



Chaitanya's Panchasakha and Lord Jagannath

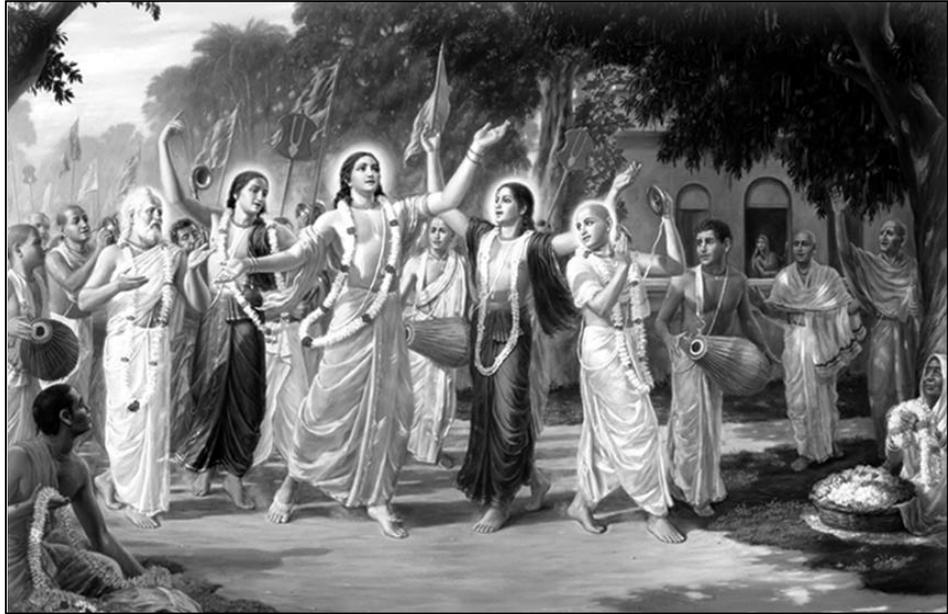
Dr. Dina Krishna Joshi

Among the various great souls, landed in the holy place Odisha previously known as Kalinga, the most prominent are the Panchasakhaa (Five Friends) who have deeply influenced both the Odia Spiritualism and the Literature. The land is witness to most of the important Hindu traditions and spiritual movements. Five poets emerged towards the 16th century: Balaram Das, Jagannath Das, Achyutananda Das, Ananta Das and Jasobanta Das. Although their dates of activity span one hundred years, they are collectively known as "Panchasakhas",

since they adhered to the same school of thought, Utkaliya Vaishnavism. These five friends lived in between 1450 to 1550 AD and enriched the spiritualism in a way that normal man can also understand and benefit out of that.

'Pancha' means five and 'Sakhaa' means friends-The great spiritual leader and Naamayogi

Avataar Chaitanya Mahaprabhu has referred to these five friends as Panchasakha and stated that the Panchasakha are like Pancha Atma, i.e., five souls (Atma- Tattva) and are in no way lesser



than Avataars of Vishnu. Shri Chaitanya was the first to establish the Bhaaba-Mishrita Naama Marga (the path of chanting the holy name with proper feelings and faith); before him this method was not so popular or well-known even if the path is partly described in the ancient Vedas. He first introduced this method for all the simple-minded people and made many realize that God-



realization can also be achieved by simpler method of pure devotion without undergoing difficult method of austerities. It is he who first disclosed the importance of the Mahaa Mantra- Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare!

Legends behind the origin of Panchasakha

There is an interesting belief about the origin of Panchasakha which relates them to the Mahabharata in the Dwapara-Yuga, and is also stated in Shunya Samhita written by Mahapurusha Achyutananda. Here, Mahapurusha describes, Panchasakhaa literally meaning 'five mates or friends'. Towards the end of Mahabharat era when Lord Krishna was leaving the mortal body, Nilakantheswara Mahadeva appeared and had a conversation with Lord Krishna. He revealed that the Lord's companions Dama, Sudama, Srivatsa, Subala, and Subahu would reincarnate in the Kali-Yuga and will be known as Ananta, Acyutananda, Jagannatha, Balarama and Yasovanta, respectively. Thus, the believers of the Panchasakha consider that these five saints were the most intimate friends of Lord Krishna in Dwapara-Yuga, who came again in Kali-Yuga to serve Him. They are also instrumental to perform the crucial and much-awaited Yuga-Karma of destroying the sinners and saving the saints, according to the Sanatana-Hindu beliefs.

Satyabadi Panchasakha

A band of selfless young men namely Pandit Gopabandhu Das, Acharya Harihar Das, Pandit Nilakantha Das, Krupasindhu Mishra and Godavarish Mishra who distinguished themselves in later life as scholars and national leaders are popularly known as Satyabadi's Panchasakha. The Panchasakha or five comrades contributed their best for the cause of national aspirations.

They were equally dedicated to the blend of educational as well as political uplift of Odisha.

Panchasakha and Buddhism

The theory of the universe has ever been the first problem in every religion. Like the Puranas and Tantric texts, the Panchasakha literature also abounds with it. The Panchasakha starts with the eternal question - who was there when this entire phenomenal universe was not? The problem of the Prime Mover is still beyond our reach and can only be explained negatively- He is not this, not this - 'neti neti'. The Prajnaparamita Hridayagarbha, a later Buddhist scripture describes Sunyata as 'neti neti'. Therefore, it seems that there are a lot of similarities between the Panchasakha ideology of Sunyata and that of the Buddhists.

Panchasakha and Lord Jagannath

Achyutananda was born in a village by the name 'Tilakana', where two distributaries of the Mahanadi, Luna (Labana Dhara) and Chitrotpala bifurcated, in Cuttack district of Odisha, during the twenty first *anka* of the Gajapati Purushottam Deva. This is thought to be somewhere between 1480 and 1505 by different scholars. His mother was Padmavati, and his father was Dinabandhu Khuntia, and his grandfather was Gopinath Mohanty, a scribe in the Jagannath temple at Puri. He was born after his mother prayed at the pillar in front of the Jagannath Temple, and his father had a dream that the divine bird Garuda brought him a child. In legend he is believed to be an incarnation of Garuda.

Jewelled by sacred Buddhist monuments to temples of Shakti (the supreme female power), Shiva (the supreme male power), and Jagannath Vishnu (Lord of the Universe), the state is unique



in itself. Most important spiritual rituals have been extensively practiced here by several seers - including Buddhist ceremonies, Devi Tantra (tantric rituals involving worship of Shakti), Shaiva Marg (the path followed by devotees of Shiva), and Vaishnava Marg (the path followed by the devotees of Vishnu). Hardly there is any seer who would not pay a visit to the Shri Jagannath temple once in his/her life.

Teachings of Panchasakha

Two important factors set the Panchasakhas apart from other Indian Hindu Saints. They were the first to take the Hindu Sanskrit texts into the reach of the common people, by translating them into the local language, Odia. This was first done by Sarala Dasa's translation of the Mahabharata in the mid-fifteenth century, followed by Balarama Dasa's Jagamohan Ramayana, Jagannath Dasa's Bhagabat Purana, and Acyutananda Dasa's Harivamsa. The second aspect is their form of Odia Vaisnavism, which sees God as the 'Shunya Purusha' and the nature of the soul as being able to merge into the Absolute.

Sri Chaitanya and Panchasakha

Utkaliya Vaisnavism also sometimes called Odia Vaisnavism developed into its present state, in the 15th century. According to the Panchasakhas, Lord Jagannath is the 'Purna-Brahma', and all the Avatars of Vishnu emanate from Him, and also enter into Him at the end. Jagannatha was the chief god of the devotional sect. The chief ideal of the Panchasakhas was that, as a Bhakta they would be faithful, humble, learned, selfless, active, benevolent and affectionate. The Panchasakhas were against the caste system, they considered all beings as one. They translated the Sanskrit Classics into local

language, Odia. Anyone could become a Vaisnava, even Muslims.

At the time of Shri Chaitanya, his followers who came from Nadia, called later as Gaudiya, were considering them greater or superior to the Utkaliya Vaisnavas and were disregarding them. So there was a cold war between them. Knowing this, Shri Chaitanya conferred the title of 'Atibadi' (the great) on Jagannatha Das to keep up the dignity of the Utkaliya Vaisnavas. But it brought no solution, and on the other had created conflict among them. The conflict of these two groups are evident in the Basana Charita Gita of Acyutananda, and even in modern day derogatory language of the Gaudiya towards the Utkaliya Vaisnavas.

Explaining to his disciples the attributes of a devotee, Shri Acyutananda Das said, "There are Bhaktas that go on chattering the name of the Lord, there are Bhaktas who will take food from any home. There are Bhaktas who perform occult acts and Bhaktas who make false offerings. There are wandering Bhaktas who carry flags to parade their devotion, and there are Bhaktas who are smeared all over their body. He who has attained the right understanding of the Divine is the real Bhakta, he is the best because he has an inward eye, sees God within him, and in every person."

Age of Panchasakha

The Panchasakhas are very much Vaishnavas by thought. In 1509, Chaitanya came to Odisha with his Vaishnava message of love. Before him, Jayadev had prepared the ground by heralding the cult of Vaishnavism through his Geetagovinda. Chaitanya's path of devotion was known as Raganuga Bhakti Marga, but the Panchasakhas differed from Chaitanyas and believed in Gyana Mishrita Bhakti Marga, which



has similarities with the Buddhist philosophy of Charya Literature.

As said earlier, the Panchasakha converted ancient Hindu texts into prose (of simple language) easily understandable by the people of Udra Desha (Odisha). Shri Achyutananda Das was the most prolific writer of the Panchasakhas and has written numerous books (called as Pothi's), believed not in one life but in many successive lives. He is known as the Mahapurusha, which means - a great man. Mahapurusha Achyutananda was a *shunya sadhak* and had acquired immense knowledge about almost every aspect, i.e. spiritualism, Ayurveda (Indian healing medical science that uses only natural resources and herbs), various other sciences, and social regulations.

Panchasakha ideology

a) Sunya Purusha

nahi tahara rupa warna, adarsha avarna ta chinha.
tahaku brahma boli kahi, sunya brahmhati se bolai.

It has no shape, no colour,
it is invisible and ideal, without a name
This Brahman is called Shunya Brahman.

The Panchasakhas believed in a concept of God as Sunya (emptiness, void, zero) called Shunya Purusha or Shunya Brahman. This Shunya signifies a transcendental principle that eludes the conceptual nexus applied to human thinking as described in the Upanishads. Achyutananda's culminating work is called the Shunya Samhita where he discusses this philosophy in depth.

sunyara akara viira sunyara vicara,
sunye thai dekha vira e sacaracara.

dekha e sacaracara sunyare prakasha,
sunyu ude hoichanti sunyare vilase.

Oh viral Look at the shunya
by placing yourself in shunya,
and meditate on mahashunya,
Shunya itself is the form,
Ground of all discriminating knowledge.

Look at the whole world from the pedestal of Shunya;
you will find everything manifested in the Shunya,
everything arises out of Shunya and
everything flourishes in the Shunya Brahman.

The philosophy is not the Shunya of the Buddhists, as it is not empty but full, sometimes even called the Purna Shunya (the full/complete void). The Panchasakhas project the deity Jagannath as the embodiment of the Shunya Purusha. Achyutananda uses a classical concept of Vaishnavism that uses both form, and formless aspects of God. This is seen in his statement from the Gurubhakti Gita:

dui je dinare paksi udikari jai,
dui je chaksure sehi samsare khelai.

ekaje na thile kana dui gale andha,
enukari nirguna saguna sehi bheda.

A bird can only fly with both wings. It can have a perfect vision with both the eyes. In the absence of one, it becomes one-eyed, and in the absence of both, it is totally blind. Thus like two eyes Nirguna (god perceived as formless) and Saguna (god perceived with form) are chained together.

b) Jnana-mishrita Bhakti-marga

The Panchasakhas are very much Vaishnavas by thought. Chaitanya's path of devotion was known as Raganuga Bhakti Marga (brought to Odisha in 1509), which says all you need is love (devotion) to get God. The Panchasakhas differed from Chaitanya's



philosophy, and believed in Jnana-mishrita Bhakti-marga, which states that one needs a combination of love (bhakti) and knowledge (Jnana) to reach God. With our knowledge if we show our pure love (bhakti), we can definitely get the *sunyatma* (GOD). The Panchasakhas therefore promoted a Vaishnavism that involved study of scriptures, yoga, rituals, and devotion.

c) Pinda-Brahmanda Tattva

The concept of the Pinda-Brahmanda is that the body (pinda) is a replica of the Universe (Brahmanda), or microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm. Much of the yogic teachings of Acyutananda are based on this core concept. His teachings are filled with references to outer locations existing as energies in the body.

d) Sabda Brahman

The concept of the Sabda Brahman is that, God created the universe as sound, and that all things have sound vibration as their essence. The writings of Acyutananda are filled with Mantras and esoteric concepts about sounds and their effects on consciousness. For example, in Acyutananda's Rama Rasa Boli, the demon Ravana is said to have meditated on the sound 'Sleem' while focusing on the ten other sacred sounds (yoga-dashakshara) to please Goddess Sita. Even more esoteric is this verse from the Shunya Rahasa where one can see the interwoven nature of internal yogic theory and sound found in Acyutananda's writings:

Oh Jnanins: utter the name of Hari [God]
 May be you are the eldest or the youngest.
 Piercing six chakras blooms the lotus
 Near the ethereal void of air
 Between the Sutala and Rasatala
 The bee abides at the zenith of the void
 One is not a servant of the Lord just because they have a rosary
 Unless he utters the name of Krisna in his inner heart;

The Name is the seed, rosary its robe
 Rosary is of no use if God's name is mindlessly uttered
 The three cords are the three triadic streams
 Make your oblations there
 Ayudhya, Dwarika, and the city of Gopa
 This knowledge is memorized by every soul.

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Dr. Dina Krishna Joshi, Post Doctoral Research Scholar,
 Gayatrinagar, New Bus Stand, Junagarh, Kalahandi,
 Odisha-766014