

Herbal Traditions in Jagannath Culture: A Holistic Exploration of Rituals, Healing, and Ecological conservation

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ABSTRACT

The Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, a cornerstone of Hindu pilgrimage and one of the four sacred Char Dham sites, embodies the inclusive and egalitarian ethos of Jagannath culture. This tradition, centered on the worship of Lord Jagannath alongside Balabhadra and Subhadra, integrates Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and indigenous tribal practices, reflecting a unique synthesis of spiritual unity. Sacred herbs and botanicals, including flowers, leaves, stems, resins, fruits, and roots from diverse plant species, are integral to the temple's rituals, traditional medicine, and environmental conservation. This study explores the multifaceted roles of these plants in daily rituals, 31 annual festivities, and three special festivals, highlighting their significance in healing practices, cultural identity, and ecological balance. The findings underscore the holistic use of sacred herbs in Jagannath culture, illustrating their contribution to spiritual, medicinal, and environmental dimensions of this dynamic and evolving tradition.

Keywords: Ecological balance, indigenous tribal practices, Sacred herbs

1. Introduction

The Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, is one of the most revered pilgrimage sites in Hinduism. The Jagannatha Culture is a distinctive tradition of Odisha, and worshipping Lord Jagannatha, as a universal deity embodying the spirit of inclusivity and compassion is at the heart of Odisha's religious contributions. The Jagannatha Temple in Puri, is one of the four sacred Chari Dham pilgrimage sites in India.

The Jagannatha Culture is characterized by its accessibility and egalitarianism with intangible natural and cultural heritage. The worship of Lord Jagannatha, along with his siblings Balabhadra and Subhadra, represents a synthesis of various religious traditions, including Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Sakta and indigenous tribal practices, making it a unique expression of spiritual unity. The Jagannath cult, with its tribal origins and Hindu influences, represents a dynamic and evolving tradition that continues to adapt and thrive.

The temple's rituals and traditions are deeply intertwined with the use of sacred herbs, which play a crucial role in religious ceremonies, traditional medicine, and environmental conservation. This paper examines the multifaceted roles of herbs in Jagannath culture, emphasizing their importance in healing practices, cultural identity, and ecological balance. There are varieties of flowers/inflorescences, leaves,

stems, resins, fruits and roots of different plant species belonging to different genera and families, which are frequently used daily, annually and in special festive attires of the deities. The various botanicals, used in the costume of 7 kinds of daily rituals, 31types of annual practices, 3 types of special festivals

2. Methodology

The significance of various plants in rituals and ceremonies has been well-documented in Jagannath culture. This study aims to explore the use of plants and their components in devotional activities, annual practices, and special festivals. Data were collected through interactions and interviews with priests of the temple and informed elders involved in ceremonial practices. The botanical names of the plants used were recorded and identified using the reference books by Saxena and Brahmam (1994) and Haines (1921). There are about 31types festivities,Seven types of daily rituals are observed, each involving specific plants and plant components.Few specific rituals has been discussed with reference to the holistic use of sacred herbs.

3. Discussion

3.1. Cultural and Social Significance

Herbs hold immense cultural and social value in Jagannath culture. Sacred herbs are integral to religious rituals, festivals, and traditional ceremonies. These plants are associated with local deities and are used in various rituals to ensure protection, purification, and prosperity. The preservation of sacred groves, where many of these herbs are found, reflects the deep cultural and spiritual connection between the followers and their environment. About 30 types of ornaments and 16 types of weapons are prepared from plant and plant parts among which 19 ornaments are used daily

3.2. Daru Brahma

Daru Brahma translates to "wooden embodiment of the divine," reflecting the deep-rooted belief that the deities manifest themselves within these sacred wooden idols. This concept emphasizes the seamless connection between nature and divinity, illustrating how spiritual essence can inhabit natural elements. Tribal communities have a long tradition of worshipping nature and sacred trees. This reverence for nature is evident in Jagannath culture, where the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) is used for crafting the Daru Brahma idols. The use of natural materials and the emphasis on ecological balance are hallmarks of this cultural synthesis.

The periodic renewal of the idols through the Nabakalebara festival symbolizes the cyclical nature of life and the constant process of renewal and regeneration. This ritual underscores the belief in the eternal nature of the divine and the impermanence of the material world.

During the Anasara period, when the deities are believed to be in a state of illness, offerings of new fruits, flowers, and herbs are made to the deities. This practice mirrors tribal rituals where offerings are made to nature for protection and fulfillment of desires

In essence, the cultural significance of Daru Brahma in Jagannath culture encompasses a rich tapestry of religious devotion, traditional practices, ecological harmony, and social cohesion, reflecting the profound and multifaceted nature of this revered tradition.

3.3. Bada Singhara Besha: An Intricate Ritual of Floral Ornamentation and Cultural Significance

The Bada Singhara Besha, a crucial decorative practice, is performed before the Ratri Pahuda, the final ritual of the day. This elaborate adornment involves various floral ornaments and the Gita Govinda Khandua Pata, a set of silken clothes intricately woven with extracts from the renowned Sanskrit verses

of the Gita Govinda by poet Jayadeva. The deities are adorned with an array of floral ornaments of *Nyctanthesarbortristis*, *Jasminummultiflorum* (Burm.f.) Andrews, *Micheliachampaca* L., *Cascabelathevetia* (L.), *Polianthestuberosa* L., *Tabernaemontanadivaricata* (L.) R.Br. ex all meticulously arranged including Adhara, Jhumpa, Chandrika, Tilaka, Hruda Padaka, Kara Pallav, Guna, Gava, and numerous garlands, some interspersed with sacred Tulsi, Jackfruit leaves. The head of each deity is covered with a cloth called Srikapada, and they are further embellished with Karapallava on their hands and Padaka, a circular lotus-like floral decoration, on their bodies. The deities remain in this auspicious attire until the Mangala Alati is offered the following morning. The Bada Singhara Besha is associated with bedtime, symbolizing sleep and rest, and thus includes the application of cool ingredients to ensure the deities' comfort. Sandalwood paste is applied to the holy bodies of the deities to induce a cooling effect, facilitating restful slumber. People in ancient times used to apply a paste comprised of sandalwood, camphor, kesar and musk on their bodies at night as a method of gaining respite from the summer heat, thereby showcasing the depth of their scientific attitudes and temperament.

The Palia Puspalak Sevaks assist by tying Srikapada cloths on the heads and adding floral ornaments like Alaka, Kundal, and Chandrika to their faces. A laterally folded saree is affixed to each deity, and additional floral ornaments such as Nakuasi and Nakachana are placed on their noses. Adharmala garlands are hung around the deities' arms, and Chausaramala garlands are positioned below. Three prominent lockets known as Hruda Padaka are placed on the chests of the deities. The Puspalak completes the embellishment by spraying camphor powder and pasting a mixture of crusted Tulsi leaves and camphor, known as Nakha Tulasi, on their navels.

3.4. Ratha Yatra

Three chariots of the Jagannath temple, Puri for the three deities named Taladhwaja for Lord Balabhadra, Nandighosha for Lord Jagannath and Deba Dalana for Goddess Subhadra require about 400 cubic meters of timber for construction. The species required for construction of above 3 chariots are *Phasi* (*Anogeissus acuminate*), *Dhaura* (*Anogeissus latifolia*), *Asan* (*Terminalia tomentosa*), *Moi* (*Lannea corommondalica*), *Simili* (*Bombax ceiba*), *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*), *Kansa* (*Hymenodictyon orixense*), and *Paladhua* (*Erythrina indica*), *Mahalimba* (*Ailanthus excelsa*), *Gambhari* (*Gmelina arborea*), *Kadamba* (*Anthocephalus cadamba*), *Kalachua* (*Diospyros sylvatica*), *Devadaru* (*Polyalthia longifolia*), *Bakul* (*Mimusops elengi* Linn) for senapatta usually affixed to idols during Pahandi Bije. Nearly 125 temple carpenters (including helping assistants) work for 58 days at the Mahakhala (in front of the Palace) and chisel out 2,188 pieces of wood for the construction of the three chariots of rath, The construction work commences on the AKSHAYATRUTIA. The techno-engineering details of the chariots are indeed a technical marvel by any standard for their static and dynamic stability.

The Jagannath Bana Prakalpa (Jagannath Forest Project) was initiated in 2000 by the Odisha Forest Department to address the scarcity of wood for the construction of the chariots used in the annual Rath Yatra festival at the Jagannath Temple in Puri. Approximately 45 lakh saplings of the 13 species were planted Around 2,800 hectares along the Mahanadi river delta in five districts, including Nayagarh and Boudh. The project encourages community involvement by urging devotees to donate specific trees for chariot making.

3.4.1. Tahia

During the grand ceremonial procession of Rath Yatra, Lord Jagannath, alongside His divine siblings, Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra, are adorned with exquisite Tahia—specially-crafted headgears.

The mesmerizing vision of Lord Jagannath's crown, gracefully swaying and undulating like the waves, causes the hearts of devotees to flutter with devotion and awe. The creation of these magnificent headgears begins with a framework intricately fashioned from bamboo, cane, banana stem, and other vibrant elements. This splendid base is then lavishly embellished with an array of verdant scutch grass, sacred basil leaves, and with flowers of *Mirabilis jalapa*, and an assortment of fragrant blossoms. The *tahia* is crafted in the shape of a betel leaf, standing over six feet in height and measuring 8.5 feet in circumference. The structure is meticulously formed by binding together 37 raw bamboo sticks with cotton strings, with additional support from cane at specific points. Alongside the use of jasmine, flowers made from solapith are incorporated into the design. A prominent row of kadamba flowers made from solapith adorns the top of the *tahia*, significantly enhancing its beauty. The idol of Lord Jagannath, towering at an impressive height of 6 feet 4 inches, is majestically complemented by this elaborate crown.

Raghab Das Mutt are traditionally entitled to supply headgears for deities. A total of 24 'Tahias' are required to put on the heads of the deities during all their festivals. "A total of 14 artisans are engaged in the making process of the 'tahias'. *Tahia* is the symbol of Lord Jagannath and his Acquaintance; when the Lord of the universe goes out on his annual sojourn

3.5. Dayana chori Niti

In the Purana Yuga, a demon named Damanaka caused great distress to humans and other living beings on earth. Responding to their pleas for seeking protection of everyone Lord Vishnu., assumed the form of Matsya, a fish battled with the demon in the sea, and ultimately defeated him. Upon casting Damanaka's body onto the earth, it transformed into a highly fragrant plant. Lord Jagannath, also known as Mahaprabhu, adorned Himself with its leaves. This plant, known today as the Dayana Plant ***Artemisia nilagirica* (Indian Wormwood)**: Used in the dayana rituals and for making nasal ornaments, holds significant importance in jagannath culture.

The Najara (Mahanta) of the Jagannatha Vallabha Matha, along with the Tadau Karana and the Deula Karana, light a torch and visit the Dayana garden to collect six small Dayana plants. These plants are placed near the temple of Jagannatha Vallabha Mahavira within the gardens. After the Bhoga offering, the Mahajanas discreetly bring six Dayana plants to the Rama Krishna. The Bhittarcha Mohapatra then touches two plants to the Deities and covers the remaining four with a Khandua, placing them in the palanquin. The Deities are then returned to the Sri Mandira. This ceremony exemplify the biodiversity conservation of endangered aromatic plant.

3.6. Chitau amabyasa

In the Sri Jagannath Temple in Puri, the term "Chita" signifies the decoration of the forehead using special materials such as chandana (sandalwood), musk, and gorachana. However, during the auspicious occasion of Sravana Amabasya, three magnificent Chitas—crafted from gold, diamond, sapphire, and emerald—adorn the foreheads of the principal deities. These ornate decorations are part of the ritual known as Chita lagi Besha.

The Chitraka Parba also involves the adornment of the deities with a head ornament called Rahu Rekha. This ornament is removed from the deities' heads during the Snana Purnima festival and re-applied in the month of Sravana. As part of the Chitraka Parba celebration, a special variety of rice cake called Chitou Pitha (similar to a pancake) is offered to the deities. This delicacy is also prepared in the households of the Odias in the coastal districts.

The intricate and splendid rituals surrounding Chita and Chitraka Parba highlight the deep cultural and spiritual significance of forehead decoration in Jagannath Temple, reflecting the devotion and reverence of the followers.

4. Medicinal Practices

The traditional medicinal practices in Jagannath culture, utilize a variety of herbs to treat ailments and maintain the health of the deities and devotees. Key medicinal herbs include:

- **Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*)**: Used for respiratory ailments, digestive issues, and stress relief.
- **Neem (*Azadirachta indica*)**: Known for its antibacterial and antiviral properties, used to treat skin conditions and infections.
- **Ashoka Tree (*Saraca asoca*)**: Used to treat menstrual disorders and inflammation.
- **Bael (*Aegle marmelos*)**: Used to treat digestive disorders and constipation.
- **Dayana (*Artemisia nilagirica*)** It has bronchodilatory properties and has been traditionally used for treating asthma and also has anti malaria, anthelminthic, anti-diarrhea properties. and many more
- **Bena Chera, (*Vetiveria zizanioides*)** Essential Oil serves as a natural antioxidant, providing relief from various forms of inflammation. Its tonic qualities are known to support regeneration, boosting and sustaining immune function. The oil's antiseptic properties help eliminate and inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria.
- **Sandalwood powder (*Santalum album*)** In traditional medicine, sandalwood oil is utilized for its antiseptic and astringent properties, as well as for treating headaches, stomachaches, skin conditions and urinary and genital disorders.
- **Camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*)**: Camphor is traditionally employed as a decongestant, cough suppressant, and remedy for skin irritation and itching. Its antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, and analgesic properties make it effective for addressing a range of health conditions.

The holistic approach of traditional medicine addresses the root causes of illness, promoting overall health and well-being.

Phuluri Tela Application: Ensuring Divine Well-being

Phuluri Tela, a fragrant oil derived primarily from sesame (*Sesamum indicum*) and a blend of flowers such as Ketaki, Malli, Boula, and Champa, is applied to the deities on Astami Tithi. This practice is part of the Gupta Niti, or secret rituals, outlined in Hindu scriptures. Phuluri Tela is provided by Bada Badia Muth and is prepared by burying a mixture of sesame oil, fragrant flower extracts of Ketaki, Malli, Boula and Champa, Jui, Jasmine and sandalwood powder (*Santalum album*), Bena Chera, (*Vetiveria zizanioides* (Linn) Nash.) fragrant rice and Camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*) herbs underground for one year.

The oil is then used to massage the deities, reducing their temperature and enhancing their strength. The preparation process begins annually on Hera Panchami during Ratha Jatra. Phuluri Tela is also believed to protect the deities from insects and moths, and is meticulously prepared by Bada Odia Muth, the Adi Pitha of Atibadi Jagannath Das.

Osua Seva: Ritual Application and Therapeutic Benefits

Following the Phuluri Tela application, Osua, a medicated paste prepared by Suara servitors, is applied to the deities. The women members of Suara families engage in the Osua Lagi rituals. Osua is composed of jhuna (resin), Kaintha atha (wood apple), sesame oil, water, and various herbs. This paste hardens upon application to the deities' bodies and is subsequently removed during the Anasara period. The

completion of Osua rituals marks the recovery of the deities from their illness due to heavy sweating. Additionally, a dough made from wheat flour, camphor, and sandalwood, prepared by Suara families, is offered to the deities in the ritual known as Shalisasthika Pinda Swedana.

Dasamulamodak

Dasamula refers to a traditional Ayurvedic formulation comprising ten medicinal herbs. This mixture is particularly significant in the context of Lord Jagannath's rituals, especially during the anabasara and nava jouvana darshan of Rath Yatra festival. The administration of Dasamula is believed to cure the deities from their ailments by the 10th day of Ashadha Krusna Paksha Dasami. The ritual, known as Chakaabije, involves the administration of Dasamula along with Various offerings, including Peda, milk, cream, cheese, mango, jackfruit, Muga, and coconut, to the deities—Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra, and Maa Subhadra—by the Royal Physicians (Raja Baidyas). This practice is believed to heal the deities and rejuvenate their divine energies. The term "Dasamula" refers to a blend of ten herbal ingredients used in traditional medicine to treat the deities. These ingredients are administered by the Royal Physicians (Raja Baidyas) to Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra, and Maa Subhadra.

- **Belacheli (*Aegle marmelos*):**
 - Commonly known as Bael, this herb is revered for its cooling properties and is used to treat digestive disorders.
- **Gambhari (*Gmelina arborea*):**
 - This herb is known for its anti-inflammatory properties and is used in treating respiratory issues.
- **Pateli (*Stereospermum chelonoides*):**
 - Pateli is beneficial in treating fevers and respiratory ailments.
- **Fanafana (*Oroxylum indicum*):**
 - Known for its antioxidant properties, Fanafana aids in the treatment of digestive and respiratory problems.
- **Agabathu (*Premna integrifolia*):**
 - This herb is used to treat inflammatory conditions and is known for its therapeutic properties.
- **Krusnaparni (*Uraria picta*):**
 - Krusnaparni is known for its ability to boost immunity and treat skin conditions.
- **Shalaparni (*Desmodium gangeticum*):**
 - This herb is effective in treating fevers, respiratory disorders, and as an anti-inflammatory agent.
- **Ankranty (*Solanum xanthocarpum*):**
 - Ankranty is used for treating respiratory issues and as an expectorant.
- **Pateli (*Stereospermum chelonoides*):**
 - Repeated for its significance, Pateli serves multiple therapeutic purposes.
- **Labingkoli (*Solanum indicum*):**
 - This herb is utilized for its anti-inflammatory properties and for treating respiratory ailments.

The use of Dasamula highlights the deep connection between the Jagannath culture and traditional Ayurvedic medicine, reflecting the holistic approach to health and well-being in this spiritual tradition. The use of Dasamula in the Chakaabije ritual underscores the holistic approach to health and spirituality in Jagannath culture. This practice not only reflects the deep connection between Ayurveda and religious traditions but also highlights the importance of preserving and respecting nature through the use of

sacred herbs. The ritual symbolizes the belief that the divine energies of the deities can be rejuvenated through natural means, fostering a harmonious balance between spirituality and well-being.

5. Environmental Importance

Jagannath culture places significant emphasis on nature worship, with various rituals at the Sri Jagannath Temples designed to be eco-sensitive. These rituals, directly or indirectly, contribute to environmental protection and play a crucial role in promoting the intangible natural and cultural heritage. By integrating ecological awareness into religious practices, Jagannath culture exemplifies the harmonious relationship between spirituality and environmental stewardship. The religiously conserved regions provide a comprehensive and rich ecological niche as repositories of genetic diversity (Anthwal et al.2010).

Certain larger temples and particularly 'Mathas' cultivate their own flower gardens and orchards to meet the diverse floral and plant requirements for various deities, thereby contributing to the conservation of plant biodiversity (Mohanty et al. 1997).

The tribal communities have relatively stable tangible and intangible special relationships with their land, water, forest and the environment of their habitat. They possess knowledge about their natural resources based on observation and experience. Indigenous knowledge is important to the tribal systems for natural resource management. Such knowledge can best be understood along with their traditional belief systems

Herbs play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance. Sacred groves, often home to these herbs, act as biodiversity hotspots, preserving rare and endemic species. Sustainable practices, such as the controlled harvesting of herbs and the protection of sacred groves, demonstrate the followers' deep understanding of ecological principles. These practices help conserve natural resources and ensure their availability for future generations.

6. Food Habits

Every day, the temple kitchen prepares Mahaprasad, which is shared with thousands of devotees. The temple administration operates as a highly organized institution, conducting daily rituals with deep devotion and meticulous precision. At the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, Lord Jagannath is presented with a diverse array of sacred foods called Bhog. This assortment, known as Chappan Bhog or 56 Bhog, consists of 56 distinct food items.

The temple's distinctive kitchen, called the Rosaghara, is renowned as one of the world's largest, capable of preparing meals for thousands of devotees each day. Cooking is performed in earthen pots over wood-fired stoves, adhering to traditional techniques and strict ritual protocols. Once offered to the deities, the food is distributed as Mahaprasad, the sacred offering, to the devotees.

Herbs play a vital role in the culinary traditions of Lord Jagannath's followers, enriching the nutritional quality of their diet. The daily Mahaprasad, prepared by the Suaras through steaming in earthen pots, retains essential nutrients and vitamins. This wholesome offering is first presented to the deities before being shared with devotees. Additionally, the Chappan Bhoga, comprising fifty-six varieties of offerings at the Puri Temple, includes traditional foods crafted by Odisha's tribal communities.

7. Conclusion

The usage of herbs in the socio-cultural, medicinal, ecological, and food contexts of Jagannath culture

underscores the profound connection between the devotees and their natural environment. The preservation of traditional knowledge and sustainable practices is essential for maintaining this delicate balance. As modern development encroaches upon these communities, efforts must be made to protect and promote their rich heritage and ecological wisdom. In this regard Council of Scientific Industrial Research (CSIR) institute and National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), Lucknow has set out to revive endangered flower species used in the 12th century Shree Jagannath Temple, Puri, Odisha. As per the demand, quality planting materials of marigold, tuberose, tulsi, jasmine, davana (Dayana) were supplied and introduced in the Matitota garden of the temple for raising these plants for their use for worshipping purposes.

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