

# Contribution of The Marathas Towards Sri Jagannath Temple of Puri

Sujata Routray\*

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## ABSTRACT

*In 1751, the Marathas became the ruler of Odisha. Being Hindus, they had great care and devotion for the Lord Jagannath and they took special interest in the welfare of the temple administration. The Marathas provided necessary facilities for pilgrims in which several pilgrims visited Puri to give tribute to the Lord in large numbers. All rituals, customs, traditions, practices and faiths relating to Jagannath culture was sincerely managed by them.*

**Keywords:** *Mughals, Marathas, pilgrims, Parichhas, Annachhatra, Koth kanjha, Satais Hazari Mahal.*

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## 1.0 Introduction

Sri Jagannath, the Lord of the whole universe, is not only a symbol of odia identity, integrity and solidarity but his gracious presence in the district of Puri of Odisha, in the eastern part of India, also unites the whole of India including a foreign country like Nepal with a coherent bond spreading the message of socialism. His temple at Puri is great holy Hindu shrine and one of the four dharmas. Representing sunya ideology of Vaishnavite concept, Sri Jagannath trio is believed to be the one of the form of Sri Mahavishnu. With spiritual concept at the background and gradually incorporating Jain and Buddhist ideologies, Jagannath culture was perhaps Hinduised during the reign of the Kesaris and then the imperial Ganga rulers. Credit goes to Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva for the construction of the present massive temple of Sri Jagannath at Puri. Since then, the temple as holy shrine and a pilgrimage centre is playing a vital role in the socio-economic - political and cultural life of Odisha. The temple witnessed for several plunderers, ravages and devastation from time to time due to frequent raids of the Afghans and the Mughals. With the ascendancy of the Maratha power in coastal Odisha from 1751 to 1803, the temple received a lot of welfare measures for the proper maintenance.

The Jagannath temple was always patronized and achieved considerable significance as it is considered as one of the four religious centers or Mathas in India ( Badrinath in the north, Dwarka in the west, Puri in the east, and Singeri in the south). The temple began to draw the attention and it was one of the targets of many invaders. Mukunda deva was the last independent king of Odisha and he was killed in 1568 and Odisha was passed to the Afghans. At the order of the Afghan sultan Sulaiman Karrani of Bengal, his general Kalapahada (Kalachand) plundered Odisha as the immense wealth of the Jagannath temple attracted him.<sup>1</sup> Odisha came under the Mughals in 1592 when the Raja Mansingh, the commanders of the Mughal emperor Akbar conquered it.<sup>2</sup> During the Muslim rule in Odisha which continued from 1568-1751, the worship of Lord Jagannath was very often disturbed excepting the reign of Akbar and Murshid Quli II due to their liberal outlook. But in the reign of Aurangzeb, a firman was passed in 1692 calling for the demolition of the temple. But fortunately that firman was thwarted because the local Mughal officers were somehow bribed out. The credit should be given to the Marathas for saving the Jagannath Temple for demolition to be done by Aurangzeb by diverting his attention towards the Deccan, helped Odisha as if the war ended up favourably for Aurangzeb, little doubt, that Puri would have been leveled.

After the end of the Mughal period Odisha came under the Maratha rule. Being Hindus, they had a great respect for the Lord Jagannath. They took a special interest and care in the temple administration.

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\*Ph. D Scholar, Department of History, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha, India. (Email: sujataroutray.rav1970@gmail.com)

In the time of Maratha rule, there was no need to shift the idols of Jagannath from the temple of Puri to a secret Place, but previously, several times the idols were shifted to the Chilika Lake to avoid plunder. The Maratha Government had taken all necessary steps for the better management which attracted the pilgrims to visit Puri in large number.

The Marathas were not in favour in changing any old traditional customs regarding the worship and rituals of Lord Jagannath. Therefore, they gave respect to all the practices, rituals, customs relating to Jagannath culture. A conflict arose inside the temple when the Vaishnavs removed the images of Shankara and Padmapada from the throne of Jagannath (Ratna Singhasana). The followers of Shankara strongly opposed the anti-social and inhuman activities of Vaishnavas. Due to this incident, the daily worship (Devniti) was stopped. Immediately interfering to this matter, the Maratha Government warned the Vaishnava Chief Laksmana Nath Krishna Goswami not to introduce any new steps regarding the traditional practices of the temple and took necessary action to reinstall the images of Sankara and Padmapada. The Marathas always encouraged the pilgrims to visit Puri Jagannath temple in large numbers. Specially Sambhuji Ganesha took great care in this regard. For the development of the temple, the Maratha Government Rajaram Pandit (1778-1793) took special interest and contributed a lot. During Maratha administration, for the observation of different religious activities of the temple, regular funds were provided. The Bhonsoles gave a sum of Rs. 6000 or 24000 cowries annually to the temple. This was divided into donations given to Brahmins, priests, widows, foods for pilgrims. In 1784, Mudoji Bhonsale made land grants to Gossains. This charity was known as 'Anna Chhatra' (free food distribution camp).<sup>4</sup> Many rich persons endowed with lands for the maintenance of the temple. This encouraged others to make large contributions. For example, in 1773, Raja Raj Narain, a zamindar of Midnapore, set aside 960 Bighas of land for Puri.<sup>5</sup> Earnings from these 960 bighas would go towards financing 'bhog' for satais Mahal (Mahal meant an area, usually a village). This revenue would go to the 'bhog' of the temple (nearly 1,48,373 or about -50,000 rupees. Sometimes it would be in kind Daspalla supplied the timbers required for making of the rathas or chariots.<sup>6</sup>

The Marathas paid special attention to the celebration of two annual festivals, the Rath yatra (car festival) and the second (possibly) the Jhulana festival. Probably, this Jhulana festival began during the Maratha Period. The money spent on these two festivals was released from the government treasury amounted to about Rs. 40,000 annually.<sup>7</sup> Money earned via pilgrims tax etc., was pumped back into making of the temple and temple festivals grandeur and richer. Raghuji Bhonsale granted the estate of Kodhar to the Uttara Purusha Matha. His mother Chimabai introduced 'Mohanbhog' offering to Jagannath. The revenue from Kodhar estate was attached to this bhog. The Marathas brought the *Aruna Stambha* from Konark to Puri.

The Maratha Government were highly religious, but not narrow minded. As they were liberal in their outlook they issued passport to the Muslims to visit Lord Jagannath. The Naib Nazim of Deccan Jasrat Khan requested the Maratha Government for a darshan of Jagannath.<sup>8</sup>

For better administration of the temple the Maratha Government appointed four Parichhas with specific duties. First and the third parichha were the Marathas and the second one was a local person. He was called as Jagannath Rajguru along with the Deula Parichha. The main source of income of the temple during the Maratha rule were (1) Revenue from Satais Hazari Mahal (2) Sayar or two duties (3) Tax on professions (4) sale of mahaprasad (5) Kot khanjah or assignment of land revenue.<sup>9</sup> A tax of pratiharas was also levied, who were allowed to collect fees from the pilgrims. Certain categories of pilgrims such as sanyasis (medicants), the deseers (who lived in the holy land between the rivers Baitarani and Rishikulya) and the kangalas (paupers) were exempted from paying taxes.<sup>10</sup>

During the Maratha rule, there was provision for pilgrims for paying taxes classified into different categories such as *Lal yatri*, *Bhuranga* and *Kangal*. This classification was made on the basis

of wealth, social distinction and pedigree. The first higher category constituted the *Lal Yatries*, the middle constituted the *Bhuranga* and the third poorest category of pilgrims known as *Kangala* who were exempted for paying taxes. The tax collected from a place called khunta on the border of Mayurbhanj and continued upto the entrance of Puri. (who came from the north). They were granted passes specifying their number, the date and the amount of tax paid by them individually. Then they were handed over to the pandas of agents. This process was necessary in order to avoid the low cast entry and unnecessary delay of entrance place. The pilgrims from south were to enter Puri through the Lokanath Ghata and the pilgrims from northern side were to enter through the Atharnala. The northern side pilgrims gave Rs. 10 and the southern side gave Rs. 6 only.

Besides this tax, there were another fee *panas* and twelve and a half *gandas* (cowries) for higher category pilgrim and the middle category pilgrim had to pay seven and half *gandas* (cowries) for paying for taking them round the Singhasana or the throne of Jagannath. Medicants, monks, merchants with articles of trade and the inhabitants of holy land were exempted from payment of taxes.<sup>11</sup> The *kangalas* (the poorest people) were also allowed to visit the temple without any payment.

In the field of religion the Marathas brought many new and novel experiments. The worship of Lord Jagannath and the maintenance of the grand temple was their primary objective. It is important to note that without political control being exercised by the Nagpur Bhonsles in Odisha, perhaps none of this would have been possible. Authors Dr. Manas Kumar Das and Dr. B.C. Ray agree that the Maratha rule led to religious rejuvenation in Odisha.

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