The “Puri Jagannath Temple” Case

What is the issue?

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- ‘Lord Jagannath’ is originally a tribal deity who has been incorporated into the brahminical fold over the years.
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- As only people of the Hindu faith are currently being allowed into his shrine in Puri, some people have been expressing dissent.
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Why is the unique case of Puri Jagannath?

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- **History -** The famed Puri “Jagannath Temple” attracts large crowds from all over India and its annual rath yathra is also very popular.
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- Most theories have it that the main deity at Puri is a “Sabara Debata” (Adivasi god) who was named Jagannath (Lord of the Universe) by early Buddhists.
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- Notably, Jagannath was established in Puri in the 9th century AD, and was usurped into the Brahminical fold after the decline of Buddhism.
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- Some Hindutva ideologues decry this, but there is clear evidence that temple entry restrictions based on caste and religion was only after 16th century.
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- **Presently -** Considering the tribal (non-brahminical) origin of the Jagannath Cult, many scholars have vouched for making the deity accessible to all faiths.
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- There is currently a ban on non-Hindus to enter the Puri Shrine, and hence a case had been filed in the Supreme Court (SC) to break the same.
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- In this context, SC suggested that the temple management should give every

visitor access to the deity and also allow them to make offerings and prayers.

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What could've been SC's rationale in the pronouncement?

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- Generally, religion can be defined as a body of particular belief(s) that a group of people subscribes to and organise themselves for fulfilling the same.
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- Interestingly, Hinduism is a conglomerate faith that incorporates all forms of belief(s) without specifically mandating the selection or elimination of anything in particular.
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- Notably, "Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam vs State of Tamil Nadu" case in 2015, stressed the inclusiveness that is naturally inherent in Hinduism.
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- That judgment had declared Hinduism as "Sanatan Dharma' (or eternal faith), which is the "dynamic collective wisdom" of the centuries.
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What are the dissenting voices?

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- Some scholars dispute the tribal origins of Jagannatha and hold steadfast with the notion that he was always part of the Hindu fold.
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- Additionally, they also vouch that temples are places of worship unlike schools or parks, and hence equal access can't be granted to people of all faiths.
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- They argue that denying entry to those who don't believe in the deity isn't discriminatory as they aren't being denied any essential service (like praying).
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- Hindutva ideologues have vowed to fight it out in courts to reverse the SC suggestion as they fear that it might negatively impact the Hindu faith.

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What are the administrative reforms proposed at the Puri Shrine?

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- There are many hereditary servitors (mostly of tribal origin) for the temple, which the court has sought to abolish (after paying suitable compensation).
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- Notably, servitors (hereditary caretakers) currently face severe allegations of extorting money and misbehaving with devotees.
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- Further, the court seeks to enable the appointment of duly qualified persons belonging to the various communities associated with the core Jagannath cult.
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- Expectedly, the current servitors have decried these suggestions and asserted that they were not mere workers who can be removed from service.
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- Additionally, they've stated that their role was a religious one (protected by the fundamental right to religion), and hence can't be regulated by the state.
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- Nonetheless, "Shree Jagannath Temple Administration" (SJTA) has begun implementing the SC orders in a piecemeal manner.
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