



Salabeg : A Renowned Saint Poet of Odisha

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Among the devotional poets of Odisha, Salbeg occupies a paramount position. Salbeg the renowned saint poet composed about one hundred fifty devotional songs including eight Sanskrit verses which are called *Patitapavanastaka* and there are six *Bhajanas* in Hindi and Bengali languages. But interestingly nowhere in his *Bhajanas*, Salbeg has indicated anything about the name of his father and mother except his origin as a Muslim. In one of his widely acclaimed *Bhajana*, Salbeg says, 'I am a 'Yavan' (Muslim by caste), My father is the son of a Mughal and mother the daughter of a Brahmin. I am born in such a family that the Hindus do not even take water from me'.

In most of his poems, Salbeg has given a short account of his life but nothing about the date and place of his birth. From *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi* of Mirza Nathan it is known that Jahangir Quli Khan alias Lalbeg was the Subedar of Bengal for one year (1607-1608 CE.). He had invaded Odisha to please his patron Jahangir, the Mughal emperor. During one of such invasion he abducted one accomplished young Brahmin widow from Dandamukundapur. Being greatly charmed by the exceptional beauty of that young and accomplished Brahmin widow Lalbeg accepted her as his wife. In course of time at Cuttack, this Brahmin widow gave birth to a male child who was named as Salbeg. ⁽¹⁾ One year after the birth of Salbeg, his father Lalbeg died on 27th April,

1608 CE. This has been corroborated by a few evidences. It can be examined in different grounds. Jahangir Quli Khan (Lalbeg) was appointed as the Subedar of Bengal after the accession of Mughal Emperor Jahangir to the throne of Delhi probably between 1605 to 1608 CE. As a trusted general, he must have been entrusted with the task of the invasion of Odisha including the temple of Jagannath at Puri.

From 1605 CE. Lalbeg lived only for three years. But Ramdasa in his book *Dandyatabhakti Rasamruta* has mentioned that Salbeg had, once in his youth, gone with his father to the battlefield where he sustained severe injuries which could not be healed up in spite of best treatment. He then, lost all hope of his life and began to cry before his mother. The mother, while consoling her son on his grief, narrated the pathetic tale of her previous life. On hearing this Salbeg with confidence determined to live further. In the subsequent chapters of Ramdasa it is known that Lalbeg suddenly left Salbeg and his mother and took no interest on them for a long time. ⁽²⁾

Probably then he must have requested the new Subedar of Odisha for the maintenance of Salbeg and his mother and they must have been properly taken care of him with the passage of time, when Salbeg came of to age, he must have earned good reputation by being enrolled as a soldier in the Mughal army and subsequently



would have sustained injuries while fighting. Then hearing everything from his mother about his past life, he must have lost all faith in his life and felt remorse. But the pious mother must have advised her son to dedicate himself to the worship of the Gods according to Hindu customs and rites. But apprehending, his son to be an atheist of being born of a Muslim father, she must have satisfied herself by administering an oath of allegiance at the feet of the Almighty.⁽³⁾ He stayed for one year at Brindavana and then returned to Puri to see the car festival of Lord Jagannath. But on the way he suddenly falls ill. *Srigundicha* (car festival) was drawing nearer. He tried his utmost to reach Puri to have a *Darshan* or glimpse of Sri Jagannath. But being helpless to reach the place of his destination before the return of Car Festival (*Bahuda Yatra*), he walked all the way to Puri by composing songs in emotion and reciting them in a very pathetic tone in which he appealed Lord with all devotion to wait for him till his arrival at Puri.

“*Jagabandhu he gosain
Tumbha Sricharana binu Anya gati nahi !
Satas Panchasa Kosha diga disunahi
Moha jiba pain nandighosha thiba rahi*”.⁽⁴⁾

(O’ Lord please wait until I reach the destination to see you)

Jagabandhu, my Lord,
Friend of everyone in this world
I have nowhere else to go
Than seeking shelter
At your pretty, auspicious feet
Fifteen hundred miles is too far
A distance for me to cover.
Till I arrive there and get a glimpse of you
Do remain on the Nandighosh.

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Says Salabega, I am a Yavana
An outcaste and fallen.
Do heed my supplication,
O Lord of Vrindavan !

The above sad prayer of Salbeg, the devotee, could reach the ears of Lord Jagannath. If the legends are to be believed, on the day of return Car Festival, *Nandighosha* the Car of Jagannath, on its way back to Srimandira, did not move and remained static till the arrival of Salbeg at Puri. The place where the car remained static to give a darshan (glimpse) to Salbeg was later utilized by the devotee in composing his ‘*Bhajanas*’ in honour of Lord Jagannath (as the *Bhajana* cited above on the title Jagannath) for the rest of his life and finally he was cremated there after his death. The tombstone of this great devotee is still standing in the *Badadanda*, the Grant Road at Puri thereby raising peculiar questions in the minds of orthodox Hindus.

Sundarananda Vidyavinod, one Bengali critic in his book *Srikshetra* has mentioned that Sri Jagannath was extremely pleased with the devotion of Salbeg and appeared before him in the Lion’s Gate in the form of *Patitapavana* (Extinguisher of Sins) and in his honour, Salbeg, wrote his famous *Patitapavanastaka*. Lord Jagannath also known as *Patitapabana* or Savior of the fallen.⁽⁵⁾ An eminent critic of Bengal Sukumar Sen,⁽⁶⁾ in his work *History of Brajaboli Literature*, has not only recognized Salbeg as an established poet of Odisha but also his Vaishnavite verses written in Hindi, Bengali and Odia literature. Sukumar Sen accepting him as a poet of 17th century Odisha he expressed his view that three poems of Salbeg are quoted in *Padakalpataru* of which one is written in Odia.

From the above points it is interesting to note that in *Srikshetra* there is absolutely no difference shown to people of different castes and creeds. In fact, the problem of caste is not at all seen in front of the Lord i.e., Jagannath culture. Again it can be said that, it goes beyond the creeds. Lord Jagannath has had a Muslim disciples, Salbega, a Muslim devotee, is celebrated disciple of the Lord, who composed



hymns singing glory of His master. So was Javan Haridas, another Muslim disciple.⁽⁷⁾

K.N. Mohapatra in his historical work *History of Khurda* has depicted Salbeg as a disciple of Yasovanta Das and Shyamananda Goswami, according to Sudarsan Das's works on the poet Yasovanta Das and Gaudiya tradition respectively. It seems improbable that Salbeg cannot be a disciple of Yasovanta Das of the 'Panchasakha Group'. He might have received his initiation from the disciples of Yasovanta Das. From another sources *Rasikamangala Kavya* it is known that Vaishnava Shyamananda dies in 1552 *Saka era* or in 1630 CE. It is not possible that, Salbeg on his mother's advice must have accepted Shyamananda as his Guru just on the eve of his death, As there is no information available about his Guru from his thought provoking 'Bhajan', Ramdas has also not given any information about his Guru, rather he accepted his mother as his direct preceptor since he received that from his mother who advised her son to dedicate himself to Lord Krishna her family deity.⁽⁸⁾ The above facts suggest that, Salbega developed a strong sense of devotion towards Lord Sri Krishna, later on he might have come in contact with a number of saints but none of them was directly accepted as his spiritual Guru. If he accepted anyone as his Guru, he must have mentioned his names in some of his *Bhajan*. He had great reputation among the saints of his contemporary period and as such his tomb stone could be constructed on the *Badadand*, the holy Grand Road at Puri.

Salbeg's Devotion

Salbeg, in fact, was brought up in an Islamic culture but getting inspiration from his mother during the time of his illness, he instantly developed a strong sense of devotion towards Bala Mukunda. Hence, he started composing 'Bhajan' eulogizing the lovable aspects of Lord Sri Krishna. Sometimes after his return from

Brindavana, he composed a few of *Bhajan* and *Chaupadis* on Sri Krishna's childhood activities and the amorous sports. Then he stayed at 'Sri Kshetra' for a considerable period and after witnessing the Car Festival and other Festivals of Lord Jagannath and hearing his glory from the devotees, he must have composed his *Bhajan* based on Lord Jagannath in the second phase of his devotional career. And in the last phase of his career, generally the saint poet gets involved in the discussion of the true knowledge of the Lord and the mystery of life. It is important to note that, Salbeg's *Bhajan* have been classified into four different groups like:

- (1) Bhajan on Jagannath.
- (2) Bhajan on Krishna and Rama
- (3) Bhajan on the Brahmajanas
- (4) Bhajan on the spiritual laws of life and on Siva and Shakti.

These above classified *Bhajan*, have been mostly collected from the twenty thousand Palmleaf Manuscript preserved at Odisha State Museum, Bhubaneswar. Some printed materials are from vocal songs of some beggars.⁽⁹⁾

Salbeg's Bhajan devoted to Sri Krishna

Intoxicated with 'Krishnarasa' Salbeg must have desired to go to Brindavan. There he might have heard about the dalliances of his presiding deity from the saints and seers of the place and greatly lost in the Bala Mukunda form of Sri Krishna. The child like behavior of Sri Krishna towards his mother must have fascinated Salbeg, therefore, he composed a few *Chaupadis* describing the amusements of that child Sri Krishna. In the composition of a poem *Sunapua Nachaire* Salbeg described the problem created by child Krishna to mother Yasoda while taking his foods. The affectionate mother Yasoda feeds the Krishna by reciting a few songs. Thereafter, Salbeg must have



composed poems depicting the youthful vigour of Krishna. He attracted by the beauty of Krishna, the ornaments of his body and therefore, his heart has been completely absorbed in Him and he has forgotten his own self. It can be said that, like Gopis, Salbeg thought himself as Gopi, danced in tune with the flute of Krishna and taken refuge under Sri Krishna flute. The *Bhajan*s of Salbeg dedicated to Sri Krishna are considered as the jewels of Odia literature so far as their lucid language thought and the style of music are concerned. No doubt it can be considered as a glorious period of the Odia literature. 17th century composition of Salbeg greatly influenced the poets like Banamali and Gopal Krishna of the later period. They had developed a strong devotional love towards Lord Krishna. ⁽¹⁰⁾

I consider it suffice to narrate the experience of contemporary of Salbeg like Mira Bai, Dharia Sahib and Kabir Das. The experience of ecstasy and love of Salbeg to Krishna has been in the same parlance as has been experienced by Mira Bai, Muslim saints Dharia Sahib and Kabir Das. Mira Bai says, “I am ascending, Chakra by Chakra, my consciousness is ascending from one floor to another floor, from one Chakra to another Chakra, gaining from *Mooladhara* to *Ajna*, coming down to *Mooladhara* again going to *Ajna*, trying to reach the top floor (*Sahasrara*) who shall that great awareness down in me, What is this sound that I hear,” There should be some symbol or indication of the manifestation of higher awareness when it comes. It does not just come without any sign. These signs are called *anubhuti* (experience) and they exist in the thousands.

Muslim saint Dharia Sahib asks “who is playing the flute in *Sahasrara Chakra*”. This means that he hears the *Anahata Nada* (the unstruck sound) in the form of flute. “The sound of the *Mridangam* (drum) is being heard, and within myself I see the spring. Close your eyes and see flowers and flowers and flowers. If you

go to the Himalayas you can see it, you will see flowers– endless, endless flowers”. The same ecstasy and love experiences by Kabir Das he narrated thus, “An every day song you sing in a room which is perfectly solitary. There is nobody there. A light is burning, please do not move, you will miss the vision of the *Deepak* (light).” Kabir tells how when the drum is being heard, it is an indication of the descent of higher consciousness. ⁽¹¹⁾

Salbeg’s Bhajan’s on Lord Jagannath

Salbeg accepted Jagannath as Sri Krishna and depicted the vivid description of Jagannath as a cowherd boy in the Gopapur, the holder of the Gobardhan hill and the destroyer of the eight demons. Salbeg was also deeply worried over the removal of Jagannath from Puri (Nilachal). On account of the repeated invasion of the Mughals, the then Gajapati king failed to protect the temple. Hence, he advised the *Sevakas* of the deity to shift them to a secluded place. When all arrangements were made to send the deities to that place on a bullock cart this became unbearable on the part of Salbeg and therefore, he composed:

*Kene Gheni Jauchha Jagannatha nku
Aambhe Darshan Karibu Kahaku
Khuntia Daka Dele Pahandi Bije Kale
Bijaya Kara Prabhu Chapaku;
Kula Badhunkara Radi Pandaye Gada Gadi
Bidhata Bama Hela Odissaku;
Bada Deulu Bahari Sagadire Bije Kari
Renu Je Padu Thiba Sri mukhaku;
Kahaee Salabega Nirmalya Kanhu Heba*

Dheek Dheek Ambha Jibanaku, ⁽¹²⁾ (Poem 11/
Page.12)

Where are you carrying away Jagannatha,
The Lord of the Universe
Of whom shall we get an audience
Of whom shall we get a glimpse
Attendants shout and announce,



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Salabega thus bemoans, feeling sad.
How can now the holy rice be dried
Our lives are truly accursed.

Permanently he decided to stay at Puri to make his life purer by taking the discarded *Tulasi* from the body of that Great Lord Jagannath. He (Salbeg) was convinced that Lord must offer him shelter under his lotus-feet. At Puri (Srikshetra), during his stay he was familiar with the amusements of the various incarnations (*avatars*) of this Great Lord and had finally given vent to his feelings through his world famous *Bhajan*s. Although, Salbeg is a famous devotee of Sri Krishna numerous *Bhajan*s have been dedicated in honour of Sri Rama, Hanuman, Siva and Shakti. A few of *Bhajan*s have been recently found out in which he has invoked Siva to free himself from the world.⁽¹³⁾

Salbeg composed *Bhajan*s on Sri Jagannath and other God and Goddesses of Hindu emotionally, though, he was not a Hindu, his songs were melodious, heart throbbing and extremely sentimental. His *Bhajan*s are appreciated by people of all walks of life because his language was simple and forceful. In 17th century many poets of Odisha composed many *Kavyas*, *Chaupadis* and *Bhajan*s etc., but they have not been so popular like that of Salbeg. The *Bhajan*s of Salbeg are greatly admired by the people of Odisha. Whatever may be the availability of his *Bhajan*s, in conclusion it can be said that, Salbeg was on the whole, a saint poet of the mass, an ideal devotee, a reformer and the creator of an age in Odia literature. In fact, Salbeg is a shining star of the Odia literary sky and will shine the whole spectrum for all time.

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