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GLIMPSES OF PURI JAGANNATH TEMPLE: THE SACRED PILGRIMAGE

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ABSTRACT

The **Puri Jagannath Temple** is famous as one of Hinduism's four sacred Char Dham pilgrimage sites and as the home of **Lord Jagannath** (a form of Lord Krishna), whose name means "Lord of the Universe".

Key Reasons for Its Fame:

- **Char Dham Pilgrimage:** It is an essential stop in the Char Dham circuit, alongside Rameswaram, Dwarka, and Badrinath.
- **The Rath Yatra (Chariot Festival):** Annually in June or July, the deities—Lord Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra, and sister Subhadra—are placed on massive, hand-pulled wooden chariots and brought through the streets to the Gundicha Temple. Unlike most temples, the divine comes out to meet the people.
- **Unique Wooden Idols & Nabakalebara:** Unlike stone or metal statues used in most Hindu temples, the idols are carved from sacred neem wood (daru) and are ritually replaced every 12 to 19 years in a grand regeneration ceremony called Nabakalebara.
- **The Mahaprasad Kitchen:** The temple features one of the largest temple kitchens in the world, where Mahaprasad is cooked daily in earthen pots over wood fires and served to thousands of devotees as a symbol of unity and equality.
- **Architectural & Mystical Wonders:**
- Built in the 12th century in the classical Kalinga style by **King Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva**.
- Famous local legends claim the main shikhara (spire) casts no shadow on the ground at any time of day, and a priest climbs the towering dome daily to change the flag against the wind.

KEYWORDS: Char dham, puri, rameshwaram, dwarka, neem wood, sacred flag, blue metal wheel, chappan bhog, chariot festival.



Figure 1: Blue Metal Wheel at Top.

The metal wheel mounted at the top of the Shree Jagannatha Temple Puri spire is called the *Neela Chakra* (Blue Wheel), representing the divine Sudarshan Chakra of Lord Vishnu.

Key Details of the Neela Chakra

- **Material:** Made of ashta-dhatu (an alloy of eight sacred metals).
- **Dimensions:** It measures roughly 11 feet 8 inches in diameter (with some historical/regional accounts noting a height or length up to 20 feet).
- **Placement:** Positioned on top of the main shikhara (spire) of the temple, approximately 214 feet high.
- **Flag (Dhwaja):** A sacred flag called the Patit Paban Dhwaja is tied to the Neela Chakra and is changed daily.
- **Spiritual Significance:** Seeing the Neela Chakra from anywhere in Puri is considered equivalent to having the direct darshan of Lord Jagannath himself, offering protection and blessings.

The Jagannath Temple is a Hindu temple dedicated to Jagannath, a form of Vishnu. It is located in Puri, Odisha, on the eastern coast of India. As per temple records, King Indradyumna of Avanti built the main temple. The present temple complex was rebuilt from the eleventh century onwards on the site of the earlier shrines, excluding the main Jagannath temple, and was begun by Anantavarman Chodaganga, the first ruler of the Eastern Ganga dynasty. Many of the temple rituals are based on Shabari Tantras which are evolved from tribal beliefs respectively. The local legends link the idols with Nilamadhaba deva worshipped by tribala and the daitapatis (servitors) claim to be descendants of the tribes. The temple is one of the 108 Abhimana Kshethram of the Sri Vaishnavite tradition.

The temple is renowned for its annual Ratha Yatra, chariot festival, which honours the three deities - **Jagannath**, **Balabhadra** and **Subhadra**. During the festival, the three principal deities are pulled on large and elaborately decorated raths, or temple cars. The worship is performed by the Bhil Sabar tribal priests, as well as priests of other communities in the temple. Unlike the stone or metal icons found in most Hindu temples, the image of Jagannath is carved from margosa wood [*Azadirachta indica*, Neem] and is ceremoniously replaced every **12 or 19 years** with an identical replica, with an elaborate month long ceremony called ***Nabakalebar***. The temple is one of the Char Dham pilgrimage sites.

The temple is sacred and holy to all Hindus, and especially in those of the Vaishnava traditions. Many great Vaishnava saints, such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Nimbarkacharya, Vallabhacharya and Ramananda were closely associated with the temple. Ramanuja established the Emar Matha in the south-eastern corner of the temple, and Adi Shankaracharya established the Govardhan Math, which is the seat of one of the four Shankaracharyas. It is also of particular significance to the followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, whose founder, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, was attracted to the deity, Jagannath, and lived in Puri for many years.

The **56 Bhog** (also known as ***Chhapan Bhog***) at the Shree Jagannatha Temple Puri refers to the 56 distinct sacred food items prepared and offered daily to Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra, and Goddess Vimala.

- **The Kitchen:** It is cooked in the world's largest temple kitchen using massive earthen pots stacked over firewood.
- **The Process:** The food is steam-cooked in a specific hierarchy—the topmost pot on the fire cooks first. Once offered to the deities, it becomes Mahaprasad (or Abadha), which is then distributed to thousands of devotees.
- **Daily Schedule:** The offerings are presented across six daily ritual times, starting with Gopala Vallabha Bhoga in the morning and ending with Bada Srungara Bhoga at night.

Categories of Items in Chhapan Bhog

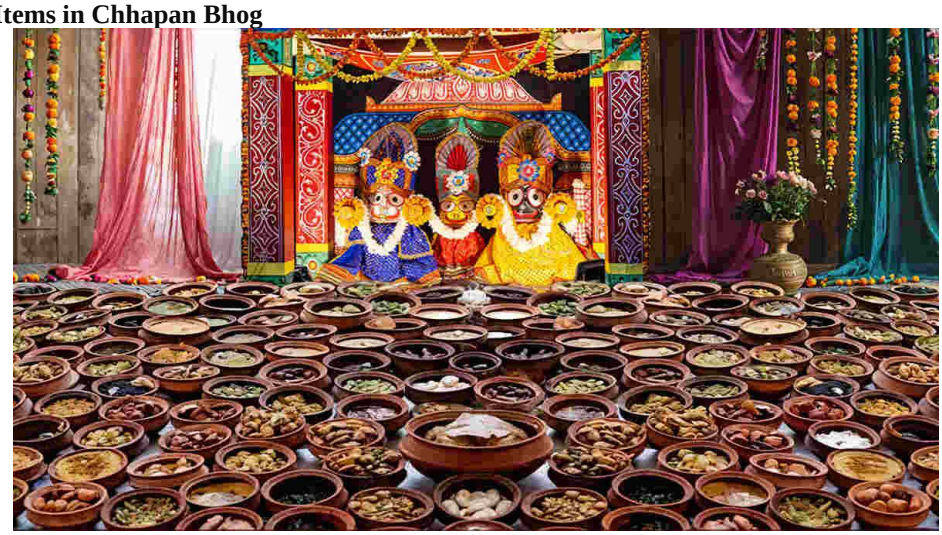


Figure 2: Chappan Bhog.

The 56 items are traditionally grouped into several culinary classes

- **Rice Preparations:** Plain rice, ghee rice (Ghia Anna), sweet rice (Kanika), and Tata Khechudi.
- **Dals and Curries:** Various lentil soups (Dali, Mitha Dali), mixed vegetable dishes (Mahur, Besar), and leafy greens (Sag).
- **Dry and Wet Curries:** Traditional Odia vegetable preps.
- **Sweet Dishes & Cakes/Pancakes:** Khaja, Rasabali, Enduri, Podo Pitha, Amalu, and milk-based desserts like Khua and Khiri.

The 56 items in the Chappan Bhog are a balanced mix of sweet, savoury, fried, steamed, baked, and liquid preparations, crafted to appeal to all senses and maintain sattvic (pure) food principles. While the exact list varies slightly between temples and regions, the traditional Puri version includes items such as:

Staple Foods & Rice Dishes: Ghee rice, Khichdi (rice and lentil preparation), Pakhala (fermented rice water), Kanika (sweetened rice), Lemon rice, Tamarind rice, Coconut rice, Plain steamed rice

Lentils & Pulses: Dalma (lentils with vegetables), Muga dal (yellow moong dal), Chana dal (Bengal gram dal), Urad dal

Vegetable Preparations: Saga bhaja (fried leafy greens), Khatta (sweet and sour preparations like tomato khatta or mango khatta), Besara (vegetables in mustard paste), Baigana bharta (roasted eggplant mash), Alu dum (potato curry), Mixed vegetable curry

Fried Snacks: Bara (lentil fritters), Alu chop (potato patties), Mathapuli (deep-fried stuffed fritters), Kachauri (stuffed puri), Puri, Papad

Sweet Dishes: Khaja (flaky fried pastry soaked in sugar syrup), Malpua (sweet pancake), Rasabali (milk-soaked sweet), Chhena poda (roasted cheese dessert), Rasa gulla, Chhena gaja, Ladoo, Suji halwa, Mitha dahi (sweet curd), Kheer (rice pudding), Payas (sweetened milk), Manda pitha, Kakara pitha, Arisa pitha, Jhilli

Other Unique Offerings: Sukhila khaja (dry sweet puff), Bhoga mandap khichdi, Gaja, Dal puri, Sukhua bhaja (dry-fried fish-like snack made with vegetables), Chhena ladoo, Pana (fruit or herbal drinks), Makar chaula (sweetened rice with banana and coconut), Saga bhaja (fried greens), Thali pitha, Moong dal chakuli, Khatta ambila, Sitabhog, Magaja ladoo, Chakuli pitha, Kancha kadali bhaja (fried banana), Mahura (temple-style mixed vegetable curry)

The offerings are arranged meticulously and presented with immense care. The variety ensures nutritional balance while celebrating regional and traditional flavours.

Symbolism behind Chappan Bhog: Chappan Bhog is not merely a feast—it's a spiritual act of love, devotion, and gratitude. Every ingredient, every dish is prepared in sanctity and reverence. The process reflects:

Bhakti (devotion): Each dish is lovingly made as an act of service to the Lord.

Diversity and abundance: They represent the Lord's grace and the richness of life.

Unity in variety: The offering unites various tastes, symbolizing how all paths can lead to the divine.

Chappan Bhog beyond Puri: Though Puri is the epicenter of this sacred tradition, many ISKCON temples and other Jagannath temples across India and the world also recreate Chappan Bhog, especially during festivals like Janmashtami, Ratha Yatra, or Govardhan Puja. In Mathura and Vrindavan, devotees prepare the Bhog to honor Lord Krishna. Even in homes, many families take up the devotional task of organizing all 56 dishes as part of personal sadhana.

Final Thoughts: Chappan Bhog is more than just food—it is a divine experience, a celebration of devotion, and a spiritual tradition that binds millions of followers to Lord Jagannath. With its rich flavours and symbolic depth, it continues to inspire awe, faith, and unity across generations. Whether you're a devotee, a foodie, or a cultural explorer, the story and spread of Chappan Bhog will surely captivate your senses and stir your soul.

The sacred flag-changing ritual at the Shree Jagannath Temple in Puri takes place every single day at sunset without interruption.

Key Details of the Ritual

• **Name of the Flag:** Known as the ***Patitapabana Bana or Dhwaja (a triangular flag)***.

• **The Climb:** A specialized temple servitor from the Chola/Chunara family scales the 214-to-215-foot high temple spire (Garba Mandira tower) barefoot and without any modern safety equipment or harness.

• **Timing:** The ceremony happens every evening—around 5:00 PM during winter and 6:00 PM during summer.

• **The Destination:** The priest climbs up to the Nila Chakra (the metal wheel at the summit representing Lord Vishnu's Sudarshan Chakra) to lower the old flag and tie the new one.

• **Wind Direction Legend:** A popular local belief states that the flag always flutters in the opposite direction of the wind, though it is an age-old spiritual custom.

The divine triad of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balarama (Balabhadra), and Goddess Subhadra is worshipped together in the inner sanctum of the Jagannath Temple, Puri in Odisha, India.



Figure-3: Sacred Flag Changing Ritual.

The Sacred Triad

• **Lord Jagannath:** Considered a form of Lord Krishna (the younger brother), represented with large round eyes and a characteristic facial form carved from sacred Neem wood (daru).

• **Lord Balarama (Balabhadra):** The elder brother of Krishna and Jagannath, often associated with strength and worshipped as an avatar of Seshanaga or Shiva.

• **Goddess Subhadra:** The younger sister of Krishna and Balarama, representing the cosmic center, divine feminine energy (Shakti), and balance between her two brothers.

Key Traditions and Features

• **Ratha Yatra (Chariot Festival):** During the annual festival, the three deities travel in massive, newly constructed wooden chariots:

• **Nandighosha:** Jagannath's 16-wheeled chariot.

• **Taladhwaja:** Balarama's 14-wheeled chariot.

• **Darpadalana:** Subhadra's 12-wheeled chariot (meaning "Crusher of Pride").



Figure 4: Chariot Festival.

• **Iconography:** Their distinctive, armless wooden forms symbolize non-duality, universal love, and spiritual surrender.

Puri Jagannath Mandir flag change why the person climbs opposite face: A member of the Chunara (or Chuna Muti) servitor clan climbs the exterior spire of the 214-foot Shree Jagannath Temple in Puri every single day to change the sacred flag (Patitapabana Bana).

• **Safety and Grip:** The main temple spire (Shikhara) tapers sharply as it rises to a height of over 214 feet. Climbing facing inward (with one's chest and face close to the stone surface of the temple) provides a much more secure, natural grip on the architectural carvings and ledges.

• **Tradition and Balance:** Facing the structure allows the servitor to maintain three points of contact and better balance against high-altitude coastal winds without safety harnesses or ropes.



Figure 5: Pillars of Puri Jagannath Temple.

The Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, features two primary and prominent pillars of immense religious and historical significance:

1. Aruna Stambha (Sun Pillar)

- **Location:** Stands about 20 feet outside the Singhadwara (Lion's Gate / eastern entrance).
- **Height & Material:** A 34-foot (10 m) tall monolithic pillar carved from chlorite stone with a sixteen-sided shaft.
- **Top Figure:** Topped with an idol of Aruna, the charioteer of the Sun God Surya, in an attitude of prayer.
- **History:** According to the Madala Panji, the pillar originally stood at the Konark Sun Temple before being relocated to Puri in the late 18th century by the Maratha guru Brahmachari Gosain during the reign of King Dibyasingha Deva II.

2. Garuda Stambha (Garuda Pillar)

- **Location:** Located inside the Nata Mandapa (Dancing Hall), facing the Ratna Vedi (sanctum sanctorum) of Lord Jagannath.
- **Height & Material:** Measures about 10–11 feet tall, featuring a shaft (believed by some accounts to be fossilized Salagrama or timber stone) topped with an idol of Garuda (the divine mount of Lord Vishnu) kneeling in Anjali Mudra (folded hands).
- **Significance:** Devotees traditionally embrace or touch the pillar while looking toward the main deities for blessings, purification of sins, and spiritual connection.

The Flag-Changing Tradition

- **Daily Ritual:** The flag is replaced every day—around 5:00 PM in winter and 6:00 PM in summer—by authorized descendants of the Chunara family.
- **The "Opposite Wind" Phenomenon:** Popular belief and folklore state that the triangular flag flutters in the opposite direction of the prevailing wind. While some attribute this to divine intervention or local aerodynamics like the Kármán vortex street (where wind swirling around the blunt structural towers creates eddies and reverse air currents), opinions remain mixed and debated between traditional faith and scientific explanation.
- **Myths vs. Reality:** Legends claim that if the daily flag ritual is missed even once, the temple **must remain closed for 18 years**, though servitors strive to maintain the unbroken centuries-old practice.

Puri Jagannath Mandir kitchen uses chariot woods. Yes, the wood from the dismantled Rath Yatra chariots is traditionally used as firewood in the sacred kitchen of the Jagannath Temple, Puri, though it supplements a larger daily supply of timber. Every year, three massive wooden chariots (Nandighosha, Taladhwaja, and Darpadalana) are built from scratch for the annual Rath Yatra festival. Because temple traditions prohibit reusing

the chariots or pulling them back to storage, they are dismantled shortly after the festival concludes.

How the Chariot Wood is used

- **Sacred Kitchen Fuel.** The majority of the dismantled timber is sent to the Rosaghara, the temple's massive kitchen. There, it is burned in traditional earthen hearths to cook the daily Mahaprasad (holy food offering) for the deities and thousands of devotees.
- **Auctions and Preservation.** Not every piece of the chariot is burned. Specific components, such as the giant wooden wheels, are often preserved as heritage artifacts or auctioned off to devotees by the Shree Jagannath Temple Administration. Yes, timber from the dismantled chariots used in the annual Rath Yatra is traditionally utilized as firewood in the Puri Jagannath Temple Kitchen (Rosaghara) to cook Mahaprasad.



Figure 6: Bhog Preparation.

Key Details

- **Tradition:** After the Rath Yatra concludes, the sacred wooden chariots (of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra) are dismantled.
- **Fuel Source:** The timber from these dismantled chariots is sent to the temple kitchen to serve as fuel for cooking Kotha Bhoga and daily meals.
- **Supplementary Wood:** Because the chariot wood is limited, it is supplemented daily by casuarina wood and timber supplied through forest department depots and private sources (with the kitchen consuming around 80–100 quintals of firewood daily).
- **Reused Idols and Carvings.** Decorative wooden elements like the kalasa (pots atop the canopies), wooden horses, and the charioteer figures (sarathi) are preserved and reused each year, only being remade every 12 to 19 years during the Nabakalebara ceremony.



Figure 7: Odisha Map.

Does It Run the Kitchen All Year?

• **A Symbolic Supplement.** While the chariot timber provides a significant amount of sacred fuel (over 1,100 logs are used to build the three chariots), it is not enough to run the kitchen for the entire year.

• **Daily Firewood Supply.** The Rosaghara operates 240 to 250 hearths daily to feed tens of thousands of people. To meet this massive year-round demand, the temple relies on a steady supply of regular firewood, such as casuarina logs, managed by the temple administration and state plantations.

CONCLUSION

Lord Jagannath of the famous Shree Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, is made of wood—specifically auspicious neem wood (known as Daru Brahma or the wooden god).

Material: Unlike most Hindu deities carved from stone or cast in metal, the triad of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra are carved from specific, ritually selected neem trees.

Nabakalebara Ritual: Every 12 to 19 years, a sacred ritual called Nabakalebara takes place, during which the old wooden idols are ceremoniously replaced with new ones carved from fresh neem wood.

The "Brahma Padartha": During this renewal ceremony, a secret core or life substance called the Brahma Padartha is transferred from the old idols to the new ones.

Symbolism: According to the Jagannath Temple History, using organic wood symbolizes that the deity is living, accessible, and connected to the natural cycles of birth, aging, and renewal.

Top 10 Facts and Mysteries of the Puri Jagannath Temple

1. **The Flag That Flutters Against the Wind:** The cloth flag (Patitapabana) atop the main dome changes direction daily and is widely believed to move opposite to the natural air current.
2. **The Main Dome's Shadow:** Local tradition and popular accounts state that the main dome of the temple casts no shadow on the ground at any time of the day.
3. **The Sudarshan Chakra Illusion:** The 20-foot metal wheel (Sudarshan Chakra) at the top of the temple is crafted so that it appears to face you identically no matter which direction in Puri you view it from.
4. **Disappearing Ocean Sounds:** When you walk through the main entrance (Singha Dwara) and step inside the temple, the sound of the ocean waves completely fades away, only to return the moment you step back outside.
5. **No Birds or Planes Fly Overhead:** Unlike most tall structures, birds are rarely or never seen resting on top of the dome, and aircraft are restricted from flying directly above the temple.
6. **The Daily Flag-Changing Ritual:** A priest climbs the tall structure barehanded and upside down every single day to replace the temple flag. Missing a day is traditionally believed to require closing the temple for 18 years.
7. **The World's Largest Kitchen & Stacked Pots:** The temple kitchen feeds anywhere from thousands to hundreds of thousands of devotees daily using 56 food varieties (Mahaprasad). The food is cooked in seven earthen pots placed directly on top of each other, where the topmost pot cooks first.
8. **Wooden Idols and the Nabakalebara Ritual:** Unlike most Hindu temples featuring stone or metal idols, Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra are carved from specific sacred neem wood. These wooden forms are periodically replaced during a secret midnight ceremony known as Nabakalebara.
9. **The Secret "Brahma" Core:** Inside the heart of the wooden idols lies a mysterious core or sealed casket (Brahma), which is transferred during the renewal ritual under strict secrecy.
10. **Tribal and Historical Roots:** While viral legends surround the temple, historical records show the current monumental shrine was built in the 12th century AD by King Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva, tracing back to earlier tribal worship of Nila Madhava.

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