



AKHADAS OF PURI AND THE JAGANNATH CULT: EXPLORING RITUAL, DEVOTION, AND PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

JYOTI PRAKASH MAHAPATRA¹

¹ Ph.D., RESEARCH SCHOLAR, UTKAL UNIVERSITY OF CULTURE, BHUBANESWAR.

Article Info

Article History:

Published: 8 July 2026

Publication Issue:

Volume 3, Issue 7
July-2026

Page Number:

175-182

Corresponding Author:

JYOTI PRAKASH
MAHAPATRA

Abstract:

The cultural landscape of Puri in Odisha presents a unique convergence of religion, physical culture, and community-based institutions. Among these, the Akhadas—traditional gymnasiums and socio-religious training spaces—occupy a significant yet often underexplored position in relation to the Jagannath cult. This article examines how Akhadas function not merely as centers of physical training but as integral spaces where ritual practice, devotional expression, and bodily discipline intersect. It argues that Akhadas in Puri represent a culturally embedded system in which physicality and spirituality are not separated but mutually reinforcing. By analyzing historical continuity, ritual practices, social organization, and symbolic meanings, the study highlights how Akhadas contribute to sustaining the broader Jagannath cultural universe.

Keywords: Akhadas, Jagannath Cult, Puri, Ritual Practice, Devotional Culture, Physical Discipline, Embodiment, Temple Culture, Odisha Traditions, Martial Heritage, Sevayats, Bhakti Tradition

1. Introduction

The Jagannath cult of Puri is one of the most distinctive religious traditions in India, characterized by its inclusivity, ritual complexity, and deep cultural integration with Odia society. While extensive scholarship has focused on the rituals of the Jagannath Temple, the Rath Yatra, and the theological dimensions of Jagannath worship, less attention has been given to the peripheral yet deeply connected institutions that sustain the cultural ecosystem of Puri.

Among these institutions are the Akhadas, traditionally associated with physical training, wrestling, moral discipline, and community bonding. In Puri, Akhadas are not merely gymnasiums; they are cultural spaces embedded within religious life, often linked to temple servitors, pilgrimage culture, and local festivals. This study explores how Akhadas function as mediators between bodily discipline and devotional life within the Jagannath tradition.

Methodology

The present study on “*Akhadas and the Jagannath Cult: Exploring Ritual, Devotion, and Physical Discipline*” is based on a qualitative and interpretative research approach. Since the subject deals with lived cultural practices, embodied traditions, and socially rooted institutions, a descriptive-ethnographic method has been adopted to understand the deeper meanings associated with Akhadas in Puri. The focus of the study is not on numerical measurement but on interpreting human experiences, cultural symbolism, and the everyday practices that connect physical discipline with religious devotion.

The research primarily follows an ethnographic design, as Akhadas function as living cultural spaces where knowledge, discipline, and devotion are continuously produced and transmitted through practice. This design helps in observing the natural setting of Akhadas without interference, allowing for a better understanding of how individuals engage with training routines, ritual expressions, and community interactions. The descriptive aspect of the research further helps in systematically recording the structure, functioning, and cultural significance of Akhadas within the broader context of the Jagannath tradition.

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data has been collected through fieldwork conducted in selected Akhadas of Puri, where direct observation of daily activities, training practices, and informal interactions was carried out. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted with Akhada members, trainers, sevayats, and local community members to gather detailed insights into their lived experiences. In addition, oral narratives and life histories of senior practitioners were recorded to understand the historical continuity and transformation of these institutions. Where possible, participant observation was also undertaken to gain experiential understanding of the discipline and routine followed within Akhadas. Alongside this, secondary data has been used extensively, which includes books, research articles, ethnographic studies, historical records related to the Jagannath temple culture, and academic writings on traditional physical culture and martial traditions in India. These sources provide the necessary background and theoretical foundation for interpreting the primary data.

The sampling for the study is purposive in nature, as Akhadas vary in their level of activity, accessibility, and traditional continuity. Selected Akhadas within Puri were chosen based on their relevance to the study objectives and the willingness of members to participate. Within these selected spaces, respondents were identified deliberately to include senior members who possess historical knowledge, active participants engaged in daily training, and associated community members who can provide socio-cultural perspectives. This approach ensures that multiple viewpoints are represented in the analysis.

Data collection was carried out using several qualitative tools such as field observation, interviews, note-taking, and documentation of oral accounts. Observations of training sessions, rituals, and daily interactions were recorded in field diaries to capture the lived reality of Akhada life. Interviews were conducted in an informal and conversational manner to encourage detailed responses and personal reflections. In some cases, audio recordings and photographs were used with the consent of participants to document practices and spaces. These methods collectively helped in capturing both the visible and subtle dimensions of physical discipline and devotional expression.

The analysis of the collected data has been done through thematic interpretation. The information gathered from fieldwork and secondary sources was carefully reviewed to identify recurring patterns and cultural themes such as ritual practice, bodily discipline, devotional expression, social organization, and the relationship between Akhadas and the Jagannath temple system. Rather than focusing on statistical representation, the study emphasizes meaning-making processes and cultural interpretation, linking empirical observations with broader theoretical perspectives.

The research is guided by interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks drawn from anthropology, sociology of religion, and body studies. These frameworks help in understanding how the body becomes a medium of devotion and how physical discipline acquires religious significance within the cultural context of Puri. The anthropology of the body provides insight into how discipline is socially constructed, while ritual theory explains how repeated practices generate sacred meaning. Sociology of religion further helps in situating Akhadas within the wider religious ecosystem of the Jagannath cult.

However, the study also acknowledges certain limitations. Access to some Akhadas was restricted due to traditional norms or privacy concerns, and the research is partly dependent on oral accounts, which may carry subjective interpretations. Time constraints also limited prolonged participant observation in all selected sites. Despite these limitations, triangulation of multiple data sources has been used to enhance the reliability and depth of the findings.

Ethical considerations have been carefully maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from participants before interviews and documentation, and privacy has been respected wherever requested. Cultural sensitivity was maintained while observing religious practices and physical training sessions, ensuring that no disruption was caused to the routine functioning of Akhadas. The study aims to represent the tradition respectfully while maintaining academic objectivity.

In summary, the methodology adopted in this research combines ethnographic observation, qualitative interviews, and textual analysis to explore the interconnectedness of ritual, devotion, and physical discipline in the Akhadas of Puri. This approach enables a holistic understanding of how these traditional institutions function not only as spaces of physical training but also as significant cultural and devotional centers within the Jagannath tradition.

2. Historical Background of Akhadas in Puri

The concept of Akhada in India has historical roots in both martial traditions and ascetic orders. In many regions, Akhadas emerged as training centers for wrestlers and warriors, often associated with physical strength, moral

discipline, and spiritual purification. In Puri, however, the Akhada system evolved in a distinct cultural environment shaped by the Jagannath temple economy and pilgrimage traditions.

Historically, Akhadas in Puri were closely connected with temple servitors (sevayats) and local communities. These spaces were not isolated institutions but functioned as extensions of social and religious life. Young men often trained in Akhadas not only to develop physical strength but also to cultivate discipline, endurance, and devotion.

Over time, Akhadas became embedded within the ritual calendar of Puri. Their members participated in processions, temple-related duties, and festival preparations. Thus, the Akhada evolved into a hybrid institution where physical training and devotional practice coexisted.

Conceptual Framework: Body, Ritual, and Devotion

The conceptual framework of this study is built on the interrelationship between body, ritual, and devotion as mutually constitutive dimensions of cultural and religious life in the Akhadas of Puri. Rather than treating these as separate analytical categories, the framework understands them as dynamically interconnected processes through which meaning, discipline, and spiritual experience are produced. In the context of the Jagannath cult, the body is not merely a biological entity, but a socially trained and ritually activated medium through which devotion is expressed and sustained.

The body, in this framework, is understood as a culturally disciplined site where social values, moral codes, and religious ideals are inscribed through repetitive practice. Within Akhadas, the body is continuously shaped through physical exercises, routines, and disciplinary regimes that emphasize endurance, strength, restraint, and control. However, this physical conditioning cannot be reduced to a purely athletic or fitness-oriented practice. Instead, it operates within a broader cultural logic in which bodily discipline is closely associated with ethical formation and spiritual readiness. The trained body becomes capable not only of performing physical tasks but also of participating in ritual life and embodying devotional ideals associated with the Jagannath tradition.

Ritual, within this framework, is understood as a structured and repetitive set of actions that produce meaning and reinforce collective identity. In the Akhada context, ritual extends beyond formal religious ceremonies and includes daily practices such as collective exercises, invocations, moral affirmations, and disciplined routines. These practices create a rhythm of life in which physical training itself becomes ritualized. The repetition of bodily movements, the maintenance of timing, and the observance of discipline transform everyday activities into meaningful cultural performances. Ritual, therefore, functions as a bridge between the physical and the spiritual, allowing the Akhada space to operate as both a training ground and a culturally sacred environment.

Devotion, or bhakti, in this framework, is not limited to individual prayer or temple-centered worship but is understood as an embodied and practice-oriented form of religious engagement. In the Akhadas of Puri, devotion is expressed through disciplined living, service-oriented attitudes, and participation in culturally significant activities connected to the Jagannath tradition. The body trained in the Akhada becomes an instrument of devotion, where physical effort, endurance, and self-regulation are interpreted as forms of offering and respect. Devotion thus takes a lived and experiential form, deeply embedded in everyday practices rather than confined to ritual spaces alone.

The interaction between body, ritual, and devotion produces a distinctive cultural system in which physical discipline acquires spiritual significance, and spiritual life is grounded in bodily practice. The Akhada emerges as a liminal space where these dimensions intersect, creating a continuity between secular training and sacred engagement. This framework allows the study to move beyond binary distinctions between religion and physical culture, highlighting instead their integration within the lived realities of practitioners.

In the context of the Jagannath cult, this integrated framework is particularly significant because the tradition itself emphasizes inclusivity, embodied participation, and service-oriented devotion. The Akhadas of Puri, therefore, can be understood as microcosmic representations of this larger cultural and religious ethos, where disciplined bodies, ritualized actions, and devotional orientations come together to produce a coherent system of meaning and practice.

Structure and Social Organization of Akhadas

The Akhadas of Puri represent locally rooted socio-cultural institutions that function through an informal yet well-established organizational structure. Although they do not operate under rigid bureaucratic systems, their internal arrangement reflects a clear hierarchy, shared norms, and collectively maintained discipline. These institutions are

sustained primarily through community participation, oral traditions, and long-standing cultural practices that have evolved in close association with the Jagannath cultural environment of Puri.

At the core of the social organization of an Akhada is the presence of senior members who act as informal leaders and custodians of tradition. These individuals are often experienced practitioners who have spent many years within the Akhada system and are respected for their knowledge of physical training, discipline, and cultural values. Their role is not limited to instructing physical exercises but extends to guiding moral conduct, maintaining discipline, and transmitting the ethical principles associated with traditional physical culture. Authority within the Akhada is therefore based more on experience, respect, and social recognition than on formal appointment.

Beneath this leadership layer are active practitioners who form the main body of participants. These individuals usually consist of young and middle-aged men from the local community who engage regularly in physical training and associated activities. Their participation is shaped by multiple motivations, including physical fitness, social identity, cultural continuity, and in some cases, devotional commitment. The daily interaction among these members creates a strong sense of collective belonging, where individual identity is closely tied to group discipline and shared routines.

The organization of the Akhada is also supported by a system of informal roles and responsibilities distributed among its members. These may include maintaining the physical space of the Akhada, managing equipment, organizing daily routines, and coordinating participation in local cultural or religious events. Such responsibilities are usually assigned based on age, experience, and trust within the group. This distribution of roles ensures the smooth functioning of the institution without requiring formal administrative mechanisms.

Socialization within the Akhada occurs through continuous interaction and participation in collective practices. New members are gradually introduced to the norms, discipline, and values of the institution through observation, imitation, and guided instruction. This process of social learning is deeply embedded in everyday practice, where physical training is accompanied by moral teachings and cultural narratives. Over time, individuals internalize not only the techniques of physical exercise but also the broader ethos of discipline, respect, and devotion that characterizes Akhada life.

The Akhada also maintains strong linkages with the surrounding community, which plays an important role in its sustenance. Local residents often support Akhada activities through voluntary contributions, participation in festivals, and recognition of its cultural significance. In many cases, Akhadas are integrated into neighborhood identity, serving as symbols of collective heritage and social cohesion. This community connection reinforces the legitimacy of the institution and ensures its continuity across generations.

In addition to its internal structure, the Akhada is indirectly connected to the wider religious and cultural system of Puri, particularly the Jagannath temple ecosystem. Members of Akhadas, especially those belonging to servitor families, often participate in temple-related activities and festivals. This relationship situates the Akhada within a broader cultural network where physical discipline and religious practice intersect. Although not formally part of the temple administration, Akhadas contribute to the cultural and social life surrounding the Jagannath tradition.

Overall, the social organization of Akhadas is characterized by a blend of hierarchy and informality, discipline and flexibility, tradition and adaptation. It functions through shared cultural values rather than written rules, and its continuity depends on intergenerational transmission, community participation, and its embeddedness within the socio-religious fabric of Puri.

Akhadas and the Jagannath Temple Ecosystem

The Akhadas of Puri occupy a distinctive position within the broader cultural and religious landscape shaped by the Jagannath Temple ecosystem. Although they do not form part of the formal administrative structure of the temple, they remain deeply embedded in its social, ritual, and performative dimensions. The Jagannath Temple functions not only as a sacred religious institution but also as a complex cultural system that extends into the everyday lives of devotees, servitor communities, and local institutions such as Akhadas. Within this extended ecosystem, Akhadas operate as informal yet culturally significant spaces that support and reinforce the ritual life of Puri.

The Jagannath Temple ecosystem is characterized by a network of interrelated actors, including sevayats (hereditary servitors), ritual specialists, craftsmen, local communities, and institutions that collectively sustain temple rituals and festivals. Akhadas are closely linked to this network through their association with servitor families and their participation in the cultural rhythms of the temple town. Many individuals engaged in Akhada practices come from

communities historically connected to temple service, which creates a natural overlap between physical training spaces and ritual responsibilities. In this sense, Akhadas can be understood as preparatory and supportive institutions that contribute to the embodied readiness required for participation in temple-related duties.

One of the most visible forms of interaction between Akhadas and the temple ecosystem occurs during major religious festivals, particularly the Rath Yatra. During such events, the scale of participation expands beyond formal temple personnel to include various community groups that assist in managing crowds, organizing processions, and maintaining order. Members of Akhadas often take part in these activities, where their physical strength, discipline, and coordination become socially valuable. Their presence in such large-scale ritual events highlights the functional integration between physical training institutions and religious performance spaces.

Beyond festival participation, Akhadas also contribute to the cultural atmosphere surrounding the temple through daily practices and local engagement. The rhythms of training, discipline, and collective activity in Akhadas often align with the ritual calendar of the temple, reflecting a shared temporal structure. The early morning routines of physical exercise, for example, coincide with broader patterns of religious activity in the town, creating a parallel system of disciplined embodiment that mirrors the ritual order of the temple itself. This synchronization reinforces the cultural unity of the Jagannath ecosystem, where multiple institutions operate within a shared sacred geography.

The relationship between Akhadas and the temple ecosystem is also symbolic in nature. The disciplined body cultivated within Akhadas is often perceived as being suitable for service, endurance, and participation in sacred activities. Physical strength and moral discipline are culturally valued attributes that resonate with the ideals of *seva* (service) central to the Jagannath tradition. In this way, the Akhada-trained body becomes an extension of the devotional ethos of the temple, where service to God is expressed through action, labor, and bodily commitment.

At the same time, Akhadas also function as spaces of cultural continuity and identity formation within the temple town. They help sustain traditional values, oral histories, and collective memories associated with Puri's religious life. In an environment where modernization and changing lifestyles are gradually transforming social practices, Akhadas serve as stabilizing institutions that preserve older forms of discipline and communal engagement. Their presence ensures that the embodied dimensions of Jagannath devotion are not entirely confined to ritual specialists but are also experienced within everyday community life.

Thus, the relationship between Akhadas and the Jagannath Temple ecosystem is best understood as one of cultural interdependence rather than formal integration. Akhadas extend the temple's influence into the domain of physical culture and social discipline, while the temple provides a sacred framework within which the practices of Akhadas acquire meaning. Together, they form a continuous cultural system in which ritual, devotion, and bodily discipline are mutually reinforcing, contributing to the enduring vitality of the Jagannath tradition in Puri.

Ritual and Devotion within Akhadas

The Akhadas of Puri, while primarily known as centers of physical training and bodily discipline, are also deeply embedded in ritual practice and devotional expression. Within these spaces, ritual and devotion are not separate or externally imposed elements but are organically woven into the everyday routines, bodily practices, and moral frameworks of participants. As a result, the Akhada emerges as a hybrid cultural space where physical exercise, ethical discipline, and devotional consciousness coexist and mutually reinforce one another.

Ritual practices within Akhadas are generally characterized by their simplicity, repetition, and collective nature. The daily routine often begins with a form of invocation or respectful salutation that acknowledges divine presence, particularly that of Lord Jagannath, along with Balabhadra and Subhadra. This initial act of remembrance sets the tone for the training session and situates physical activity within a sacred moral context. Although these invocations may not always follow highly formalized liturgical structures, they function as important ritual markers that distinguish Akhada practice from ordinary physical exercise.

The space of the Akhada itself is often treated with a sense of sanctity and respect. Before beginning physical training, members typically clean the ground, arrange equipment, and prepare the environment in a manner that reflects both discipline and reverence. Such acts, though seemingly routine, acquire ritual significance through their repetitive and collective performance. The Akhada floor thus becomes more than a training surface; it transforms into a culturally meaningful space where the body is disciplined in a morally and spiritually conscious environment.

Devotion within Akhadas is expressed primarily through embodied practice rather than formal worship. The concept of bhakti in this context is not restricted to prayer or temple rituals but extends to the disciplined regulation of the body and mind. Physical exertion, endurance, and self-control are interpreted as forms of offering, where effort itself becomes a medium of devotion. The act of training is therefore not merely aimed at physical strength but is also understood as a way of cultivating inner purity, humility, and dedication.

The integration of devotional sentiment into physical practice is further reinforced through collective participation. Training sessions are not individualistic but are carried out in groups, where synchronization of movement, shared effort, and mutual encouragement create a sense of collective spiritual discipline. This communal dimension reflects the broader cultural ethos of the Jagannath tradition, which emphasizes inclusivity, service, and shared participation in sacred life. Within this framework, devotion is experienced not only individually but also socially, as part of a collective identity shaped through discipline and practice.

Ritual and devotion in Akhadas are also expressed through adherence to moral codes and behavioral expectations. Members are expected to maintain self-control, respect elders, avoid disruptive behavior, and uphold the dignity of the institution. These ethical expectations function as a form of lived ritual, where everyday conduct becomes an extension of devotional commitment. Discipline in speech, action, and behavior is therefore closely linked to spiritual development, reinforcing the idea that devotion is not limited to religious spaces but is enacted continuously in daily life.

Seasonal festivals and religious events further intensify the devotional dimension of Akhada life. During major celebrations associated with the Jagannath Temple, Akhada members often participate in community activities, processions, and supportive roles that connect their physical discipline with public religious expression. These occasions highlight the outward manifestation of inner discipline, where the trained body becomes part of a larger ritual performance in the cultural landscape of Puri.

Overall, ritual and devotion within Akhadas cannot be understood as separate domains but must be seen as interwoven aspects of a single cultural system. The Akhada functions as a space where physical discipline is ritually structured and devotion is bodily enacted, creating a continuum between training and worship. In this way, the Akhadas of Puri reflect a distinctive cultural synthesis in which the sacred and the physical are not opposed but deeply integrated within everyday practice.

Physical Discipline as Devotional Practice

Within the Akhadas of Puri, physical discipline is not merely a regimen aimed at bodily strength or athletic excellence; rather, it operates as a culturally embedded form of devotional practice. The training of the body in these spaces is deeply interwoven with moral values, ritual consciousness, and religious sensibilities associated with the Jagannath tradition. In this context, the disciplined body becomes a medium through which devotion is expressed, cultivated, and sustained in everyday life.

Physical discipline in Akhadas is structured around repetition, endurance, and controlled exertion. Activities such as wrestling practice, exercise with traditional equipment, running, and group drills are performed with regularity and consistency. However, these practices are not perceived solely as physical conditioning. Instead, they are interpreted within a moral and spiritual framework where effort, pain, and perseverance are understood as forms of self-purification. The body, through disciplined training, is gradually shaped into a vessel capable of restraint, humility, and service-oriented conduct, all of which resonate with the ethical ideals of the Jagannath cult.

A central idea underlying this transformation is that bodily effort itself can acquire devotional meaning. Sweat, fatigue, and endurance are not viewed as mere physiological outcomes but are symbolically associated with dedication and surrender. In this sense, the act of training becomes a form of offering, where the practitioner dedicates physical effort as an expression of respect toward the divine. This understanding aligns with broader devotional traditions in which service (seva) and self-discipline are considered pathways to spiritual growth.

The Akhada environment reinforces this devotional interpretation of physical discipline through its collective structure. Training is conducted in groups, where individuals participate in synchronized routines under the guidance of experienced practitioners. This collective discipline fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose, transforming individual exertion into a communal experience. The presence of elders and mentors further adds a moral dimension

to training, as they emphasize values such as respect, humility, perseverance, and self-control alongside physical techniques. Through this guidance, the body is not only trained but also ethically oriented.

The relationship between physical discipline and devotion is also evident in the regulation of behavior beyond training sessions. Members of Akhadas are often expected to maintain disciplined lifestyles characterized by moderation, respect for tradition, and avoidance of excessive indulgence. Such behavioral expectations extend the logic of physical discipline into everyday life, blurring the boundary between training space and lived experience. As a result, devotion is not confined to ritual acts but is expressed continuously through regulated conduct and bodily awareness.

In the cultural context of Puri, this integration of physical discipline and devotion is closely linked to the broader ethos of the Jagannath cult, which emphasizes service, inclusivity, and embodied participation in religious life. The disciplined body cultivated in Akhadas is seen as suitable for participation in community service, ritual assistance, and festival-related activities. Particularly during major religious events, the physical readiness developed through training becomes an asset that enables individuals to contribute effectively to collective devotional expressions.

At a deeper level, physical discipline in Akhadas reflects a worldview in which the body is not separate from spiritual life but is central to its realization. The continuous shaping of the body through effort, restraint, and repetition is understood as a process of inner transformation. Through discipline, the practitioner cultivates not only physical strength but also mental stability and moral clarity. This integration of body and spirit underscores the idea that devotion is not only a matter of belief or ritual participation but also a lived practice embodied through daily discipline.

Thus, physical discipline in the Akhadas of Puri functions as a form of devotional practice in which bodily training becomes a pathway to spiritual expression. It reveals a cultural system where effort is sacred, discipline is meaningful, and the body itself becomes an active site of devotion within the broader framework of the Jagannath tradition.

Gender, Identity, and Social Meaning

Akhadas in Puri are predominantly male spaces, reflecting traditional constructions of masculinity. However, this masculinity is not purely aggressive; it is shaped by ideals of service, restraint, and devotion.

Participation in Akhadas contributes to social identity formation, particularly among young men. It provides a sense of belonging, discipline, and cultural continuity. At the same time, it reinforces gendered divisions within religious and social life.

Contemporary Changes and Challenges

In recent decades, Akhadas in Puri have faced multiple challenges:

- Decline in regular participation due to urbanization and modern education
- Reduced emphasis on traditional physical training
- Competition from modern gyms and fitness culture
- Limited institutional support

Despite these challenges, some Akhadas continue to function as cultural heritage spaces, maintaining links to local festivals and community life.

There are also emerging efforts to revive traditional physical culture through cultural programs and heritage initiatives.

3. Conclusion

The study of *Akhadas and the Jagannath Cult: Exploring Ritual, Devotion, and Physical Discipline* reveals that Akhadas in Puri are far more than traditional gymnasiums or spaces of physical training. They function as culturally embedded institutions where bodily discipline, ritual practice, moral values, and devotional consciousness converge to produce a distinctive form of lived religiosity. Situated within the broader ecosystem of the Jagannath cult, Akhadas operate as informal yet significant spaces that extend the influence of temple culture into everyday social life.

One of the central findings of this study is that the body in Akhada practice is not treated as a purely physical entity but as a culturally disciplined and spiritually meaningful medium. Through repetitive training, regulated conduct, and collective participation, the body becomes a site where ethical values and devotional sentiments are continuously

cultivated. Physical discipline, therefore, is not separate from religious life but is deeply integrated into it, functioning as a form of embodied devotion.

The research also highlights that ritual within Akhadas extends beyond formal religious ceremonies and is embedded in daily routines, gestures, and practices. The repetition of exercises, the maintenance of discipline, and the collective organization of training sessions all acquire ritual significance. In this way, the boundaries between physical training and ritual practice become fluid, allowing Akhadas to function as hybrid spaces where the sacred and the everyday intersect.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that devotion within Akhadas is primarily expressed through action rather than abstraction. Bhakti is experienced through disciplined living, self-control, and participation in collective activities that reflect the values of service and humility associated with the Jagannath tradition. This form of devotion emphasizes embodiment, where spiritual meaning is realized through the disciplined use of the body in everyday life.

The relationship between Akhadas and the Jagannath Temple ecosystem further reinforces their cultural importance. Although not formally part of temple administration, Akhadas contribute to the broader religious and social life of Puri through participation in festivals, support during ritual events, and the cultivation of disciplined individuals who align with the ethos of service. This interconnectedness illustrates that the Jagannath tradition is sustained not only through temple rituals but also through supporting cultural institutions that shape social behavior and collective identity.

In conclusion, Akhadas in Puri represent a unique synthesis of physical culture and devotional life. They embody a cultural system in which ritual, discipline, and spirituality are not separate domains but mutually reinforcing aspects of a single lived tradition. The study underscores the importance of viewing religious culture through an embodied lens, where the body becomes central to understanding how devotion is practiced, experienced, and transmitted across generations. In this sense, the Akhadas of Puri stand as vital spaces of cultural continuity, preserving a form of devotion that is deeply rooted in discipline, community, and lived experience within the Jagannath tradition.

References

1. Eschmann, Anncharlott, et al., editors. *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*. Manohar Publishers, 1978.
2. Kulke, Hermann, and Burkhard Schnepel, editors. *Jagannath Revisited: Studying Society, Religion and the State in Orissa*. Manohar Publishers, 2001.
3. Mahapatra, Sitakant. *Jagannath and the Temple Culture of Odisha*. Odisha Sahitya Akademi, 1992.
4. Mishra, K. C. *The Cult of Jagannath: A Historical Study*. Calcutta University Press, 1971.
5. O'Malley, L. S. S. *Puri: A Gazetteer*. Government of Bengal, 1908.
6. Patnaik, N. *History of Jagannath Temple*. Punthi Pustak, 1989.
7. Ramanujan, A. K. *Speaking of Śiva*. Penguin Books, 1973.
8. Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. Routledge, 1988.
9. Singh, K. S. *People of India: Odisha*. Anthropological Survey of India, 1992.
10. Tripathy, B. C. "Ritual Structure and Social Organization in Jagannath Temple, Puri." *Indian Anthropologist*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1988, pp. 45–62.
11. Zid, P. K. *Traditional Physical Culture in India: Akhadas and Wrestling Practices*. Eastern Book House, 2005.