The Cult of Lord Jagannath

Sasmita Pattanaik

Lord Jagannath is considered as the most powerful and popular Deity of the Hindu religion. It is an indubitable fact that the cult of Jagannath was inducted and indoctrinated into the religious life of the Hindus, which has traces of many religious creeds and sects. There is debate ongoing about the impact of tribal culture upon the epitome of Indian culture i.e. the cult of Jagannath.

The sediment of non-Vedic traditions gradually emerged into Aryanised form and various major faiths like Saivism, Saktism, Vaishnavism, Jainism and Buddhism have been assimilated into this Jagannath Cult.

Till this time ideologists are having elaborate explanation regarding the Savar inclination with Jagannath Cult. Massive research work is going on about the inclusion of Savar origin for the formation of the Cult of Jagannath.

By taking into consideration of the prevailing traditions and literary references, like the Ramayana, Vishnu Purana (7th Cent A.D.), Jnanasidhi (8th Cent. A.D.) and Trikandeswara (9th Cent. A.D.), we can get a look at the term of Jagannath.

The special Non-Brahmin Priests in the Jagannath temple of Puri are designated as Daita and Soaro who claim themselves to be the descendants of the Savara tribe. The Primary
aspect of the Savara belief was the worship of tree, log and the stone which is in use even today to the Cult of Jagannath. Analyzing these factors one can conclude the lineage of Lord Jagannath with the Savara deity.

Anncharlott Eschmann holds that the Nabakalebara ritual, the ceremony of renewal of the deity is a tribal custom, such practices of renewal of the wooden deity are to be found among the primitive tribes like or as Khonds. During the 15th and 16th Centuries A.D when the evolution of Jagannath Cult reached its apogee, vernacular facts like Sarala das, Nilambar Das and Jagannath Das in their literary creations portrayed the Savara tribe in an exaggerated manner as the early worshipper of Lord Jagannath.

The Indradyumna tradition was given literary form during the 13th century A.D., in the Purushottama Mahatmya of the Skanda Purana. According to Sarala Das’s Mahabharat, the dead body of Lord Krishna transformed into wooden form landed at the Puri sea shore, Jara Sabara an aborigine picked it up and worshipped it. Subsequently Indradyumna, the king of Somavamsi, got 3 wooden images made out of the log and built a temple for the deities. According to Deula Tola of Nilambara Das, Indradyumna, the king of Malva got piece of sacred wood, which was metamorphosed shape of God Nilamadhava from the Sabara Chief named Viswavasu and out of the wood, he carved 3 images.

Based on the literary tradition other beliefs sprang up in the tent of Jagannath, where only association of Savara tribe has been projected, one such belief relates to the Daita and Soara priests in the services of Lord Jagannath of Puri. It has been held that the Daita Priests are offspring of the traditional Savara girl Lalita and the Brahmana Priest Vidyapati. They are therefore designated as Daita (descendants). Similarly another section of tribal priests known as Soara believed to be derivation of the term Savara.

The process of the disposal of the old post shows a great similarity between the Jagannath tenet and the tribal ritual. Accordingly, after the carving of new icons the Brahma Padartha (lift substance) is shifted from old to the new images. Therefore the old images are considered dead. The old icons are taken to the graveyard in the manner of corpses. The burial ground, known as Koili Baikuntha, is located within the precinct of the temple of Lord Jagannath. Thereafter the Daita Priests started weeping. They mourn for Jagannath whom they consider one of their clan. They observe ritual impurity for 10 days. Since they are the heirs of the deceased (Lord Jagannath), they lay claim on the articles used by the deity.

The belief of a guardian deity is the practice prevalent among the tribals of western Odisha and the Jagannath temple of Puri. In western Odisha, one may notice the installation of a uni conial stone at the main entrance into the village as a guardian deity. A keen observer may recognize the deity Nrisimha as the guardian deity in the Jagannath temple of Puri. The tribal belief in a guardian deity had its role to play at the time of Sanskritization, because of which the Jagannath tenent evolved.

In the Tribal Culture, caste distinction is conspicuous by its absence. There is also no taboo of eating the Bhoga or sacred food, even if touched by an untouchable. Tribal priests and non-tribal priests occupy equally important positions in the worship of Lord Jagannath. There is also no restriction on the eating of Prasada (Mahaprasad). It is partaken by the Brahman and the Chandala.
In popular beliefs, Jagannath trios are considered brother and sister. Prevailing tradition exhibits the trio in deep social bond. The psychological and emotional attachment among brother and sister discerned in the tribals of South Western Odisha can't be overlooked while evaluating legends and folklore that bespeak this social fervour in the belief and tradition of Jagannath Cult.

According to Padhi, Jagannath was a resultant from the name "Jagant" which was another name of "Kitung" the Chief Savara deity. Kitung is said to have 10 incarnations like Lord Vishnu and the Jagant incarnation of Kitung is one of them.

It is indeed difficult to say anything definite on the etymology of the term Jagannath. The name of the deity Jagannath came into use since ancient time. Literary sources like the Ramayana refers to a deity, (Jagannath), Vishnu Purana 7th century A.D., Janasiddhi (8th Century A.D) and Trikandeswar (9th century A.D.) mention the name of Jagannath. It was only from the beginning of the 14th Century A.D. exclusive use of the name Jagannath relating Puri deity has been known.

The Jagannath cult, as it appears today can therefore be said to be a conglomeration or synthesis of Vedic lore and tribal ritual practices at the regional level. How Lord Jagannath metamorphosed into a Hinduised deity if he was tribal in Origin. The legends regarding the origin of Lord Jagannath recorded in various sources such as Mahabharata of Sarala Das, Deula Tola of Nilambara Das, Skanda Purana, Brahma Purana, Narada Purana, Padma Purana, Kapila Samhita suggest the tribal as well as Brahmanical lines of the deity is the initial stage.

Rituals of Sri Jagannath temple are quite different from the ritual system of Puja or offering performing in other temples. It is an accumulation of many faculties of Hindu religion which synergizes here in one platform. Arya, Anarya and Brahmana represented by so called. Brahma Raja Aryan Raja "Indrayumna", Savara Srestha Biswavasu and Brahmana Vidyapati are associated with him. His Seva and Puja are traditionally performed by Sevak called Gajapati, Daitapati and Brahmana.

In the Kalian Copper Plate of Sridharara Rate, the chief of Samanta which has been dated to the 2nd half of the 7th century A.D. there is reference to Bhagavana Purushottama Jagannath as the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. Sri Jagannath was regarded as the Gajapati of the empire of Utkal, Kapilendra Dev (1435-68 A.D.) describes himself as the Sevaka of Sri Jagannath. Here at the shrine of Sri Jagannath various religious creeds, cult, and strands Saivism Saktism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, Jainism, Tantricism, Surya Cult and Ganapati Cult were welded into an organic entity called the Jagannath Dharma.

The Cult of Jagannath is a natural outcome of the religious aspiration of the people intent upon devotion based worship of a single personal God (Aikantika Bhakti). The Swetswatara Upanishad and the Kaivalya Upanishad desirable Purusha as the creator of the universe (the Brahma) as one who possesses neither hand or leg who has no eyes but sees everything, no ears but hears all and who through unknown knows everything. This description of Purana explains the peculiarity of the form of Lord Jagannath of Puri.

In the course of history, the image formation of the Lord has changed from single figure to 4 or
rather 7. The initial figure changed to a thus two with the addition of Laxmi under the Agamic modec by about the 7th cent. A.D. next to transformation into trinity was as much a political consideration as a religious necessity.

Jagannath Cult is an amalgamation of diverse religious cults line tribal religion, Buddhism, Saivism, Santhism, Tantricism and Vaishnavism.

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Sasmita Pattanaik, Ph.D Scholar, Berhampur University, Berhampur.