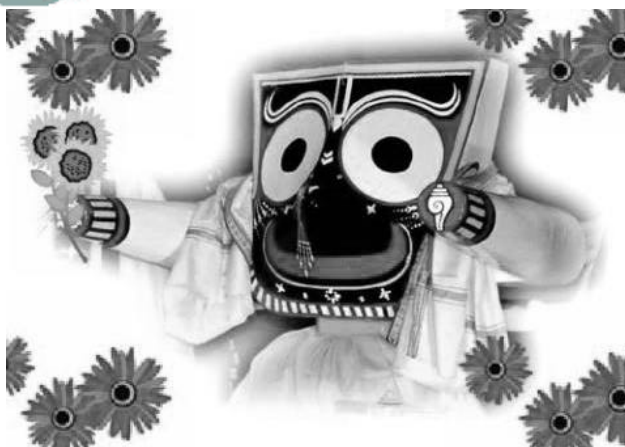




# Lord Jagannath as Viewed in English Literature - A Study

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Sri Jagannath is a mystery and enigma in Himself. It is rather an imprudence to fathom the Unfathomable, to know the Unknowable, to empower the All Powerful. It is a very narrow and un-courteous term to call **'His Consciousness'** as a **'Cult'**. He is certainly far above the cultic Gods and Goddesses. He is still worshipped for His time transcending ideology and estimated as the super synthesis of utilitarian Consciousness, Traditions, Religions, Worships and Dogmas. He is not only the epitome of religious Consciousness of the universe but also the nerve centre of the cultural, literary and social ethos of the Hindus, Jainas, Buddhists, Christians, and so on. He is both Finite and Infinite, Visible and Invisible, Tangible and Intangible.

Sri Jagannath in English literature provides an interesting study to analyse the view points of several travelers, tourists, administrators, scholars, missionaries and Indo-Anglican writers. Most of the travelers have delineated Sri Jagannath in a befitting manner. Yet, some have become cynical. Interestingly, foreigners and scholars from the west have dwelt upon Jagannath in varied ways. Friar Odoric (1321 AD), Nicolo Conte (1430), Sir Thomas Roe (1616), W.Bruton (1633) Bernier (1667), Capt. Hamilton (1727), Major W. Thorn (1803), Robert Southey (1810) and scholars like Stevens, Prof. Wilson, James Fergusson, Gen. Cunningham, W.W. Hunter etc. have lavished

profusely, though obviously not eulogistically always, on the deities, or the car-festival or even the Buddhist origin of Jagannath. The Britishers have oscillating attitudes ranging from awe and admirations to sequential disillusionment, viewing it initially as an amorphous idol. Christian missionaries have tried to supersede the spiritualism of Jagannath, by using a despicable metaphor – Juggernaut. However, in Indo-Anglican writings Sri Jagannath has been the symbol of Henotheism. It is curious to make an account of differences and echoes in observation of so-called intelligentsia.

The holy shrine of Puri and Lord Jagannath, has not only drawn pilgrims from across the country for centuries, but also foreigners who took considerable interest about the place and the Lord. Among the foreigners, two Europeans such as William Bruton and Fray Sebastian Manrique are remarkable. Their description about the deity, ritual practices and places are the earliest available account on the theme. Though a great deal of work about the culture has been found in the accounts of A. Stirling, W.W. Hunter, John Beams, some significant research has been done by a group of German idealists like Hermann Kulke, Anncharlott Eichmann and H. Von Stieterncron. Bulloram Mullic's account of his journey to Puri is a good package of philosophical evaluation of Jagannath consciousness. However



the tremendous proliferation of Jagannath research till today had its origin in the emergence of the “Oriya School” in the early 1970s. It gathered momentum in the late seventies with the publication of Nityananda Patanaik’s ‘Cultural Tradition in Puri’. This development enforced the theory oriented scholars to prove into the culture in full steam. K.C. Panigrahi’s “Seminal historiographical studies on the medieval Oriya literature and traditional accounts and their relevance for the Jagannath cult” is a monumental study. Scholars like K.B. Tripathy, P. Acharya, K.C. Mishra, G.N. Dash, G.C. Tripathy, Sabita Acharya, B. Ray, Subhakanta Behera, Nibedita Mohanty, Bishnu Mohapatra etc. have their remarkable contributions to the study on Jagannath.

In order to understand what Jagannath Consciousness is, it is necessary to learn what He has, for ages, been. The study proposes, therefore, to examine stage by stage that complex growth of enchaining superstitions and of yearnings after truth, which, nourished by the pilgrim bones of centuries and watered by the tears of millions of disciples, now spreads itself out in full grown luxuriance upon the Puri sands. Besides certain perpetual appeal to the popular instinct, Jagannath Consciousness aims at a catholicism, which embraces every form of universal belief. The fetishism and bloody rites of the aboriginal races, the mild-flower worship of the Vedas and every compromise between the two along with lofty spiritualities of the great Indian reformers, have found refuge. The rigid monotheism of Ramanuja in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the monastic system of Ramananda in the 15<sup>th</sup>, the mystic quietism of Chaitanya at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> and luxurious love worship of Vallavacharya towards its close, mingle within the walls of Jagannath at this present day.

Sri Jagannath Consciousness is not only a manifestation and fusion of eclectic essence of

all religious currents but also a reflection of humanitarian appeal, proclamation of universal brotherhood and renunciations, beyond pride and prejudice. Since antiquity Lord Jagannath has been a pollinating agent, sucking nectar from various petals of spiritual spheres and transmitting the grains of universal consciousness. He has been a forum for free exchange of philosophical, secular and intellectual curiosities and consequences of synthetic values.

The Europeans particularly the British attitude to Jagannath offers an interesting study. Viewing it initially as an amorphous idol, they made it into an abusive metaphor – Juggernaut-but soon got boomeranged by it in their evangelical endeavours. Vilifying the immense importance of the car-festival of the Lord and ascribing to the festival a genocidal contour, they wrote from time to time about the pilgrims throwing “themselves under the chariot so that its wheels may go over them..... and the car passes over them and crushes them and cuts them asunder and so they perish on the spot”. Conti even supplements by adding that to be “crushed to death” in such a manner was “a mode of death which they say is very acceptable to their God”. Gasparo Balbi also repeats this preposterous nonsense. In Bruton’s aspersions the same insularity of vision is reflected. Berrier is also cynical in his view. Hamilton, Wood House, Robert-Southey, David Smith, Reverend Ward, W.W. Hunter etc. had also done the same. Some of them even described Jagannath as “a figure that resembled nothing in the heavens above or the earth beneath or in the waters under the earth. This had impelled Maj. Thorn to visit the place and see the amiable object of veneration by millions of pilgrims, though he found the deity disgusting.

Christian missionaries, came to give a sadistic sense of “hellish triumph”. Stirling, the Collector of Puri, wrote in 1818 to say that such so-called “excess of fanaticism” reflected in and



through instance of immolation were too few far between and that invariably these were results of accident or euthanasia. Chevers would endorse such a view. This naturally would give credence to the view about “that ecstatic mockery of martyrdom” as figments of the alien flights of fancy. If that be the case then the barbarity of commercializing the temple and its traditions in the name of seeking insulation from pollutions of superstitions is as preposterous as it is mock rhetoric. Perhaps a pseudo-reformatory zeal for missionary purposes lay at root, which raised a hullabaloo about frivolous accidents but found soon, to its dismay, that the Jagannath-culture is not so fragile as to succumb to such susceptibilities and insinuations.

Lord Jagannath in Indo-Anglican literature can be analysed in two aspects, as the impact of Jagannath consciousness on literary works and literary creations based on Lord Jagannath. The ancient writings have accepted Lord Jagannath as the symbol of henotheism. He is every form in one form. In the writings of Gandhiji, Nehru, Dayananda Saraswati etc. the scarcity of cosmopolitan outlook is discovered in the practice of temple culture. But the description of His glory is so mountainous that the reformist views have lost their vigor.

The synthetic cult and consciousness of Jagannath is an epitome of divergent religious creeds and schools of philosophy that prevailed in India at different periods of her long cultural history. In the historic process of adjustments, Jagannath has assimilated strange contradictions in a manner that is most amazing in the history of religious thought. There is no discarding any in this religion of man”, wrote Pandit Nilakantha Das, “and all the gods and goddesses attacking and appealing have found a place in the compound of the temple. Jagannath has welcomed and embraced all, but been overwhelmed by none and has lost Himself in none”.

The Central theme of the Jagannath cult and consciousness is that the macrocosm manifest in the Triad is the same as the microcosm or the individual self. This cumulative Upanishadic substance deified in the Triad and the transcendental state of gnosis intrinsic to it were beyond the cane of evangelical comprehension.

The obsidian eyes continue to notoriously glitter without a flicker !

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