Similarities Between Jagannath Cult and Mahima Cult: A Comparative Study

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Jagannatha cult is not sectarian in nature, it is a cosmopolitan and eclectic philosophy. In course of time, the cult took an Aryanized form and various major faiths like, Saktism, Vaishnavism, Tantricism, Jainism and Buddhism have been assimilated into it. There is another cult known as Mahima cult which has also many similarities with Jagannath cult. This paper makes an attempt to analyse the similarities of Mahima cult with Jagannath cult. What ever may be the different forms of this cult, it has been admitted by different scholars that this Jagannath cult is the centre; around which divergent currents and cross currents have revolved in course of time as the ways of all rivers have fallen into one sea.

It is said that, Mahimadharma always went against image worship. So at first time, it had opposed Jagannath cult. But when we see the different aspects of both the cults then we can know that all these two religions have one philosophy, one thought and many similarities between them. Mahimadharma doesn’t completely oppose Jagannath cult. It is only a reformation movement that turned against Jagannath worship. The thorough analysis of the writings of Bhima Bhoi, one of the harbingers of Mahima cult and the usual rites of the Mahima followers will give a clear idea about the relation of Mahima dharma with the Jagannath cult. In this regard, Eshmanna cited that “this Mahima movement derives its criticism of the Hindu tradition directly from the tradition of itself, thus standing in an almost paradoxical two fold relation to the tradition which it accepts on the one hand and rejects on the other.”

Bhima Bhoi has interpreted Alekha Prabhu as Jagatara tata (father of universe), Jagannath (lord of universe), Chakadola, Kalia, Madanamohana, Pitavasa, Venudhara (holding flute). Sometimes he also describes Alekha Prabhu as Visnhu, He, is Narayana, the Khirasindhuvasi (Who lives in the milk ocean). From this, we know that both these two cults are same, and all the cults worship the God in one
name. So the writings of Bhima Bhoi is no way against the Jagannath cult but he only opposed to the superstitions in Jagannath cult.

Besides the name of God, there are many similarities between the philosophical aspects of both the cults. Jagannath cult is always related with Veda, Upanishad, Gita, Bhagabat, Panchasakha religion etc. All the philosophical, spiritual and moral things have been related with Sri Jagannath cult. He is omnipresent. Both these two cults namely Mahima and Jagannath are related with Panchasakha tradition of Vaishnavism.

The first conception is the ideology of Sunya which is followed by both the cults. It was formulated by the Panchasakhas. Balarama Das in the first chapter of ‘Sarasvata Gita’ declares that Sunya and Brahma are identical ideas and in his ‘Siddhanta Dambaru’ he presents a Bijamantra which reads ‘Om Salutation to Sunya-Brahma’. It may be pointed here that Brahma in its Saguna aspect is perceived in the world manifestations, while in its Nirguna form it is conceived as the prime mover behind all such manifestations. This ideology appears to be the same as that of the Mahima cult where the world manifestations become unrecognizably unified with Sunya.

Both these two cults describe their Gods as, ‘Sunya Purusa’ or Supreme Being. Achyutananda Das 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 further emphasizes in his “Nitya Rasa” that the supreme entity not only creates the whole universe but also He sports inside ‘Sunya’ with His permanent associates which he described as ‘Nitya Rasa’.

Chaitanya Dasa, a contemporary of the panchasakhas in his ‘Visnugarbha Purana’ writes that the incomprehensible. Being has neither form nor colour, He is the great void and He has no existence. He is not a shape and shapeless is his body and so he remains in Sunya with the Sunya. One who possesses a body cannot describe the secret of his form, because even veda fails to depict His merit. He in his book, “Nirguna Mahatmya’ declares that the beginning less and the shapeless lord fulfills the desire for emancipation of the living creatures. In the faith of the devotees, He resides in all the material bodies. The mahima cult also declares their God as Anakar, Nirajana, Alekha, Achyuta, Ananta. Though, they have not supported the image worship but they have believed in the same ideology of Sunya Brahma.

Secondly like Upanishads both these cults claim the Absolute reality of God or Non-duality that the Parama Brahma in one and without second. Bhima Bhoi says, ‘I will serve one religion, one name and one Brahman.’ Here we find a close similarity between Jagannath cult and Mahimadharma. Like the Non-duality of Sanakaracharya both these two cults claim all the multiplicity and duality of the empirical world which is due to neiscence finally fuse into it and forget all their distinctions as the rivers in the ocean.

Thirdly, both these two cults believe in cosmology i.e synthesis of two opposite trends-the dualism of Sankhya and monism of Vedantas. According to Vaishnavites of Orissa, the process of creation is the result of the union of space (Yogamaya) and time (Kalarupa), symbolically expressed as the union of the primordial Sakti and Phallus. According to Sankhya thinker the material cause which undergoes a real modification and is a composite of three qualities : Sattwa, Raja and Tama. Reference may be made here to Bhima Bhoi’s Stuti Chintamani which favours the same hypothesis.
Fourthly, both these two cults believe in Niskama Bhakti or desireless devotion as the aim of religion and law of Karma. Both Gita and Bhima Bhoi’s writings depict above Niskama Bhakti that “A person having no desire is worthy to be my disciple”. Bhima Bhoi speaks that if one has good deeds in his previous birth, he can achieve Brahmajnana. Man is mortal and illusion surrounds him. He will be free from transmigrations by uttering the name of Alekha or God. The most important aspect of both these cults are the Niskam Bhakti Yoga. The aims of Yoga system are to control disease, decay, and death through physical culture and to realize the Alekha Niranjan (the formless and spotless) by transmuting the subtler body into a gross physical super conscious one.

Fifthly, one of important features of the Yoga system of these cults are the Guru Vada and ‘Pinda Brahmanda’. The Indian culture gives prime importance to Guru Balaram Das in his Gupta Gita says “Guru is Brahma, Hari and Hara and He is also the formless voil himself.” Bhimabhoi of Mahima cult also says Guru is the remover of ignorance. Ignorance can be removed by the realization of Param Brahma. As he is the only destroyer of ignorance, he is the only true Guru. This Guruvada is also accepted in the Puranic and Upanishadic literature of the Hindus. In case of the Orissan Vaishnavas, however Lord Jagannath is regarded as the ultimate Guru not only of the individual but also of the whole universe.

Both these two cults believe in Pinda Brahmanda theory. ‘The principle of identifying the human body with the universe is markedly present in the Yogic Philosophy of the Jagannath cult. All the Oriya philosophers declare in almost the same voice that the entire universe is located within body and that the Pinda and Brahmanda are one and the same. In ‘Saptanga Yogasara Tika’ of Balaram Das and in ‘Siva Svarodaya’ of Yasovanta Das, they depicts the various phases of time are explained with reference to the functions of the vital winds in the nervous system, and it pointed out that by controlling the vital wind one might escape from the malignant influence of ‘Whirl of time.’

Here Bhimabhoi says about Parama Brahma that He is the master of three words. He is present in the heart of wicked and good. He is omnipresent in the form of soul in all forms. This theory is the concept of Jivatma and Paramatma. The relationship between them is depicted in the Adianta Gita; of Bhimbohi.; He also sought the various places of the universe within the humanbody. According to him the body is of eight leagues which contains Param Brahma within. This body is the manifestation of 3 idols i.e. Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra. This body is like an inverted tree. Both agree in the same Pinda Brahmanda theory. According to them there are the Astakula Naga in the feet, the seven universes in the head, the seven oceans within the body, the forceful sound indicates the presence of Nada Brahma. Brahma, the creator of Veda, exists in the naval, lord Jagannath in the heart, Sadasiva in the throat, Param Brahma exists on the Alekhapura at the peak of the Skull. He will realize this will get the salvation. But one difference between these two cults are that Mahimaites say if God lives in the heart and body of the man so there is no necessity of worshipping Gods and Goddesses in the shape of all images. Bhimabhoi says, “Everything is within you, never wander outside.” Jagannath is within this body. It is needless to worship the idol. The idol is a dry wood. How can it lead us to salvation? One is deceived without realizing the inner thing in the body. The human body is compared with Narayana and Astabrahma. True religion is to be
found not in external practices i.e. idol worship but inward realization of Param Brahma i.e. Antargata Anubhava.

Besides, all these similarities, both these cults, practice many things like the Yanjna of Jagannath cult, the Mahimites follow the practice of Dhuni Yoga practices.

Though there are many similarities between them, it is said that in 1881 some Kumbhipatias of Sambalpur became jealous of the statues of the Lord Jagannath as they were against idolatry. J.S Armstrong, the then Magistrate of Puri has given the account that some followers of the Mahima cult attacked Jagannath temple on 1st March 1881. But they were arrested by police and were placed on the trial and had given imprisonment for 3 months in Jail. B.C Majumdar mentions that a large number of Kumbhipatias (Mahima followers) led by Bhimabhoi himself marched towards Puri to challenge the worship of Jagannath. The Gazetteer of Sambalpur and C.E Buckland described that a party of fanatics went to Puri with the object of burning the idol of Jagannath but there is no mentions of the name of Bhima Bhoi with them.

In this way though the Mahima cult had supported the philosophical thought of Jagannath cult but it had gone against image worship. Both are rooted in Vedic foundation. But the Mahima cult is an indigenous reform movement within the Hindu fold. It does not accept Maya as the cause of creation. It admits that the world is a real creation of Him, through Him (Mahima). Lord Jagannath of Puri, the highest deity of the Hinduism is considered identical with Krishna. Vishnu, but Mahima religion does not believe in image worship and supremacy of Lord Jagannath as such. Mahima Swami had to fight like a reformer against the Brahmanical orthodoxy, it was not specifically meant against the Brahmins. So from these discussions it is proved that Mahima cult was not opposed to Jagannath cult. Bhimabhoi himself writes, “Mahimaswami appeared in the age of Kali. You all surrender yourself to the Lord now. Submitting yourself, enjoy salvation and see in your own eyes the form of Buddha (Jagannath).” Dhenkanal magistrate mentions that Mahimaswami believed in the existence of Hindu Gods and Goddesses but to them, they are under his commands and that they are bound to obey whatever He wished them to do”. It is concluded that, like the Nirguna. Bhakti followers, they are against idolatry, pilgrimage, and offering worship to the ancestors. They also oppose the wearing of beeds and use of sandal marks.

References:

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