



Buddha Consciousness in Prachi Valley: The Vajrayana Influence on the Evolution of the Jagannath Cult (3rd century B.C. to 9th Century A.D)

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Abstract

This study explores the profound impact of Vajrayana Buddhism on the evolution of the Jagannath Cult in Prachi Valley, a region in Odisha rich in spiritual and cultural heritage. It delves into the idea that Vajrayana and Tantrayana traditions within Mahayana Buddhism significantly influenced the early development of the Jagannath Cult, which is today a cornerstone of Odia culture. The study highlights that Vajrayana's, known for their deep knowledge in behavioural sciences, played a crucial role in shaping the ideological foundations of the cult. Prior to its transformation into a Vaishnavite centre around the 9th century A.D., the Jagannath temple is believed by some historians to have functioned as a Buddhist shrine. The study further discusses the incorporation of Buddhist principles, such as the Sunya-theory (the concept of emptiness) and the trio-theory (Three Jewels of Buddhism), in the cult's growth and its rituals. Through an examination of historical, religious, and cultural perspectives, this study aims to uncover the layers of Buddhist influence that contributed to the unique synthesis in the Jagannath tradition. The study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Buddhist consciousness, particularly Vajrayana seen, left an indelible mark on the region's spiritual landscape and on the cult practices in Prachi Valley, contributing to its enduring legacy.

Keywords: Vajrayana Buddhism, Jagannath Cult, Prachi Valley, Sunya-theory, Tantrayana Influence.



Introduction

Odisha, located in eastern India, has held a significant place in the historical geography of India since at least the 3rd century BC. Its ancient inhabitants played a crucial role in shaping the country's cultural and political landscape. The region is uniquely positioned between dense jungles and mountain ranges to the west and the Bay of Bengal to the east, which has contributed to its distinctive history. The presence of dominant tribal elements in Odisha's population points to a pre-Aryan, or prehistoric Stone Age, culture. This perception led the northward-moving Aryans to view Odisha as an impure region. Anthropologists suggest that the original inhabitants were remnants of the Austic and Proto-Austroloid races, who interacted with other races entering the area. This interaction fostered the emergence of new cultures, religious beliefs, and traditional values, leading to a cultural synthesis rooted in local traditions. This synthesis became especially prominent during the long Hindu period, during which various dynasties maintained the integrity of Odisha as a unified geographical unit. Evidence of prehistoric cultures from the Old, Middle, and New Stone Ages has been found throughout the region. Odisha, originally marked by a tribal culture, underwent significant cultural transformation with the influx of Aryan influences from the north and Dravidian influences from the south, creating a distinctive Orissan culture that predates Islamic and Western influences. Known by various names such as Utkal, Kalinga, Trikalanga, Kosala, Odra, Orissa, and now Odisha, the region has been a territorial, political, and cultural entity since the time of the Mahabharata, embodying the essence of Bharatavarsha (India).

The Prachi River, flowing gracefully through this land, serves as a sacred divide, splitting it into two distinct halves. Renowned as the holiest river in Odisha, the Prachi River contributes significantly to the region's remarkable history and glory. Despite its significance, the origin of the Prachi Valley remains shrouded in mystery, adding an air of intrigue to its narrative. It's fascinating



to consider the flourishing civilization that once thrived on the banks of this modest river, as compared against the grandeur of mighty rivers like Mahanadi, Brahmani and Birupa. Spanning approximately 3600 square kilometers, the Prachi Valley witnessed the rule of various ancient Kalinga dynasties. Notable among them were the Chedi, Murunda, Mana, Vighraha, Bhaumakaras, Somovamsi, Suryavamsis and Gangas. Beyond the ebb and flow of empires, this land has been a crucible for the rise of diverse religions, including Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism.

The fusion of Buddhism with other religious cults, along with their fundamental beliefs and cultural practices, made a lasting impact on the Prachi Valley from the beginning. When each religious movement encountered the local traditions, it underwent a process of adaptation, transforming into a form distinct from its original doctrine. The abundant iconography present in the Prachi Valley indicates that Buddhism, celebrated for its profound idealism, might have transformed into Vajrayana Buddhism during Odisha's early medieval period, particularly under the rule of the Bhaumakaras. Additionally, the strong presence of Vaishnavism, Shaktism, and Saivism, along with various other cults, significantly influenced the native traditions focused on the worship of Jagannatha. This complex intermingling of various religious and cultural elements has shaped the Prachi Valley into a rich landscape of spiritual transformation and historical importance.

Hinduism is distinguished by its ability to adapt to evolving circumstances. The Upanishads' philosophy explores the idea of the impersonal Absolute, known as Brahman, which can be realized through deep meditation and spiritual knowledge. An individual's ultimate goal is to merge their higher self with Brahman, and the Upanishads are considered guides to understanding this profound hidden reality. This philosophy suggests that truth can be attained through one's personal effort, emphasizing the power of self-reflection and inner transformation. However, over time, the original focus on individual effort evolved, leading to the acceptance of



a personal God, such as Siva or Vishnu. These deities could be approached and worshiped through devotion and love; a practice known as bhakti. This shift marked a crucial development in the history of Indian religion during the early Christian era, reflecting the triumph of popular needs and aspirations over a rigid adherence to scriptural interpretations.

This transformation also manifested in the increasing desire of ordinary individuals to incorporate revolutionary concepts into Buddhism. Undoubtedly, the Mahayana system introduced innovative ideas into primitive Buddhism by introducing the notion of a deified or revered form of Buddha. This aimed to provide a visible representation of the Master, offering hope for attaining Buddhahood at various stages of Bodhisattva development and embodying ideals to alleviate the world's suffering. However, the demanding disciplinary practices, excessive generosity at the expense of personal convenience and the prospect of achieving Buddhahood over multiple lifetimes could scarcely fulfil the needs of the common people. The fundamental pursuit of truth, inherent in the entirety of the world's creation, stands as the ultimate aspiration of Hinduism. To attain this realization, the practice of Sanyasa Vrata, an extreme form of asceticism, was initially prescribed for all adherents. However, over time, the Brahmins monopolized the Sanyasa Vrata, asserting it as an exclusive privilege granted solely to them. They propagated a doctrine advocating that a Brahmin's life should progress through four stages: Brahmacharya (celibate life during studentship), Grihastha (family life), Vanaprastha (life dedicated to meditation in the forest) and Sanyasi. Consequently, this restricted the common people from accessing the opportunity to grasp the ultimate truth.

Methods and Procedures Adopted

In conducting the research on " Buddha Consciousness in Prachi Valley: The Vajrayana Influence on the Evolution of the Jagannath Cult (3rd century B.C. to 9th Century A.D)", a comprehensive and multifaceted methodology was employed, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were meticulously collected from authentic outlets, including original texts,



gazetteers, literature, inscriptions, reports, practical observations, and interviews conducted during the experimental field survey. Qualitative research methods, such as field studies and personal interviews, were employed for data collection. A thorough field survey provided detailed information on the art, architecture, legends, traditions, and tentative dates of all monuments in the Prachi Valley, adopting a qualitative approach. Thus, an empirical method was adopted to gather primary data for the research. Secondary data related to the temples of Prachi Valley, an important aspect of this work, were derived from scholarly materials such as books, magazines, reviews, journals, periodicals, texts, proceedings, manuscripts, encyclopedias, antiquities, records and reports. These secondary sources were accessed from various educational institutions in Odisha and across India, including the State Museum Library in Bhubaneswar, Odisha State Library in Bhubaneswar, Central Library, State Archives in Bhubaneswar, Parija Library at Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Archaeological Museums in Kenduli and Niali and Prachi Gaveshana Prathisthana: Amaresvara among others. The methodology for this research was guided by a meticulous review of previous works, following the approach of earlier scholars. Additionally, secondary data on the history and culture of the Prachi Valley Civilization complemented the research narrative. The integration of primary and secondary data was a fundamental aspect of the methodology, ensuring that only pertinent and valuable information was included in the study through a rigorous examination of all materials.

Odisha's contact with Lord Buddha and his religion

Buddha taught that anyone, regardless of age or ability, could pursue a path of asceticism or Sanyasa Vrata to discover the truth, provided they nurtured a desire to achieve Nirvana. This groundbreaking idea resonated with many, inspiring them to follow his teachings. However, the rigorous lifestyle and strict monastic rules led to disillusionment and frustration among his followers. They found themselves unable to return to Hinduism, which allowed many exits but no



re-entry, and the strictness of Buddhism did not offer the personal freedom they desired. Feeling marginalized, they began to consider altering the principles of Buddhism. As dissatisfaction grew, many people, though outwardly adhering to Buddhist practices, secretly violated the doctrines they found impractical, unnatural, or incompatible with their way of living.

Tantra stands out as a significant gift from India to the world. Exploring its impact on public perception and its influence on diverse facets of human life, along with assessing prevailing attitudes towards its appeal, remains an intriguing study even today. During an era where individuals perceived themselves as mere pawns in a relentless struggle against elusive and incomprehensible forces of malevolence, rationalization had limited space. In such times, people sought solace in Tantra for immediate relief. Tantra encompasses a broad spectrum of subjects, delving into mystic sciences such as alchemy, astrology, astronomy, prognosis, diagnosis of diseases, as well as the associated treatments, suggestions, autosuggestions, yoga, subjugation and de-subjugation, among others. Naturally, when physical responses prove insufficient in navigating life's challenges, individuals instinctively turn to a Higher Power, a recourse often facilitated by tantric practices. Contrastingly, Buddha rejected Tantra and its methodologies. He urged his disciples to transcend Tantra, viewing it as a compilation of superstitious beliefs. The Hinayanists, too, had a plan to integrate its elements into their religious pursuits.

Justifying the above statement by Dr. Bhattacharya it can be stated that from the Historical Context Lord Buddha, lived in the 5th century B.C, a period before the development of Tantra, which became prominent in Indian religious practices later, around the 6th century CE and onward. The early teachings of Buddha, as captured in the Pali Canon, focus on the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, which emphasize ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom. There is no mention of Tantric practices in these teachings. From philosophical perspective Buddha's teachings encouraged rationality, direct experience and personal verification of truths. Tantra, with



its complex rituals and esoteric practices, could be seen as antithetical to these principles, hence Buddha might have viewed it as superstitious or unnecessary for enlightenment.

On the other hand, the followers of the Hinayana tradition also considered incorporating certain elements into their religious practices. The Hinayana philosophical tradition, better known as Theravada, does not accept the term "Hinayana" (meaning "Lesser Vehicle") due to its derogatory connotation. Theravada Buddhism is characterized by its strict adherence to the early teachings of the Buddha. While various Buddhist traditions have occasionally adapted to local beliefs and practices, Theravada Buddhism has largely resisted such integrations, maintaining a strong commitment to the original teachings. The suggestion that there might be instances where Theravada Buddhists adopted certain elements from other traditions, such as Tantra, would require specific historical evidence. Therefore, the idea of Buddha's initial rejection of Tantra being followed by a plan among Hinayanists to incorporate Tantric elements seems improbable, given the conservative nature of Theravada Buddhism.

The gradual integration of tantra in Buddhism: from mahasamghikas to Vajrayana in Prachi Valley

Tantra gradually made its way into Buddhism, particularly among the Mahasamghikas, through a slow and secretive process that involved the use of magical spells and dharanis—Buddhist chants or mantra recitations. With the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, however, Tantra became a more prominent feature, often appearing as charms and spells, as exemplified in texts like the Sukhavati-Vyuha from the 1st century A.D. Over time, the Mahayana tradition split into two schools: Mantranaya and Paramitanaya, with Mantranaya eventually serving as a forerunner to Vajrayana Buddhism. The introduction of Tantra into Buddhism has been a subject of much speculation. The primary source for understanding its origin comes from the accounts of Taranath.



According to Taranath, Asanga, a prominent philosopher of the Yogachara School, often referred to as the "Indian Plato," introduced Tantra to Buddhism in the 4th century A.D. He received initiation into this mystical practice from Maitreya in Tushita Heaven. Asanga's work, the Mahayana Sutra Alankara, notably mentions sexo-yogic practices, highlighting their significance for achieving spiritual liberation.

Some critics assert that the infusion of the esoteric aspect of Tantra into Buddhism can be attributed to the philosopher Nagarjuna of the Madhyamika school. According to some accounts, Vairochana, with the assistance of the Bodhisattva Vajrasattva, initiated Nagarjuna into the mysterious cult of Tantra. Alternatively, Tibetan tradition suggests that Siddhacharya Sarah played a role in introducing Nagarjuna to the Tantric cult, although there is confusion regarding the identification of Nagarjuna due to the existence of two distinguished scholars with the same name. The second Nagarjuna is recognized as a prominent tantric or magician, and his works, particularly one expounding the sadhana for the goddess Ekajata, have been incorporated into the Sadhanamala.

Some scholars, like Dr. B. Bhattacharyya, argue that Tantra was introduced into Buddhism by Buddha himself. Although Buddha initially opposed tantric elements in the spiritual pursuit, he is said to have adopted certain practices due to their profound impact on people's minds. Dr. Bhattacharyya contends that Buddha had a strong belief in Riddhi—psychic powers or the four types of miraculous abilities—citing evidence from the Tattva-Samgraha, a text composed by Śāntarakṣita and later commented upon by Kamalaśīla. Dr. S.B. Dasgupta, after a thorough examination of available materials, dismisses the notion that Buddha sanctioned Tantricism merely based on the belief in Riddhi. He argues that the evidence provided by Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, who lived nearly fourteen hundred years after Buddha, is insufficient for credible confirmation. While various scholars present differing opinions on this matter, none provide a definitive answer regarding the historical evolution of tantric practices in India, which are



referenced as early as the Atharva Veda. Tantric beliefs have been deeply embedded in Indian culture since ancient times, subtly appearing across all religions. Over time, these beliefs coalesced into a structured form, evolving into a comprehensive Tantra that became the foundation of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Dr. Dasgupta, a prominent scholar in this field, emphasizes that attempting to pinpoint a specific origin of Tantra may be fundamentally flawed. Dr. N.K. Sahu concurs, stating, 'There is scant compelling evidence to establish the inception of Tantra in the 4th century A.D. In reality, its origins defy attribution to a singular moment or the efforts of an individual.

In essence, it was the devotion and faith of the people that fueled the impetus behind integrating Tantra into Buddhism. This transformative movement commenced in the early Christian era, despite potential opposition from influential figures within orthodox Buddhism. Consequently, adherents resorted to clandestine gatherings, often referred to as Guhya Samaja, to practice Tantra away from the disapproval of traditionalists. Indeed, there were distinguished scholars among the neo-Buddhists who deemed it necessary to secure religious validation for the diverse elements within their faith. They could not disavow their responsibility towards both Buddha and the Buddhists simultaneously. Thus, they sought to interpret Buddha's teachings in a manner that would convey the impression that Tantric Buddhism was directly promulgated by Buddha himself. This strategic approach mirrors the tactics employed by Mahayana proponents in the past, who aimed to attribute revolutionary ideas to Buddha through their texts.

Many early Mahayana texts, composed during Buddhism's formative period, presented their revolutionary ideas as if they were revealed by Buddha in gatherings attended by Bodhisattvas and devotees. These texts often took the form of *Samgiti*, resembling an address by Buddha to an assembly. Neo-Buddhist tantric scholars adopted a similar *Samgiti* form in their early writings to elucidate the tantric aspects of Vajrayana. Among the earliest texts of Tantric Buddhism or Vajrayana are the *Manjusri Mulakalpa*, composed around 200 A.D., and the *Guhya Samaja Tantra*, composed around 300 A.D. The *Manjusri Mulakalpa* addresses topics such as ordinary



yoga, mandala, mantra, vrata, kriya, dhyana—essential elements for tantric sadhana—and provides basic instructions on creating deity images. Drawing inspiration from earlier texts, the *Guhya Samaja Tantra* explores the tantric theory of Dhyani Buddhas, their families, and Sakti worship. Known as the 'Tantra of the Secret Communion,' the *Guhya Samaja Tantra* is considered foundational to Tantric Buddhism due to its innovative features, including the association of a Sakti with each Dhyani Buddha and other elements that were deemed controversial. Because of these unique features, its teachings were practiced discreetly in secluded chambers, hidden from orthodox Buddhist exponents. The lessons were closely guarded secrets, transmitted from preceptor to chosen disciple, maintaining secrecy for nearly three centuries, until the 6th century A.D.

During this pivotal period, Buddhist scholarship experienced a decline, and orthodox Buddhism gradually lost its influence over people's minds. Tantric Siddhacharyas, such as Sarah, Indrabhuti, Padmavraja, Lakshminkara, Nagarjuna, and Luipa, began to emerge as esteemed scholars, bringing the Vajrayana system into prominence around the 7th century A.D. This transformative movement is validated by Taranath, the Tibetan historian, who documented the flourishing of Vajrayana in India.

In Orissa, a parallel development of this neo-Buddhism was evident, as indicated by Hiuen-Tsang's 7th-century A.D. account. The tantric sadhana, as outlined in the *Guhya Samaja Tantra*, presented a challenging process. Misunderstood by the common populace, it seemed to involve aspects such as wine, women and sex, posing a considerable risk and temptation for inexperienced learners to stumble into the depths of spiritual peril. To counteract this, Vajrayana texts emphasized the crucial role of a Guru, who, out of compassion and love, guided disciples through the challenging sadhana towards spiritual emancipation. It is essential to recognize that these tantric practitioners, often anonymous, engaged in psychotherapeutic methods akin to contemporary approaches in understanding the unconscious drives of the human mind. Their



continuous efforts were directed towards uplifting individuals to the highest states of spiritual elevation, highlighting the profound importance of the Guru-disciple relationship in the Vajrayana tradition. In essence, these practitioners navigated a delicate balance, employing psychotherapeutic techniques to unravel the depths of the human psyche and establish harmonious psycho-somatic relations. Vajrayana, at its core, embraces humanity in its raw form—a being driven by emotions and primal instincts, evolving gradually towards perfection and the pursuit of ultimate bliss or the guidance of an enlightened teacher for achieving emancipation within one's lifetime. The transformation from primal instincts requires an acknowledgment and acceptance devoid of guilt or sin. In essence, any ethical teaching, whether religious or secular, proves efficacious only when it acknowledges and embraces the true nature of man. Genuine improvement surfaces when individuals grasp the inherent laws of their minds, as defined by nature. It becomes imperative for individuals to comprehend that a substantial portion of their unconscious is characterized by childlike tendencies, immorality, illogicality, irrationality, cruelty and savagery.

Individuals must recognize that their deep moral compass and noble aspirations coexist with antisocial forces within them. By employing understanding and reason, one can bring order to the chaotic forces within their mental landscape, fostering a harmonious coexistence of contrasting elements. This acknowledgment and integration of one's inner duality pave the way for personal growth and spiritual advancement on the path to perfection and enlightenment. Vajrayana Buddhism emphasizes the cultivation of *Samyak Jnana* (right knowledge) and *Samyak Dristi* (right views) as essential elements for this inner transformation. Yoga practices are also central to Vajrayana teachings, with ordinary Yoga practices detailed in the *Manjusri Mulakalpa* and both ordinary and tantric forms elaborated in the *Guhya Samaja Tantra*. The transformative effects of these teachings deeply influenced the Natha Siddhas (monks), contributing to Vajrayana's widespread recognition.



In the contemporary context, Vajrayana's influence on modern psychology is evident, as it has become a frequent subject of study and teaching. Modern psychiatrists underscore the significance of Yoga for mental health, happiness, emotional balance, and spiritual development. According to Yoga teachings, correct breathing plays a pivotal role in achieving these states. By acknowledging this realization, we open ourselves to embracing the comprehensive wisdom of Yoga and engaging in ancient practices that align with modern scientific perspectives.

Lakshminkara, the Buddhist siddhacharya, imparted profound wisdom to her disciples by emphasizing the intrinsic connection between individuals and the divine, teaching that the essence of Buddha resides within each person. She encouraged her followers to cultivate a direct relationship with this inner divinity through propitiation, a practice embraced by Vajrayanists who believed in a rich tapestry of Gods and Goddesses capable of healing ailments like smallpox, ensuring success, and providing protection from calamities. This diverse pantheon served as a spiritual resource for devotees facing various threats and crises, symbolizing the versatility of the Vajrayana tradition in addressing the multifaceted aspects of human experience. The Vajrayana conception of the universe is rooted in the emanation from a Supreme Absolute, inherently void or sunya, represented as the Vajra in the Guhya Samaja, embodying qualities of being indivisible, immutable, eternal, incomprehensible, and adamant. Although this eternal cosmic force is unseen, it is anthropomorphized as the Adi-Buddha, or Vajradhara, the adept handler of the Vajra, with the universe taking shape as the Dhyani Buddhas—each linked to a Sakti and a family of Gods and Goddesses, and one serving as the progenitor, or Kulesa Dhyani Buddha. Initiates are free to choose or visualize a deity and engage in the realization process known as Sadhana, a transformative practice involving the purification of the mind, withdrawal to a serene setting, and deep engagement in Yoga until achieving a state akin to deep sleep but with inner awareness. In this heightened state, the ascetic, or sadhaka, establishes communion with the infinite spirit, believed to be the highest creative principle underlying the world structure, drawing forth energy and empowerment. The teachings of Lakshminkara and the Vajrayanists underscore the belief in



an immanent divine presence within individuals and a dynamic interplay between the human and divine realms, where Sadhana serves as a vital means for the ascetic to integrate the deity into their psychic journey.

Buddha Consciousness in the Jagannath Cult

It is believed that the Vajrayanists were profoundly knowledgeable individuals in the field of behavioral sciences. Driven by a spirit of compassion and empathy, they endeavored to alleviate the world's suffering, aspiring for all to transcend trivial arguments and attain Buddhahood. Regrettably, history has cast their message as immoral, violating societal norms and deemed sinful. An anecdote tells of a Ganga king scouring hills and valleys to persecute Vajrayanists, seeking to crush their heads to the last breath. Yet, discourse and oppression have proven powerless against the enduring truth. Even if the message vanished in one place, it reappeared in another hemisphere. The origin of Vajrayana remains a crucial inquiry, as our history and even Indian traditions, remain silent on the matter. Our sole source is the Tibetan tradition, notably Taranatha's account and the Pag-sam-jon-Zang texts, which point to an unspecified region named 'Uddiyana' as the birthplace of Vajrayana.

According to Dr. Bhattacharya, the village of Vajrayogini, likely named after the Vajrayana deity of the same name, should be recognized as Uddiyana in the Dacca district. In addition to a historic monastery, various Vajrayana images, including Jambhala, Parnasavari, Vajrasattva, Tara, etc., are located in close proximity to this village, strongly indicating a distinct Buddhist connection to the area. On the contrary, scholars such as Dr. P.C. Bagchi contend that Uddiyana was situated in the Swat Valley, reflecting a diversity of perspectives on its location. Dr. N.K. Sahu has conducted extensive research to accurately pinpoint the region, presenting a wealth of facts in his book that compellingly argue for the equivalence of Orissa and Uddiyana. Consequently, he concludes that Odisha may be regarded as the birthplace of the Vajrayana system based on substantial evidence provided in his thorough investigation.



The book Sadhana Mala illuminates the significance of four tantric pithas, sacred locales revered by Vajrayana practitioners. Among these, Purnagiri, Srihatta, Kamakhya, and notably Uddiyana are highlighted. Within the text, Uddiyana assumes prominence, intricately linked to the spiritual practices or sadhana, of Kurukulla, Raktalokesvara, Trailokyavasamkara, Marichi and Vajrayogini. Dr. Sahu's perspective aligns Uddiyana with Marichi, Kurukulla, Lokesvara, Urddvapada Vajravarahi and more. Indrabhuti, the proponent of Vajrayana and the sovereign of Uddiyana, authored 'Jnana-siddhi', a seminal work unraveling the principles of the Vajrayana system. In his exposition, he delves into the ineffable nature of voidness or sunyata, asserting its inexplicability and incomprehensibility. Indrabhuti underscores the essence of formlessness, nirakaratva, in attaining Bodhi.

Dr. Sahu, in his literary endeavors, initiates his books with a solemn invocation to Lord Jagannatha, aligning with the prevalent tradition in Orissa where writers commence their works by offering invocatory prayers to their respective deities. Within this ritual, Jagannatha is eloquently depicted as the 'Sarva Buddhamayam', the supreme embodiment of the Buddha. It is paramount to recognize that Lord Jagannatha holds the esteemed position of the presiding deity in Odisha, with his worship exclusively observed in the sacred precincts of Puri. Esteemed as the representation of the formlessness aspect of the supreme force, numerous medieval works expound upon this divine characteristic. Notably, the Oriya Srimadbhagavata, succeeding its Sanskrit counterpart by Jagannath Das, commences with an invocation to the formlessness aspect of the God, linking Vajrayana, Indrabhuti, Uddiyana and Jagannatha inextricably to Odisha's cultural fabric.

According to the Kalika Purana, Jagannatha and Katyayani reign as the presiding deities of Odrapitha. The Prachi Mahatmya further elucidates that Katyayani, the divine consort of Sobhanesvara, manifests as an eighteen-handed Chamunda with a fearsome countenance. The ancient text narrates rituals of propitiation involving offerings of blood and flesh to appease this



formidable Goddess. In the contemporary era, these rituals have evolved into elaborate ceremonies exalting the glory of the Goddess. Delving into the historical context, it becomes imperative to unravel the intricate intercultural connection between Buddhism and the Vaishnavism cult within this region. This metamorphosis, grounded in Odisha's soil, has solidified into the predominant religion, shaping the spiritual landscape that endures to this day. Odisha bears witness to the profound influence of Buddhism on its socio-cultural fabric. The emergence of Vajrayana and Tantrayana within Mahayana Buddhism is believed to have flourished within the realms of Odisha, leaving an indelible mark on its cultural tapestry. This influence continues to shape the essence of Odia culture from its inception. Numerous theories have been proposed to explain the evolution of the Jagannath cult, marked by Buddhist ideological perspectives. Some historians posit that the Jagannath temple, prior to its Vaisnavisation around the 9th century A.D, functioned as a Buddhist shrine. The growth of this cult is often linked to Buddhist concepts, including the sunya-theory of Vajrayana and the trio-theory of Buddhism in general.

The three schools of Tantrayana, namely Vajrayana, Kalachakrayana and Sahajayana, are believed to manifest their essence within the Jagannath cult. The term 'Vajra', commonly translated as the thunderbolt, is employed here to signify the immutable and inexorable nature of dharmas. Sunyata, described as firm, substantial, inseparable, and imperishable, is equated with Vajra. Additionally, 'Kala' denotes time, death, and destruction and 'Kalachakra' represents the wheel of destruction. The term 'Sahaja', meaning easy, implies a path that allows individuals to realize the truth in the most natural way, aligning with the inherent nature of humanity. This nuanced exploration of Buddhist influences on Odisha's cultural evolution underscores the rich interplay between spirituality and cultural identity in the region.

Jagannath, the sovereign deity of the entire Universe, resides atop the Nilachal, also known as the Blue Mountain, Srikshetra or Purusottama (Puri). Within the Jagannath cult, a harmonious amalgamation of Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism takes form. The Trio-theory of religious faiths



holds a distinguished position within this cult, a concept thoroughly scrutinized by numerous historians. However, K.C. Mishra dissents from this theory, asserting that Jagannath is exclusively a Hindu deity, countering the belief that Jagannath holds Buddhistic elements. According to Mishra, while both faiths engage in ritualistic practices, Jagannath worship is deeply rooted in elaborate rituals, which Buddha, he argues, did not endorse. In opposition to Mishra's stance, Dr. Binodini Das, a renowned historian, aptly contends that Vajrayana Buddhist rites and worships share commonalities with Jagannath rituals.

In Vajrayana Buddhist practices, various articles such as incense, lamps, conch shells, bells, perfumes, flowers, garlands, sesamum, grains, seats, flags, jars, cloths, ornaments, fried paddy, unboiled rice, offerings, the five preparations from cow milk, and the five sweets are utilized. These rituals incorporate elements like laughing, artistic gestures, movements, music, dancing, and playing musical instruments. The use of Yantra, mantra, mudra, mandala, and upachara in the daily rituals of Lord Jagannath indicates a discernible influence from Buddhist-tantra. Furthermore, the worship of Jagannath initiates with the recitation of Bija-mantra, possibly influenced by the Bijamantra of Tantrayana. Although the bijamantra system is widespread in Hindu Tantras, its roots trace back to Buddhist tantra. According to Buddhist tantra, the chanting of bijjamantras transforms the ultimate void, Sunyata, into the specific form of a deity, conferring boundless benefits upon the reciters. A parallel belief is observed in Hindu Tantras. The bijamantra of Sri Jagannath, 'Om, Hlrim Hlrim, Slrim Klrim Dhrlim', appears to mirror tantric bijamantra, such as 'Om Hrim Strim Hum Phat'. This resemblance underscores the intricate connections between the rituals of Jagannath worship and the profound influences of both Buddhist and Hindu Tantras on its sacred practices.

The gradual decline of Mahayana Buddhism became evident during the Mathara rule in the 4th century A.D. They actively promoted and patronized the process of Brahminization in society, contributing to the slow conversion from Buddhism to Hinduism. This transition incorporated



Buddhist principles and thoughts into the Hindu fold. Seeking religious asylum, believers turned to Lord Jagannath, whom they considered to be none other than Lord Buddha. Numerous attempts were made to legitimize the concept of 'The Buddha is Lord Jagannath', and one notable effort was made by Indrabhuti, an influential figure among the eighty-four Siddhacharyas and the ruler of Uddiyana (modern Sambalpur in Odisha). In his renowned treatise Jnanasiddhi, King Indrabhuti described Lord Jagannath as Buddha and presented a symbolic representation of Buddhichitta, including a mace and wheel to eliminate ignorance, a lotus symbolizing wisdom, and a conch to alleviate the world's suffering. Odia Santha literature also portrays Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. Sudramuni Sarala Das, credited with ushering in a literary renaissance in Odia through the composition of the epic Mahabharata, referred to Lord Jagannath as Buddha, further emphasizing the intertwining of these religious traditions.

The essence of Buddhization in relation to Lord Jagannath becomes more pronounced in the ideological concepts of the Panchasakha (five friends) who lived between 1450 and 1550 A.D. These contemporaneous saints significantly influenced the development of Vaishnava philosophy, spiritualism, and literature in Odisha. The philosophy of Buddha and Buddhism exerted an indomitable influence on the life, character, and thoughts of the Panchasakha. In their literary creations, they spared no effort to establish the notion that Lord Jagannath is none other than the Buddha. A rational exploration of the Panchasakha leads social scientists to portray them as the 'Panchadhyani Buddhas' or incarnations of Buddha. The Panchasakha sometimes evaluate Lord Jagannath as the Buddha, while at other times, they present the Buddha as one of the incarnations of Lord Jagannath. This perspective is evident in the literary works of the Panchasakha for instance, Balaram Das's 'Bhaba Samudra' (Ocean of Love) states, Hey Hari! You have incarnated in various forms such as the Buddha and the Kalki. You have compelled Balaram to serve at your feet.

Intriguing is the narrative, delving into the post-departure saga of Sri Krishna from the



mortal realm. Following this celestial exit, King Yudhisthira, accompanied by his five brothers, embarked on an extraordinary journey to heaven, choosing to retain their temporal bodies. Along their celestial path, they encountered a picturesque Blue-Hill nestled on the Mahodadhi's shore, destined to become Sri Krishna's revered seat, worshipped in the future in the form of the Buddha. According to the same narrative, a revelation unfolds that in a bid to alleviate the suffering and deluge of Kaliyuga, Sri Krishna would forsake the worship of Biswabasu, chief of the Sabara tribe, where He manifested as Nilamadhav. Instead, He would adopt the form of the Buddha, to be venerated on the shores of the Blue-Ocean. Achyuta expounds that despite the futile attempts of King Indradymna and his generals to relocate the Vishnu idol (Niladhav) worshipped by Sabara Biswabasu from the Vyaghra-cave, the king found himself in a quandary. In this critical juncture, a voice resonated from the void, advising the king not to be dismayed. The iconic form of Nilamadhav would wane in significance during Kaliyuga, and Sri Krishna would emerge as the Buddha. Remarkably, amidst the diverse tapestry of religious beliefs in Kaliyuga, the Buddha would garner reverence from all religious sects.

It has wisely observed that Lord Jagannath is perceived as the manifestation of Buddha. The Jagannath Buddha theory, based on the iconographic evidence found within the Jagannath temple that frieze over the main gate of the temple showcases the ten incarnations of Vishnu, with Jagannath assuming the role of Buddha, the ninth incarnation. This symbolism is not confined to the exterior; similar carvings are discernible on the interior walls of the Natyamandapa within the Jagannath temple. An intriguing aspect of this iconography is the consistent depiction of Jagannath in both locations with a complete form, possessing intact hands and legs. This portrayal underscores the connection between Jagannath and Buddha, emphasizing the assimilation of these two revered figures. However, not all historians align with this perspective. P. Mukherjee, for instance, diverges in opinion, asserting that Lord Jagannath holds no connection to Gautama Buddha. Mukherjee argues that Jagannath transformed into a Neo-Buddha only after the decline of Gautama Buddha's religion. This dissenting viewpoint adds complexity to the interpretation of



Jagannath's identity and its relation to the Buddhist tradition. The divergence of opinions among historians adds depth to the ongoing discourse surrounding the spiritual and historical significance of Lord Jagannath.

The concept of Yugabandha, depicting the divine union of God (Upaya) and Goddess (Prajna) in an iconographical form, as developed by Vajrayana's Tantricism, appears to have left an indelible mark on the temple architecture of Odisha since the 12th century. This influence is particularly evident in the overt eroticism showcased in the design of significant shrines such as the Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar, the Jagannath temple, and the Konark temple in Puri. Numerous other temples scattered throughout Odisha also bear witness to the profound impact of Vajrayana cult on the region's artists and sculptors. The explicit erotic elements present in Odisha's temple architecture reflect the assimilation of Vajrayana's Tantric principles into the artistic expression of the Odia culture. The Buddha and Bodhisattvas, frequently represented in the state's temples, further underline the influence of this tantric tradition.

The later dissemination of Vajrayana teachings, orchestrated by the 84 Siddhacharyas, further solidified the syncretic nature of the religious landscape. These Siddhacharyas, some possibly with connections to Odisha, played a crucial role in spreading Vajrayana beyond hidden conclaves. The inclusivity of Vajrayana, incorporating elements from various philosophical tenets and appealing to a wide audience, contributed to its popularity despite appearing contradictory to traditional Buddhist teachings. In essence, the Prachi Valley served as a melting pot where Shaktism, Saivism, Vaishnavism and Buddhism coexisted and intermingled, leading to the unique culmination of Vajrayana. The historical and archaeological evidence, coupled with the rich religious and cultural practices, paints a vivid picture of the dynamic and interconnected nature of these diverse traditions in the region.



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