The Saint - Poets of Odisha

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The saint-poets; the major figures in the cultural history of Odisha, are but little known outside the state - a fact that throws into sharp relief the inadequacies of Indian historiography and the political marginalisation of Odishan culture. Paradoxically enough, the Odishan situation is but another sub-set of the pan-Indian socio-politico-religious praxis. Eventually after all, a modest attempt is undertaken in this paper to deliberately focus upon certain broad features in the lives of the saint-poets, while making succinct efforts to be exhaustive in respect to their works and also of their times. Nevertheless a comprehensive background of history, especially cultural history, is furnished in order to situate the saint-poets’ socio-cultural endeavours while highlighting their urgency and thrust. It, therefore, requires a patient perusal of the numerous narratives/texts brought out by them through earlier centuries to properly navigate and understand how manifold, sustained and far-reaching their efforts were.

Modern Odisha has been variously named as Udra, Kalinga and Utkala and such names have achieved political and cultural relevance over a period of time. On account of different reasons, however, the territorial limits have been changed time and again. From a cultural viewpoint, it has remained a ‘salad bowl’; a colourful cultural mosaic inhabiting the Buddhists, Jains, Hindus, Muslims and Christians. In this context, the point to be noted here is that the reigning deity of the land is Lord Jagannath, who embodies in Him the chief elements of different Indian sects and cults. In fact, the cult of Jagannath has proved to be a curious mixture of many elements -heterogeneous and homogenous, welded into one through a long synthetic process of evolution. In order to appreciate the ‘cultural canopy’ that is Odisha (we should also remember that India also offers a similar cause), we should have thorough re(visioning) of the geographical situation and the historical setting, which would provide the background study on the currents and crosscurrents of the religious and cultural history of Odisha.

The geographical situation of Odisha has been the main factor contributing to its religious grounding. Bounded on the west by inaccessible jungle tracts and rugged mountains, the vast sea in the east; it is laid in isolation from the rest of India, little affected by the political turmoil and confusion that convulsed other parts in the Middle Ages. Besides, it also served as a connecting link between northern India and the Deccan through the eastern corridor. However, the recesses in the jungles and mountains of Odisha provided the different religious sects with veritable sanctuaries and ideal settings for carrying out their religious
activities in peace and tranquility, without any fear or favour of oppression and persecution. Odisha has been, for that matter, the favourite haunt of religious preachers since ancient times.

It is quite probable and is often accepted that the people of Odisha had adopted Brahmanical faith before the advent of Buddhism and Jainism. The infiltration of the Aryan culture must have been a slow and long-continued process, though we find the mention of Udra, Utkala and Kalinga in Manu and the epics. The wave of religious upheaval of the 6th century B.C. had also reached Odisha, as according to the prevailing Buddhist folklore Sakyamuni promulgated ‘Kalachakra System’ in Odisha in his lifetime. The spread of Buddhism in the state can also be ascertained from the excavations of Lalitagiri, Ratnagiri and the recent findings in Langudi Hills. Similarly Jainism had spread in Odisha from very early times and the ‘HatiGumpha inscription’ in Udayagiri and the Jain temple at Khandagiri bears testimony to such a premise. Also as per a legend in the JainaHarivamsaPurana, MahaviraVardhamana had preached his religion, before Brahmanism was firmly established in this region.

In the 3rd Century B.C. Ashoka had promoted the cause of Buddhism after the Kalinga War and in the 2nd Century AD emperor Kharavela professed Jainism. Towards the close of 5th Century or in the early 6th Century, the Gangas who were staunch Saivites ruled the region and flourished their religion. The Sirpur kings Jayaraja, Sudevaraja and Pravararaja, who were Vaishnavas also ruled in the later 6th Century called themselvesParamaBhagabata and incidentally the elements of Vaishnavism sipped into Odishan socio-religious fabric. The Sailodbhavas of 7th Century A.D. and the Karas then after championed the cause of Saivism, except TribhubanaMahadevi who was a Vaishnavi. However, from 7th to the middle of 11th Century with the patronage from Somavamsi Kings in Kosala and Gangas in Kalinga, Saivism reigned supreme with the Saktu-Tantric Cult followed in its trail. In this connection Sankara’s visit to Puri cannot be lost sight of, as it imparted fresh strength to Saivism in the 9th Century onwards. With the end of Keshari Kings, Saivism gradually declined in its prominence to make room for growing Vaishnavism. Ananta Varman Choda Ganga Deva, though originally a Saivite adapted Vaishnavism towards the later part of his life and he left behind him the glorious monument of his devotion to that faith in the temple of Jagannath, which was constructed during his reign and subsequently developed by his successors. In the first quarter of the 12th Century Ramanuja visited Odisha. The famous temple of Alarnath (Alwarnath) at Brahmagiri in Puri district bears testimony to the influence of the preaching of Ramanuja, the last of the Alwars. It is also believed that the installation of the goddess Lakshmi in the Jagannath temple-complex was due to the influence of Ramanuja, who along with his followers viewed Jagannath as Vishnu. Eventually, Vaishnavism rose to prominence from about the middle of the 11th Century and is still continuing in its sway to influence a larger population of the region.

In the process, the 12th Century Odisha encountered two celebrated Vaishnava poets – Jayadeva, the writer of Gita Govinda and Nimbarka, the author of Krishna Karmamrita, who popularized the Radha-Krishna lila. It is said Jayadeva visited Lord Jagannath and recited Gita Govinda before Him and from the time of Kapilendra Deva recitation of Gita Govinda before the Lord during night has remained a regular practice. However, the Radha-Krishna idea started by the aforesaid saint poets was
perfected by Sri Chaitanya in the 16th Century. Incidentally, it also created another school of Vaishnavism (known as ‘Utkaliya Vaishnavism’, which was distinctly different from the Gaudiya version), which focused on Lord Jagannath.

In the similar footing the Sun-god worship which was expected to be initiated in the 1st Century A.D. got institutionalized in Konark (the temple, otherwise known as ‘Black Pagoda’ – a superb architectural and artistic excellence). Similarly the Ganapatyas had their centre in Darpan estate in the district of Jajpur and the Saktas promoted the Viraja Kshetra at Jajpur proper. From what has been stated in the aforesaid paragraphs, it is clear that the different sects of India had surcharged the socio-religious setting of Odisha in different periods of history and finally, all merged into the melting pot of the Jagannath cult and its all-embracing domain.

We are here reminded of the five celebrated Vaishnava poets of the 16th Century, otherwise known as PancaSakhas (the five friends) – Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Achyutananda Das, Yasobanta Das and Sishu Ananta Das, who were pioneers of Utkaliya version of Vaishnavism. They are also viewed as Crypto Buddhists, as they were Vaishnavas who believed in Buddhist cult of the void. SunyaSamhita, Tula Vina, Gupta Gita, Virata Gita etc. written by these poets are thought to be essentially Buddhist within the veneer of Vaishnavism. However, in Dharma Puja Vidhana Lord Jagannath is called the Buddha incarnation of Hari. Nevertheless, in the Pancasakha literature, philosophy and religion became close allies and worked together hand in hand to reach the common man in a manner, which is really unique in the history of this land. A case in point is Jagannatha Das’s Bhagabata (a transcreation of Sanskrit Bhagabata), where the emphasis is on the life of the spirit, the problems of ignorance or illusion and knowledge, the equations of pleasure and pain, of human destiny and grace, and the attainment of spiritual salvation. These make the Odia Bhagabata an unsurpassed document in the quest for spirituality as an essential dimension of the Hindu view of life. At the same time, the narratives of Pancasakhas are conceived in a language which is both lyrical and metaphysical, aesthetically satisfying and emotionally invigorating. For centuries the works have served as the basic foundation of social and ethical values, and have regulated Odisha’s culture, social ethics and value systems ever since. To be focussed, we are to ascertain that Jagannatha Das’s Bhagabata is to the Odias perhaps more than what the ‘Bible’ is to the Christian world. There is, however, scarcely an Odiavillage where at least one complete set of the Bhagabata is not worshipped or a home where it has not been known, listened to, read and recited. Even when society has been changing fast under the impact of modernizing forces, the Bhagabata Tungi (The house at the centre of a village, where Bhagabata is recited and listened to by the masses) is still found in many villages or at individual homes and Bhagabata Parayana or recitation is done in every evening. It is said that Sankardeva from Assam saw for himself the tremendous impact of the Bhagabata Ghar in the life of Odias and started the institution of Namagharas. Like Jagannatha Das’s Bhagabata, the other seminal epics, which have shaped the society and culture of the Odia-speaking people and given them a distinct identity, are the Mahabharata of Sarala Das, the Jagamohan Ramayana of Balarama Das and the Harivamsa of Achyutananda Das. This phase, however, compels us to admit that Odisha had been in the mainstream of the spiritual quest that characterized Indian life. The work cited above
and their writers [essentially Srasta (creator) and Drasta (visionary) are they all] are the finest expression of such a quest. Chitta Ranjan Das, who has done a commendable work on Santha (Bhakti) Sahitya, has identified a tradition perpetuated by saints in Odisha, which may be cited here as under:

The Pancasakhas are the representatives of a time, which in the whole of India is accepted as the Saint Period – in literature, in spiritual practice and in culture as well. Unlike the literature of Saint Period in Odisha, Indian literature in any other period has not embraced the broad aspects of life and society.  

In the 19th Century we also find some Crypto-Buddhists taking the name of Alekha. The pioneer of Alekhism was the poet Bhima Bhoi, who was born of a Kondh family in Rairakhol estate sometime between 1850-60. The blind tribal poet preached through his typical philosophic-religious symbolism the equality of masses, as he realized the uniform presence of formless God in every human being. While questioning the idol worship, the followers of the Mahima Swami (of whom Bhima Bhoi was the foremost disciple) denounced the traditional ritual practices. In fact, the Dharma adopted a position of open attack on the orthodox tradition of Brahmanical restrictions and practices. In this context, we are reminded of the observation of Sitakant Mohapatra, the noted litterateur of Odisha, which goes thus;

It is a phenomenon of great significance that Bhima Bhoi who was a blind low-caste Kondh became the progenitor of a religious system, which disowns caste system and idolatry. His principal seat was in the Feudatory State of Sonepur, where a large number of his followers assembled to hear his doctrines.

Bhima Bhoi’s poetry, largely metaphysical and spiritual in its concern, marked a radical departure from the pervasive romanticism of the 19th century Odia literature. Though obscure at times in the use of esoteric symbolism of the Mahima Cult, the poems of Bhima Bhoi depict the human suffering with characteristic ease and poise. His masterpiece Stuti Cintamani (A Prayer to the Lord) is a collection of one hundred prayers, where the poet gives vent to his anguished sense of spiritual isolation. An example:

Sad, miserable I pray for refuge in You, O Lord
I’ve no strength left in me, no patience, to practise and realise the One Letter Pure.

* * *

So very ignorant a creature I am
I humbly hope to realise the secret desire of my soul,
Thus says Bhima, small, insignificant,
Lord Guru is his saviour.

[ Bhima Bhoi, Stuti Cintamani, 31 (A Prayer to the Lord), 1950 ]

Here we are also reminded of a host of saint-poets : Raghu Arakshita, Bhakta Salabega, Bhaktakabi Krushna Das, Mahatma Panu Das, Sridhar Swami, Sidha Kabi Parshurama Bihari, Narayanananda Abadhuta Swami and Kantakabi Laxmikanta, to name a few, revealing their passionate devotion to the Almighty in their songs (otherwise known as Jananas / Bhajanas), especially in praise of Lord Jagannath. The poets have also indicated their intense suffering in hostile surroundings in which they found themselves helpless, but for the succour provided by the ‘Ocean of Compassion’. We can cite here an example :
You have deprived me of everything,
What glory’s banner can you fly now?
You have taken away all you had given me,
What else can you snatch from my hand now?

[Laxmikanta, Jivana Sangita II (A Lover’s Complaint II)1942]

In the later part of 19th Century we come across important poets like Kavisurya Baladeba Rath, Gopal Krushna and Dinakrushna, who were essentially linked to the past, to the earlier Bhakti and Vaishnavite traditions that manifested in devotional, metaphysical love lyrics. We also find in Madhusudan Rao, Kuntala Kumari Sabat and Baikunthanath Patnaik a contemplative and semi-mystical meditative preoccupation with life. A couple of examples:

Life is limitless, Salvation infinite;
total fulfilment, the perennial fountain flow,
exists in your formless appearance-
and hence, let my life flow as a fountain beneath your eternal feet.

[Sabat, Viswarupa O Premaswarupa (Cosmic Form and the Image of Love), 1935]

And,

In the garden of my life-breath can be heard
Your flute’s delicate time, the breath of life
your welcome arrival;
...
now that at your touch
the lean plants of autumn are flowering again?

[Baikunthanath, Jatra Sangita (The Song of the Journey), 1970]

In fact, the contributions of the poets mentioned in the afore-said analysis form a composite whole of the Odia literature that had grown and developed between the 15th and mid-20th Century. For the most part, the saint-poets speak for themselves. In our effort to present a comprehensive picture, we should not however force a superficial similarity upon them, rather we must try our best to point at significant differences among the saint-poets of Odisha. Let us now conclude with a couple of lines from Plotinus, which, as we humbly presume, capture the basic nuances of a seer’s supplication:

Even here the august and the veritably beautiful life is the life in wisdom, here dimly seen. For their Wisdom gives sight to the seen and power for the fuller living and in that tenser life both to see and to become what is seen…In virtue of this essence it is that life endures, that the Intellectual Principle endures, that the Beings stand in their eternity. 

References:


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