

August 25, 2025

Faith, Filtered: Jagannath Temple at Puri

By: Ankita Subudhi

The Puri Jagannath temple's organic sanctity has been eroded by commercialisation, turning tradition into spectacle and control. Devotion has been reduced to regulated ritual, and the Rath Yatra now emphasises order over faith, with crowd management in 2025 failing to provide even basic care.

Puri has a temple. That's it, and sometimes a beach. The temple draws crowds in their thousands during the Rath Yatra, a pilgrimage from which some never return home where accidental deaths are not uncommon. Now and then, the sea unleashes its fury (Mohanty 2021), but as the locals say with a shrug put it, “*Chkadoliabaacchi*”, an old wisdom.¹ As an Odia, you grow up with one absolute certainty—Lord Jagannath is blessing us, and he will always live in Puri.

This faith operates in a pattern—it is strongest at the temple, then ripples through the city. Before dissolving into prayer, it is choreographed into spatial controls—barricades, checkpoints, rituals.

So, people without legs travel from towns that buses do not reach, just to get to the temple. During the peak season, hundreds sleep outside the temple doors on the road, be it rain or sun. These are seen as acts of devotion. Stampedes during the Rath Yatra are rarely seen as failures of management. Instead, they are often recognised as a summons from above. Each year, the crowds swell.

In Odisha, every trip to Puri beach is accompanied by an unspoken ritual—a visit to the temple. This reflects a faith that has been passed down through generations and continues to grow stronger. When in Puri, always end a conversation with “Jai Jagannath”, which makes you truly belong.

This faith operates in a pattern—it is strongest at the temple, then ripples through the city. Before dissolving into prayer, it is choreographed into spatial controls—barricades, checkpoints, rituals. It is all the while held together by the gaze, an age-old instrument of enforcing discipline (Foucault 1995).

The internalised discipline of the temple begins a little before the threshold. First, there are the policemen, stationed there to scrutinise who is entering, and how. Anyone who does not abide by the unspoken code of conduct for *darshan* is either corrected or removed. For example, following the *dhadi* (queue) is more sacred than seeing the idol, and women often choose to cover their heads as a sign of respect. Covering the face, however, is frowned upon.

Then appears the priest, and there is a moment of quiet transition into subservience. There is a shift from lively conversation to bowed heads, as the priest taps each gently with a stick or a peacock feather. The act of bowing, performed almost unconsciously, is the product of generations of ritualised servitude.

There is a rhythm inside the space. Vendors calling out urgently, “Would you like a plate for the deity?” or “Perhaps a larger *dia*?”—each offering a package to help you display your devotion and, in turn, drawing even more attention to your actions. Even without signs, everyone knows where to stand, when to step forward, what to carry, and, importantly, what not to. No shoes. No leather. No phones. No non-Indian IDs. No non-elite castes. Last, do not be too white. If you are, carry your Indian ID.

Once a year, during the Rath Yatra, the gate is open to all.² If one can push through, they let you see. From the moment you enter to the moment you leave, police, priests, and vendors line the way. Each group watches with its own intent, creating a constant, ever-shifting gaze. The police scan for disobedience. The vendors watch for empty hands. The priests look for money.

This gaze is not malicious, but judging. You will know when you have crossed the line. A wrong turn. A missing offering. A delay in bowing. Dropping a burning *dia*, for instance. The corrections here rarely come with force; it comes through shame, through being watched.

So, one is ushered through a guided and restricted space, and at the end, herded out of the garbagriha. Money can buy a brief pause, but without it, a stick might find you.

Surveillance at the temple is not limited to authorities—it is embedded in every role and ritual. Everyone, from priests to security and even fellow devotees, observes one another, weaving a web of mutual self-regulation. A philosopher called this constant scrutiny an instrument for creating hierarchy and discipline (Foucault 1995). The result is that the temple feels less like a sacred sanctuary and more like an institution. Devotion turns into a carefully orchestrated performance, with unquestioning faith playing along.

A devotee's obedient demeanour allows entry, but does not ensure the attention of the priests. The obedience makes the devotee almost invisible, allowing priests and police to control the flow of people without distraction. Once inside, the goal is assumed to be a *darshan*. So, one is ushered through a guided and restricted space, and at the end, herded out of the *garbagriha*. Money can buy a brief pause, but without it, a stick might find you.

To reach the *garbagriha*, you have to be barefoot and constantly judged for your worthiness through various acts you pay for. From empty hands to how many *dias*, *malas*, or *prasad* are bought from the vendors—it is a silent and quick evaluation. The head priest's blessing often depends on the note you place in his plate—his expression shifting from indifference to satisfaction on seeing it. The route to the inner sanctum is guided less by signposts than by the silent expectation in every gaze.

On 15 January 2023, the management of the Puri temple rejected a petition for allowing non-Hindus and foreigners into the temple, an idea its traditionalist followers ridiculed. This exclusion is not new (Khuntia and Bhatta 2012). In 1934, when M.K. Gandhi led a march with a group of non-Hindus and lower-caste citizens, they were denied access to the temple. B.R Ambedkar was denied entry in 1945 for being a Dalit by birth.

Caste discrimination at the temple has been a longstanding controversy, said to date back to its very inception, with defenders justifying it in the name of “tradition” and “security” (Khuntia and Bhatta 2012). The prevailing narrative insists that the temple's status as a *chardham*—a high pilgrimage site—requires strict propriety to prevent threats like terrorism. Yet, what often goes unnoticed is how even those permitted entry are subject to further filtering.

There exists a sacred knowledge system here that only the practiced can navigate. Touching all twenty-six steps, buying offerings, glimpsing the *sudharshan chakra*, raising hands, chanting the deity's name, kissing the ground—all these are habits formed through imitation. These acts serve to create a show of intimacy with the divine, offered as proof of one's devotion and submission. In the process, they diminish genuine human connections and turn the temple visit into an exclusive, transactional exchange between priest and devotee.

This sense of ownership has allowed them to control the expression of faith—politicising, commercialising, and socially regulating how devotion unfolds within the temple.

A devotee rarely acknowledges another while waiting in line to offer *prasad* to the priests. Over time, the system has come to prioritise ritual performance over genuine spiritual connection. This control over the mind has shaped, managed, and conditioned faith itself. It is increasingly hard to say where personal belief ends and the demands of the system begin.

Historically, the regulation of this faith was managed by far fewer stakeholders. Once, the temple was under the sole care of the King of Puri, but its management has since become a matter of national importance. In 1955, the Sri Jagannath Temple Act enabled the administration of the temple to work in close coordination with the state government as well as a specially formed temple committee.

Although certain parts of the temple came under the protection of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act of 1958, there is often friction between the temple committee and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) regarding control and access. This is because the temple is required to comply with ASI guidelines, particularly concerning conservation work.

Today, every stakeholder within the temple grounds—administrators, priests, and vendors alike—claims authority based on their long-standing presence. This sense of ownership has allowed them to control the expression of faith—politicising, commercialising, and socially regulating how devotion unfolds within the temple. As a result, faith is left with little room to be personal or shared. All that remains is a fleeting glimpse of the idol and the hum of collective ritual.

Jagannath temple controls the identity of the state (Hegewald and Mitra 2008). The way it controls its space, and, by extension, faith, needs closer scrutiny. The Rath Yatra, a time of mass devotion and public spectacle, is not just a spiritual procession. It has become a showcase of scale, surveillance, and state-managed access.

In 2019, as part of the Jagannath Temple Corridor Project, more than 17 acres of land—including homes across five villages—were acquired, leading to the demolition of houses and the resettlement of residents. This was part of a broader drive to standardise and modernise pilgrimage sites across India, creating spaces that are increasingly controlled, regulated, and made accessible according to state-defined standards.

Its sanctity arises from centuries of lived meaning, not artificial assignment. Today, however, systems that commodify the sacred have overwritten local memory and ritual, turning them into spectacles for profit.

The area around the temple, once a complex and lived-in space, has been flattened and replaced with checkpoints, barricades, and open visibility. The aim is less about protecting sacred tradition and more about ensuring smooth circulation, facilitating media coverage, and driving tourism revenue. The government's push to standardise access—often through coercion—is a growing trend, with Puri standing out because its spiritual character is deeply bound to Odia cultural identity.

The Jagannath temple was meant to be seen. Its sanctity arises from centuries of lived meaning, not artificial assignment. Today, however, systems that commodify the sacred have overwritten local memory and ritual, turning them into spectacles for profit. The temple's timeless rhythm has been disrupted—a claustrophobic break from what Christopher Alexander called the “timeless way of building”.³

With the Rath Yatra, what should be a celebration of collective faith becomes an exercise in rigid control. Even in 2025, crowd management continued to overlook basic needs—such as proper care, cleanliness, and genuine respect for the wishes of pilgrims. In this environment, authentic devotion is reduced to mere procedure.

Because visitors only pass through, unlike the vendors and priests who live and work here, their fleeting presence seldom raises the question of what is happening to their beliefs. Control works best when it fades into the background—when following the rules becomes the norm.

To question faith in this context is not to challenge the temple authorities, but to return to the heart of belief itself. What distinguishes genuine devotion from mere obedience? Lived faith from something designed and managed?

How would your belief endure if no one was watching?

Ankita Subudhi is an architect and researcher based in Bhubaneswar, who focusses on architectural history and the intersections of space, culture, material and society.

Footnotes:

1 It means the one with the big black eyes is watching over us. The eyes of Lord Jagannath are always there to protect devotees, especially if they were born in Puri.

2 Throughout the year, the temple precinct is not open to foreigners and non-Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs. They can see the idols when they are taken out of the temple during the Rath Yatra and at the Gundicha temple, where they rest. The main temple though is still closed to them. Once the idols are moved to the Mausī Maa temple, the restriction on entry is enforced there as well.

3 The phrase draws on Christopher Alexander's concept of the “timeless way of building”, where forms grow out of lived patterns rather than imposed design. Architecture is not imposed from above but emerges organically from everyday life, ritual, and human patterns. A place is said to possess a timeless rhythm when its form evolves naturally with the people who inhabit it, something that is disrupted when external forces overwrite these lived traditions.

References:

Alexander, Christopher (1979): *The Timeless Way of Building*. Oxford University Press.
https://library.uniteddiversity.coop/Ecological_Building/The_Timeless_Way_of_Building_Complete.pdf

Foucault, Michel (1995): *Discipline & Punish*, Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books.
<https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.disciplineAndPunish.panOpticism>

Hegewald, Julia A. B. and Subrata K. Mitra (2008): “Jagannatha Compared: The Politics of Appropriation, Re-use and Regional Traditions in India”, Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics, University of Heidelberg. https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/8015/1/HPSACP_Hegewald_Mitra_final.pdf

Khuntia, Rekharani and Brajabandhu Bhatta (2012): “Entry of Non-Hindus to the Jagannath Temple, Puri: A Study”, Odisha Review, June, pp. 107–108. <https://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2012/June/engpdf/110-115.pdf>

Mohanty, Shyama (2021): “Quasi Operational Forecast Guidance of Extremely Severe Cyclonic Storm Fani over the Bay of Bengal Using High Resolution Mesoscale Models”, Meteorology and Atmospheric Physics, 133, pp. 331–33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00703-020-00751-4>