



Indradyumna of Mauritius

Asit Mohanty

The inseparable relation between Lord Jagannath and Odias surpasses geographical boundaries. Presence of Sri Jagannath along with Sri Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra in Mauritius reiterates it. Again an Odia had become the catalyst to materialise presence of Sri Jagannath in this far off island nation more than a century ago.

It is an irony that although it is accepted historical fact that this man was from Odisha, yet no one knows for sure his place of birth in Odisha. His name finds place in history of Mauritius as a social activist who also happened to be a Hindu priest. He is better known as the builder of largest Hindu temple of Mauritius in Triolet. While in Mauritius, the Odia title of his name must have shrugged off. For the Mauritian he is remembered as Pundit Sanjeewan Lal Ramsunder or as only Pundit Sanjeewan.

There remains recorded data regarding his life in Mauritius. But only sketchy information exists about his place of origin and early life in Odisha and India. Much has been written about Pundit Sanjeewan in Mauritius although he is almost unknown in his country of origin as well as in his home State Odisha. This author got glimpses of these writings because of Mr Ramroop, a citizen of Mauritius who links his ancestral history to Jajpur of Odisha.



In 2011, Prahlad Ramsaran, who has conducted researches on history and culture of Bharo-Mauritian (Hindu citizens of Mauritius having their origin in India) wrote an article named 'Pundit Sanjeewan (1844-1907): An Orthodox Hindu Priest and a Social Worker' in a major English daily of Mauritius named 'Le Mauritian'. This research based article of Mr Ramsaran was based on a Gazette of Mauritius named 'Le Vrai Progress Colonial' dated Feb 18, 1998, portions of the book 'Hindu Mauritius' by Atmaram Biswanath, Shivaratri edition of 'Ganga Talao' of 1978, Hindi book of Mr Ramsaran named 'Mauritius Ka Adi Kavya Kanan', publications in 1998 in journals like 'La Express' and 'La Cotidien' etc.



Fate had made his life resemble to King Indradyumna of Malaba who as per mythology had first built up temple of Sri Jagannath in Srikshetra Puri. Like King Indradyumna, Pundit Sanjeewan had also tried hard not to let people remember his origin and dynasty. He had therefore never let anyone document his earlier part of life in Odisha. King Indradyumna had asked for a boon from the Lord that let he have no progenies which would not let anyone to boast that his ancestors had materialised Sri Jagannath. Similarly no one remains in the clan of Pundit Sanjeewan. He was a married man but had no progenies. He had dedicated all his assets and income to the large temple he had built up at Triolet. So, no one of his clan remains to put light on his origin and ancestors. So, no one in Odisha would be able to relate themselves with this modern day Indradyumna of Mauritius.

As per the available data Pundit Sanjeewan was born in a Brahmin family of Odisha. He was born in 1844. At the age of 22 years, in 1866, he had boarded a steamer named 'Mozambique' from Calcutta on his way to Mauritius. The reason behind his decision is yet to be ascertained as he was not among the bonded labourers from India exported to Mauritius during that time. The number of co-passengers during his journey to Mauritius was 4996.

In Mauritius he was free to search for occupation as he was neither a bonded labourer nor contractual worker. He first stayed in Mahebourg and Vacoas. Later he shifted his abode to Triolet, which was a small village then. At Triolet he got employed in the public works department and monitored road building work. He left this job to take up business of real estate and construction work. But his greatest work was the huge and beautiful Shiva temple in Triolet which shines like a jewel on the face of Mauritius.

Its geographical structure makes the beautiful island nation Mauritius emerge as a human heart when one glides a floating gaze on the southern hemisphere. It may also look like the revered 'Salagram' if one takes up insightful or spiritual vision. This island is located in the Indian Ocean to the southwest of African Coast. Wavy deep green mountain ranges border its three sides. Area of this island is too small, only 2040 square kilometres. Tourists from any corner of the world who may have visited this island nation at different times of the year have without any hesitation accepted that as per natural beauty it is a fairy land.

It is located in the Indian Ocean at a height of 2000 feet from sea level. Beautiful coral reefs encircle it. The experts, who have studied the geography and geology of Mauritius, opine that long back in forgotten history island of Mauritius was created because of a devastating volcanic eruption. Although throughout the year greenery covers up the whole Mauritius, yet colour of its soil is black. Geologists say its soil is black as it is created of volcanic lava. Nature has dotted the greenery covered black soil of this island with deep blue lakes. Beauty of these lakes is splendid. At times emotion laden tourists say, Like the clear and clean waters of lakes of Mauritius, inhabitants of this island are also too cultured, gentlemanly and their spirit and behaviour is pure.



It is astonishing to note that the inhabitants living within the small 2040 square kilometre area of this small island differ from each other as per their origin. The major communities in the populace who live here are Europeans, Africans, the ones who have come from India to settle here called Bharo Mauritian and people of Chinese origin called Sino Mauritian. Bharo Mauritians are mostly Hindus. Majority of the festivals celebrated in Mauritius are of Hindu Bharo Mauritian community.

Hindu Indians are a majority in Mauritius. They constitute 49 per cent of the population as per the 2011 census, followed by 32 per cent Christians, 17 per cent Muslims and 0.4 per cent Buddhists. But human habitation in Mauritius is quite new. In 1507 the Portuguese explorers who reached the island had found no indigenous people living on the island. It was the only home of the Dodo bird, which is now extinct. This rare bird became extinct on the island after less than eighty years of its discovery by the Portuguese. The Dutch settled here in 1598 and abandoned it in 1710, Mauritius became a French colony in 1715. The British took control of Mauritius in 1810. This island nation became an independent state as a Commonwealth realm on March 12, 1968 and a republic within the Commonwealth on March 12, 1992.

Usually rainy season continues in Mauritius from January to May. During these months no major festival is celebrated in Mauritius. Rainfall decreases in April and drizzles continue till June. Climate becomes enjoyable. The best time of the year in Mauritius is from September to November. So, most of the festivals in Mauritius are celebrated during this period. Apart from them Maha Shivaratri festival is observed in February or March, festival to honour the mother goddess at different times of the year and Dipavali is celebrated in October and November.



It is noteworthy to mention here that like the festivals of India, the religious celebrations in Mauritius are also attached to faith, folklores and mythological traditions. So, there is similarity in the stories and beliefs attached to festivals like Maha Shivaratri and Dipavali that of India and Mauritius.

Origin of major temples and deities worshipped in Mauritius can be easily tracked down to India, like the temple in Triolet built by Pundit Sanjeevan. As per mythology time had made people forget that King Indradyumna had built the Sri Jagannath temple in Puri. Similarly with time people of Mauritius had also forgotten the presence of Lord Jagannath in the temple built by Pundit Sanjeevan and relation of this great man with these deities of Odisha. People of Mauritius again realised the importance of the idols of Sri Jagannath, Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra in this temple when Rath Yatra was celebrated for the first time in the history of Mauritius in 1984. This Rath Yatra celebration had preceded the astonishing miraculous rediscovery of the idols originally worshipped in Puri. It also unfolded an unknown chapter of Hindu history of Mauritius.

Few decades back a Vaishnav Sadhu named Charanambuja Prabhu, who was a disciple of the founder of ISKCON Srila Prabhupada



used to stay in Mauritius. It was the formative period of ISKCON in Mauritius. One night in 1983 he had a dream that he was moving all around Mauritius embracing an idol of Lord Jagannath.

For him this dream was puzzling. He started to ponder, why he saw this dream in Mauritius thousands kilometre away from Odisha. More he thought about his dream, he started to believe that this dream was not without a reason.

On the next morning when he woke up, he described his dream to other devotees in the temple. The head priest of the temple provided startling fact that since long three idols similar to those of Sri Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra of Puri were being worshipped in the Shiva temple or 'Shivala' in Triolet. This Shiva temple was the one built by Pundit Sanjeevan.

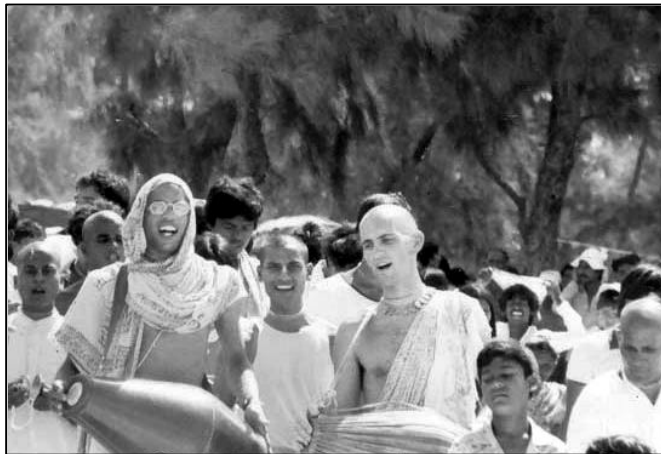
This information made heart of Sadhu Charanambuja fill up with devotional emotions. He got engulfed in eternal astonishment and joy. Along with some other devotees he took up a journey to Triolet. The 'Maheswarnath temple' in Triolet was 90 feet high and built up of concrete. It had temples for several other deities in the temple campus. In one of these subsidiary temples on the campus forgotten identity of deities of Srikshetra were discovered.

Sadhu Charambuja could immediately identify the deities similar to that of Puri reigning in the tranquility of the temple. But the colours of

the deities baffled him. These deities at Triolet did not bear the traditional colours of the original deities worshipped in Puri. They existed in separate unique colours. The deities had been coloured up in light pink. So, they did not have the black, white and yellow appearance of our well known deities. In their light pink look, they seemed different and foreign.

Sadhu Chranmbuja had come across these deities in the middle of June 1983. During this time famous Rath Yatra or car festival of Jagannath is celebrated in Puri. Preparations for

Sri Gundicha or start of Rath Yatra festivities had already started. As per the traditions and Hindu almanac Sri Gundicha is celebrated on the second day of bright fortnight (Sukla Pakhya) of Hindu month of Ashadha. A fortnight before it, Deva Snana Purnima



or the day to bath the deities is observed on full moon day (Purnima) of month of Jyestha. From that day, special rituals or 'Anabasara Niti' of the deities start. During this fortnight the deities are worshipped by a special class of servitors called Daitas and the deities are kept away from the eyes of other devotees. During this time Daitas do the traditional annual maintenance of the deities. This is called 'anabasara'. The traditional maintenance work is called 'ghana lagi'. The 'banak lagi' or traditional colouring of the deities is performed after that. The day on which the deities appear again before the devotees in the new look is called 'navayouvan darshan'. It falls on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight



(Chaturdashi) or no moon day (Amavasya) day of Ashadha month. By the time the construction of chariots or three Rathas that had started from the day of Akshaya Tritiya gets completed. Yellow, black and green coloured chariots remain ready to carry the deities. These three chariots are prepared in the 'ratha khala' (the yard of Chariot making) in front of the palace of Gajapati king of Puri. After getting the 'agya mala' of ritualistic directive chariots are dragged in front of Singhadwara and on the day of Sri Gundicha Rathayatra festivities start.

As an active member of the ISKCON, Sadhu Charanambuja Das knew all about these rituals of Lord Jagannath. His investigation revealed that the localites were totally ignorant about these rituals as well as origin of these deities. It was obvious that the persons who were ignorant about colours of the deities had no knowledge about the rituals attached to them. Sadhu Charanambuja was worried and hurt. He discussed with the management of the 'Maheswarnath temple' in Triolet and with the cooperation of localites and devotees started preparation for the renovation of the three deities.

Their first job was repair of body of the idols and 'banak lagi' or colouring, which is done during 'anabasar' in Srikshestra Puri. No dates were fixed there for the process as per the tradition. But the way Daitas toil hard during the period to renovate the idols in Puri, they used their all efforts to remove the several coatings of colours put on the three idols at the temple. Another member of the ISKCON Sahasrakshi Dasi had also played a major role in this process.

Construction of the temple in Triolet built by Pundit Sanjeevan had started in 1888 and it was ritually consecrated in 1891. Inscription on the wall of the temple proclaimed Pundit Sanjeevan's relation with the temple. A famous

priest of Mauritius Pundit Daulatram Chaturvedi had presided over the ritualistic ceremonies attached to the consecration of the temple.

Construction of this temple also had links with the historical developments in Mauritius. Till 1880s the labourers from India had no right to own land or build up their own houses. These workers who toiled in industries and sugarcane fields were compelled to suffer in dingy industrial slums. A labour movement during that period led to change in this draconian law. These labourers got permission to own their own land and houses. This had provided chance for Pundit Sanjeevan to buy up 150 acres of land from a person named Jules Langlois. He later sold off this land to others at huge profit.

Pundit Sanjeevan utilised most of this acquired funds for the construction of the temple of his dreams in Triolet. He was a staunch devotee of Shiva. So, the temple built by him was dedicated to Lord Maheswarnath. But he could not forget the reigning deity of his ancestral origin, Sri Jagannath. So, deities of Sri Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra were also part of the temple complex.

It is for sure the deities established by Pundit Sanjeevan must have got original colours of the deities worshipped in Puri. But during almost ten decades the people who took over charge of the temple after Pundit Sanjeevan had forgotten importance of the colours of these deities. With time several coatings of different colours had been added up on the idols. The bodies of idols had got hidden behind it.

Through efforts of Sadhu Charanambuja and Sahasrakshi Dasi seven coatings of these colours were removed carefully. It was astonishing to note that different layers of colours put on the deities were not only pink; there were also different layers of hues of the rainbow. When the



original layer of colours on the idols was reached, the traditional black, white and yellow colours of the deities emerged out. At last 'banak lagi' of these idols was made using those traditional colours.

Another startling fact also came to the fore. The idols of the temple in Triolet were not made up of wood what to speak of neem wood (neem wood is used for construction of idols worshipped in Puri). White marble had been used to construct the idols at Maheswarnath temple complex. So, the members of the Temple Trust did not feel it safe to take out these idols for Rath Yatra and opposed the suggestion. It took almost a year for Sadhu Charanambuja to persuade the temple management and localites to agree for observation of Rath Yatra. It was decided to have a single large idol of Lord Jagannath constructed of wood for the Rath Yatra rituals.

Rath Yatra was celebrated at this temple in Mauritius for the first time in middle of August in 1984. 'Chhera Panhara' ritual (sweeping of chariots by the Gajapati king of Puri) was also held in this first Rath Yatra celebration of Mauritius. Amidst joyous chants, Kirtan, dance and claps the chief of management of Triolet temple conducted the 'chhera panhara' ritual. A large rally of devotees flowing in devotional emotions travelled up to the sea beach, where 'sandhya arati' of the deities was held. After that 'Sri Jagannath prasadam' was distributed among all present.

Meanwhile, the ISKCON has built up another temple dedicated to Lord Jagannath, Sri

Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra near Triolet. It has only enhanced the importance of the memory of first appearance of Sri Jagannath in Mauritius more than a century back.

It is to be noted that although Sri Jagannath temple had been established at Triolet in 1891, till 1984 Rath Yatra had been never celebrated there. Due to non-traditional colouration, there was little chance to identify their relation of these idols with the revered deities of Odisha, Sri Jagannath, Sri Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra. The exploration of this site through the dream of Sadhu Charanambuja revealed a undiscovered chapter of Indians especially that of Odisha in Mauritius. It also brought to fore a great Odia Pundit Sanjeevan. It proved that the dream of Sadhu Charanambuja was not trivial; it was a gift with deeper intentions. In other words it can be described as a wish of Almighty; whose plans and wishes get manifested through the spirit and activities of humans. This episode of human history again proved that Almighty never lets selfless devotion of people like Pundit Sanjeevan to be forgotten although the man himself tries for it. It had happened with King Indradyumna and it has got repeated in case of this great Odia ancestor of ours.

Asit Mohanty, 4R ½, Unit-3, Bhubaneswar-1, Email: mohanty.asit@gmail.com.

