in the Narada Purana. The material furnished by the Skanda Purana, is not very clear. The story is found in Utkalakhanda.

At the time of the Varaha incarnation of Visnu, Brahma asked Visnu of the means of attainment of salvation of all human being. Visnu replied –“He himself is being worshipped as Nilmadhava in the Blue Mountain of the holy Purusottama Pitha. The highest form of salvation on earth is to be obtained by a visit to this God. But this frightened Yama, the God of Death, because of his apprehension that he would lose his importance. To assure him of his position, Visnu declared that He would remain invisible for some days. The story further goes in this manner. The Rohini Kunda (well) was situated at a short distance away to the west of the desire- yielding (Kalpa-vrksa) tree on the “Blue Mountains”. To the north of the Rohini Kunda was the shrine of Nilmadhava who was being worshipped by the Sabaras. By that time nobody knew about the sanctity of that holy place. Only the Sabaras used to worship Lord Nilmadhava every day. Indradyumna, of the solar dynasty, standing fifth in line in succession to Brahma, was the king of Avanti in the Satya Yuga (era of truth). He was very wise, learned and a Vaisnava too. One day, he called a council of learned people to discuss about the place of Lord Visnu. A sanyasin (lady hermit) replied that Lord Visnu Himself can be visible in the “Blue Mountain” of Odra. At this, Indradyumna sent Vidhyapati, the brother of his family priest, as a messenger to the country of Odra. On his way Vidhyapati took refuge in a Sabara village, to the west of the “Blue Mountain”. There he made friends with the Sabara chief Viswabasu. Vidhyapati requested him to be kind enough to make arrangements for a sight of the Lord Nilmadhava.

He told him that Indradyumna, his sovereign Lord, would be fasting until he returns. The Sabara chief out of his compassion for the king took Vidhyapati through a narrow track and showed him the shrine of Nilmadhava. Vidhyapati went back to the country of Avanti. Meanwhile Lord Visnu, in order to fulfill the pledge He has given to Yamaraja, made the shrine of Nilmadhava invisible in a heap of sand. The king at that time, set out for Utkala with his forces accompanied with Narada. No sooner had he reached its boundary he got the sad news of the disappearance of Nilmadhava.

At this news Indradyumna felt very much aggrieved. Narada, however, assured him that the Lord would appear in the form of a Daru (wood). The king thus got some consolation and went to Nilgiri for the performance of Horse sacrifice. On the closing day of the horse sacrifice, the Lord Nilmadhava made Himself visible to Indradyumna in a dream. The very next day his attendants gave him the news of the Daru with four branches floating on the sea. Then, the king placed the daru on the Mahavedi (main throne).

At the time of discussion with Narada about the construction of the shrine a voice from above announced,,the Lord Himself will construct his own image, and thereafter will appear on the Mahavedi which will be secretly covered for 15days. The old carpenter standing with the instrument will get himself confined inside the temple with its doors shut. Nobody will approach him until the construction is over. Even the sound produced by it is forbidden to hear.” At the end of 15days, the image of four deities, Balabhadra, Subhadra, Jagannatha and Sudarshana, became manifested on the Mahavedi. Again, the heavenly voice declared, “O king, dress these four deities with silken garments and adorn them with their own colours. Then construct a temple of one thousand cubits high on the Blue Mountain and establish the images there with due propriety”.

Accordingly the king worshipped Lord Jagannatha, Balabhadra and the Goddess Subhadra. He offered wealth and cattle while worshipping the Lords. The trampling of the cattle created such a big pit that it got converted into a tank filled with the conch water. It was later known as the “Indradyumna tank” (the most sacred space of the town of Puri).

Indradyumna then made up his mind to begin the work of the temple. Before the temple was finally built, on Narada’s advice he went to Brahmaloaka to invite Brahma for the consecration of the shrine as per the ceremonial rites. Since Brahma took a long time (years) to arrive, another king named Galamadhava, claimed the shrine to be his own. Brahma intervened and had the temple restored to its original builder.



**International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology**  
**Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 06, June 2026)**

It is evident from this elaborate description that the Skanda Purana attempts the co-ordination of the various anecdotes of the Mahabharata and the Puranas. It presents Purusottama as the “Sabara Devata” worshipped by the Sabaras under the leadership of Viswabasu, whereas the Padma Purana refers to Purusottama as worshipped by the Bhils.

Sanskrit texts like ‘Niladrimahodaya’ furnish us with interesting details regarding the respective colours and forms of the deities which we do not find in the earlier texts. While giving the iconographic features of the images of Sri Jagannatha and others, the main image is described as sky blue in colour with round eyes like lotus leaves. Unlike the description given in the Skanda Purana, this text endows Jagannatha and Balabhadra with two arms (the other two being concealed). Balabhadra is referred to as Guptapada or with the feet concealed and with a head covered by the seven hooded serpent: his colour is said to be as white as the kunda flower or the moon or the conch, and He is also said to possess lotus-like eyes. Subhadra is described as pillar shaped and jitendriya or the one who has controlled the senses.

No account of the tradition associated with Jagannatha can be regarded as complete without the consideration of various literary works in Oriya. The earlier important work of this nature is the Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa. Sarala Dasa appears to ascribe the origin of the worship of Jagannatha to that of Madhava or Nilmadhava. The story begins with Basu Sabara, (Viswabasu), and the son of Jara Sabara, who used to secretly worship the stone image of their traditional God Madhava. The practice of secret worship was started by them on the command of the deity Madhava Himself; the God wanted to be worshipped secretly because of the Kaliyuga (age of vice), and had threatened Basu to wipe out his community if he revealed the secret to others. Sarala Dasa next introduced another character, Galamadhava, the king of Kanchi. One day the Brahmin family-priest of the king, also named “Basu”, told Galamadhava about the secret worship of Nilmadhava in the Sabara palli (community). Galamadhava sent his priest (Basu) to find Nilmadhava. Basu made friends with Basu Sabara, and was taken blind folded to the spot where the deity was then worshipped. On the way he skillfully managed to drop seedgrains so that he could reach the place afterwards. After hearing the secrets of Nilmadhava from his priest Basu, Galamadhava set out on an expedition to the Sabara palli to take possession of the deity. But, to his misfortune the deity had disappeared. The God Nilmadhava reassured Jara (Basu Sabara’s father) that he would reincarnate himself as Buddha in the Nilgiris.

Galamadhava was enraged at the disappearance of the deity from the spot and attacked the Sabaras to get the information of the deity. A fierce fight ensued and all the Sabaras were killed except one. The surviving one cursed the king that his entire family will be extinct, as he was responsible for the destruction of the Sabara community. When Galamadhava was fighting with the last Sabara a divine voice told him to stop the battle as he was a great devotee of the Lord. Here ends the story of Galamadhava; Indradyumna was then introduced to carry the story further. Indradyumna was a devotee of Visnu and was inspired by what he had known from Jara, regarding the worship of Lord Krishna. After offering prayers to Jamesvara Mahadeva at Puri, he completed the construction of the temple and was anxious about the deity whose image would be installed there.

Indradyumna established friendship with Jara who told him about the existence of the half burnt body of Sri Krishna and the Rohini Kunda. Krishna was killed by Jara, and while his body was being consumed in fire, a heavenly voice ordered the latter to throw the half burnt body into the sea. This partly burnt body of Krishna floated down to the Rohini Kunda in the shape of a Daru. When Indradyumna failed to remove the daru from the Rohini Kunda, he was advised by Sri Krishna in a dream to send for Jara Sabara and Basu Brahmin to lift the daru. This daru was not a mere piece of log, but the “pinda” or very body of Sri Krishna Himself. Indradyumna followed this instruction and the daru was finally lifted by Jara and Basu. What is striking here is that the failure of thousands of Indradyumna’s men to remove the daru and the miraculous success of the joint endeavor of the two persons belonging to two different cultures, Aryan and non Aryan.

Now Indradyumna was at a loss as to how the images could be carved out of the Daru. So, he again sought divine grace. The Lord appeared in a dream and asked him to request Jara, to build the images. In compliance with Indradyumna’s request, Jara entered into the temple and was joined by a queer-looking Brahmin. Both constructed three images of three different shapes- the tallest, the medium sized and the smallest. When the sound of the implements used in making the images was no longer heard, Indradyumna became impatient and dashed into the temple. He saw three images on the altar bearing three different colours—white, yellow and black.

Indradyumna took the help of the Brahmin priests to identify the images who said that the white image was that of Shiva, the yellow one embodied Brahma, and the black image belonged to none but Lord Visnu Himself.



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Sarala Dasa interprets these images as the symbols of Triguna (talent of the three). According to his story, Brahma stood for Subhadra, and this female form of the God was due to the previous curse. It is also said by Sarala Dasa that Jara's descendants would be known as Daitas and those of Basu as the Brahmin priests. This class of people would act as the sebayats of the trio. At present both these sebayat groups are found in the temple.

Nilambara Dasa offers a slightly different account of the three images. He starts straight with Indradyumna of Malava who sent Vidhyapati to find the image of Nilmadhava. Vidhyapati took the help of Lalita, the daughter of Viswabasu, the Sabara chief and found the deity. On getting the news Indradyumna started a military expedition to Orissa and met Viswabasu at Banki in the district of Cuttack. Both became friends. Nilmadhava disappeared but was pleased to appear in a dream to Indradyumna, who had kept on fasting for twenty one days. He told him to get the Daru of Nilmadhava floating on the sea and install the images to be constructed by Viswakarma. He further commanded not to open the doors of the temple till the work is completed. But, the doors were open before the prescribed time at the impatience of the queen Gundicha. This hasty action is considered to be the cause of the half finished images of the three deities—Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannatha. This mythic story is generally accepted by the local people of Puri.

The Gaudiya Vaisnavas offer the following explanation regarding the incomplete forms of the deities, Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Once, the eight patta mahisies (chief queens) of Sri Krishna were listening to his Lila (games) at Brindavan as narrated by Brinda (Rohini/Devaki according to other versions) in the palace of Nanda. They had posted Subhadra at the gate to guard against any male person coming in. As the story proceeded from the Brindavan lila (games) to the greatness of the Gopinis (Krishna's friends), the two brothers Krishna and Balarama arrived at the gate and wanted to get in, but they were prevented by Subhadra. Overhearing the story of Krishna Lila from the gates they became so impressed that their bodily forms underwent changes, their hands and feet became smaller and smaller and their eyes more and more expanded in divine wonder. This transformation reached its climax as they heard about the greatness of Radha.

At this stage, when Narada came to the spot he became overwhelmed at this divine revelation. He fell at their feet and requested them to appear in this form to the common people.

Being pleased by his devotion they granted his prayer with the promise that they would appear in that mystic form at Nilachal (Puri) to the people of Kaliyuga. The story of the construction of the temple and the installation of the images of the three deities is given in much detail in the Deulatola by Sisukrsna Dasa. The pattern of the story is more or less similar. The difference lies in the introduction of some interesting anecdotes to emphasize the intensity of the desire of Indradyumna to get the clue for finding the image of Nilmadhava. Out of the four messengers set by him to different directions, only Vidhyapati succeeded in getting the secret about Nilmadhava by marrying Lalita, the daughter of Viswabasu. Here, Nilmadhava is represented as expressing his desire to go to Nilgiri where he would be worshipped as Darubrahma. Indradyumna, who constructed the temple (to fulfill the desire of Nilmadhava), requested Brahma to come down to the earth to consecrate the temple.

Brahma took a long time to come down and in the meanwhile the temple was covered under sand and was later removed by king Galamadhava, who claimed it as his own. Brahma, who was accepted as the arbiter, went to "Bhusanda Crow" and Kalpavata (mythological figures) to know the truth. The crow's evidences went in favour of Indradyumna's claim as the constructor of the temple. When this was disbelieved, they all went to the tortoises in the Indradyumna tank. At the sight of Indradyumna, all the tortoises hid themselves under water and told Brahma that they were employed by Indradyumna to carry the stones for the construction of the temple and became tortoises due to heavy work pressure and so they were afraid of meeting Indradyumna who might re-employ them in the same work. This evidence proved conclusive, and Galamadhava was discomfited. Brahma consecrated the temple and helped in the performance of the sacrifice. The rest of the story is the same as given in the earlier works. After the installation of the images, Indradyumna got four boons from Jagannatha. The first was that-- the descendants of Viswabasu would be designated as Daitas who would decorate and do other services especially during the car festival and Anabasara (a ceremony). Secondly the children of Lalita and their descendants will serve as the Suara (Supakara—temple workers) or the cooks of Jagannatha; thirdly, the descendants of Vidhyapati would be the priest of Jagannatha. But, on being asked as to what he wanted for himself, Indradyumna prayed for the survival of his dynasty and the Lord was pleased to grant him this last boon as well. Thus, Sisukrsna Dasa attempted to make Indradyumna immortal through self-sacrifice.



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**Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 06, June 2026)**

### III. CONCLUSION

From a comparative study of the stories as narrated in the various works of both Sanskrit and Oriya it is evident that the name of Indradyumna is invariably associated with the construction of the temple as well as the installation of the images at Purusottamasetra.

Jagannatha and Purusottama are descriptive epithets, one meaning "Lord of the Universe" and the other "the Supreme Being". The four images which were worshipped today have enjoyed a continuity of traditions. The images are renewed every twelve years, which according to the traditional Indian computation is called a yuga (years). The most surprising element here is that though the images are altered in every 12 years they bear the same look as in the past without any changes. It can, therefore, be said that in a sense the worship of Lord Jagannatha is the worship of the mysterious forms and symbols which the images represent throughout the ages. The wood which forms the "Kalebara" (festival) or the body of the deities is being removed but the forms and symbols are strictly preserved with utmost precision and care. Then again, it is only a particular species of wood (such as Neem) which is being regularly used for carving the images.

Jagannatha religion is a result of the process of evolution, and many historical and other forces might have contributed to the evolution of the most universal form of religious worship.

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