The Traditional Role of Gajapati Maharaja in Shri Jagannath Temple

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As early as 13th century AD the scions of Ganga dynasty were calling themselves as son of the trinity - Lord Purusottama, Lord Rudra and Devi Durga. This fact has been testified in some inscriptions of King Ananga Bhima Deva during his sixth regal year in 1216 AD. The “Putra” concept gave rise to the designation, “routa” of Purusottam Jagannath.

The “Surya Vamsis” who succeeded Ganga dynasty also not only expressed allegiance to Purusottama-Jagannath but also value added to the temple and dawned the awakening of people on Shri Jagannath.

Hence, the ruler of Puri, the Gajapati is traditionally entwined with the rituals of Shri Jagannath, the deity and the epitome of this lasting culture.

The role of Gajapati Maharaja of Puri in proliferation of awareness of Shri Jagannath Culture throughout India, has been significant from the time of yore. He has also got some constructive role in masonry, maintenance and conservation of the Temple and in all the important ritualistic festivals including the “Nava Kalebar” wherein the wooden body-divine is renewed. Down from Ganga dynasty till the present regime of Bhoi kings all the ruling Gajapati Maharajas have propitiated Shri Jagannath Mahaprabhu as the principal deity.

Therefore the Gajapati Maharaja, Puri has always, commanded the respect of the three crore-strong populace of Orissa. Although many Gajapatis have functioned from different places like Jajpur, Cuttack and Khurda besides, Puri, the ancestors of Sri Ramachandra Deva the founder of the extant “Bhoi” dynasty have been swearing in as the Gajapati Maharaja of Puri till date. The dynastic genealogy of “Bhoi Vansha” dynasty from the 16th century onwards is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ramchandra Dev.(Abhinab Indra)</td>
<td>1568-1600</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Gajapati Purusottam Deva</td>
<td>1600-1621</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gajapati Narasingha Deva</td>
<td>1621-1647</td>
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</tbody>
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4 Gajapati Balabhadra Deva 1647-1657
5 Gajapati Mukunda Deva-1st 1657-1689
6 Gajapati Divyasingha Deva-1st 1689-1716
7 Gajapati Harekrushna Deva 1716-1720
8 Gajapati Gopinath Deva 1720-1727
9 Gajapati Ramchandra Deva 1727-1736
10 Birakeshari Deva 1st (Bhagirathi Deva) 1736-1793
11 Gajapati Divyasingha Deva-2nd 1793-1798
12 Gajapati Mukunda Deva – 2nd 1798-1817
13 Gajapati Ramchandra Deva –3rd 1817-1854
14 Gajapati Birakeshori Deva-2nd 1854-1859
15 Gajapati Divyasingha Deva-3rd 1859-1882
16 Gajapati Mukunda Deva-3rd 1882-14.2.1926
17 Gajapati Ramchandra Deva- 4th 14.2.1926-15.11.1956
18 Gajapati Birakishore Deva- 3rd 15.11.1956 – 8.7.1970
19 Gajapati Divyasingha Deva- 4th 8.7.1970- Continuing

Since the last 2 centuries Gajapati Maharaja is staying at Puri town and thereby is popularly known as Puri Gajapati. Although with the advent of democracy in India, royal administration has lost its glory the Gajapati Maharaja of Puri still holds his dynastic importance as the principal servitor of Shri Jagannath and is being held as a symbolic personality of the Orissan culture. He is worshipped as the Vishnu incarnate and the numero uno servitor of Shri Jagannath.

Till today, whenever he is addressed ceremonially, elongated chanting goes as:


On 8th July-1970 the present Gajapati Maharaja, at the tender age of 16 was sworn in as Divyasingha Deva. His childhood name was “Bada Jenamani Kamarnava Deva” and he took the oath of royalty on the lap of Buxi. His father who had preceded him Birakeshori Deva had also his childhood name “Jenamani Nilakantha”.

On 3-12-1978, Gajapati Divya Singha Deb married Vinita, middle daughter of Lt. Cornel Ananta Singh Charak of Jammu. As per tradition the name of the queen became Lilabati Patamahadei after marriage.

In cyclic order the names of Gajapati Maharaja appear generation wise as

The chronological naming of the kings and the queens have been in currency since last three hundred years of the 450 years’ rule of the Bhoi Dynasty.

As per the ROR of the Temple, Gajapati Maharaja is the principal and foremost servitor
of Shri Jagannath and this service is the hereditary service of the royal dynasty.

The Gajapati scavenges the chariots to consecrate them for the Car Festival of Shri Jagannath (and also on the Return Car Festival) with the assistance and direction of Rajaguru (the royal priest). On the day of Car Festival he offers worship inside the Raja Nahar (the palace) to Kanak Durga and dones his sacred thread.

On this occasion and on receipt of invitation, wherein the highest official of the Temple Administration is involved, The Gajapati clad in traditional attire like white tunic, turban, “Kaustuva” necklace, accompanied by Temple Commander and the security employees and wielding sword, comes out of the Palace. The palanquin named as “Mehena” or “Tamjana” is made of wood, ivory and silver carries the Gajapati from the Palace to the chariots. This royal procession is led by Behera Khuntia Sevak holding a cane, accompanied with a trumpet blower and drum-beater. While the Gajapati is carried through the crowd, he is hailed with “Hari Bola” and ululation, as like as God.

The Gajapati offers “Arati” before the Lord with golden receptacle and scavenges the platform of the chariot with a golden broom and consecrates the chariots by sprinkling sandalwood water. As per the ROR, in absence of the Gajapati, only “Mudi Rasta” servitor manages this ritual.

Barring the Car Festival and the Return Car Festival the Gajapati may also perform “Chherapanhara”, on the festive day of Dola Purnima and Chandan Yatra. The present Gajapati Maharaja Divyasingha Deva has a consistent record of participating in Snana Purnima for many years.

Apart from the above, the Gajapati has the privilege of performing service during several “Besha” decorations of the deities. During such occasion, the royal head moves in the “Tama jana” which is kept at the Lions’ Gate promenade and servitors like Karana, Parichha and others accompany and follow him. On the occasion of the Queen’s visit the palanquin enters the inner Bedha of the Temple and being parked at the Banyan Tree and the Temple precinct is evacuated of all other visitors. Only the “Mudi Ratha” Servak accompanies the queen and the King, This is popularly known as “Gahana Bije”. On the last 8th April-07 this occasion was solemnized after a long gap of forty years, wherein Gajapati Divyasingha Deva and his consort Lilabati Patamahadei visited the Temple alongwith other members of royal family and offered prayers. Since the queen is treated as the goddess “Laxmi Mata” who is not supposed to directly face the Lord Balabhadra (husband’s elder brother) as a token of respect, the deity of Balabhadra was put under cloth partition.
There are other ritualistic connections of Gajapati Maharaja in the festivals such as Saradiya Durgapuja, Banayaga, Laxminarayan Bheta (Bahuda Yatra), Champak Dwadasi and Pousa Purnima.

The second day of the bright fortnight of the month of “Bhadra” is celebrated as “Sunia” which symbolizes the beginning of a New Year as per the “Odiya” tradition. Some opine that since this is the birthday of the mythical king “Indradyumna” all the kings celebrate this day as the day of reckoning the New Year and for beginning the collection of revenue. It is reiterated here that all the almanacs published from Orissa and the palm-leaf horoscopes of the newborns carry the name and the reigning year of Gajapati Maharaja.

As a source of receipt from the Temple, daily offered items like Mangal Alati, tender coconut, consecrated “Abakash Jala”, floral offerings are sent to the palace. On the day of birth anniversary of the King, the Queen and other royal members, special Mahaprasad is provided to the palace besides daily Mahaprasad.

The rule of primogeniture is in currency in the royal dynasty where the eldest son inherits. No female member of the royal family can succeed to the throne of Gajapati. As per the tradition the seat of Gajapati is never vacant and after the successor succeeds by “Abhisek” (coronation) then only the ritual for the death is observed. Hence it is called-

“King is dead- Long live the King”

As of the present Gajapati Maharaja Sri Dibyasingh Dev 4th is on the higher side of fifty and very fare and also well-known for his amiable civility and is the cynosure of 3 crore-strong Orissan people.

He is a strict vegetarian and a complete devout of Lord Shri Jagannath. He has been involved exponentially in the spread of Shri Jagannath Culture both nationally and in international sphere. During the last 37 years of his incumbency he has inaugurated and put-up foundation stones of hundreds of Shri Jagannath Temples in Orissa and elsewhere in India.

His studentship continued through Prince College in Raipur (MP). He completed graduation from St. Stephens College with honours in History; Bachelor in Law from Delhi University and Master Degree in Law from Northwestern University, Chicago (U.S.A). He had pursued legal practice for a very short period at the Indian Supreme Court but forgone the legal practice in favour of the service of the Lord.

As the hereditary Chief of the royal family, he acts as the Chairman of the Shri Jagannath Temple Managing Committee. He is very punctual in attending to rites of the temple during the festive occasions like Pusyaabhiseka, Snan Yatra, Rath Yatra, Bahuda Yatra and many special events. Presently he leads a team of scholars under the aegis of Temple Administration in the title of “Shri Jagannath Tatwa, Gabeshana O’ Prasar Upasamiti” for the spread of Shri Jagannath consciousness.

References :


Bhaskar Mishra, Deputy Administrator, Shri Jagannath Temple, Puri.