

## [PURI](#)

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## PURI

Orissa's Sacred City Enforces Strict Laws To Protect its Pilgrims

Imagine...you're on pilgrimage. After strict preparations and weeks of travel, you've finally reached the city of Puri on India's east coast of Orissa, sacred abode of Lord Jagannatha. Your heart beats faster and you tremble just a little as you proceed downBadadanda, the grand road to the giant temple. Immersed in thoughts of Lord Jagannatha, you can't help but notice children gathered around televisions in the homes you pass, while the park across the street is empty. Then,"choli ke piche kya he," a raunchy Hindi pop song breaks your reverie. It blares from one of the streetside music shops. You try to bring your mind back to God, but loud film songs assail you from a video store across the street. You falter a bit. Suddenly, a waiter brushes by you with steaming dishes of fish, egg and meat on his way to serve the carnivorous customers at one of the sidewalk cafes. Your bhava is shattered as you cry out, "Lord Jagannatha! Have you forsaken us?"

Though this "pilgrim's worst nightmare" was dreamed up in the offices of Hinduism Today, it may well have occurred prior to 1994, when, by passing stringent legislation, the local Puri government began a campaign to save pilgrims from the encroachment of impious merchants besieging the temple. Hinduism Today visited the city to see if the controversial laws were being embraced, or ignored.

By M.P. Mohanty, Delhi

This holy city, like other places in India, has undergone tremendous change in recent years. The process of modernization, improvement in transport and communication has turned the city of pilgrimage to a place of modern tourism. The government and hoteliers have taken several steps to maximize their earnings from the tourism industry. By commercializing the annual Konark Dance festival and Puri Beach Festival, along with national telecasts of the annual Rath Yatra (car festival), declaring tourism as industry and providing soft loans and land to hotels, they have attracted a large tourist inflow both from India and abroad. No doubt, the steps have given a boost to the economic life of the native people. But the simple and peaceful life of Puri has been disturbed. Some say sullied.

Nowadays you find shops, hotels and lodging houses in every part of the city, even abutting the temple itself. The Badadanda (grand road), where rolls the wheels of the lumbering chariots of Lord Jagannath, his elder brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra, so sacred to the people, has become a crowded place of shopping. On both sides of the street you have all sorts of cafes, hotels and shops for handicrafts, ladies garments and audio-video cassettes.

Before the new laws, the shopkeepers played loud music, mostly popular Hindi film songs and "vulgar" Oriya ditties, to attract more customers. On the way to the temple you had to endure the smell of meaty displays of what the cafes were serving--chicken tandoors, high fry, mutton tikkas, egg

bhujiyas--and listen to the base bass of crude pop songs. Then there were the wine shops and paanshops where the local varieties of bhangal[intoxicant] were available in plenty. Pilgrims coming for moksha from far away places were dismayed to find themselves in a worldly metropolis, where film sound tracks had replaced the sound of temple bells and bhajans. While the elders and religious people used to raise faint objections, the vast majority of shop owners, business people, hoteliers and even the local youth welcomed the changes, calling it inevitable modernization. But devotees stood strong. Their righteous indignation grew thunderous, and officials listened.

In 1994 the local municipal authorities passed legislation to outlaw the sale and preparation of meat, fish, poultry and eggs in all restaurants and shops within specific areas around the temple and on certain roads. In these areas, public playing of non-religious music was restricted as well. Also, plans were announced to begin teaching yoga in local schools. In addition to these "secular" improvements, the temple administration began its own crusade to upgrade conditions within the temple compound itself. Overall, the people are overjoyed. I spoke to sadhus, shopkeepers and city officials. Here is what they had to say.

Mahanta Sri Ram Krishna Das, Radha Ballav Mutt: The decision of the authorities is historic. Non-vegetarian foods are tamasic, or asuric (demonic) foods. They are not offered to the Lord. If you eat such things, you pollute your body and mind and you are not open to spirituality. Devotional and classical music has a soothing effect on the mind. Now, if you walk on Badadanda, you can feel the difference.

Regarding the plans to teach yoga in the schools, in ancient times, munis and rishis used to practice yoga and remain healthy and live very long. Sound health is a prerequisite to following dharma and leads to concentration and meditation. Through meditation we attain to God. If both of these decisions are fully implemented, we will have a different Puri. It will be the real land of the Lord.

Sri Maheswar Mohanty, former municipal Chairman and present member of Legislative Assembly: As a local resident and the peoples' representative, it is my duty to take new and innovative steps for the improvement of this holy city. Slowly, over the past few years, I noticed how the purity and sanctity of Puri was eroding. On the grand road shop owners used to play vulgar music. Now we have banned this practice. Most of the shopkeepers cooperated, but there are a few who still resist.

I visited most all the important places of pilgrimage in the country--Kedarnath, Badrinath, Garidwar, Rishikesh and more. Nowhere could I smell non-vegetarian foods. So, out of my personal feelings and experience, I decided to improve the situation here. Ideally, we should have banned non-vegetarian food in the entire city. But Puri has this complex mixture of being the holiest place and also an international tourist spot. We have many hotels on the beachside and the economic affairs of the local people depend on this trade. Therefore, this law does not apply to those parts of the city. We are organising small public meetings to create awareness, because no law can be implemented fully without the cooperation of the people. It will take time to change the habit. But the overall response is very encouraging. We are receiving rare

compliments from all over the country.

We have also passed a resolution to include yoga in city schools. It will help the younger generation a lot. The implementation of this will take more time. We are trying our level best to restore the glory and purity of Puri.

Sri Mahi Mohan Tripathi, temple administrator: We do not have any role to play, administratively, but the decision is a noble one and we encourage it. On the grand road, where the Lord's car rolls, selling of non-vegetarian food-stuffs should be banned. Of course, around the temple such shops never existed. People have welcomed the ruling and participate voluntarily to make it a success. On our own we have taken a few steps to improve things. We have created washing platforms in the eastern, western and southern gates of the temple. We have acquired and are trying to beautify the land near the meghanad prachir, outer wall of the temple. We are publishing a quarterly journal, Sri Mandir, and are working in collaboration with other agencies to clear and maintain the holy ponds in the city.

Dr. Sidheswar Mohapatra, researcher and Oriya professor: We all welcome the decision. The Skanda Purana's Lutkal Khanda (chapter on Orissa) has a detailed reference and description of Puri. It is mentioned as the most pious land on earth. The representative of Lord Jagannath "God Amavasya Narayan," visits the seashore on the day of the dark moon. Traditionally, the seashore is a place for dana [offerings], tarpana [honoring ancestors] and puja [worship]. But now it has become a place for "fun and food." Nowadays people are interested in easy

money, so I am sceptical about the complete and successful implementation of the project. But if the people realise the need for it, to preserve sanctity, it will work.

Shri Mayadhar Maharana, district information and public relations officer: On both sides of Badadanda we had egg and mutton shops. Now, even all the big hotels have stopped. Now only devotional songs and classical music can be played. The devotees coming from far away places highly appreciate the changes.

Initially, some of the owners did not obey the order, so we told them that non-implementation of the rule will lead to cancellation of their food license. Then, they all agreed. Contrary to the fear that this step would diminish the number of tourists, the tourist inflow has grown substantially.

We plan to relocate the shops next to the temple and to plant trees and flower gardens there. Earlier, dada ghee (vegetable oil) was used in the lamps in the temple. Now only pure ghee is used. Thus, in many ways we are trying to restore and maintain the sanctity of Puri dham.

Ms. Sandhya Mohapatra, proprietress, Jagannath Travels: Puri is a unique travel destination. It is the only place which attracts all types of tourists and is a great pilgrimage center also. So the "no killing zone" is a good gesture by the administration. Chairman Shri Maheswar Mohanty has dared to shift all the business related to animal killing away from the main marketplace of the city. This bold but useful step will help the

travel industry, devotees and the common people to regain the glory of Puri. At the same time, it will result in economic upliftment of the down-trodden.

Prasanna Misra, Headmaster, Navaka Le Bar Upper Primary School; General-Secretary, Primary Teachers' Association: The recent announcements by the Municipality are much needed. If you practice yoga regularly, you will not suffer from disease. Yoga makes one healthy and handsome. It will not harm the regular study process. On the contrary, it will help students to concentrate. Good health means more time for study and other creative works. Our children must practice yoga to maintain a proper balance between body and mind. I will introduce yoga classes in my schools shortly.

Bishnu Priya Das, head teacher, Trilochan Upper Primary School, Matia Pada, Puri: Yoga and Hinduism are closely interlinked. So far, we have not received any official circular to introduce yoga in our school, but I am keen on doing it. Our children are forgetting our rich traditions. Nowadays, the children do not go out and play. After school hours, they remain indoors and watch television. There is very little scope for physical exercise, not only in Puri, but in the entire state of Orissa. The guardians do not encourage it. They think if you exercise, you will get tired and sleep, hence neglect study. The truth is that yoga develops both physical and mental health and strength.

N. Mohapatra, vegetarian restaurant owner, Narendra Square: My great grandfather established a tiny restaurant in this pious square (photo above). Since that time we have prepared only

vegetarian items. Narendra Pond is very sacred, and Lord Jagannath's holy chariot passes by our restaurant. By the mercy of the Lord, we have grown in size year after year. The decision does not impact us directly, since we are already vegetarian. The hoteliers and restaurants that still serve non-vegetarian meals should stop voluntarily.