

# Puri: The Sacred Land of Forgotten Temples

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**Abstract:** *Puri, is a sacred land of pilgrimage known for the world famous temple of Lord Jagannatha in Orissa, the abode of Lord Vishnu in Eastern India. Hindus are always driven by the heritage, cultural legacy and the sanctity of a sacred site. So the importance of Puri as a tirtha or "sacred crossing" is undeniable. Being the abode of Lord Jagannatha (incarnation of God Vishnu) it has attracted a large number of tourists from distant places all over the world and have also gained worldwide recognition. But apart from Lord Jagannatha temple, Puri is blessed with numerous other temples of Gods and Goddesses which according to ancient myths are considered to be the protector Gods of the main deity. These temples belong to the Saiva, Shakti, Hanuman and Narsingha (another incarnation of Lord Vishnu) cults, distributed at the major cardinal points surrounding the main temple of the Lord. But these temples over the years have turned into ruins and are hardly known to the tourists or pilgrims visiting this sacred tirtha. The present study is an attempt to highlight these ancient temples which had a glorious history and to know about their socio-economic status. Apart from these, emphasis is also given on the study of the present status of the temple-workers who are solely dependent on these temples for their livelihood. Away from the glams and glamour of the Sri Jagannatha temple, how these religious institutes are surviving is the main focus of concern. The need of rehabilitation and reconstruction of these sacred places and preservation of their sanctity is the urgent need of the hour. The sacredness of a pilgrim centre can only be achieved if all its heritage and cultural sites are maintained, and their sanctity is preserved. If these temples are brought to the limelight and renovated it will definitely contribute to the enrichment of the town culturally, spiritually and will truly prove the sanctity of the place of the Universal Lord, Jagannatha.*

**Keywords:** Sacred Crossing, Protector Gods, Lord Jagannatha

## INTRODUCTION

To the Hindus the whole world is sacred and is believed to have sprung from the lap of God. One such sacred crossing is Puri or Sriksetra (land of god), the abode of Lord Jagannatha in the east. The world famous temple of Lord Jagannatha is visited by numerous pilgrims, tourists from all corners of the world. Apart from the Lord Jagannatha temple Puri is blessed and beautified with numerous other temples which are much older than the main temple of Lord Jagannatha. These temples are dedicated to Lord Shiva, Shakti, Narsingha, and Hanuman who according to ancient myths are considered to be the protectors of Lord Jagannatha. These temples were built all-round the town and creates a sacred circle encircling the main temple. Just as parents protect their children these Gods and Goddesses create a protective shield protecting Jagannatha from all sides. However, these temples of religious and historical significance, in and around Puri could not attract institutional attention. Unfortunately, very few people knew about them. These temples are of local importance and are hardly visited by tourists or pilgrims. These temples, over long periods of time, have turned into ruins. They are totally managed by local people through donations and hence lacks infrastructural development. The present paper is an attempt to study these Saiva-Shakti temples, to highlight their socio-economic condition, whose glory is greatly hidden by the glamour and grandeur of the temple of Lord Jagannatha. Furthermore, the sebayats or temple workers who are entrusted to carry on the daily rituals of these temples are in miserable condition as they are totally dependent on these temples to earn their livelihood. So a study on the socio-economic status of the temple purohits becomes very much important in this context. An attempt has been made to compare these temples with that of Lord Jagannatha temple to access the level of socio-economic disparity these temples suffers from which truly proves the necessity of upholding the stature of these temples on an urgent basis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Saiva and Shakti temples in Puri have a glorious history and are of great religious significance. In "Purir Katha" (Pal, R.K 1920) has given a detailed description of the temple town of Puri. Stoddard R.H (1966) in his book have talked of the sacred sites of India explaining the characteristics of each as a pilgrimage centre. Though many books and journals have talked about the Jagannatha Temple it was Mishra, R (2003) who have narrated the story of the holy land and described the temples of Puri glorifying the cult of Lord Jagannatha. Oral traditions about the different temples and sites have been cited in various religious books from "The Centre of Social Science and Research, Kolkata", "Puri Town State Library", Puri, Orissa, as well as from the "Sri Jagannatha Temple Information Centre" which are very much interesting and informative. But not much work has

been done on the socio-economic condition of the temples and their present status, whose glory is no less than that of Lord Jagannatha and shares an intimate relationship with the lord.

## METHODOLOGY

The temple town of Puri is nestled with numerous temples of Saiva and Shakti shrines spread all over the town. It is the temple itself that has lead to the creation and extension of the sacred space of the town. The basic aim of study is to analyse the present status of these sacred shrines which had a profound influence in shaping the physical as well as the socio-economic structure of the town of Puri. Since secondary data source is very much limited, primary survey is conducted to gather information from these temples. Of these numerous shrines, 27 temples of religious importance have been chosen for study to know their present status and relation with the main temple of Lord Jagannatha. The entire survey schedule for the temples has been divided into groups dealing with the various aspects of the temple. The general profiles of the temples are known by questioning regarding the conservation of the temples, history of the temples, including the year of its construction. The details of the Gods and Goddesses, the materials with which they were built, their history, myths, stories were all included in the survey questions. The maintenance of the temple and its management which forms another segment of the survey schedule is known by seeking answers to questions regarding the source of water for the temple, supply of electricity, bhoga (prasada) preparation and distribution system, as well as the detailed information regarding the income and expenses (salary of the purohits, electric bills, beautification works) of the temple as well as its trustee body. The third and final segment of the survey schedule highlighted the present socio-economic status as well as the popularity of the temple for which questions were asked regarding the help received from the Municipality and Government and grievances of the temples regarding their present status and condition. The popularity of the temples is calculated on the basis of the data obtained regarding the number of tourist's visits in the temple daily and during festivals.

## RESULTS

The temples which are culturally rich and a heritage property of the town are in ruins are falls under the ignorance zone of the town where the tourists seldom visits. The visitors are completely ignorant about these sacred sites which had a glorious past leading to its unpopularity and deplorable conditions. The sebayats or the temple purohits are no less important than that of the Puja Pandas of Jagannatha temple but they are ill paid, living below the poverty line. They lack popularity and observance; and thus maintain a low standard of living. These temples fall within the ignorance zone of the town both socially and economically and thus have lost their popularity and importance in comparison with the main temple which is the central point of economic activity of the town.

## DISCUSSION

The study of the general profile of the temples reveals its present socio-economic status. Though the temples are very much neglected now but the shrines look very attractive and were mainly constructed of stone and metal. Many of the idols was made up of gold (10%), silver (20%), and some are made up of astadhatu (70%).(Table 1).But most of the images are curved out of granite, touchstone and ordinary stones.

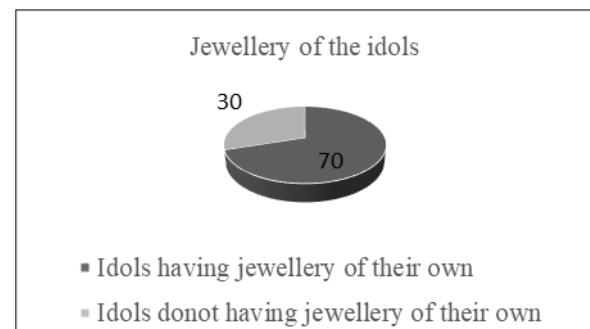
**Table 1: Materials with which the idols are made-**

No of idols	Metal (23%)			STONE (77%)		
	Gold	Silver	8-metal	Granite	Stone	Touch stone
43	10%	20%	70%	36.36%	60.60%	35%

The temples have a glorious history and are very much important from the religious point of view. It is now that they had lost their social importance, but the magnificent jewellery of the idols bear testimony of their glorious past. The majorities of the deities (70%) have their own jewellery and ornaments which signifies their past opulence.(Table 2).But the tourists and pilgrims are totally unaware of these famous shrines. (Fig1)

**Table 2: Jewellery of the idols**

Idols having jewellery of their own	Idols donot having jewellery
70%	30%



**Fig 1**

In the past the King was regarded as the main sevak of the temples. So the temples were mainly built on land donated by the King to the Purohits (sebayats) who performed the daily rituals out there. But when the Government took charge the kings were ruled out. The Government took control over this temple and the landed property of most of the temples were vested by them (Table 3). In recent years some local people have formed committees and donated land for the reconstruction and renovation of many temples. (Fig2)

**Table 3: Land on which the temples were built**

KING	LOCAL PEOPLE	GOVERNMENT
75%	15%	10%



**Fig 2**

The temple of Lord Jagannatha is solely managed and administered by the Government through Jagannatha Temple Office. Long term measures are always taken and implemented to improve the temple of the universal Lord. But these temples which are as old as that of Jagannatha do not receive any help from the Government. Very few of them are under Governmental control (10%) but their administration is very much unsatisfactory. Most of these temples are managed by local people and some are run by famous personalities and associations. (Table 4) It is on the basis of their support that these temples are working and in course of time is encountering a lot of problems due to lack of capital and strong administrative infrastructure. It can be said that all the Government support have been diverted towards the betterment of the temple of Lord Jagannatha (the main economic base of the town) and in this process the other temples are totally forgotten and neglected. But here it can be stated that by no means were these temples inferior to that of the main temple and some are even older than that of Jagannatha temple.

**Table 4: Management of the temples**

Government	Private	
	Association	Local people
10%	45%	45%

Supply of water one of the basic infrastructural facilities needed for the smooth running of the rituals of the temple. This water is supplied by the Puri Municipality. But in case of these temples the role of Municipality is almost negligible (19.2%). Some temples (Narendra Pushkarini, Swetaganga and Markandeswara) are situated beside sacred ponds and obtain water from there to carry out their daily ritual. Whereas the majority of the temples drew water from the nearby local wells (54%) and tube wells. Some initiatives are taken by the local people and associations and tanks were dug for the regular supply of water. (Table 5)

**Table 5: Municipality help and source of water supply for temples**

Temples	Municipality help received	No help received		
20	25%	75%		
Well	Tube well	Pond	Tank	Comm unity tap
53.76%	15.36%	7.68%	3.84%	19.2%

The second phase of the study deals with the analysis of the economy of the temples which is studied on the basis of the income and expenditure of the temples.

The major source of income of the temples is mainly from the donations received from people and the associations who run these temples. Some tourists who visit the temples (mainly during festivals) give some dakshinas which also contribute to the temple income. But the continuous flow of income is not guaranteed in these temples because of their unpopularity. One of the essential characteristics of all the temples in Puri is that they have a separate kitchen of its own where bhoga (prasada) is prepared every day in sufficient amount. After it is being offered to the deities and among its sebayats (purohites and others) this bhoga (Prasada)

is sold to the general public as well as to the tourists. This selling of bhoga constitutes a major source of income to these neglected temples (65%). Though the money earned in this process is very much less but still it is very important source of income. As already said that these temples are in a very critical condition and earn their income from donations and bhoga selling. But the maintenance and the bhoga preparation involves great expenses. So it becomes very difficult for the temples to carry on their rituals smoothly due to lack of capital investment. Expenditure of the temples are mainly in the form of salaries given to the purohites who carry on the daily temple works, maintenance and electricity bills of the temples as well as the money spent for the arrangement and preparation of the bhoga(prasada). It can be mentioned here that all these expenses in the Jagannatha temple are borne by the Government and Municipality. But in the case of these temples the respective authorities take no action. Except few all others are managed by the local people.(Table 6)

**Table 6: Income of the temples (in Rs)**

<10000(Rs)	10000-300000(Rs)	>30000 (Rs)	NONE
50%	5%	15%	30%

The temple of Lord Jagannatha had over the centuries attracted millions of pilgrims from all over the world. A tourist or a pilgrim comes to Puri only to worship Lord Jagannatha. But they are totally unaware of the fact that this sacred space of Puri is also gifted with the blessings of other Gods and Goddesses who are as important as that of the Lord Himself. But due to lack of information people hardly know about them. Thus these temples are mainly visited by local Oriya residents of the wards. However during festive seasons tourists can be seen in some temples (around the sacred pushkarinis to take a holy dip in the pond), but their percentage is very little. (Table 7)(Fig 3)

**Table 7: Pilgrim flow in the temples**

No of temples 20	<100	100-300	301-500	>500
Normal days	55	40	5	-
Festivals	-	45	20	35

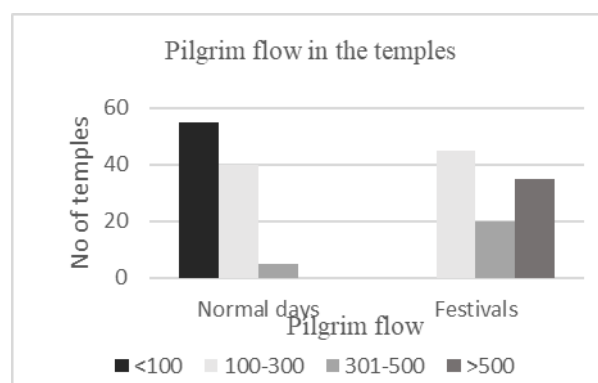


Fig 3

#### THE SEBAYATS OF THE TEMPLES:

The temple workers or sebayats are mainly the purohites and some Brahmins (mainly 2 to 3 for each temple) who



perform the daily rituals and during festivals of the temple. Most of the sebayats who work in these temples is totally dependant on it to earn their livelihood. So the conditions of these workers are miserable as they do not get much purosakar (salary) in return of their hard work. They make arrangements for the daily worship of the Gods and Goddesses, prepare food for the Lord, maintain the cleanliness of the temple; yet they are not paid sufficiently for their hard labour. They cannot even run their family because of their very low income (<Rs1000). Their salary (or purosakar) is mainly dependant on temple income i.e from the selling of bhoga (Rs10/20 per day approx) and some money given to them by the temple associations (committees) which is very less. Sometimes income is also derived from the tourists as dakshinas. Sometimes these workers also receive payments in kind (like cloths, food) given by famous personalities or foreigners and pilgrims who visit the temples during festivals to pay homage to the Gods. At that time these workers are handsomely rewarded (Rs 10,000). Sometimes at the time of "kangali bhojan" (feeding the beggars) arranged by the devotees (whose wishes are fulfilled) these sevaks earn some money. But it is very rare. But no initiatives have been taken by the Government for the welfare of these sevaks. Though many schemes have been made for the sebayats of the Jagannatha temple (pension benefits, educational loans to children of the workers, health schemes etc), nothing is done for these helpless poor sevaks. It is very important to note that most of the sebayats who serve the temple are directly attached with the temple and are not employed anywhere else. They solely depend on these temples for their daily livelihood. But from the above discussions we can easily make out that these sevaks are not at all satisfied with the salary as well as the facilities they receive from the temples. The conditions of these sevaks are really miserable and they really need help from the Government.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

After a brief review of the information obtained from the survey it can be said that these sacred sites which are culturally very rich, must be maintained and equal attention must be given to them along with that of the temple of Lord Jagannatha. More people should be attracted towards these temples to regain its popularity and prestige through proper Government support and committee works. The economy of those temple must be strengthened by providing financial assistance to them so that it may recollect its past glory and prestige. The architectural excellence and the beauty of the temples reflect our rich cultural heritage, which at present are in ruins. Special care must be taken for the renovation of the temples which are a treasure to us. To maintain these hidden gems must be the foremost objective of the government of Orissa and the temple administration. Promotional tourism must be encouraged in these places so that the pilgrim tourists become aware of these places. This will help to bring these temples in the limelight and regain their past glory and

importance. Infact the significance of a sacred place rightly depends on the proper conservation and preservation of all its heritage sites.

## CONCLUSION:

Significance of a sacred space rests upon the preservation of all its sacred elements, giving equal privilege and maintaining it. But from the above discussions and observations we can say that these temples and its workers are just facing enough trouble and problems in their daily lives. Such miserable conditions of the temples in the world famous religious town couldn't be thought of. It seems that all the Government centres, Municipality as well as the tourist department are very much busy and concerned with the Jagannatha Temple and have completely forgotten about these rich heritage sites. These temples neither have any support nor have an exposure. But a pilgrimage centre owes its importance and significance when all its heritage sites are well maintained and all pay equal respect to them. The sanctity of the place is really questioned when one sees the helpless conditions of the temples. This world famous sacred site is losing its own identity as the sacred deities themselves are neglected. Though Puri is the land of Lord Jagannatha, but still purity of a place is only maintained when all its deities and idol are treated equally including its subjects. So these temples must be given special privilege and proper steps must be taken for their popularity and development. Though the Jagannatha Temple Administration and the government are involved in the renovation works but the goal is yet to be achieved. The temple workers must be given special privilege and endurance and incentives so that they could contribute to the maintenance of these temples and prove the real sanctity of this sacred space of Puri.

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