

# MATHA CULTURE OF PURI : RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS

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## Abstract:

The sanctity of *purusottama kshetra* Puri in Odisha exists from pre-historic period where traditions never reach. This *kshetra* has been described as the most sacred place in *Bharata Varsha*. Lord Jagannath is the presiding deity of this *kshetra*. This *kshetra*'s greatness is unparalleled, its importance is unique and sanctity of this *kshetra* is unquestionable. Jagannath culture is responsible to combine people under one common bond of unity of different faiths, castes and creeds. The spiritual heritage of *srikshetra* has long motivated philosophers to explore their unknown wisdom. The Acharyas of different *sampradayas* (sects) could realize it, and they prayed God to fulfil their much cherished ambition to establish a *matha* (monastery) at *Srikshetra* puri, which could speak of their full bloom personality. This is the real cause behind the foundation of *matha* culture and tradition at puri. While many works has been done in the Jagannath culture, very little attempt has been made in the matha culture of puri. The focus of the study is to project a comprehensive description of the spiritual and cultural aspects of the mathas belonging to various *sampradayas*. their archaeological vestiges, system of worship, administration and their relationship with Lord Jagannath. The present study has been taken up with a view to understanding, analyzing and interpreting the *matha* culture of Puri, which has been in existence between 8<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century A. D. The method of study adopted was exhaustive field work based on, on the spot study of the different *Mathas*. Collection, compilation, editing and representation of information and data gathered from various primary and secondary sources. (Primary sources like palm leaf manuscripts, *Sanandas*, *Chitaus* of respective *mathas*, archival records pertaining to *mathas* have also been explored and studied. Similarly, secondary sources like previous works by several authors on this subject and gazettiers, endowment records have been consulted to validate the findings obtain in the course of the study). Survey of archeological remains and their systematic documentation. Personal Interaction with the *Mahantas* of different *Mathas* and with their other associates.

**Key Words:** *Kshetra*, *Srimandira*, *Darubrahma*, *Mahanta*, *Sampradaya*, *Anushasana*, *Sanandas*, *Chitaus*, *Endowment*.

Puri is the ornament of earth, very close to the silvery beach, which is one of the four sacred *dhamas* of the Supreme God, a place of cultural efflorescence and an international centre of pilgrimage and tourism, bears the innumerable foot prints of the devotees. The sanctity of this *kshetra* exists from pre- historic period where tradition never reach<sup>1</sup>. This *kshetra* has been described as the most sacred place in *Bharata Varsha*. In the *Purusottama Mahatmya* of *Skanda Mahapurana* we find the sacred place existed even during the universal deluge and also in the beginning of this creation. This *kshetra*'s greatness is unparalleled, its importance is unique and sanctity of this *kshetra* is unquestionable. *Skanda Mahapurana* narrates the *mahatmya* of *purusottama kshetra* in detail. Here is mentioned the sanctity and glory of the *kshetra* in the following verses, "*Purusottamakshyam sumahata kshetram paramapavanam yatraste darabatanu sriso manusalilaya. Darsanad muktida sakshat sarvatirtha phalapradam.*"<sup>2</sup> This *kshetra* is *paramapavana kshetra*, which is supremely purifying. It is a miraculous place which is unique and eternal and is free from the process of creation, preservation and annihilation.<sup>3</sup> Lord Jagannath is the presiding deity of this *kshetra*, who is a total symbol of world's identity- social, cultural, religious and

spiritual. He is the most pervasive and comprehensive integration of ideas and ideals. He is also the source of our beliefs, social norms and relationships, cultural excellence and value system. In the Indian context the form of worship of Lord Vishnu is different in different places. But there is a uniformity of worship of Lord Jagannath at different places of India. So all the Acharyas of different sects are surprised with this wonderful uniformity form of worship of Lord Jagannath. Jagannath culture is responsible to combine people under one common bond of unity of different faiths, castes and creeds. The spiritual heritage of *srikshetra* has long motivated philosophers to explore their unknown wisdom.

In the Jagannath culture Brahma and Iswara are not different, they are the same. The degree of service to God speaks of the intensity of the devotion of a man. The *Acharyas* of different *sampradayas* (sects) could realize it, and they prayed God to fulfil their much cherished ambition to establish a *matha* (monastery) at *Srikshetra* puri. This is the real cause behind the foundation of *matha* culture and tradition at puri. The liberal and easy form of worship of Lord Jagannath has surprised the *Acharyas* and other great men. They have examined and compared it to the traditional form of worship. But ultimately they have been attracted to the worship of Lord Jagannath and finally have accepted Lord Jagannath as the prime deity of their own sects. Devotees of each religious school had seen in Jagannath the object of devotion. Lord Jagannath holds the highest concepts of the major faiths. The great preachers, philosophers and saints came and propounded their theories and discovered their ultimate findings in Lord Jagannath. It is assimilation without resistance, integration without conflict. There is no bar, no restriction, no rigidity. It is like the open sky across which any bird can fly and yet leave sufficient room for others to steer their course<sup>4</sup>.

The origin of *matha* culture in Puri has been long before the construction of the present Jagannath Temple. Some *mathas* like *Vrugu ashrama* and *Angira ashrama* date back to an earlier period. The *Acharyas* created multiple *sampradayas* in India, but more in Puri causing it as the principal centre of united sects, which is the real place of God realization and propagation of their thoughts. These philosopher's staying places were converted into various *mathas*. To unify different religious concepts all over India, *anusasana* is arranged in *matha* culture. In puri *anusasanas* were instituted in the name of *rishi*. These were recognized as Vedic *ashrams*. Later *anusasana* got the form of *matha*. Different *mathas* were organized for many *anusasanas*, so it is quite evident that *matha* culture succeeded *anusasana* culture. Adisankara after establishing *Adwaitanusasana* in *purusottama kshetra*, spread the movement of *kaulanusasana* and *pashupatanusasana*. This resulted in a strong philosophical plinth of *matha* culture.<sup>5</sup> Jagadguru Adisankaracharya is the first who paid equal respect and honour to *Darubrahma* and *Arnnabrahma* in this *kshetra*. Later on the visit of Ramanujacharya, Sri Madhavacharya, Sri Nimbakacharya, Sri Ballavacharya, Sri Ramanandacharya and Sri Vishnu swami etc. spread Jagannath consciousness too far and wide through *matha* culture .

*Matha* culture is a different type of culture. Religious inquisitiveness and spiritual considerations are the two leading and motivating factors behind the establishment of *mathas*.<sup>6</sup> In 7th century A.D. *matha* culture was originated in *Srikshetra* Puri, but it was popular towards the last part of 12th century A.D. and thereafter a great spiritual renaissance started. They had a chequered career of long thirteen hundred years and are primarily vaishnavite by faith.<sup>7</sup> Devotees from every nook and corner of India came to this *kshetra* to spread *Sanatana Dharma* worldwide. For leading the people to walk on the path of salvation *matha* played a dynamic role. To promulgate and pervade the consciousness of *dharma matha* stands as a sacred institution. Under the royal patronage of the Gajapati rulers *matha* culture flourished. The great patron was Anangabhima Deva who established a lot of *mathas* around *Srimandira* of *Srikshetra* dedicated to different religious sects. Primarily three main objects were found in the *mathas*

i.e.<sup>8</sup> i) Proper care of *Bhoga Niyoga*. ii) Coaching the *Sevakas* of the Lord iii) to listen to public grievances and punish the convicts. In the latter period, the *mathas* were not only linked with *Srimandira* but were also engaged in propagating their own concepts and the philosophy of *Sanatana dharma* coupled with all embracing Jagannath culture. It also provides shelter for the pilgrims coming from different parts of the country, offering an essential service to the ascetics.

The main aspect of the *matha* was to educate students in traditional studies and to make them well versed in Sanskrit Language.<sup>9</sup> It was a place where the students reside, learn and recite religious discourses mainly spiritual discourses, teaching of Sanskrit and classics.<sup>10</sup> It was originally founded with the object of giving religious instructions to disciples and encourage them for a religious life, provides accommodation and financial help to poor and meritorious students.<sup>11</sup> *Mathas* never stopped educating the poor and providing them with shelter, employment and basic needs. It has extended its hands to protect and elevate the social administration, health, education, art centres, museum and entertainment programmes having affinity with culture.<sup>12</sup> *Mathas* served for both the spiritual and physical development of the human being. In this place the learners were well trained with law, humanity, behavior and legal thinking and religious activities, spiritual and general knowledge.<sup>13</sup> *Mathas* were museums in exhibiting the art and architecture of past culture. Sanskrit tools were established by the *mathas* where Sanskrit was taught to the students. Libraries were maintained for them to study literature, religion and philosophy. Scholarship was given to students and monetary help was given to various educational institution and orphanage.<sup>14</sup> It also provides accommodation to co-religious brethren during their visit to Puri especially during car festival of the deities.

*Matha* played a vital role in contributing copper plate, stone pillar inscriptions and *sanandas* to Indian history and archaeology. Celibacy, moral discipline and truthfulness were the hymns chanted by *matha* dwellers. Spiritual realization, ardent devotion of how to adorn the lord, severe practice in contemplation, restrained mind were mainly observed in the *mathas*. In the Indian mind the *mathas* provide a focus for sacredness. The main purpose of the *matha* is to preach *Sanatana Dharma* and to keep up the language, thought and action in original in the society with a view to maintaining the tradition.<sup>15</sup>

*Mathas* of puri add to the lustre of the culture and heritage of Orissa and India as well. It has been established with a view to protect *Sanatana Dharma* and to help the disciples to realize the absolute truth and reality. The followers of different *sampradayas* are so divergent in their principles, ideas and teachings that most of the times the followers fight among themselves to establish the supremacy of their own sect. But Jagannath cult at puri embrace all the different religious creeds and sects and treat them equally and impartially putting up unity and diversity. So among all the places of pilgrimage throughout India, Puri is very conspicuous for its having innumerable *mathas* belonging to various *sampradayas* (sects) located around the shrine of Lord Jagannath.

*Sampradaya* means the believers of a particular creed or upholders of a particular practice to expound its own system of discipline to prove Jagannath as the embodiment of its sectarian philosophy. *Padma purana* refers, the age of Kaliyuga shall witness four *sampradayas* i.e.

“*Sampradaya vihine ye*

*Mantraste nisphal matah*

*Atah kalau bhavisyanti*

*Catvarah sampradayinah*  
*Sri – Brahma- Rudra – Sanak*  
*Vaisnavah ksiti –pavanah*  
*Catvaraste kalau bhasya*  
*Hyutkale purusottamat. ” 16*

Here we find *Sri Sampradaya*, *Brahma Sampradaya*, *Rudra Sampradaya* and *Sanak Sampradaya*. The prediction of *Padma Purana* is that these philosophies will arise in Utkal, Orissa or *purusottama puri*. From *srikshetra* it will spread throughout the world. All these *sampradaya*'s origin proves that, Puri is a spiritual seat, where we find the growth of Hindu religious segments for the propagation of *Santana Dharma*,<sup>17</sup> Here also we find a confluence of the various schools of Vedanta namely *adwaita*, *vissistadwaita*, *dwaita*, *suddhadwaita*, *dwaitadwaita* and *achintyabhedabheda*. The *Chaturdha Vighras* are involved as *saguna sakara* or *nirguna sakara* or even as *nirguna nirakara* depending upon the religious inclination of the devotee, all these philosophies were spread via the *matha*. The *Mathas* of puri classified into different groups, i.e. *asrama* type, *raja –angila* type, individual type like Guru Nanak and Kabir have also established their *mathas* in puri. All these *mathas* have more or less connection with the temple of Lord Jagannath. The saints of different *sampradayas* left their foot prints and the *mathas* which they had established to perpetuate their magnanimity till today. Legend speaks 752 *mathas* in puri, but at present many of them are not traceable. The head of the *matha* is known as *Mahanta* or *Adhikari*. A *Mahanta* must possess few qualities like, he should have a deep understanding of life's philosophy and belief in God. He should be a force that keeps the society going. He must consider the welfare of others. He is the one who worships the deity; participates in religious discussion, and gives good advice in worldly matters. He keeps away from all worldly affairs, speaks the truth and serves people. He has no worldly attachment and anxieties. He recites the name of the deity and speaks noble words to the society. He has to do good work and have faith in God.<sup>18</sup> A *Mahanta* is he who is very selfless and who loves his disciples even more than a father can love his child. He gives his disciples that knowledge which comes through his direct experience.

The *Mahantas* received liberal gifts, *sanandas* and some rights etc, for the worship of Sri Jagannath Temple and for other charitable purposes.<sup>19</sup> Their specific importance was recognized by the Gajapati Maharaja who looked after the management of the temple. These *mathas* were directly involved in the various rituals as well as in different festivals round the year of Sri Jagannath Temple.<sup>20</sup> In return of the *seva*, the *mathas* get some *khei* as a symbol of respect for performing the *seva puja* in the temple of Lord Jagannath.<sup>21</sup>

Among the *Mathas* of Puri Emara matha, Raghava Das matha and Dakhinaparswa matha are richest. Prominent Goudiya mathas are Radhakanta matha, Gangamata matha, Kothabhoga matha, Bada Odia matha, Sisu Ananta matha and few others belongs to Utkaliya Vaishnavas. Govardhana matha and Sankarananda matha are saivites. Govardhan matha has been propagating Hindu religion and culture. The mathas were granted acres and acres of land by the kings. Rich landlords also donated land to the mathas for the service of the lord.<sup>22</sup> The *Mahanta* serves as the *marfatdars* of these properties. It was his responsibility to manage and over seeing that the produce is used for the rightful purpose for which they have been donated. The money thus earned was used for ceremonies, festivals and philanthropic activities of lord and for performing other acts of charity.

Though the *mathas* possess acres and acres of land they do not get proper income from these lands. The system of land tenure followed in Orissa is responsible for this. The dearth of sincerity is visible. This has resulted in several irregularities in the service of the lord and in the ritual practice of the temple. Now the rooms of the *mathas* have been occupied by the businessmen who have opened up shops for no rent or for a very nominal rent. Had it been checked and the actual rent be collected, the *mathas* could have increased their income. Today the holy duty of the individual is to protect these national properties for the development of the national culture for the coming generation.

The *mathas* of *srikshetra* are intimately associated with the worship of Lord Jagannath and they also have various types of *sevas* or duties to perform in the temple.<sup>23</sup> The *Mathas'* specific importance was recognized by the Gajapati Maharaja and they were directly involved in the various rituals as well as in different festivals celebrated round the year in Sri Jagannath temple. The *mathas* like *Emar Matha, Jagannath Ballava Matha, Govardhan Matha, Gopaltirtha Matha, Raghadas Matha, Bada Odia Matha, Uttaraparswa Matha, Dakhinaparswa Matha*, are very well associated with the various rituals of Jagannath temple. Several *Mathas* have the rights to offer *bhoga* to the deities every day.<sup>24</sup> The *Mangu Matha, Panjabi Matha* and *Bauli Matha* have been given some ritualistic responsibilities of the Jagannath temple. Though ideologically different from each other, the *Mathas* have one thing in common i.e. they are related to the Jagannath temple in some way or the other.

Nowadays most of the *Mathas* have lots of problems. Weak financial condition and mismanagement of funds have prevented the development of the *Mathas*. The rooms are damaged, the roofs are cracked and walls are broken. Banyan trees and unwanted vegetation have grown in the cleavages of the walls. Previously these *Mathas* were glow with glory, vigour and vitality and looked vivacious and crowded with disciples and devotees throughout the year. Large numbers of students stayed in the *Mathas* and were imparted free education. *Mathas* were the lighthouse of confidence and hope for innumerable people, students and devotees, young and old alike. At present *mathas* are forsaken. The atmospheres within the *Mathas* are deadly silent. No students are found and if devotees and disciples are found there number is negligible. The premises are littered with garbage and dirt. The *Mathas* are neither swept nor cleaned.

The Endowment Commission maintains and protects the property of the *Mathas* only on pen and paper. The properties of many *Mathas* have been encroached upon illegally. The very existence of the *Matha* is at stake.<sup>25</sup> The *Mathas* were built to strengthen the cultural unity and integrity of Utkal, but in reality all this has been lost. Mutual distrust and misunderstanding among the *Mahantas* is one of the main causes of disunity. Each wanted to supersede the other, each wanted to show off his knowledge and attainment, and to show off how he is superior to the other *Mahantas*. For this reason the *Mahantas* did not hesitate to take the help of the people. The *Matha* culture is deteriorating day by day. May be keeping it alive for future generation it would be more difficult. The old traditions of the *Matha* culture should be revived and an effective system of administration can be introduced to revamp the *Mathas*. So it is the duty of the nation to protect this national culture.

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