

## The Legitimacy of the Maharaja of Puri Relating to Feudatories and the Car Festival

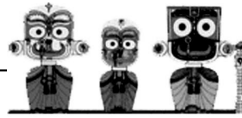
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The association of the Kings of Odisha with the Jagannath Cult became very close after King Anangabhima Deva III had recognized Jagannath as the overlord and state deity of Odisha in 1230 A.D. He claimed to reign under His supreme overlordship. The feudatory Kings of the Gajapati Maharaja took active participation in preparation of the cars for the festival. They actively provided wood, iron and ropes for smooth functioning of the Car Festival at Puri. Not only the feudatories of the Maharaja of Puri spiritually rendered cooperation but also militarily and politically provided assistance.

Before 15<sup>th</sup> Century the role of Gajapati Maharaja in the Car Festival was very casual or limited. The situation changed under the Suryavamsi Kings in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first two kings of this dynasty Kapilendra Deva and Purusottama Deva were usurpers. In 1434 A.D. Kapilendra Deva overthrew the last legitimate King of the Ganga dynasty. His son Purusottama Deva usurped the throne in spite of the legitimate claim of his elder brother. Both the kings needed a special legitimization of their rule which they gained through an intimate association with the Jagannath Cult of Puri. Kapilendra Deva called himself a Servitor (Sevaka) of Jagannath. He threatened his opponents in most of his inscriptions with the wrath of the “Lord of the

Universe”. He threatened others to attack on the basis of treason (droha) against the Lord of Puri. After the rule of Kapilendra Deva, his son Purusottama Deva established himself on the throne of Gajapati. He poured gifts over the God (Jagannath) and priests of Puri. Furthermore, he was the first King who cleaned the cars (chherapahamra) to prove his association with the ritual of the Jagannath Cult.

Even today the Car Festival cannot start before the King or his representative (Mudarasta) has sprinkled (chera) the three cars with water and cleaned (Pahamra) them with a broom. From 17<sup>th</sup> century source it is known that the King after finishing the ritual Chherapahamra put a silk – covered pillow (Pata muchula) on his head and symbolically pushed the cars from behind, thus starting the Car Festival. However the Chherapahamra of the cars of Puri became the main source of legitimacy of the later kings of Khurda and Puri. Now a days the grand ceremony of sweeping the cars remains the most important royal duty which bears the proud name “Gajapati Maharaja Seva”. It makes the ‘Maharaja’ of Puri indispensable to the Car Festival even now though they have lost all their ancestral territory around Khurda in 1804 A.D. A few years before they lost their remaining royal privileges.



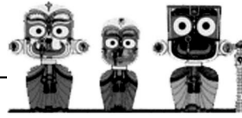
The imperial Gajapati of Odisha lost his empire in 1568 A.D. due to extermination of Mukunda Deva by Muslim armies of Bengal. Ramachandra Deva I after being recognized by Akbar as the king of Khurda with semi-autonomous status established his legitimate relation with the Jagannath cult of Puri. He ruled from Khurda but the capital of the new province remained at Cuttack under the Mughals. The Kings of Khurda were usually called as the Maharaja of Puri. But during the reign of Jahangir one Hindu Rajput, Keso Das Maru who was in service of Jahangir attacked and looted the Jagannath temple at the time of Car Festival of Puri. The Gajapati King of Khurda stubbornly opposed and used his military Paik forces but was defeated. The temple cars were also destroyed. After the Gajapati king of Khurda lost his military and political power during the fight he turned his attention to Puri. He systematically enlarged his influence and control over the Jagannath cult during the peaceful reign of Sahajahan. Since then an intricate set of temple-palace relations had evolved which became the main basis for Khurda's influential position during its power struggle with the various feudatory states and the Muslim Governors of Odisha. The car festivals played an important role during this struggle for power and legitimacy. The feudatory Kings also played significant role during this period.

With the exception of a few iconoclasts, the Muslim Governors of Odisha were genuinely interested in enlarging their control over the Car Festival because of the pilgrim tax with a view to increasing revenue. The Gajapati Kings of Khurda, on the other hand, used the Car Festivals to maintain their influential position at Puri. The Car Festivals afforded an excellent opportunity to display their role as successors to the Imperial Gajapatis. Their power enhanced as "First Servitors" of Lord Jagannath before the feudatory Kings of Odisha.

In the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Gajapati Kings of Khurda issued 'royal letters' (Chhamu Chitau) to the feudatory kings of Odisha granting them certain privileges in the Jagannath cult in order to gain their loyalty and political support. These letters established Khurda's ritual-political relations with the other feudatory states of Odisha.

Gajapati Maharaja Virakesari Deva reigned Khurda for a long period from 1737 A.D to 1793 A.D. During his reign Khurda's political power collapsed because of the conquest of Odisha by the Marathas in 1751 A.D. The Marathas of Nagpur deprived Virakesari Deva of his relationship with the feudatories. The Marathas also took over the administration of the Jagannath temple of Puri in 1760 A.D. Virakesari Deva desperately tried to maintain his leading position among the Hindu Kings of Odisha. For this purpose he issued 'royal letters' permitting feudatory Kings to contribute to the yearly construction of the Cars. He also rewarded them with special privileges in the Jagannath cult during the Car Festival.

He requested the Kings of Dasapalla to provide wood for the construction of the three cars which was important in his power struggle with the Marathas. The Marathas were compelled to acknowledge this power of the king of Khurda. Since the Maratha period it was the privilege of the Kings of Dasapalla whose territory comprised large forests at the southern bank of the Mahanadi to provide wood in lieu of tributes. This privilege was also acknowledged even by the English East India Company in its treaty with Dasapalla in the year 1804. According to the treaty of the year 1804 Dasapalla had to pay no peshcus or tribute or payment. In cases of severe drought when the waterway on the Mahanadi became unpassable, the Kings of Khurda had to organize an alternative. For this purpose Virakesari Deva sent a royal



order to the superintendent of the Jagannath temple on 03.03.1749 stating that the timbers required for the construction of the cars of the deities could not come up to the Atharnala bridge. So people should be deputed to Banpur for procuring the required timbers. These timbers were cut from the forests on the boundaries of the two states named Ghumsur and Athagarh in southern Odisha. Saris (turbans as sign of honour) were sent from the temple store for the two chieftains through the royal messenger.

Similarly iron necessary for the construction of the cars was procured from the feudatory kings of Dhenkanal and Talcher in Central Odisha. Thus on 01.05.1744 Virakesari Deva issued a royal order (hukum) to the temple officers at Puri to “send saris and mahaprasad” to the Kings of Dhenkanal and Talcher for supplying the iron for the construction of cars. Both the places produced iron locally.

Ranpur, another feudatory state in Central Odisha and an important ally of Khurda used to provide ropes for constructing and dragging the cars. On 9.4.1749 a letter was issued from the palace for the construction of the Nandighosa Car the simuli ropes will be brought. So the royal messenger named Jamai Atibuddhi should be deputed to Narendra the King of Ranpur with Sari and Mahaprasad from the temple store. The father of Virakesari Deva, during his reign had rendered Ranpur’s economic and military support for which he received several important privileges in the Jagannath cult. The Khurda King had exempted tax to Ranpur’s monastery at Puri. In return, Ranpur’s Kings donated valuable gifts to the temple treasury. One King of Ranpur state was appointed bodyguard of Jagannath by performing the honourable “dagger and sword service” (chhuri khanda seva) in front of Jagannath.

Other Chiefs and Kings of Odisha received special privilege during the Car Festival as a reward for their support to the Khurda kings. They were permitted to serve Jagannath with a special Chamara fan during the Car festival. In 1760 Virakesari Deva granted this privilege to the King of Tigeria of Central Odisha. In 1778 this privilege was also extended to the Mahanta of the Chikiti monastery at Puri. Chikiti was an important princely state in South Odisha. Its monastery at Puri played the role of “ambassador” at the Court of Gajapati Kings of Odisha.

An incident occurred that the King of Parlakhemundi in South Odisha attempted to capture the Gajapati Kingship through occupation of the Car of Jagannath and performance of the royal ritual of the Gajapatis of Khurda on the Car. The King of Parlakhemundi claimed to be the descendant of the imperial Gangas who ruled over Odisha until 1434 A.D and not accepted Khurda’s claim to Gajapati Kingship. On 12.7.1753 Jagannath Narayan Deva of Paralapatana (Parlakhemundi) had come together with his brother to see the return Car festival from the Gundicha temple to the main temple. He sat on his royal seat of the elephant alongwith a Nagara drum and flag staff. The elephant was placed in front of Jagannath’s Car and Narayan Deva with his brother ascended the Car from the back of the elephant to have Darsan. The presents offered by them were taken by the Daitapati priests. During the Darsan of the great Lord on the Nandighosa car a necklace fell from the holy body of the Lord. Narayan Deva asked to be given the necklace but in this moment all priests hid the necklace, gave him Tulsi and Prasad (offerings) and sent secretly the divine necklace to the King. On the next day the cars reached the Lion’s Gate of the temple of Jagannath towards the close of the night. Being dressed in royal robes



Narayan Deva and his brother sat on the Car. On the same day all the priests had a confidential discussion because of the Darsan of the King of Parlakhemundi and his brother in full royal dress on the car and the possibility of their entering into the temple in royal dress. It was dawn before the discussion was over. Because these two people while sitting on the Car demanded to be allowed to discharge the duties of the King during the time of the ceremonial return of the deities from the cars into the temple, this ceremony did not take place. Consequently the three incense offerings (dhupa) were performed on the cars and Narayan Deva went away. On the next day the deities stayed on the cars. After the three incense offerings had been performed the ceremonial return of the deities to the temple began at 10.30 P.M. Wearing a royal turban and a belt Narayan Deva followed the great Lord and walked majestically into the temple.

Narayan Deva returned to the temple the next day in royal dress together with the Maratha general Mahana Singh to worship Jagannath. But due to the passive resistance of the priests of the Jagannath temple he did not succeed in his attempt to perform royal ritual. Thus none accepted him as the legitimate Gajapati King. As a compromise he was allowed to enter the temple in full royal dress.

The generous distribution of privileges to the feudatories by the King of Khurda during Car Festivals and unsuccessful attempt of the King of Parlakhemundi to capture the Cars prove that the Jagannath temple had a definite political role to play at the time of the Car festivals. On the other hand, the Car Festival safeguarded the legitimacy of the Kingship of the Gajapati Maharaja.

Owing to the ritual policy of the Kings of Khurda, the Jagannath cult of Hindu royalty spread to the Capitals of the former feudatory

states of Odisha during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Several new capitals were constructed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a Jagannath temple and a palace in their centre with a Grand Road leading to Gundicha hut outside the town. Those new capitals built for the purpose were in the States of Tigeria, Baramba, Ranpur and Daspalla etc. They were imitating the model of Puri where the present palace was constructed at the Grand Road near the Jagannath temple in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In most of the capitals of the former feudatory states of Odisha, Jagannath's Car festival became the main event. The Cars usually imitated the Cars of Puri.

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