

Social Life of the Sevayats of Puri in the Cult of Lord Jagannath

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Religion without society is not a religion. Society without religion is not a society. Both religion and society exist together in the cult of Jagannath. They are inseparable. The social life of the Sevayats are interlinked in the cult of Jagannath. The society and the cult can't progress in the absence of either of the two. Although the cult of Lord Jagannath has spread widely in the 21st Century, the social life of His own land remains unchanged. To conserve the cult for future, the social life of the Sevayats of Puri is not changed by external influences. Puri, though a small temple town, attracts large number of people from different parts of India, many of whom desire to settle down here as the ultimate place of salvation. Normally the original inhabitants of Puri consisting of priestly class, artisans and others connected with the services to the temple reside mainly in Markandeswar Sahi, Harachandi Sahi, Balisahi, Daitapada Sahi, Dolamandap Sahi etc. The original inhabitants of these localities are Sevayats (priestly class), Supakaras (cooks), Carpenters (Badhei), Painters (Chitrakaras), Potters (Kumbhakaras), Stone Carvers (Pathurias), Applique workers and artisans like *patta* painting and palm-leaf carving. Their way of living, food, cloth, income and expenditure pattern, housing and social functions etc. are more or less influenced by Jagannath culture. This article

contains housing, food, marriage, dowry, position of women, Jagagharas, Naga, Medha and Gotipua dance, Devadasis, Yatras, fairs and festivals, Muktimandap, Swargadwar and some common social features.

Housing

The people of Puri town particularly the Sevayats are not interested to build spacious houses in distant parts of the town in order to remain close to the Jagannath temple. Consequently the size of the houses of this area are very small. Even some of the houses nearby the temple are three feet in width because of division of paternal family. The people like to stay in these areas in their parental houses. Each of these houses in this area is considerably raised on a masonry plinth of four to eight feet in high. In the front of each house there is a verandah. There is no proper ventilation and light in the houses.

Most of the Pandas having Jatri (Pilgrim) business are the owners of more than one house. They have these extra houses varies from 30 to 50 rooms. These rooms have little facilities of proper light and ventilation of air.

At present some of the Sevayats prefer to construct spacious houses outside the temple



town to remain free from jammed housing in their paternal houses. But they do not forget to serve the temple which is their bread and butter. Their service to the temple of Lord Jagannath is the base of their livelihood.

Dress

A race is known by its dress. The people of Puri and the Sevayats are identified by the dress they wear. The female population of Puri wears sarees of cotton in ordinary days. But in festivals they wear *pata* (Silken cloth). The males wear *dhoti* and *kurta*. The dresses are simple. The priests and the local indigenous people wear towel. The Sevayats colour the towel in an indigenous process with cheese, oil and milk which is very costly. At present the young Sevayats use to wear pants and shirts after their service to the Lord particularly outside the temple.

Food

The Mahaprasad is sacred to all pilgrims. Generally, the Mahaprasad is served in all social functions of the local people and also nearby villages. Some of the local people only take Mahaprasad as their daily food. The people pay highest regard to Mahaprasad. There is no bar of caste while taking Mahaprasad. Nirmalya (dried Mahaprasad) which can be kept intact for years is taken by the pilgrims as a token of divine presence of the deity of Jagannath. They take Nirmalya everyday. The Mahaprasad is the most sacred object on which people solemnly swear at the time of marriage between the parents of bride and bridegroom. It is one kind of promise in pre marriage period. The local people believe that before a person breaths his last he is fed with Nirmalya which is believed to take him to heaven.

Pujapanda Sevayats (priests worshipping Jagannath) who worship the Lords in the temple

do not take cooked foods in their houses on the day of their Seva. After the rituals they take Mahaprasad. They do not take any non-vegetarian foods in their house on the day of their seva. But there is no restriction on food for the suar sevayats who cook for the Lords. They are allowed to take food of their choice before going to cook for the Lords. As they take sufficient food before cooking, they will not have any attraction for the foods which they cook for the Lords.

Sevayats take rice, dal and curry etc. in day time but at night most of the sevayat families take Mahaprasad or bread. But they like to consume milk products and milk at night. 'Dalma' is a popular food item among the sevayats prepared with dal and vegetables. In all the functions dalma is a common food item. The people prepare community feast.

In addition to this after consuming food the people generally use pan (betel). Betel consumption is very common in the locality. People of all classes consume betel which contains digestive properties. Betel leaves are supplied to Puri from Chandanpur situated in ten kilometers distance. People of Puri in general and sevayat class in particular consume bhang. Bhang, leaf of a plant having intoxicated properties is popularized by the Sevayats of the Jagannath temple as a sign of luxury. Bhang also contains digestive properties.

Marriage

There are three categories of Sevayats in the temple. They are Brahmin Sevayats, Daita Sevayats and Sudra Sevayats. Brahmin Sevayats are not allowed to have marital relationship with other category of Sevayats and other non-Sevayat caste. A Brahmin Sevayat is debarred from



performing his *seva* in the temple, if he marries in other Sevayat or non-Sevayat caste. The Brahmin Sevayats keep marital relationship with their Brahmin Sevayats of the Jagannath temple. Even they are not allowed to marry the Sevayats of any other temple. They give first preference to marry their son to his uncle's daughter. This system of marrying uncle's daughter is found not only in Southern part of India, but also in foreign countries like Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan etc.

In the Brahmin Sevayat family the bridegroom with his friends and relatives visit the bride's house on the day of marriage in a procession. There the marriage is held and the bridegroom returns back to his house without bride. On the 2nd day of the marriage again the bridegroom visits bride's house for some rituals and he returns back to his house on the same day without bride. On the 3^d day of the marriage again the bridegroom visits the bride's house. After some rituals the bridegroom returns on the same day to his own house in a procession. This time the bride also accompanies the bridegroom. But in other castes the bridegroom returns with bride on the marriage day after the marriage rituals are over. Here the impact of the temple on Sevayat is visible as found in Rukmani *vivaha*. The Sevayat bridegroom does not use new clothes on his marriage days. He is not allowed to use stitched clothes. He wears Chheda (clothes) washed by the washer-man. He also does not cover his upper portion of the body with shirt. On the 7th day of the marriage the bride and bridegroom both visit the bride's house and after some rituals again backs to bridegroom's house on the same day.

Even the Pujapandas are not keeping marital relationship with other Brahmin Sevayats of the temple. Now the Pujapanda Sevayats have marital relationship with other Brahmin Sevayats

of the temple. But there is no such restriction for Sudra Sevayats and Daita Sevayats. They can have marital relationship with other caste Hindus.

Dowry

Marriage is held within their own temple Brahmin Sevayats. There is no case of dowry torture. These Sevayats know the economic status of each other. Before marriage proposal they know the economic condition of the bride's house. They know what they will get as dowry. And also all the families are related to each other, as they marry within their own society. That is why, there is no such dowry torture in the Sevayat society. On the 2nd day of the marriage, the bridegroom's house sends some ornaments to the bride's house for the bride. And on the 3rd day of the marriage before entering bridegroom's house, the bride is presented with a golden ring. From the 7th day of the marriage the bride stays in the bridegroom's house. And the bride's house sends cooked food or money to the bridegroom's house minimum for 7 days for the bride. Some rich families send food for their daughter's maintenance for years together. But all the families are bound to send food for 7 days minimum. In lieu of cooked food they can send money or vegetables and grocery to bridegroom's house. The people believe that marriage is decided in the heaven by the God. Marriage is a lifetime contract. Divorce is regarded as sin. Divorce is also regarded as the most obnoxious act. Religion restrains divorce. The women too do not seek divorce. Marriage in Sevayat families generally is not individual's decision but this is a family's concern. The elder members of the family have a great say in the marriage of youngsters.

Position of Women in the Society

A small number of highly educated girls are found among the Sevayats. They do not give



importance to women's education because they give marriage to their girl's among their own limited Sevayat youths. And it would be difficult to find highly educated match for the girl. At present this system is gradually changing. In general Sevayat's women are restricted to their homes. Even after marriage, the movements of the women are restricted till they give birth to a child. In many cases the rickshaw is covered with clothes if any Sevayat women go outside in rickshaw. The ladies cover their head and face with cloth while going outside. But this system is going to disappear gradually. They are enjoying freedom. Every year in the month of 'Pausa' the bride visits her father's house. This system is also followed by the general people. This is because in the temple, Lord's consort Goddess Laxmi visits her father's house in this month.

Jagagharas

Jagagharas are paramilitary organizations which originated in Puri particularly in Sahis (localities) during the rule of the Gajapati Kings to protect the Jagannath temple from the attack of the Muslims. The young Sevayats start exercises like body building, wrestling, weight lifting, sword fighting and Javelin throws not only to maintain good health but to fight the Muslim enemies physically. A Jagaghara possesses acres of land encircled by strong wall with a pond to bath and a deity Hanuman to worship.

Besides military activities, the Jagagharas are centres of learning and culture. Odissi dance, Chhanda, Champu, musical instrument like Mrudanga, Gotipua dance, Medha dance are also performed here. Feasts and Bhanga are common in the Jagagharas. A Jagaghara plays a great role culturally in connection with the Jagannath temple during Ramanavami and Chandan Jatra.

Naga, Medha and Gotipua Dance

During the time of Sahijata, Chandan Jata and Makar Sankranti the young men of the Jagagharas being dressed like warriors march in procession to other Sahis to perform martial dance like Naga dance to commemorate the past. Some other members of the Jagagharas perform Medha dance in which *puranic* stories of Lord Rama are performed during summer every year.

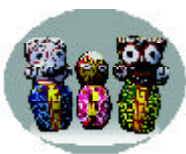
In the last part of the 17th century Gotipua dance was introduced in Puri, when Devadasi dance was in a declining stage. Gotipua dance performed by male dancers. This dance was patronized by monasteries of Puri. In the dance Vaishnav songs describing the *lilas* of the incarnation of Lord Krishna are sung. Later on the Odissi dance emerged from Gotipua dance.

Devadasis

Unmarried girls become Devadasis to dance before Lord Jagannath. They marry to Lord Jaganath. Devadasis also danced in King's palace and social functions of dignitaries of the town during kings rule. But in the later period the Devadasis were exploited by Sevayats of the temple and the king. Their sex relationship with such persons brought ill fame to them. As a result the Devadasi numbers gradually decreased. At present one Devadasi named Sashimani lives who is very old and spent life in poverty. The famous Odissi dance Guru Sri Pankaj Charan Das is the son of a Devadasi. He once remarked that "there is no future in it and it is very hard to make a living by it today". So his daughter is not a Devadasi.

Yatras

Yatras (festivals) of the Jagannath temple have great influence on the society. Lord goes to



sleep at the time of 'Sayana Yatra' for a period of three months. During this period all social ceremonies such as marriage, Upanayana (sacred thread ceremony), coming of the bride to her father-in-laws house (Nava Badhu Yatra) are suspended. During the rising ceremony of the Lord (Devothana) all these social activities are resumed.

Fairs and Festivals

The fairs and festivals of the temple have great social impact. The important festivals namely Chandan Yatra and Rath Yatra observed in the great temple in every summer are gladly participated by the Sevayats and the common people of Puri. In Chandan Yatra the participants of the Sahis start procession from their Jagagharas to the Narendra tank with much pomp and grandeur. Madanmohan the representative of Lord Jagannath is carried in a palanquin to the tank to move around the tank in boats which is called as *chappa*. The people take bath in the Narendra tank in large number in the evening and after returning to the starting point they take pleasure of consuming the Mahaprasad. The Rath Yatra (Car festival) is performed in the month of July in which besides the pilgrims, the people of Puri take part along with the Daitapatis and other Sevayats for nine days in lakhs. The houses of every inhabitants of Puri enjoy the guests in feeding and entertaining in order to derive pleasure. In Bahuda Yatra (return of the cars) at the time of 'Adharapana' the people of every house in Puri in company with guests take pleasure of consuming 'Rasgola'. Culturally it promotes a healthy social life. 'Adharapana' though offered to the deities while on chariots really meant for the Chandis and Chamundas who are waiting for this occasion in every year.

Muktimandapa

Cases involving religious controversies in any part of Odisha are referred to the Muktimandap which stands as the judiciary of the temple. This Muktimandap is the famous seat of the learned Brahmins associated with Jagannath temple and the verdict pronounced by this august assembly of Brahmins of Solasanas (16 Brahmin Sasana villages) is accepted by the contending parties with great respect. Thus the Muktimandap solves a number of social problems of the Hindus of Odisha.

Swargadwar

Swargadwar (gateway to heaven) is a cremation ground at Puri, situated in the sea shore of the Bay of Bengal. It is meant only for the Hindus. The people believe that if the dead body of a person is cremated in the Swargadwar the deceased soul goes to heaven. The soul needs no cycle of birth and rebirth. Among the Sevayat community if a Sevayat dies then his dead body is cremated at Swargadwar after bringing the fire from the kitchen of the temple of Lord Jagannath. It is their special privilege and different from others. This tradition is still maintained among the Sevayat families of Puri. This is a significant social feature of Swargadwar.

Some common social features

Many social activities have common link to the cult of Jagannath. In Odia society Lord Jagannath is considered as the head of their families. In all social functions like marriage and sacred thread ceremony the Lord is first invited. One begins a letter by first putting the Lord's name at the top. It is usual practice to humbly remember the Lord's name at the top in order to make an auspicious beginning. From birth to death in all activities, the local people take the name of the



Lord. The people offer their best things to the Lord.

During the Rath Yatra festival of the Lord all kinds of trees are planted. The newly built houses are being inaugurated, because these days are considered to be the most auspicious. The first fruit of a tree is offered to the deities. Even newly published books prayer to Lord is written in the first page. When the children are born or saved from calamities or severe diseases, the parents go to the temple to offer one lakh lamps to the Lord. Men are named after Him, as Jagannath Das, villages as Jagannathpur and market as Jagannath haat etc. People offer gold ornaments when their problems are easily overcome. His temple is Bada Deula. His road is called as Badadanda (Grand Road). His sea is named as Mahodadhi.

Marriages are social customs of the Hindus. So the marriage is sacred. Some marriages are being held in the Jagannath temple with his approval which is equivalent to registered marriage. Even before marriage negotiations are being held in the Surya temple which exists in the premises of the great temple and guests take pleasure for consuming Mahaprasad after negotiation.

Another social institution like common sacred thread ceremony which is performed on behalf of the temple and also organized by some social organizations in which many a number of Brahmin boys altogether take sacred thread in the premises of the temple of the Lord. Generally poor Brahmin boys perform their sacred thread ceremony in this temple because of poverty. Thus the temple of Lord Jagannath solves a lot of our social problems. Hence the Jagannath temple is inevitable in the social order of the Hindus.

The impact of the cult of Jagannath is deep rooted in the social life of the people of Puri in particular and Odisha in general. Undoubtedly, without the cult of Jagannath the existence of a unique society of the Sevayats in Puri would be an impossible one. Their life style, the marriage system, the dowry less society, no divorce, ideology of Jagagharas, message for promotion of casteless society through Mahaprasad indicate that they are much above the evils of modern society.

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