

Research Article

## Towards Understanding Jagannath Worship: A Narrative of Conflict Between the Brahminical and the Local and its Resolution

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### ABSTRACT

An attempt is made here to study the conceptualization of Lord Jagannath and the ritual system associated with his worship over centuries in terms of brahminization, localization and the resolution of the conflict between these two. Analysing *Skanda Purana* and *Sarala Mahabharata* and a particular ritual, *anasara*, in some detail, it brings out the inclusiveness of Jagannath worship.

**Keywords:** Brahminization, Inclusiveness, Jagannath worship, Jagannath, Jara, Localization, Neela Madhava

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In 2014, touching the Deities on the *rathas* (chariots) was not allowed to the devotees by the Jagannath Temple administration of Puri, on the advice of the Shankaracharya of Govardhana Peetha, Puri, whom they had approached for advice on this matter, setting aside the circumstances under which they had done so, because that will take us far a field. The Gajapati King of Puri, who is the first among the servitors of Mahaprabhu Jagannath (henceforth, “Jagannath”, as he is popularly and fondly called, without any honorific suffix or prefix) had strongly supported the Shankaracharya. Touching the Deities is *papa* (sin), the Shankaracharya had declared. The devotees were not allowed to climb on to the *rathas* to reach the Deities. The only ones who opposed this were some *daita* (also called *daitapati*) *sevakas* (servitors of a non-brahmin category), who said that the disallowance was against the tradition but their opposition was to no avail. The following year, this proscription was even more strictly followed, with the Odisha High Court’s ruling in favour of it and criminalizing the touching the Deities. Incidentally, in 2006, the Temple administration had arranged for ladders so that the devotees could

climb on to the *rathas* and everyone knew that they would touch the Deities. Sin was in nobody's mind; I presume that at least for most of the devotees, it still is not. In any case, this aspect has not figured in public discourse on the subject. It must be mentioned that the disallowance has turned out to be hugely popular but its popularity is entirely unrelated to the matter of sin. It has been popular because the devotees have since been having a clear *darshan* of the Deities, untroubled by someone or the other asking or bullying them for a fee for *darshan*. Earlier, often those who were on the *rathas*, both servitors and the devotees, would surround the Deities, making it difficult for those on the ground to see them clearly. It was often alleged that many of the devotees on the *rathas* had paid money to the servitors to be there.

Still on the matter of touching the Deities, *sparsa darshana* (literally, touching the Deities, while having *darshan* of them), as it is called, was allowed by convention, even when the Deities were in the *garva griha* (sanctum sanctorum), seated on the platform called "Ratna Sinhasana". During *paramanika darshana* (paid darshan) or *sahanamela* (public *darshan*), devotees could touch the Deities on certain days: Dola Purnima when the Deities were in their *suna besha*, (dressed with gold ornaments) or in their *Padma* (lotus) *besha*, among similar occasions. Some believed that the Deities could be touched when they were not on their platform in *garva griha*, where they received worship in terms of the mantra-centric brahminical tradition. In, 2013 Puri Shankaracharya pronounced that the Deities must not be touched irrespective of where they were: on the platform in the *garva griha*, or *rathas* or *anasara pindi* (inside the temple, but outside the *garva griha*, where the Deities remain for fifteen days) or on the ground during their *pahandi* (moving step by step) while going to their *rathas* or *snana bedi* (the designated platform inside the compound of the temple, where the Deities are given a special "big" bath once a year). Shankaracharya's view could be viewed as discouraging the non-brahminical, *vyabaharic* tradition and providing support to the brahminization of Jagannath and the ritual system in the Jagannath temple, a process that started centuries ago.

This is the context for the present paper. Trying to understand Jagannath and his worship, it constructs a narrative of the brahminization (preferring this term to "Aryanization") of Jagannath worship, its contestation by concepts and practices that are contrary to it, which is called here "localization", rather tentatively and of the resolution of the contradiction between brahminization and localization in this worship. Evolution of Jagannath and his worship is too rich and complex a topic to be dealt within the familiar limitations of a paper; this paper is rather of an indicative nature with respect to its subject and hasn't gone beyond merely scratching the surface of it. The terms "brahminization" and "localization" are merely descriptive labels and have no connotations at all, either favourable or negative. And "brahminization" subsumes the concepts

underlying the terms “Vishnuization”, “Krishnaization”, etc. used in this paper. As far as the origins of Jagannath and his worship are concerned, the paper has drawn its data from some puranic narratives, in particular, *Skanda Purana* in Sanskrit and *Sarala Mahabharata* in Odia. As far as the rituals performed in the temple dealt with here, are concerned, some informative texts on this topic, my own experience as an observer of some of these rituals and my discussion on this subject with scholars on Jagannath culture and a few locals, including the servitors of the temple, constitute the data.

Jagannath appears to be unique in many respects, considered against the background of the religious narratives and the relevant *tattwik* (philosophical) deliberations of ancient and medieval India on murti worship. Many questions arise with respect to him, especially his origins, some of which are as follows: what explains the incompleteness of his murti (form) and the nature of that incompleteness? What explains his colour and the colours of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshana, along with whom he receives worship and when and why the above three came to be worshipped with him, assuming, not without reason, which we just cannot go into here, that in the beginning he was worshiped alone? There is a body of literature on these and one might find answers to the above satisfactory or inadequate and unsatisfactory. There is at least one question that has hardly been addressed by scholars, which is about the colours of the Deities (Jagannath is black, Balabhadra, white and Subhadra, yellow). Although in the recent centuries, he has come to have been generally viewed as the manifestation of Vishnu, some have connected him to Buddhism, Jainism, Krishna-centric Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Ganapatya sect, among others. For some, he is the Purushottama of the Rig Veda, for others, the Brahman of the Upanishads, the Buddha of Buddhism; for some Shaivites, he is Shiva, the Shaktas, Mahavairava (the Great Vairava), the Vaishnavas Krishna, for the Ganapatya followers, Ganesha and the like. Now, no god in the pantheon of Sanatana dharma (henceforth “Hindu” dharma) has been as acceptable to the followers of such diverse faiths and beliefs as him. For fifteen days a year, except for two categories of servitors, the Chaturdhamurti (The Four-fold-Form), are inaccessible to the devotees and these two categories of servitors, who are engaged in this secret and intimate worship of Jagannath, are *patimahapatras*, one sub-category of “Jagannath-temple brahmins” (to distinguish them from *shotriya* brahmins), and *daitas* (also called *daitapatis*, non-brahmins, whose ancestors are said to be savaras, who, being forest-dwellers and non-Aryas (Aryans), were outside of the caste-system, and did not enter the caste-system later as high caste. Incidentally, the term “*daita*” is entirely unconnected with the term “*daitya* (asura or demon)”. Now, no other Hindu god is worshipped by the brahmins and the savaras, who belong to two significantly different cultures. There are many more such aspects to the worship of Jagannath, which are unique to it. So the question has often been asked about Jagannath, namely, “Who is Jagannath really?” by

those, as Surendra Mohanty suggests in his celebrated novel “*Neela Saila*” (1979, p. 299), who are inclined towards philosophy, religion and history of culture. This question shows that those who ask it would like to find Jagannath related to a single, specific religious tradition. They find the inclusiveness of Jagannath uncomfortable. As far as the common man is concerned, as Mohanty observes (1979, p. 299), he has no interest in this question. In the spirit of *Neela Saila*, we would like to articulate his perspective as follows: Jagannath is Jagannath, not restricted to any single religious tradition. However, if one wishes to see in him Krishna or Vishnu or Shiva or Ganesha or whosoever else, including goddess Kali, one could do so. Every view is legitimate; no view is privileged; so, no room for the question, who he really is. In the idiom of the *tattviks*, this perspective of the common man can, roughly, have the following form: “Being Nothing, the Void, he absorbs everything”.

In sum, there are two contrastive perspectives on Jagannath: the *brahminical*, considered educated and “sophisticated” by those who believe in the authority of the *shashtras* and the *puranas*, composed in Sanskrit, and the other, the people’s perspective, the “localized” one, in the sense it is used here. The former dismisses the people’s view as naïve and simplistic; as for the latter, the former is uninteresting and meaningless. But neither has cancelled out the other in course of centuries, each finding its own space in both the narratives about Jagannath and the rituals performed in the temple. This inclusiveness constitutes the resolution of the conflicting perspectives of brahminization and localization, with respect to Jagannath and his worship.

Probably the first detailed account of Jagannath’s origin in the brahminical tradition occurs in “*Utkala Khanda*”, which is a part of the twelfth century composition, *Skanda Purana*, cited here as Das (2016). A sketchy but entirely adequate summary for our present purpose is the following: The first worshipper of Neela Madhava, taken to be the ancestral form of Jagannath, was a savara named Viswabasu. King Indradyumna, a great devotee of Vishnu, was advised that Vishnu was manifest in his fullest divine glory in the forests of Utkala and was being worshipped by a savara. At the king’s behest, the brahmin Vidyapati, the younger brother of the minister of the king came in search of the Deity. Afraid of the brahmin’s curse, Viswabasu showed him the Deity, an idol who had the familiar human form of the Hindu deities. When on the following day he came to worship Neela Madhava, he had disappeared. The king was inconsolable. The Divine Voice told him not to worry. He would manifest himself in the form of a log of wood. The following day, the king’s men found a splendid log of wood on the shores of the sea nearby. No one knew where it had come floating from. The brahmins took the sacred wood and placed it on the chosen platform. No one knew how to make the murti (idol) of Vishnu. The Divine Voice told the king that an old carpenter would come to him

and he would make the murti in fifteen days. The carpenter worked all alone and in complete secrecy and in the appointed time, he made the murtis of Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshana. The job done, he disappeared; he had actually absorbed into the murti of Jagannath, which no one knew. Only Vishnu could make his own murti; no human could. The Deities had hands and feet, etc. unlike their incomplete counterparts today, who have been receiving worship for centuries now. Indradyumna was advised by the Divine Voice to designate the savara Viswabasu's descendants and the brahmin Vidyapati's descendants as the servitors of Jagannath. This system of worship, not initiated by a human agent but by the divine decree, made Jagannath worship un-brahminical, or at least, only weakly brahminical, right from the beginning. By including the savara in the worship, the divine voice had set limits on the brahminization of Jagannath worship.

There are variations of this narrative in several puranas and puranic texts, some of which have dealt with how the incomplete Deities came to be worshipped, in contravention of the brahminical system. One extremely popular account, which can be said to have become part of the Odia consciousness, is the following: The Creator god himself, assuming the form of a very old and frail carpenter, told king Indradyumna that he needed twenty-one days to make the murtis and that he would be alone inside the temple, making the murtis and that no one must have access to him under any circumstances. Every day, for fourteen days, the king and his queen, Gundicha, would hear, from outside, the sounds of the making of the murtis but on the fifteenth day, they could hear nothing. Persuaded by his queen, who was extremely worried that the carpenter had died inside, Indradyumna opened the door of the temple and found the incomplete Forms. The carpenter had disappeared. The Divine Voice said that Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma would receive worship in their incomplete Forms. The rest of the story is of no concern to us. This account is similar to Sarala's, as we shall see.

The following are of interest to us in the *Skanda Purana* narrative: (a) the names Neela Madhava and Viswabasu, (b) The murti of Neela Madhava having the form a supra-human, of Vishnu, as in the puranic depictions of him, with four hands, etc. (c) the shifting of the divine wood from the sea shore to the platform by the brahmins and (d) the making of the murtis by the carpenter. Now, the names above are not tribal names and tribal communities are not known to have worshipped murtis having a graceful, human form. This shows that the brahminization of the object of Viswabasu's worship had already taken place and inevitably, the narrative of the origin of Jagannath as well. The god of "no-tradition" (what else would describe him better, when he had just one human worshipper- of course, the great gods worshipped him, but they are not part of any articulation of the Little and the Great traditions -who had hidden him from everyone's view till Vidyapati's arrival) had been assimilated into the Great tradition.

We now turn to Sarala's narrative of the making of the murtis. Sarala Das, the *aadi kavi* of Odia literature, who belonged to the fifteenth century and who is the first non-brahmin to retell the great classical narrative in a regional language, composed the story of the origins of Jagannath in his *Mahabharata* in "*Musali Parva*". Despite similarities, his narrative shows some fundamental differences from *Skanda Purana*. In brief, in *Sarala Mahabharata*, the equivalent of Viswabasu is Jara, and of Vidyapati is Vasu and between the personal names, Jara and Viswabasu, the former sounds less brahminical than the latter. The Divine wood manifested itself at the Rohini Kunda (pond), and not on the shores of the sea. That wood was the form of Krishna himself, the complete manifestation of Vishnu. In Sarala's account, Shiva wanted to be with Vishnu and so did Brahma, when they knew that Vishnu had decided to receive worship in Neelachala (Puri of today). The brahmins, the royals and the ministers of Indradyumna tried their best to move the Divine wood into the majestic temple King Indradyumna had built for Vishnu but it would not move. Krishna told the king in a dream that night that only the savara Jara and the brahmin Vasu together would be able to move the Wood. The following morning, Jara and Vasu moved the wood into the temple. Now the murti had to be made and Indradyumna did not know who to engage for that. He meditated on Krishna and he told him in a dream that Jara would be the one to make the murtis. The king told Jara that Krishna himself had chosen him as the one to make the murti; how he would do it, was up to him, he told him: *kemanta kaributi tuhi janasi bhale / pratima nirmana kara tote sri Krishna agyan dele* (How to make the murti you know / Krishna has ordered you to make the murti (*Musali Parva*, p. 2643).

With Jara inside the temple, the king closed the door. Jara was wondering what to do; he had never made a murti and had never even seen portraits. As he was mulling over these things, the Creator Brahma arrived in the form of a brahmin, made the murtis and entered the one of Subhadra. Now, with no sound of murti-making coming from inside, king Indradumna was worried, thinking that Jara must have fled. On the tenth day, he opened the door of the temple and found the incomplete murtis. They were without legs and in addition, Jagannath's and Balabhadra's murtis had no palms and Subhadra's no hands. Indradyumna was not upset; he asked the brahmin, Basu who the Deities were and he told him that they were Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra, Forms of Narayana, Shiva and Brahma. After Brahma entered Subhadra's murti, at Krishna's behest, Jara had covered the wooden murtis with the thick paste made of the bark of the *saal* trees. Jagannath (the cover term for the three Deities) had chosen to hide his feet; that would be his Form in *Kali yuga* (the age of darkness), says Sarala. About two centuries later, the poet Vipra Nilambara, in "*Deula Tola*", which tells the story of the origin of Jagannath, offered a different explanation for the incompleteness of the Deities but it must be stressed that essentially, it is a variation of Sarala's story, as Mansingh remarked ( 1981, p. 100 ), a view, with which we concur.

In the episode of the making of the murtis in *Sarala Mahabharata*, Krishna is Narayana, the Source of the avatara Krishna, into whom the avatara had absorbed, after his passing away. Thus, it was Narayana's wish to remain incomplete and receive worship in that form. This is interesting for our present purpose. Unless in a symbolic form, such as *salagrama* or *linga*, the Hindu gods are worshipped in the form similar, essentially, to the human form, complete with hands and feet. Some, like Vishnu, has four hands and Brahma, four heads, etc., but the basic similarity with the human form remains. Now, in Sarala's creation, the murtis of Vishnu (Jagannath), Balarama (Shiva) and Brahma (Subhadra) are in complete dissonance with the way the Trinity are represented as forms in the *shashtras* and the *puranas*. In their incomplete form, in which they look less human and more abstract, they are symbolically closer to the objects of tribal worship, where the same are not forms which resemble a human. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that Sarala had tried to restore, although partially, Jara's god for him from *Skanda Purana*'s brahminized Neela Madhava – “partially”, because the Deities that Jara was involved with in their making had non-tribal names. Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra are not tribal names. This said, still remaining within the framework of the brahminical narrative of the origin of Jagannath and his worship in *Skanda Purana*, Sarala introduced innovations that are unmistakably non-brahminical - local, in our terminology.

Now, we find that in Sarala's narrative, the cooperation of the savaras and the brahmins has been highlighted far more strongly than in *Skanda Purana*. Unlike in the latter, in Sarala's, the Divine Wood could move only when the savara was involved in it; the earlier attempts to do so with the brahmins and the royals alone had failed. More importantly, Jara, was involved in the making of the murtis. He was the chosen one. Thus, Sarala's narrative of the origin of Jagannath counter poses the puranic or *shashtric* (scriptural) account with a distinct non-brahminical or local flavour. His narrative can be viewed as an effort to reclaim Jagannath for the savaras.

Incidentally, at the conceptual level as well, Sarala can be said to have brought about a paradigm change in the thinking on man's relationship with God. According to tradition, it is through *bhakti* (devotion) that man connects best with God. Now, in the puranic literature, be it Savari or Hanuman of the *Ramayana*, the gopis of *Srimad Bhagavata*, Radha of Vaishnava literature or Prahlad of *Vishnu Purana*, it is the *bhakta* (devotee) who seeks Bhagawana (God) and needs his companionship, longs to be his servitor, etc. but in the Jara-Krishna relationship, it is the opposite: it is Bhagawana who needs man and his chosen one may not be his *bhakta*, in the accepted sense of the term, based on the idea of *navadha bhakti* (nine forms of *bhakti*) of *Srimad Bhagavata* and of the *Ramayana*.

Vaishnavization transformed Anantadeva of the first part of *Skanda Purana* (2016, p. 307) and Balarama of *Sarala Mahabharata* into Krishna's elder brother, Balarama. In *Skanda Purana*, Subhadra was described at once as goddess Lakshmi, Vishnu's (manifest as Jagannath) consort and as Rohini's daughter and Balarama and Krishna's sister, Subhadra, when Vishnu took the avatara of Krishna. In the episode under discussion in *Sarala Mahabharata*, Subhadra is not sister to Balarama and Jagannath, neither is she the manifestation of Lakshmi. She is the creator god, Brahma. Vaishnavization had frozen Subhadra to being the sister of Jagannath and Balabhadra, by which name Sarala's Balarama is known today as part of Chaturdha Murti or the Four-fold-Form.

The savara's (be it Vishwabasu of *Skanda Purana* or Jara of *Sarala Mahabharata*) object of worship, Neela Madhava (be it a shining gem or a murti) had no story of his own. It was only after his Vishnuization that the stories of the origins of Jagannath emerged (in the brahminical *Skanda Purana* and some other puranas, and the partially non-brahminical *Sarala Mahabharata*). However, in our view, the more accurate statement would be the following: Neela Madhva story may be disconnected from the Jagannath story. The former ended with his disappearance. With the Divine Wood began another story: Jagannath's story in both the brahminical and the non-brahminical frameworks. The Divine Voice, Krishna's directives, etc. connect these two different stories to tell how Jagannath originated.

Neither in *Skanda Purana* nor in the *Musali Parva* of *Sarala Mahabharata*, is Jagannath viewed as an avatara of Vishnu. He is conceptualized as Vishnu himself. The savara's god had been Vishnuized into Jagannath in *Skanda Purana* and Sarala accepted it, although, as mentioned above, his narrative is different from it in crucial respects. In due course, the stories of the avatars of Vishnu got attached to Jagannath. As this happened, the ritual system was augmented to reflect this; thus, Krishna *janma* (birth), Rama *janma*, Vamana *janma*, etc., Kaliya *dalana* (taming), Rukmini *vivaha* (wedding) and some other rituals connected with Krishna and Balarama as children in Gopapura, Rama *avisheka* (coronation) and many rituals connected with the avatars entered the ritual system of Jagannath worship. Barring one or two rituals, related to Krishna, these find no mention in *Skanda Purana*. *Pushyavisheka* is there but it is unrelated to Rama's *avisheka* of today. Attribution of the stories associated with Vishnu and his avatars to Jagannath and the augmentation of the ritual system by avatara-centric rituals indicate the increasing Vishnuization of Jagannath over centuries. The Ganapatya (a sect that worships Ganesha as the Supreme god), connection of Jagannath is evident in the *Hati veshha* (Elephant dress) of Jagannath and Balabhadra on *Snana vedi* (the platform for the Great Bathing).

Now, stories, unconnected with the puranas and the shashtras, thus, local, were composed, in which Jagannath is seen as Jagannath, not Vishnu, as in the brahminical

literature on Jagannath. These stories counterpose the brahminical perspective. One such story describes how, granting his wish, Jagannath waited for his devotee, Sala Bega, who was not in Puri then, to come and see him on the ratha. Another is how, once, listening to the pleadings of Balarama Das, Jagannath manifested himself in his sand ratha during Rath Yatra. He returned to his ratha when Balarama Das allowed him to. There are quite a few such stories. At least two of these, the *Rai-Damodara* story and the *Talichha Mahapatra* story have impacted the ritual system. The former has led to a *besha*, called *Rai-Damodara besha* and the latter, a *dhupa* (food-offering) called *Bala dhupa*. This *dhupa* is held when the Deities are in their *Rai-Damodara besha*. Incidentally, *Rai-Damodara* is now being brahminized as *Radha-Damodara*. Rai in the relevant narrative is Jagannath's spouse and is unconnected with Krishna.

*Snana* (Bathing) and Ratha Yatra are unique rituals because the *mula vigrahas*, that is, the *murtis* themselves, not their representatives (*chalanti pratima*, as they are called, who are taken out during festivals) leave the platform in the sanctum sanctorum and come out, which is un-brahminical. Both the brahmin and the non-brahmin (*daita*) servitors participate in the rituals, although the *sevas* (what they do) are different. In *Skanda Purana*, the *savaras* were excluded from these rituals (Part I, p.399). Their subsequent inclusion in the same can certainly be viewed as an assertion of the non-brahminical tradition in Jagannath worship.

Two rituals that find no mention in *Skanda Purana* concern the renewal or the repair of the *murtis*; there is no description of the *navakalevara* and the *anasara* rituals. The former takes place once in a few years, the details of which we skip. It is a forty-five-day ritual. The old *murtis* are given a ritual burial and in their place, new *murtis* are made and worshipped. It is an elaborate and complex ritual, but details are out of place here. What is of present relevance is the following: in the *gupta* (secret) *seva* in these two rituals, the *daita* servitors of the *savara* origin, have an extremely important role. This is more in tune with the *Sarala Mahabharata* narrative of the making of the *murtis* than the *Skanda Purana* narrative of the same. Recall that it is in the former that the *savara*, Jara, has a crucial role; his equivalent, the *savara*, Vishwabasu has no comparable in the latter. Jara does not make the *murtis*; the divine carpenter, the Creator god himself, does. But Jara covers the wooden *murtis* with the paste made of the barks of the *saal* tree.

*Anasara* is observed every year. It is a fifteen-day ritual, essentially the same as *navakalevara*, except that there is no replacement of the existing *murtis*. The existing *murtis* are attended to. The role of the *daitas* during the *anasara* ritual and the *navakalevara* ritual, as far as the *murtis* are concerned, is essentially the same. Like Jara, the *daita* servitors today put pastes on the *murtis*, the difference being that the

materials used today are not just the paste of the bark of the *saal* trees; herbs, oils, etc. are used as well. The nature of involvement of the *daitas* in this intimate ritual highlights the fact that Jagannath worship is not entirely brahminical; it is basically inclusive. *Skanda Purana* had mentioned that both the brahmins and the *savaras* (descendants of Vidyapati and Vishwabasu respectively) would be involved in the worship but what role the *savara* servitors would have, it did not mention or even suggest. Going by the spirit of *Skanda Purana*, it couldn't be as central as it was in *Sarala Mahabharata*.

The significance of the *anasara* (and the *navakalevara*) ritual is this: It is virtually totally un-*shashtric* or un-brahminical. It ensures that Jagannath worship cannot be totally brahminized; the *seva* of the *daitas*, which, to repeat, is central to it, cannot be done away with. If it ever happens, then it would be the origination of a different Jagannath worship. Just as with the disappearance of Neela Madhava, his story ended, as we have suggested above, similarly, with the elimination of the non-brahminical *seva* during *anasara* and *navakalevara*, the present story of Jagannath and his worship would end, as far as we are concerned. And just as the Divine Voice connected the story of Neela Madhava with the story of Jagannath, similarly, the culture historians will connect the two narratives of Jagannath, the present one, characterized by inclusiveness and the future one, if at all there will be one, to be characterized by exclusiveness. With this remark, we conclude the paper.

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