

The potters who serve the Jagannatha Temple are but a single element of the great network of belief, ritual, duty and reward that energizes the living institution. The creation and distribution of sacred food (*mahaprasada*) is a powerful central process that draws pilgrims from throughout India. Prepared by various categories of temple servants working in the temple kitchen, using raw materials gathered from dedicated temple lands, the *mahaprasada* is sanctified in the daily offerings to the temple deities, then distributed to temple servants and devotees. This chapter will present the chief elements of that process, so as to provide the context for the potters' role in the temple.

PILGRIMAGE

The whitewashed stone tower of the Jagannatha Temple rises majestically over the green and red landscape of coastal Orissa.¹ To the traveller or pilgrim approaching Jagannatha Puri, “the city of Jagannatha”, by land, the tower first beckons from a great distance across flat fields punctuated by clusters of coconut palms. Once, like the tower of the “black pagoda” at Konarak to the north, it also guided seafarers following the coast. In the eight centuries since the Jagannatha Temple was erected at the command of the founder of the Imperial Ganga dynasty, Chodaganga (r 1078–1147 or 1150),² allegedly to replace a still older temple in this ancient holy place, this tower has been the focus of widening rings of spiritual, political and geographical identity.³ The original shrine of the patron deity of the dynasty incorporated the local aboriginal cult of the wooden god, but the temple gradually became associated with overarching Hindu cults, and Jagannatha was identified with the ninth incarnation or avatar of Vishnu. Supported by a growing body of legends and sacred texts, the temple drew worshippers as pilgrims from ever greater distances toward the sacred centre—the Jewel Altar beneath the tower, bearing the images of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra.

Ordinarily, these three main images remain deep within the temple.⁴ Once a year, however, on the second day of the bright fortnight in the lunar month of Ashadha (June–July), they are brought out through the Lions Gate and placed on three towering, newly constructed and adorned wooden carts. Throngs of worshippers pull the carts along the length of the broad central road of the city to the Gundicha Temple, said to

Pilgrims leave the Jagannatha Temple with clay pots and palm-leaf packets of *mahaprasada*.



During Ratha Yatra, pilgrims visit the three deities on their carts in the square in front of the Jagannatha Temple.

be Jagannatha's birthplace, where the deities rest for seven days before returning the same way. Exaggerated tales by British missionaries of pilgrims throwing themselves beneath the wheels of the cart created the English term "juggernaut", an inexorable force that crushes whatever lies in its path. To worshippers of Jagannatha, however, the Ratha Yatra or Cart Festival, when the deities move through the city among their ecstatic devotees, is the highpoint of the annual cycle of temple rituals.⁵

Huge crowds assemble in Puri annually for Ratha Yatra, and cyclically for the ritual renewal of the images (Nabakalebara) at intervals specified by astronomical calculations (most recently in 1996), but numerous pilgrims approach the city at all times of the year as they have for centuries. Their goal is liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Within the network of sacred sites (*tirtha*) that stretches across the Indian subcontinent, Puri occupies multiple positions of meaningfulness.⁶ Pilgrimage is *tirtha yatra*, journey to a *tirtha*, or simply *yatra*. As one of the four most important and holy *tirthas* marking the four cardinal directions, Puri is also known as a *dhama*, together with Badrinath in the north, Rameshvaram in the south and Dwarka in the west. It is also one of the four cardinal centres of ascetic orders, or *pithas*, reputedly established by the sage Shankara in the ninth century, along with Joshimatha in the north, Shringeri in the south and Dwarka in the west.⁷

Puri is believed to be a powerful sacred field, or *kshetra*. As *shankha kshetra*, the sacred field of Puri takes the shape of a conch shell (*shankha*), one of the four emblems of Vishnu, with the broad end of the shell lying at the Lokanatha Temple in the west and the tip resting in the east, at the Beleshwara Temple. Swargadwara to the south and Indradyumna Tank to the north-east mark the other boundaries, with almost half of the sacred shell lying beneath the Bay of Bengal.⁸ In the centre

or navel of the conch rises the low artificial hill called Nilachala, Blue Mountain, where the Jagannatha Temple stands.

At one time all but the wealthiest pilgrims made the journey to Puri on foot, however great the distance. A British visitor in 1868 met a party of Punjabis who had journeyed two thousand miles and had been travelling for four or five months.⁹ Soon after taking control of Orissa in 1803, the British constructed a paved highway following sections of the ancient pilgrim road leading south from Bengal. A British administrator described the "Jagannath Road" in the 1870s as

a work of almost Roman solidity, being raised fifteen or twenty feet above the level of the country across which it runs, visible from afar like a great dyke with its solid masonry bridges, long rows of shady trees and lines of telegraph posts and wires. The surface is metalled with laterite, or iron-sandstone, a dark red stone found all over Orissa which makes admirable roads, bridges and other buildings. Along this noble road passes all the year round, but chiefly at the seasons of the great festivals—the Dol Jatra or Spring festival in January, and the Rath Jatra or Car festival in June—an endless string of pilgrims from all parts of India; the poor limping wearily on foot, the rich in bullock carts or *palkis*, to the great temple at Puri.¹⁰

Railroads followed. Starting in 1918, the Puri Express reduced travel time from Calcutta to twelve hours.¹¹ Nowadays, whole villages of pilgrims from Rajasthan travelling by chartered bus make the round-trip journey in just a month.¹²

The usual activities of the pilgrim after reaching Puri have not changed greatly since the British administrator Andrew Stirling described them in 1846:

After the preliminary ceremonies are gone through and the fees paid, the pilgrim goes and looks at the image; he next bathes in the sea, and then returning to the temple, purchases some rice which has been recently offered to Juggernaut, and with it performs the obsequies of his deceased ancestors. During his stay he attends the daily solemnities, and makes offerings through the Brahmins of rice and other articles to Juggernaut. For payment the officiating priests supply him with food ready dressed, which is particularly nutritious, as having been first presented to Juggernaut.... The penitent also feasts the Brahmins, and eats with all descriptions of pilgrims, of whatever caste.¹³

What the pilgrim does in Puri depends partly on his or her social status and level of education and wealth. The more knowledgeable the pilgrims in textual traditions, the more thoroughgoing their activities will be within the sacred field of Puri.¹⁴ Some pilgrims go around the *shankha kshetra* in a clockwise direction, starting and ending at the Lokanatha Temple and passing along the ocean shore, in the belief

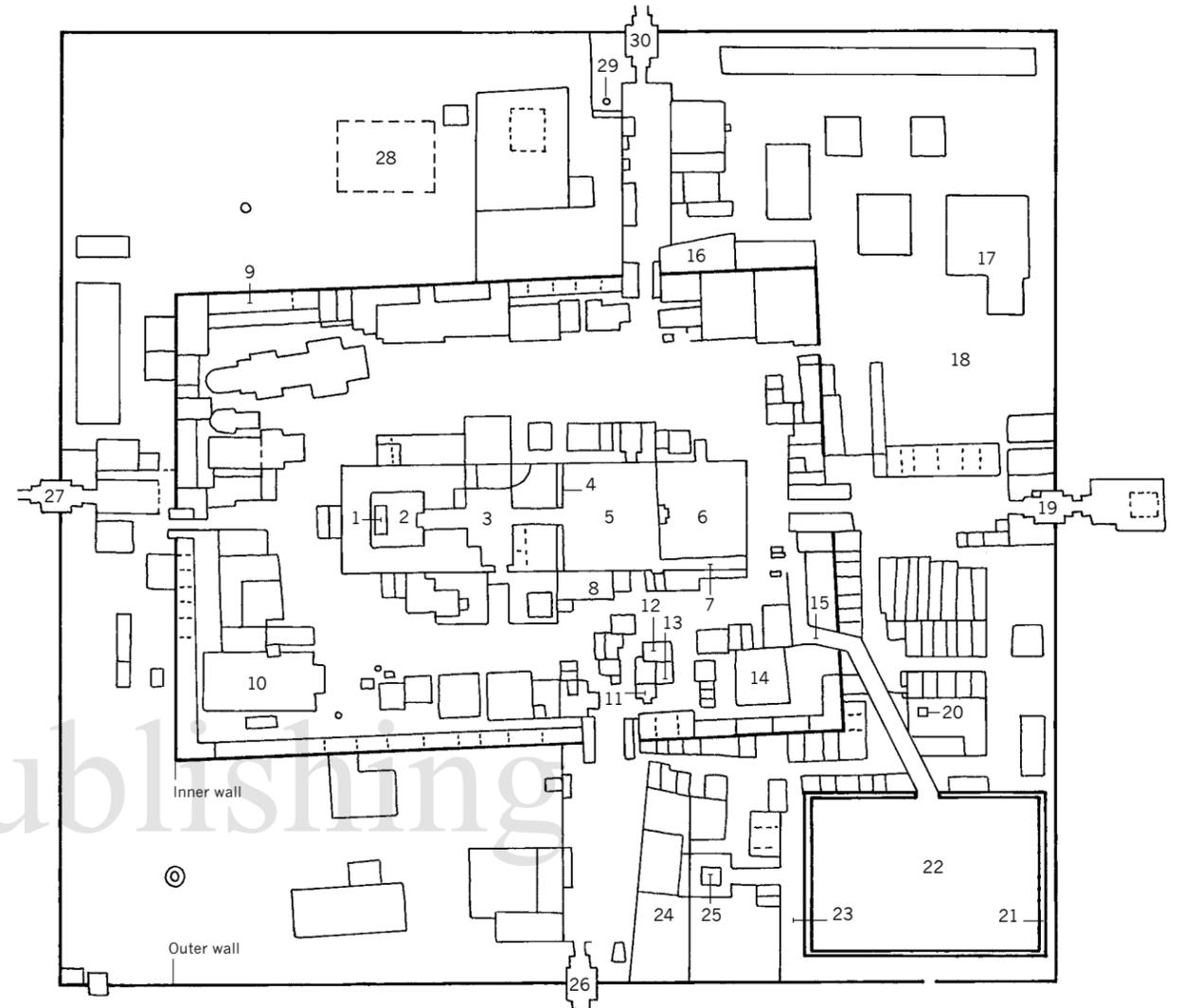


The red-roofed Lions Gate, in the outer temple wall, is the main entrance to the Jagannatha Temple complex. The offering hall, or Bhoga Mandapa, is located just inside the inner wall; behind it are the towers of the dance hall, the assembly hall, and the sanctuary containing the Jewel Altar.

an inner wall (*kurma bedha*) enclosing the main temple buildings, including the new Bhoga Mandapa.³¹

Madala Panji records credit various Khurda dynasty kings with elaborating the menu further and improving facilities, contributing to a still wider distribution of sacred food. The dynasty's founder, Ramachandra I (r 1568–1600), decreed an increase in the variety of dishes.³² Mukunda I (r 1657–88) introduced lavish innovations in the category of sweets.³³ A grandmother of Birakeshari I (r 1739–93) donated funds to erect a “golden hall” to be used for drying the remnants of *mahaprasada* rice.³⁴

The regular offering of cooked rice and accompanying dishes to Lord Jagannatha on the Jewel Altar became associated with the well-being of the kingdom itself. During the reign of Purushottama (1600–21), when Mughal vassals threatened the temple, the main images were secreted on an island in Chilka Lake for several years and then taken to a remote village; only cold food was offered to them when they were thus in exile.³⁵ In effect, the deities were reduced once again to the condition of eating wearisome “jungle fruits and flowers”. The temple was desolate: “The cooking of Puri *mahaprasada* was stopped forever”, as were all the major temple rituals, and Puri “took the form of a cremation ground”³⁶ instead of the auspicious conch shell. The deities were removed again for safekeeping during



Plan of the Jagannatha Temple.

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| 1 Jewel Altar | 16 Shrine of Ishaneshvara |
| 2 Inner Sanctum | 17 Bathing Dias |
| 3 Audience Hall | 18 Ananda Bazaar |
| 4 Jaya Bijaya Gate | 19 Lions Gate |
| 5 Dance Hall | 20 Well |
| 6 Offering Hall (Bhoga Mandapa) | 21 Drainage from Kitchen |
| 7 Passage from Kitchen to Inner Sanctum | 22 Kitchen |
| 8 Shrine of Indrani | 23 Path |
| 9 Lakshmi's Kitchen | 24 Handi Joganias Office |
| 10 Temple of Bimala | 25 Well |
| 11 Shrine of Bata Ganesha | 26 South Gate |
| 12 Shrine of Bata Mangala | 27 West Gate |
| 13 Shrine of Bala Mukunda | 28 Burial Ground |
| 14 Kitchen | 29 Well used for Bathing Festival |
| 15 Passage from Kitchen to Inner Sanctum | 30 North Gate |

This map shows only the structures mentioned in the text. It is based on Starza 1993, fig. 3, which identifies all structures.