



Panchasakha and Their Cosmological Theory

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The theory of the universe, or in other words explanation of the uncaused cause has ever been the first problem in every religion. Like the *Puranas* and Tantric texts, the Panchasakha literature also abounds with it.

The Panchasakha starts with the eternal question of “who was there when all this phenomenal universe was not”. The problem of the Prime Mover is still beyond our reach and can only be explained negatively-” He is not this, not this-”*neti neti*”. The *Prajnaparamita Hridayagarbha*, a later Buddhist scripture describes *Sunyata* as “*neti neti*”. Therefore, it seems that there is a lot of similarities between the Panchasakha ideology of *Sunyata* and that of the Buddhists. The concept of *Sunyata*, being the most characteristic ideology behind Jagannath, formulated by the Panchasakhas can be no doubt the continuation of the Vajrayana idea of the void accepted by Vaisnavism after identifying it with the Vedantic idea of *Nirguna Brahma*.

The factor of compassion (the second factor which necessitates the function of world creation the first factor being the factor of conflict or imperfection) in which Balarama Dasa and Achyutananda Dasa think that compassion moved God to creation. “after crores of years, compassion came to me and I wished a creation” or “when all was submerged in the *Sunya*

Brahma, the God wished to create. He became compassionate and his bliss percolated out as the *Sabda*”. This idea of compassion reminds us of the development of *Karuna* in Mahayana Buddhism. Buddha was then meditated upon as the Lord of Mercy.

The Panchasakha and other Vaisnavas of Orissa become one with the Vajrayanists in maintaining this *Sunya* as a Supreme Being- the *Sunya Purusa*, who appears to be the same as Vajrasattva.

Achyutananda Dasa in his “*Sunya Samhita*” states- “You have well asked me of the esoteric mystery. The *Sunya Purusa* is just a prisoner in *Sunya*, and creating all illusions. He remains quite indifferent to them. But at the same time, he is very kind to all and he also resides in all the created things. Moreover, he is well versed in crafty devices and so is the author of all sorts of performances.”¹ Another member of the Panchasakha group, Balarama Dasa in his *Virata Gita* and Chaitanya Dasa (a contemporary of the Panchasakhas) in his *Visnugarbha Purana* have also described about the *Sunya Purusa*.

Almost all the writings of many other Vaisnavas of Orissa are replete with similar brilliant description of the *Sunya Purusa*, who is sometimes called *Virata Purusa*, *Nirakara* and *Adi Brahma*.



The same ideas may also be traced in the description of the Vajrayanists.

A Buddhist work, the “*Jnanasiddhi*” of Sambala king Indrabhuti, for example, states, “He (Vajrasattva) is the Being without origin and end the all good the soul-substance of all, the enlightened one included in him all the static and the dynamic.”²

In the “*Sri Vajra-Mandalankara*” quoted in the *Jnanasiddhi*, it is said, “he eternally belongs to all the elements, to all the beings. He remains pervading all the bodies in the form of the flow of consciousness.”

He is immutable, unthinkable, pure, passionless, perfect void like the sky, free from existence and non-existence.³ Example of this type are abound in the Vajrayana works like *Prajnopaya Viniscaya Siddhi*, *Advayavajra Samgraha*, *Hevajra Tantra*, *Samputika* etc.

The *Sunya Purusa* of the Jagannath cult as expressed in the Panchasakha literature in Orissa is an expression of “*Chidvilas*” embodying thereby the conception of the Vajrasattva of Tantric Buddhism. It may also be pointed out that both *Sunya Purusa* and *Vajrasattva* are alike regarded as the non-dual state of *Sunyata* and *Karuna* and are characterized as the Primal Enlightened One-*Adi Buddha* or *Adi Brahma*.

The theory of five Dhyani Buddhas, expounded in Tantric Buddhism has found a striking exposition in “*Visnugarbha Purana*” of Chaitanya Dasa where it has been given a novel Vaisnavite setting.

This great philosopher conceives of six Visnus one of whom known as *Nirakara Visnu* is characterized as the shapeless and figureless *Sunya* and hence is the same as *Vajrasattva*, while the other five who are emanations of *Alekha Purusa* do undoubtedly resemble the five Dhyani

Buddhas- Vairocana, Aksobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha and Amogha Siddhi.

The tradition about the position of the *Panca-Dhyani Buddhas* in the *Mandalas* and similar mystic diagrams, is also to be found in literature. In the “*Visnugarbha Purana*” the six Visnus including *Nirakara Visnu* are given similar positions in the *Sunya Mandala* (N.N.Basu, in his “*Archaeological Survey of Mayurbhanj*, PP. CL.XXXVII has also brought the identification of five *Visnus* with the five *Dhyani Buddhas*).

Even the colour scheme found in the Buddhist pantheon is not missed, and in the manner of the six *Tathagatas* these six *Visnus* are represented in different colours like white, yellow, saffron, red, blue and green.⁴ Moreover, as the five *Tathagatas* have their respective *Bodhisattvas*, four of these *Visnus* have four *Brahmas* of their own, who are credited with the creation of eighty four worlds.

It may also be pointed out that the conception of the five *Tathagatas* is present in the Yogic speculation of the Jagannath cult, where five out of the six plexuses (*Satcakra*) of the human body are presided over by five *Devas*, viz. Ganesa, Kamadeva, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva and the sixth one by *Anadi* the analogue of *Adi-Buddha*. The noticeable fact is that the five *Devas* are represented with a number of accessories i.e the divine Saktis, *Vahanas* (Mounts), *Bijamantras*, colours, *Karmas* (Actions), *Pranas* and vital winds almost in the manner of the Five Tathagatas (*Dhyani Buddhas*).

The minor differences existing between the accessorial schemes of the *Dhyani Buddhas* and the *Devas* are very probably due to the assimilative nature of the Jagannath cult itself (as expounded in the Panchasakha literature).

In this way one can find a lot of similarities between the cult of Jagannath and Buddhism the



reasons for which are critically analysed and discussed in the following manner.

The great Jagannath cult of Orissa has become symbol of universal brotherhood where most of the important religious movements occurred in India have amalgamated. In a long course of time and passing through many changes and religious cross currents of variegated nature the deity has obtained its present form.

Archaeologically as well as epigraphically the historical importance of Puri in connection to Purusottama can't be established prior to the 7th century A.D. For the first time the names of Purusottama (Jagannath) and his elder brother Balabhadra (Balaram) occurred in the Neulpur grant (copper-plate inscription) of the Bhauma king Sivakaradeva. The Brahmadeo temple inscription, dated in the Kalachuri era 840 (1088 A.D.)⁵ can be taken as the first epigraphic evidence where the earliest mention of the Purusottam Ksetra occurs.

It has been known from *Dathavamsa* that Khema, one of the disciples of the Buddha took the tooth-relic from his funeral pyre and gave it to king Brahmadatta of Kalinga who constructed a shrine for it in Dantapura, his capital city. The *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* of *Digha Nikaya* also refers to this event.⁶ Scholars like N.L. Dey thinks Puri to be Dantapura, the ancient seat of the Kalingan capital.⁷ In this connection the story relating to Guhasiva, another king of Kalinga can be taken into account, who was a devout worshipper of this tooth-relic. He faced attack from a neighbouring king Khiradhara, fell in the battle and as instructed by him before his death, the tooth-relic was taken away to Srilanka for safety by his son-in-law Dantakumara and daughter Hemamala.. As mentioned by the scholar D.K.Ganguli in his book "*The Historical Geography & Dynastic History of Orissa*"

(page-26) This tooth-relic is worshipped even now-a-days in the shrine at Kandy (Srilanka). Therefore there are ample evidences to belief the story of king Guhasiva and his sacred tooth-relic. King Guhasiva was ruling Kalinga in the 4th century A.D.⁸

As the antiquity of Jagannath as a Hindu god is yet to be traced back to the 4th century A.D archaeologically and epigraphically, it can be presumed that the story of the Kalinga invasion of Yavana Raktavahu in 323 A.D.⁹ (as narrated in the Jagannath temple records *Madalapanji*) has a striking similarity to the Kalinga invasion of Khiradhara. Both invasions took place in the 4th century A.D.. Therefore, it seems that the story of Jagannath being taken away to some unknown place for safety by the then Kalingan king Sobhanadeva due to the invasion of Yavana Raktavahu is a clever representation of the *Dathavamsa* story of Khiradhara's invasion of Kalinga and the shiefting of the tooth-relic to Srilanka by the son-in-law and daughter of the then Kalingan king Guhasiva.

It is more probable that *Madalapanji* (which is a much later work) has borrowed the story from *Dathavamsa*.

Nothing is known with certainty regarding the history of Orissa in between the 2nd century A.D and the 6th century A.D. This period is known as a dark period in the history of Orissa.

Mr.James Fergusson is of the opinion that the Jagannath temple of Puri now occupies the site where there former stood the shrine containing the tooth-relic.¹⁰ The present temple was built by King Chodagangadeva (12th century A.D). But *Madalapanji* attributes the construction of the first Purusottama temple to Yayati Kesari (can be taken as Yayati II of the 2nd quarter of the 11th century A.D). This Yayati belonged to the Somavamsi Kesari dynasty. This king came from



the Daksina Kosala region (modern western Orissa). King Yayati is said to have started the construction which king Chodagangdeva finished.

The cult of the wooden post was prevalent in Western Orissa (Daksina Kosala) since circa 500 A.D and is still practiced together with the rituals of renewal (*Navakalevara*). H.Kulke, A.Eschmann and G.C.Tripathi¹¹ are of the opinion that king Yayati took this cult to Puri, as wooden gods are not known to Hinduism. Therefore, many scholars¹² are believing that Jagannath was originally a tribal deity. K.C. Mishra is of the opinion that Jagannath was brought to Puri from Seorinarayan, which lies near to the historical site of Sirpur (Chhattisgarh.), the seat of the ancient capital of Daksina Kosala, from where the Panduvamsi kings were ruling. Jagannath, originally being a tribal deity is also corroborated by traditions, where He is said to be worshipped by a tribal chief, named Viswvasu.

Saraladasa, the author of *Odia Mahabharat*, a famous Oriya poet belonging to the early 15th century is also of the opinion that Jagannath was brought to Puri from Savarinarayana (Seorinarayan). Therefore it seems that the existing deity Jagannath was brought to Puri from Seorinarayan where it was a tribal deity, by the Kesari ruler of Kosalotkala, Yayati Kesari-II, who originally belonged to the Daksina Kosala region. Seorinarayan being very near to the historical site Sirpur it seems quite feasible that Seorinarayan was the chief tribal deity of the Daksina Kosala kingdom, and therefore, Yayati might have thought it wise to take the chief deity of his region along with him to Utkala, which he ruled in the later period. (1st half of the 11th century, 1025-1040 A.D.)

Daksina Kosala was a strong centre of Tantric Buddhism, where the great king Indrabhuti

ruled, and where the Buddhist Tantric Philosopher Nagarjuna lived. Therefore, there is every possibility of this tribal deity, Seorinarayan, being influenced by the Buddhist rituals.

Buddhist influence on the Savaras (aborigines) was not only confined to the western part of Orissa, but also present in the north-east. About the 5th-6th century A.D, the present districts of Balasore and Keonjhar happened to be the seats of the Mahayanists, who used to worship their deities in association with the Savaras. For example, in Sitabhinji (Keonjhar District) there are some monuments of that period where the Savaras act as the main priests.¹³ Therefore, as goddess Parna Savari was highly regarded in the Mahayana School of Buddhism,¹⁴ the God Savarinarayana (Seorinarayan) can either be taken as a tribal deity or a deity of the Mahayana School, worshipped by the tribals (Savaras) of Daksina Kosala region, who was taken to Puri by king Yayati only in the 11th century A.D, and was soon taken into the Hindu fold.

It seems more probable that the followers of the Jagannath Cult borrowed the Snana Yatra (Bathing Festival) and Ratha Yatra (Car Festival) from the Buddhists which are said to be prevailing as Buddhist festivals in Khotan and Pataliputra, as testified by the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien. There is a stone sculpture where the ancient Car festival is carved, Which is kept in the Orissa State Museum.

As recorded by Fa Hien, the Car Festival (Ratha Yatra) was celebrated by the Buddhists of Khotan on the 1st day of *Asadha*. The pilgrim noticed a similar festival at Pataliputra, celebrated nearly the same day of the year in *Asadha*. As the Bhaumakara kings of Orissa had close cultural ties with China, they might have borrowed this tradition either from Khotan (which was situated in the north-western part of India and was not far



off from the India-China trade route) or from Pataliputra.

In the ancient and early medieval periods there was a close cultural relation between Orissa and Assam. The main deities, Jagannath and Kamaksya, respectively of Orissa and Assam were established in the spots bearing the identical name *Nilachala*. The Hindu Tantrik text *Kalika Purana* mentions *Odra* (Orissa) and *Kamarupa* (Assam) as two glorious seats of Tantrik cult.¹⁵ The Buddhist Tantrik texts *Hevajra Tantra*¹⁶ and *Sadhanamala*¹⁷ refer to *Odiyana* or *Uddiyana* (Orissa) and *Kamaksya* or *Kamarupa* (Assam) as two primary centres of Vajrayana or Tantrik Buddhism.

Besides, other Tantra works entitled *Rudrayamala*¹⁸ and *Kubjika Tantra*¹⁹ also mention both Assam and Orissa as principal seats of Tantricism.

The Vajrayana Goddess Tara in the tribal cult of Tara-Tarini suggest that there are Buddhist elements. A small Bodhisattva image is worshipped together along with the goddess Tara-Tarini in the *Garbhagrha*. Tarini is also the name of a tribal or semi-tribal goddess worshipped in the Keonjhar area.²⁰ Twine Goddess Tara-Tarini has been taken into the Hindu fold. Therefore, it seems that the Hinduization was proceeded by an incorporation of a tribal cult into Buddhism. The same thing might have happened to the tribal deity Savarinarayana also. It might have been taken into the Tantrik Buddhist fold at first and then into the Hindu fold as Purusottama in the later period.

Therefore many tribal and Buddhist traditions persist in the Jagannath cult till these days.

When the three wooden images are taken out in a procession in three cars every year during

the Car Festival to the garden house, the worship is done by certain priests, who are said to be the descendants of the Savaras (aborigines), known as *Daita-Pati*.

Scholar R.L.Mitra found the oldest work with a fixed date, *Dasavatara Carita* by Ksemendra where Buddha has been replaced by Jagannath as an *Avatara* of Visnu. This work can be assigned to the 11th Century A.D.

Therefore it seems more probable that the tribal-cum-Tantrik Buddhist deity Savarinarayana was taken away from Daksina Kosala by king Yayati Kesari and was installed in Puri in the present form. It is quite feasible that the tooth-relic of Buddha, which was worshipped in a shrine in Dantapura was taken away to Srilanka in the 4th century A.D.

Tradition everywhere accepts Jagannath to be the same with the Buddha *avatara*, and the image of that divinity has been accepted to be nothing more than a mystification of Buddhist monogram. The idea was first put forth by Mr. Stevenson in a paper in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain*,²¹ reiterated by Mr. Laidlay in his English version of the "*Travels of Fa Hien*",²² and subsequently fully demonstrated by General Cunningham.²³ Looking moreover, to the history of Buddhism in other parts of India, and the way in which the Buddhist doctrine of the identity of the human soul with the divinity was appropriated by some of the Vedantists, the Buddhist belief of the sanctity of the Bo tree made a part of the Hindu religion; the Buddhist repugnance to animal sacrifices taken up by the Vaisnavas; and Buddhist emblem, Buddhist temples; Buddhist sacred places, and Buddhist practices appropriated to Hindu usages. It is impossible to resist the conclusion that Puri was a place of Buddhist sanctity, and gradually converted to Hinduism.



Jayadeva, (a 12th century poet), in his *Dasavatara* hymn, has also admitted Jagannath as the 9th incarnation of Visnu in place of the Buddha. Bipra Nilambara's *Deula-Tola-Suanga*, has also discussed in the last chapter, an allegorical representation of this metamorphosis.²⁴ Most probably it was Ramanuja who gave the final touch to the fusion of the Buddha and Visnu in the god-head of Jagannath, for which the Tantrik Buddhists probably had already prepared an excellent foundation.

According to the *Aisvarika* School of Tantrika Buddhism the visible is created as a result of the union between *Adi Buddha* and *Adi Prajna*, and this concept with some modification is noticed in the speculative philosophy of the Jagannath Cult.. The theory of the transformation of the Buddha, the first jewel of the Buddhist Tri-Ratna, into Jagannath has its corroboration in the literary tradition of the Dharma Cult (of Bengal) also.

There are also similarities between the cosmological theory of Orissa Vaisnavism (as expounded by the Panchasakha School along with Chaitanya) and the Jagannath Cult, and the *Sarva Sunyata* doctrine of Buddhism. The cosmological theory of the Panchasakha has many things in common with the Buddhist Philosophy of Voidness.

Buddhagupta, the Guru of Lama Taranath is said to have visited many sacred places like Jagannath and Jharikhanda.²⁵ Therefore, it seems that, in his days also, Jagannath (Puri) was regarded as a place of pilgrimage by the followers of Tantrik Buddhism.

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In many of the Tantrik centres Buddhist images are also found. A seated Buddha figure was observed by this scholar while on a tour to the famous Tantrik centre Ranipur-Jharial (Dist. Balangir, in the historical Daksina Kosala region). The furious-looking tribal deity, housed in the temple of Narasimhanath hill (Dist. Bargarh-in the historical Daksina Kosala region) as observed by the late scholar A. Eschmann of Heidelberg University (Germany) is also a clear inter-mixture of Tantric Buddhist and tribal deity. Narasimha hill, was the place where the Tantrik Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna is believed to have lived.

Therefore, it is believed by this scholar that if Jagannath was originally a tribal deity, named, Savarinarayan of the Daksina Kosala region, there is every possibility of this deity to have been influenced by the Tantrik Buddhism, of which Daksina Kosala was a famous centre.

The Panchasakha poets of medieval Orissa, contemporary of Chaitanya (namely Balarama Dasa, Ananta Dasa, Yasovanta Dasa, Jagannath Dasa and Achyutananda Dasa) were at once Buddhists, Vaisnavites and Tantriks, still neither of the three wholly. The history of Vedic and Tantrik ways with all their ratifications, and Buddhism with its later development into Vajrayana also show that they were all offshoots of the same fundamental religious aspiration in man and only differ in their approaches, again shaped by objective conditions.

To think that Lord Jagannath is exclusively a Hindu, Tantric, tribal or Buddhist deity is to uproot religion of its environmental dynamics and fancy an assembly of values.

In the post-10th century A.D. there was an attempt on the part of Brahmanism to absorb the declining Buddhism in its fold while Buddhism was also making efforts to retain its identity by taking in, a part of Brahmanism, viz Tantricism.



From the Buddhist ruins discovered at Udayagiri, Lalitagiri, Ratnagiri and Baudh, we find traces of the influence of Tantrik cult in those days, which influenced Buddhism, Saivism and Vaisnavism at the same time.

Borrowing a term of the psycho-analysts, let us conclude that there are also the universal types in religious culture. Man's religious consciousness has universally bifurcated itself into the two salient channels, those of pure wisdom and worship. This 'worship' counterpart has given birth to *Tantra*, to *Purana* and to the many other later developments. The interesting suggestions of the *Tantra* can be so clearly read in Buddhism, in Brahmanism, in Jainism and even in the Cult of the Blacks (of Africa). To deny that the *Tantras* were not a homogeneous movement in Orissa is to deny a universal and almost inevitable religious expression to her cultural history. The tendency did exist in the land, even flourished side by side with other and often diverse tendencies.

Only it modified itself into new shapes and characters by coming in contact with others. And all these tendencies together moulded the religious culture of the people and integrated themselves round the institution of Jagannath.

Lord Jagannath can be taken as a symbol of the universal religious aspiration of the mankind, where all forms of religious experiments have assimilated themselves in a long course of the history.

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