

Role And Status Of Tribal Priests In Jagannath Temple, Puri

Arpita, Jagannath Dash

(Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. Of Anthropology And Tribal Studies, PPRACHIN, Siksha 'O' Anusandhan University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India)

(Professor Emeritus, Dept. Of Anthropology And Tribal Studies, PPRACHIN, Siksha 'O' Anusandhan University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India)

Abstract:

The **Jagannath Temple** in Puri, Odisha—also called Jagannath Dham—is one of the esteemed **Char Dham** pilgrimage sites, alongside Badrinath, Dwarka, and Rameswaram. Founded in the **12th century** by King Anantavarman Chodaganga of the Eastern Ganga dynasty and later completed by Ananga Bhima Deva, it was sanctified by Adi Shankaracharya. This paper explores the unique presence and role of tribal priests in Jagannath Temple, in Odisha, a region known for its deep cultural syncretism and religious diversity. While mainstream Hinduism has traditionally been dominated by Brahmin priests, certain temples in Odisha notably feature tribal priests in key religious functions. This study examines the historical, cultural, and sociological significance of this phenomenon, focusing on temples such as the Jagannath Temple in Puri. The paper also discusses the challenges tribal priests face today and their continuing importance in preserving indigenous religious traditions within a broader Hindu context. Our findings initially examines the role of Daitapati priests, a group of tribal-origin priests who perform unique and sacred rituals in the Jagannath Temple, Puri. Their association with the deity reflects a deep-rooted tribal connection in the Jagannath cult. The paper explores the historical background, ritualistic responsibilities, cultural significance, challenges, and the ongoing challenges to preserve their tradition.

Keywords: Jagannath temple, Daitapati, Sevakas (servitors), Nabakalebara, Rath yatra Snana yatra, Anabasara, Mahaprasad, Sahi.

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I. Introduction

Odisha, a state rich in tribal heritage and religious tradition, exhibits a unique religious integration where tribal customs and Hindu rituals coexist. In several temples across the state, especially in the Puri temple of lord *Jagannath* and other tribal-dominated regions, tribal priests play a central role in performing rituals and maintaining temple traditions.

Context of Tribal Priests in Odisha

Historically, Odisha has been home to more than 62 tribal communities(at present 64). The tribal influence in religious practices predates Aryanization and Brahmanical dominance. The worship of nature, spirits, and ancestral deities formed the basis of tribal religion, which later merged with or influenced local Hindu practices. At present we highlight the role and responsibilities of so called tribal priests of *Jagannath* temple ay Puri who are popularly knowns as *Daita-Patis*.In brief, their identity may presented as follows.

- The *Daitapatis*, who serve Lord Jagannath, have tribal origins linked to the *Sabara* tribe.
- During rituals like *Nabakalebara*, the *Daitapatis* exclusively handle the replacement of the old wooden idols with new ones.
- Their participation symbolizes the tribal roots of *Jagannath* worship and reflects the inclusivity of Odisha's temple traditions.

This paper examines the role of tribal priests within the Hindu cult especially Jagannath Temple cult at Puri, focusing on their duties, the interplay of tribal and Hindu traditions, and the significance of their role in the ritual performance of the temple.

II. Research Methodology

Ethnographic Approach

This study will employ an ethnographic approach, which is particularly suited for understanding the life experiences, social relations, and cultural practices of tribal priests.

Participant Observation

Participant observation will be a primary method for data collection, allowing for an insider perspective while maintaining analytical distance. The researcher will observe ritual performances, family interactions, knowledge transmission practices, and daily routines of *Daita* and *Patis* priests across different age groups.

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with approximately 30-40 participants from *Daitas* and *Patis* families, including elderly priests with extensive ritual experience, in temple, middle-aged priests navigating traditional roles and modern pressures, young adult members of *Daita* families making vocational choices, family members who have chosen non-priestly vocations and become extremely supportive for the temple services.

Visual Documentation

With appropriate permissions and cultural sensitivity, visual documentation (photography and video) will be used to record ritual practices, knowledge transmission processes, and material aspects of priestly life. This visual data will serve both analytical and archival purposes, contributing to the preservation of cultural knowledge while enabling detailed analysis of ritual performances.

Ethical Considerations

Anderson's approach to ethical engagement with indigenous populations emphasizes moving from a protective paradigm to one of equality, partnership, and mutuality (GFBR, 2015). This framework will guide interactions with the *Daita-Patis* community, ensuring that research relationships are built on mutual recognition, comprehension, and trust.

Historical Context and Background of Jagannath Temple at Puri

The Mythological connection The Jagannath Temple is deeply rooted in the history of Odisha and the worship of the deity Jagannath. The temple is a significant pilgrimage centre, known for its grand festivals, particularly the **Rath Yatra**. The Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, stands as one of India's most compelling examples of cultural syncretism, where tribal religious practices have been integrated into mainstream Hinduism. At the center of this cultural fusion are the *Daita* (or *Daitapati*) priests, who trace their lineage to the aboriginal Sabara tribe and specifically to *Savara chief Viśwawāsu*, the first worshipper of Jagannath. Despite their tribal origins, these priests perform crucial functions in temple rituals, particularly during significant events such as the *Navakalevara* (renewal of wooden images) and the *Ratha Yatra* (annual chariot festival). **Niladri Mahadaya**, though not widely known outside certain circles, provides important insights into the historical and spiritual relationship between the tribal community and the Jagannath Temple. *Savara chief Viswabasu's* descendants unique role as the caretaker of the deities' sacred wooden idols, as well as his deep involvement in the temple's renewal ceremonies, highlights the cultural richness and diversity of the Jagannath tradition.

Tribal Priests in the Temple: The Jagannath Temple in Puri, constructed in the 12th century CE, embodies a remarkable integration of tribal and Brahmanical religious traditions. Numerous studies have documented the tribal origins of Jagannath worship, with scholars like Eschmann et al. (1978) arguing that Lord Jagannath was originally a deity of the Sabara tribe before being incorporated into the Hindu pantheon. Archaeological and textual evidence suggests that Jagannath was worshipped by *Savaras* in Sambal (present-day Talcher in Angul District) before the deity was established in Puri (IGNCA, 2016).

The concept note from the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts notes that "The worship of Sri Jagannath by the *Savaras* tribes might have later adopted in the Hindu rituals" and that "Jagannath Culture is derived from the little traditions of worship by the Savara tribal has been *sanskritised* by Brahman priests and Rajas at Puri" (IGNCA, 2016). This process represents what anthropologists have traditionally called "Hindu method of tribal absorption" (Guha, 2016), though such frameworks have been criticized for privileging Brahmanical perspectives.

Indigenous tribal communities in Odisha have long been part of the cultural and religious fabric of the region. The temple's rituals reflect this unique blend of tribal and Hindu practices, making the role of tribal priests especially important in preserving this cultural synthesis.

Tribal Representation in Rituals: The tribal priests, especially from the **Scheduled Tribes** like the **Sabar** have been entrusted with certain ceremonial duties that are integral to the temple's religious life. The *Daita* priests occupy a unique position in the temple's ritual hierarchy. The *Daitas* are the clan of *Bidyapati* and

Lalita (THE SABARA girl). According to Orissa Historical Research Journal (OHRJ, 2015), these priests are entrusted with specific responsibilities during the *Navakalevara* ceremony, including leading the *Banajaga Yatra* to search for sacred Daru (wood) for new idols. They follow strict lifestyle guidelines during the ritual period and participate in the tree-cutting ceremony with specific ritual implements.

Furthermore, during *Anavasara* (when deities are considered sick), *Daitas* take over the worship from Brahmin priests, offering medicinal treatments and covering the deities' faces with special fabric (*Mahaprasada*, 2023). They also act as messengers between the recovering deities and the Gajapati Maharaja (king), carrying sacred items as 'prasada' (blessed offerings). This role highlights their special relationship with the deity, whom they consider a clan member (Religion News Service, 2018). Except this they have daily ritual like *CHITALGI*, *PAITA SEBA*, *PAHUDA ALATI SEBA*, *GHASAPATTA SEVA* and other 'sevas' that related to the idols body.

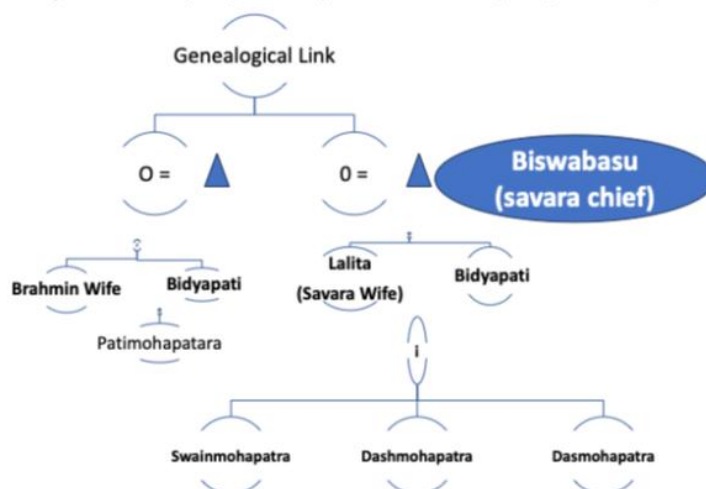
The *Daita Patis* can be broadly classified into different categories, each of whom performs a specific set of duties within the temple. Their roles are deeply tied to both **tribal traditions** and **Hindu practices**. As mentioned below the main types of *Daita Patis* and the *sevas* (services) they provide are -

The *Pati Mohapatra* is one of the most important **priests** in the **Jagannath Temple** in Puri, Odisha. Traditionally, the ***Pati Mohapatra*** belongs to the **Brahmin community** and holds a prestigious position in the temple hierarchy. The ***Pati Mohapatra*** are the clan of *Bidyapati* and his brahmin wife supervises the **daily rituals (Niti Seva)** performed for Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra. This includes overseeing all the **pujas**, **aartis**, and offerings that take place each day in the temple. *Nabakrusna Pati Mohapatra* who is the one known as the ***BADAGRAHI (CARETAKER)*** of *Sudarshan* idol and is the most privileged priest of Jagannath cult. this family stay in *Manikarnika sahi* of puri. This is only family which is now existing in this category of sacred temple service.

Daitas are further divided into three types. *Swain Mohapatra*, *Dash Mohapatra*, and *Das Mohapatra*. During major festivals like the **Rath Yatra**, **Snana Yatra**, and **Nabakalebara**, the **Swain Mohapatra** plays a critical role in ensuring the offerings and rituals go according to the prescribed religious practices. now in recent time Jagannath Swain Mohapatra's family is the only family who serve Lord Jagannath's *Badagrahi* (caretaker). this family has got four members who all got the *sevas* including his two son *Rakumar daitapati* and *Sanjeev kumar Daitapati*, *Seyansh Daitapati*. Though they are not *Patis* the *Daitapati* is the community and the surnames are *Swain Mohapatra*. The *Swain Mohapatra* belong to ***Ulkasya Gotras***. These *Sevaks* stay in *Dolamandapa sahi* of Puri, which show that they reside close to temple vicinity to perform their duties easily. Their 'seva' performance is mostly conferred to the following occasions.

- **Snana Yatra**: The *Swain Mohapatra* is involved in the **Snana Yatra** rituals, where the deities are bathed in holy water. During this time, special offerings are made to the deities after their bath.
- **Rath Yatra**: During the **Rath Yatra**, the *Swain Mohapatra* helps in preparing and offering the **special sacred food items** for the deities when they are taken out for the grand procession.
- **Daily rituals**: The *Swain Mohapatra* is involved in daily rituals like *chitalagi*, *paitaseva*, *ghasapatta niti* etc. Every day a member will perform the ritual which is known as *PALI Khatiba*.

The *Daitas* are belonging to the same clan of group and caste of the *Patis* and also divided into division based on their origin. *Swainmohapatra*, *Patimohapatra* and *Dashmohapatra*, as follows,



Dash Mohapatra sevaks holds a prestigious and integral position in the **Jagannath Temple** service. Their duties range from overseeing **daily rituals**, **offering sacred food to the deities**, and **coordinating priestly activities**, to playing key roles during major festivals like **Rath Yatra** and **Nabakalebara**. They also maintain the **purity** and **sanctity** of the temple, ensuring that the temple rituals are conducted in strict adherence to traditional customs. *Ramachandra Dash Mohapatra* serves as the goddess *Shubhadra's badagrahi* and *Haladhara Dash Mohapatra* serves as *Balbhadrha's badagrahi* at present.

As a **spiritual sevak**, the **Das Mohapatra sevaks** helps to guide the religious practices and plays a key role in the administration of the temple, ensuring that the Jagannath Temple remains a place of divine worship and spiritual significance. They perform the *Sudha Suara* seva which include betel offering, *Duba* offering called as *Bedia* sevas in daily basis. They also help *Swain Mohaptras* and *Dash Mohaptras* in other *Rathyatra*, *Nabakalebara* and *Anasara* seva.

All the *sevaks* are member of **chatisa nijoga** of the temple administration and they have a special sitting room where they decide the ritual timings and other responsibility distribution inside the temple near *Nabagraha* temple called as *Daitapati nijoga*. the president of *Daitapati nijoga* is now *Ganesh Dash Mohapatra*, and secretary is *Ramakrusna Dash Mohapatra*. Total number of family in *Swain Mohapatra* are now 3 families with 8 members. the three families include *Jagganath Swain Mohapatra*, *Surjakant Swain Mohapatra*, and *Jagabandhu swain Mohapatra*.

Cultural Significance of Tribal Priests in the Jagannath Temple

- a) **Tribal Integration into Hindu Practices:** The involvement of tribal priests in the Jagannath Temple illustrates the integration of tribal traditions into mainstream Hinduism. Their role underscores the harmony between local tribal customs and the religious practices of the larger Hindu society.
- b) **Preserving Indigenous Culture:** Tribal priests help preserve the indigenous religious practices and connect them to the broader Hindu narrative, especially in the rituals and offerings made to Jagannath. Their continued participation in the temple's activities is a testament to the respect given to tribal communities within Hinduism.
- c) **Interfaith and Intercultural Exchange:** The participation of tribal priests in the temple's rituals also symbolizes an intercultural and interfaith dialogue between tribal communities and the broader Hindu religious framework, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect.

The Importance of Tribal Priests in Temple Rituals

As already discussed, tribal priest are the first worshippers of Lord Jagannath in his Nilamadhav form, however in Puri temple the so-called savara worshippers are involved in the following important ritual celebration.

- **The Snana Yatra:** One of the most significant rituals involving tribal priests is the **Snana Yatra**, where the deities are bathed in a sacred water in sacred procession. The tribal priests, known for their knowledge of indigenous practices, play a central role in this event.
- **Anabasara:**

The term "Anabasara" can be broken down into two parts:

"Ana": Meaning "not" or "absence".

"Basara": Meaning "dwelling" or "staying".

Thus, **Anabasara** means **absence from the public eye** or **temporary seclusion**. This ritual is an important part of the temple's tradition and involves the deities being kept in a secluded area, known as the **Anabasara Ghara** (a special room), where they are not visible to the public.

The **Anabasara Seva** serves multiple spiritual and symbolic purposes, including:

1. **Ritualistic Rest:** After the grand events of **Rath Yatra** and the **Snana Yatra**, the deities are considered to be tired and in need of rest. During this time, the deities are kept in seclusion, and it is believed that they rejuvenate and undergo a form of spiritual rest before resuming their daily rituals.
 2. **Maintenance of Idols:** During the Anabasara period, the deities' **wooden idols** undergo maintenance. The idols of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra are meticulously cleaned, repainted, and sometimes even re-carved, as part of their annual rejuvenation.
 3. **Symbolic Reflection of the Divine:** The seclusion of the deities is also seen as a symbolic act of the divine taking time for introspection, renewal, and rejuvenation. It is a reflection of how divinity sometimes retreats from the world, only to return in an even more glorious form.
- **The Rath Yatra:** During the celebration of **Rath Yatra**, tribal priests participate in pulling the chariots of Lord Jagannath, Balaram, and Subhadra. This event, one of the largest religious gatherings in India, features tribal priests as essential participants in maintaining the sanctity of the procession.

- **Sacred Food (Mahaprasad):** Tribal priests are also involved in the preparation and distribution of the **Mahaprasad**, the sacred food offered to Lord Jagannath, which is later shared with devotees. The distribution of Mahaprasad is considered a divine blessing.
- **Nabakalebara:** Nabakalebara is one of the most significant and sacred rituals of the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha. It refers to an elaborate process of renewing the sacred idols of Lord Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra, and sister Subhadra. This ceremony is a rare and momentous event that occurs once every 12 to 19 years, depending on the specific cycle of the **traditional Hindu lunar calendar**. The term "Nabakalebara" can be translated to "new body" (Naba = new, Kalebara = body), symbolizing the renewal or re-incarnation of the deities' physical forms. This ceremony is deeply rooted in the religious beliefs of Odisha and holds profound significance for both the temple's rituals and the community's spiritual life.

In all this *sevas* the *Daitas* maintain the sanctity in their home and keep fasting for whole day taking one meal a day with *HABISA* which means without onion garlic and spices like *Haldi*(turmeric). The female members of the family also maintain the sanctity and preparation of food and medicines for the dieties. After *Anabasara* *Daitas* take *Mahaprasada* and maintain the purity by not taking any kind of alcohol and *tamasika bhojan*. During this period if a family member died then also they can perform the rituals with no obstruction and the same things happens with child birth.

Challenges and Contemporary Issues

Savaras, unlike other *Mundari* and *Dravidian* tribes of Odisha are Indo-Aryan tribes and undergone the process of Hinduization because of prolonged contact and interaction with Hindu neighbours.

Erosion of Tribal Traditions: The role of tribal priests in the Jagannath Temple, while historically significant, is under threat due to urbanization, modernization, and the commercialization of religious practices. The younger generation of such tribal communities may not be interested in continuing these traditional roles, leading to a potential loss of this unique cultural practice. Despite their crucial ritual roles, many *Daita* priests face significant socioeconomic challenges. According to a temple servitor quoted in Religion News Service (2018), "One-third of us live below the poverty line." The same article mentions that priests receive only minimal compensation from the government—about \$11 for bimonthly ritual service and approximately \$1,400 as annual health insurance. This economic precarity is compounded by their limited educational opportunities and specialized training, which has historically focused exclusively on ritual knowledge rather than skills applicable to the modern economy. But as a resent servay one of the *Daitapati Sanjeev Daitapati* said..they get about 50000/- Indian rupees in monthly basis by Jagannath temple administration. The other *Daitas* bellow the age of 18 years get only 25000/- rupees after they are recognised with "*saree bandha niti*".

In response to these challenges, the state government of Odisha has implemented welfare measures including housing schemes for landless priests and free education for their children (Economic Times, 2019). However, these interventions may be insufficient to address the fundamental economic insecurity that drives younger generations away from priestly vocations. few of the *Daitas* studied in NITS and done MBA from reputed institution and persuing their career in those field but when its come to *sevas* they come for the rituals and perfrom their dutied added *Sanjeeb Kumar Daitapati*. Some *Daitapatis* runs their hotel and priligrim business, along with some shophouses and other way of livelihood. The girls are persuing their career and getting married to other communities, gradually.

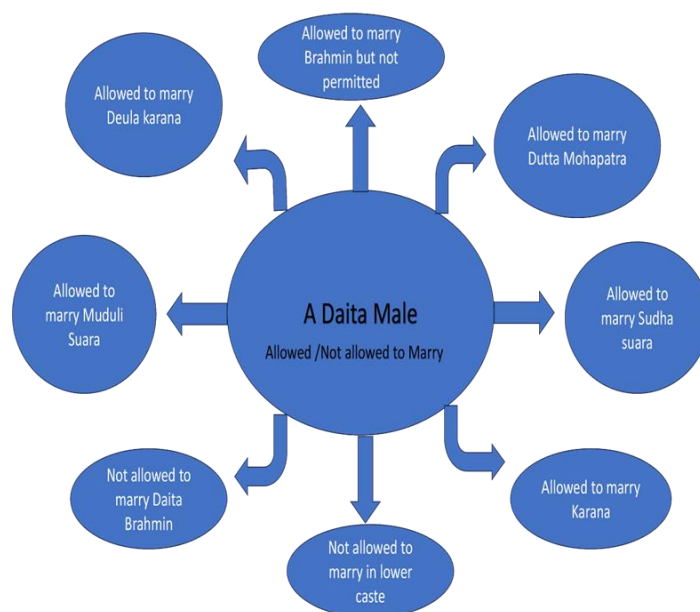
Occupation structure: *Daitas* are basically assigned temple services and from the temple service they get their livelihood. when they come for services like *Palikhaatiba*, *Anasara*, *Rathayatra*, *Nabakalebara*, they get their share out of the temple income. *Daita* male after getting birth and *Taatiprabesha* they are called as *Vegari* group of *Daitas* (shareholders) of income (*Rathayatra*) of Jagganath temple. *Daitas* called as *Adhavegari* until they starts giving services and when the male eligible for *Pahandi sevas* of 3 dieties in Rath yatra. After 21 days of birth when the next *Nabajoubana* happens to the three dieties the male child is taken to temple with lots of offerings to lords including gold, pattabastra, fruits, and varieties of bhoga for *Taatiprabesh* ritual. now a days the small *daitas* are getting 25000/- Indian rupees for learning the ritual practice and helping the *daitas* in their work till they are fully involved in Rath yatra or other temple rituals.

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity: The intersection of tribal traditions with mainstream Hinduism sometimes leads to tensions, as modern practices may not always align with the ritualistic customs of tribal priests. Limited research exists on the specific dynamics of intergenerational vocational changes among *Daita* priests. However, Religion News Service (2018) notes that some servitors have diversified into other occupations such as "tourism, hospitality, politics and real estate," while others have pursued higher education. This occupational diversification reflects broader trends observed in traditional communities facing modernization pressures.

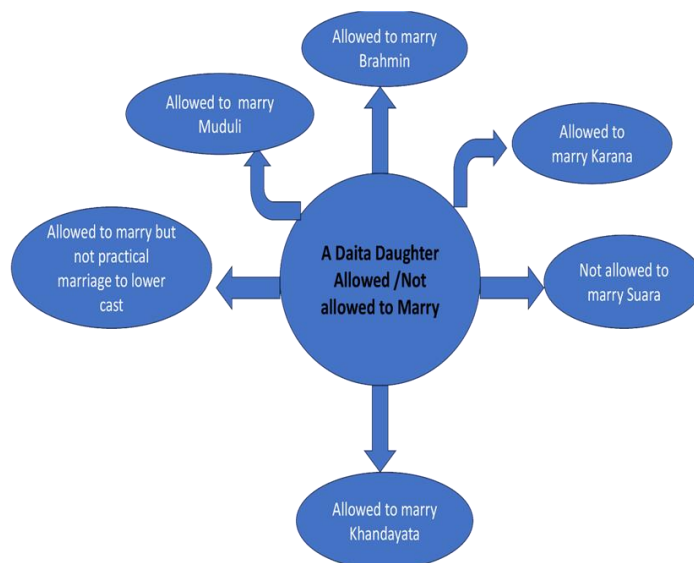
Mishra & Das (2023) conducted research on intergenerational occupational mobility in traditional priestly communities in Odisha. While not specific to *Daita* priests, their findings suggest that hereditary occupational practices are increasingly challenged by modern economic pressures, educational opportunities, and changing social aspirations.

The **marriage practices** within the *Daita Sevaka* community are somewhat distinct from the general society, as the focus is not just on family or social relationships, but also on the **spiritual duties** they hold in connection to the deities of the Jagannath Temple. **Endogamy** refers to the practice of marrying within the community. In the case of the *Daita* Sevakas, **marriage is typically within the tribe** or the broader ***Daita Sevaka* community**. This ensures that the community's sacred traditions, rituals, and responsibilities remain within the families involved in the service of the temple. The idea behind this practice is to maintain a **spiritual continuity** and preserve the **traditional knowledge** of temple rituals across generations. Normally their marriage is done to "Karana" cast. as *Jagganath Swain Mohapatra* married to *Anusuya Pattanaik* now *Anusuya Swain Mohapatra* of *Nagasya gotra*.

As per *Daitapati* soci-cultural tradition, the following practices are ideally followed in the past. Though changes are coming naturally, the following set of soci-cultural need to be reflected for understanding the *Daitapati* Social system.



As per empirical data, few more interesting cultural principles come to lime light in the following manner.



Need for Preservation: However, there is a growing need for initiatives to preserve the traditions of tribal priests in the Jagannath Temple, ensuring their continued role in the temple rituals and maintaining the cultural diversity that defines the religious practices of the temple.

III. Conclusion

The present paper is based on our primary enquiry on *Daitapatis*. The initial studies on **tribal priests** within the **Jagannath Cult** represent a unique intersection of **tribal heritage** and **Hindu religious tradition**. Their role in the Jagannath Temple is a testament to the **syncretic nature of Hinduism**, where local, indigenous traditions are deeply woven into the fabric of pan-Hindu practices. The Daita Sevakas, through their spiritual dedication, ensure the continuation of these sacred rituals, while simultaneously representing the **rich diversity** of Indian culture. Their service is not only central to the **Jagannath Cult** but also to the **preservation** and **transmission** of a **living religious tradition** that has thrived for centuries, which is not only a necessary but also highly essential tradition as one of the Four religious *Dhams* of Hindu India.

Tribal priests in Hindu temples of Odisha represent a vibrant cultural fusion and stand as custodians of a unique religious heritage. Their roles, though often overlooked, are critical for understanding the inclusive and adaptive nature of Hinduism in Odisha. Recognizing and preserving their contributions is quite essential for cultural continuity and religious pluralism.

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