

The “Puri Jagannath Temple” Case

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n

- ‘Lord Jagannath’ is originally a tribal deity who has been incorporated into the brahminical fold over the years.

\n

- As only people of the Hindu faith are currently being allowed into his shrine in Puri, some people have been expressing dissent.

\n

\n\n

Why is the unique case of Puri Jagannath?

\n\n

\n

- **History** - The famed Puri “Jagannath Temple” attracts large crowds from all over India and its annual rath yatra is also very popular.

\n

- 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.

\n

- Notably, Jagannath was established in Puri in the 9th century AD, and was usurped into the Brahminical fold after the decline of Buddhism.

\n

- Some Hindutva ideologues decry this, but there is clear evidence that temple entry restrictions based on caste and religion was only after 16th century.

\n

- **Presently** - Considering the tribal (non-brahminical) origin of the Jagannath Cult, many scholars have vouched for making the deity accessible to all faiths.

\n

- 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.

\n

- 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.

\n

\n\n

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

\n\n

\n

- 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.
- Interestingly, Hinduism is a conglomerate faith that incorporates all forms of belief(s) without specifically mandating the selection or elimination of anything in particular.
- Notably, “Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam vs State of Tamil Nadu” case in 2015, stressed the inclusiveness that is naturally inherent in Hinduism.
- That judgment had declared Hinduism as “Sanatan Dharma’ (or eternal faith), which is the “dynamic collective wisdom” of the centuries.

\n

\n\n

What are the dissenting voices?

\n\n

\n

- Some scholars dispute the tribal origins of Jagannatha and hold steadfast with the notion that he was always part of the Hindu fold.
- 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.
- 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).
- 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.

\n

\n\n

What are the administrative reforms proposed at the Puri Shrine?

\n\n

\n

- There are many hereditary servitors (mostly of tribal origin) for the temple, which the court has sought to abolish (after paying suitable compensation).

\n

- Notably, servitors (hereditary caretakers) currently face severe allegations of extorting money and misbehaving with devotees.

\n

- Further, the court seeks to enable the appointment of duly qualified persons belonging to the various communities associated with the core Jagannath cult.

\n

- Expectedly, the current servitors have decried these suggestions and asserted that they were not mere workers who can be removed from service.

\n

- 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.

\n

- Nonetheless, "Shree Jagannath Temple Administration" (SJTA) has begun implementing the SC orders in a piecemeal manner.

\n

\n