

The Ritual of Herapanchami and Lord Jagannath

Durgamadhab Dash

Puri is famous for Lord Jagannath. It is also famous for the Grand Temple. As a Dham of the Lord, Puri is adored as one of the four pilgrim centres of the Hindus. According to Hindu scriptures, there is a belief that a person cremated here has direct access to heaven in defiance of all his or her sins. Puri in this sense is a sacred place on earth. It is the most unique place as the fourth pilgrim centre of the world. There is a scriptural belief that if one sees the Lord on His chariot during the period of Rath Yatra, one will have no life after death and ultimately one will have “Moksha” in life.



The Grand Temple of the Lord is known as Srimandira. “Sri” means Laxmi. So the name of the Temple as “Srimandira” signifies the fact that Maa Mahalaxmi is the principal goddess of the Grand Temple. She is also worshipped as the “Maya Shakti” (the power of delusion) of Lord Jagannath. There is a belief among the Hindus that Mahalaxmi is the goddess of wealth and

prosperity. She cooks the “Prasad” of the Lord and the Lord in oblation receives the same with great satisfaction.

The “Prasad” offered here to the Lord is inclusive of plenty of food of different varieties and this feature of the temple is beyond one’s imagination. This is the notable illustriousness of the place.

Mahalaxmi is both the cook and the purveyor of the Prasad. A Bhakta visiting the Temple has never gone empty-bellied at any point of time. Everything in the temple is great and unique in the matter of every ritualistic practice. The functions observed here are related to different auspicious occasions in reference to the Principal deities and the other deities installed in the Temple.

“Herapanchami” is one such function of the Temple. It is observed in pomp and splendour during the period of “Rathayatra”. The Principal

deities at this point of time are worshipped in Gundicha Mandap. It is known as a ritual of Maa Mahalaxmi, the “Maya Shakti” of the Lord.

Like Parvati being inseparable from Lord Siva, Maa Mahalaxmi is also inseparable from Lord Jagannath. Sri Jagannath and Maa Mahalaxmi are always one. As per the spiritual belief among the “Vaishnavas”, Sri Jagannath is inconceivable without Mahalaxmi. She is always seen and worshipped by the side of the Lord. It is only during Rathayatra that there is a departure in this practice. Mahalaxmi is left alone in the Temple and the Lord comes out on a divine outing in the company of His brother, Sri Balaram and Sister, Maa Subhadra and other gods along with His divine weapon, “Sri Sudarsan”. Maa Mahalaxmi derides this “Yatra” of the Lord as indiscreet, shocking and finally dubs it as a heartless journey. It is true that She, for this reason, has much of animosity for the Lord but She, at the same time is the most devoted and lovable consort of the Lord. How can She remain without His sacred companionship? How long can She entertain Her fume against Him? At long last, She tilts, realizes and ultimately makes up Her mind to meet the Lord in the Gundicha Temple where He has encamped with His brother, sister and other Gods.

Finally, She proceeds to Gundicha Temple. She meets the Lord. She expresses Her anguish but with love as Her beloved consort in utmost devotion. The Lord is moved and touched by Maa Mahalaxmi Who entreats Him to come back to the Temple at His earliest. The Lord concedes to Her. He is pleased with Her humble imploration. He also gives Her a time to return to the Temple. Shorn of other details, this is the Herapanchami ritual. It is observed in pomp and ceremony in Gundicha Temple during the period of “Rath Yatra”. The ritual highlights the separation

of Mahalaxmi from the Lord. At the same time, it accentuates the anxiety of Mahalaxmi as Srimandir in the absence of the Lord has lost all its glory and divine lustre and the Temple looks like a place shorn of divine grace and celestial beauty.

It is to be mentioned here that all the rituals of the Grand Temple are prima facie related to our social traditions and conventions. We may give here an example to explain this social truth of life. In our social life, a husband cannot afford to move out on an outing even for a short period of time in the company of his brother and sister to the exclusion of his wife as the Lord has done during the period of “Rath Yatra”. If such an occasion ever arises in our social life in the normal course of any such incidence, there will a bonfire in the house as the wife will never tolerate such a situation to go by. The wife will be very much disturbed and perturbed on account of the happening of such an event. She will be intolerant till the husband returns from his journey. The pangs and feelings of Mahalaxmi are reflected and displayed to Her Lord in a similar order. These factors are reflected in the Herapanchami ritual.

As per the scripture of “Jugal Sahasra,” Mahalaxmi is seated in the heart of Lord Jagannath. She is described as a precious stone embedded in the ornament worn by Sri Jagannath. Therefore Mahalaxmi is adored as “Nilachalabasini”. She is eulogized as “Sobhasalini” of Lord Jagannath.

The ritual of Herapanchami as an important function of Srimandir has found mention in “Skandapurana”. Vidyapati while narrating the manifestation of the Lord as Nilamadhab on a mountain-range (believed to be near Puri) has described the most illustrious resplendence of the Lord and His consort Mahalaxmi Who, as per his narration, is magnificently attired and costumed.

He also mentions that Mahalaxmi, the daughter of the sea, is the “Parashakti” of the Lord who is the creator of the universe.

Thus seen, Mahalaxmi’s place is very important in the Grand Temple. The twelve ‘yatras’ of the Lord include the function of Herapanchami Yatra, a ritual that is related to Mahalaxmi and Lord Jagannath in “Adapa Mandap” that is Gundicha Temple. Succinctly stated, it is a function relating to the divine meet between Mahalaxmi and the Lord.

It is said in this connection that in the Grand Temple, the Lord with Mahalaxmi seated by His side is manifested in “Aiswarya Lila.” But in Gundicha Mandir, He gives ‘darshan’ to His devotees in “Madhurya Lila”. And the Lord for that purpose has opted to move out from the Temple without Mahalaxmi during the car festival.

The ritual of Herapanchami is considered an ancillary function of “Rath Yatra”. In some scriptures, “Herapanchami” is also known as “Horapanchami” function of the Temple. At some places the function is also known as “Harapanchami”. Pundits say that the words ‘Hera’ ‘Hara’ or ‘Hora’ used before the word “Panchami” mean one and the same expression. As explained in this regard, all the three words refer to the journey of Mahalaxmi from the Grand Temple to “Gundicha Ghar” to meet the Lord. The purpose of Her journey is already mentioned above. So, the function of Hera/Hara/Hora Panchami-whatever be the expression in this regard-signifies the journey of Mahalaxmi to Gundicha Temple where, in the company of other gods and goddesses, the Lord has manifested Himself in “Madhurya lila” highlighting for that purpose separation of “Parasakti” from “Brahma” which fact is an important feature of the “Vaishnava” Cult.

Herapanchami function is celebrated on the 5th day of the bright fortnight of Asadha. As a ritualistic practice followed in Gundicha Mandir, Jagannath Mahaprabhu most affectionately receives Mahalaxmi on Her arrival in His new encampment and accepts Her graceful imploration. Immensely pleased, He promises Her to return to the Grand Temple very soon and as a token of His love, He offers Her a garland taking it out from His own self with great love and affection, He kisses the garland and offers the same to Mahalaxmi in the memory of Her loving care and warm-hearted divine service.

The devotees, seeing these scenes, feel greatly elated and experience a lot of spiritual fun as if they have expiated all their sins. This is said to be the graciousness of the evening “darsan” of the Lord on the Herapanchami day in Gundicha Temple during the Ratha Yatra festival.

According to history of the Temple, this “utsav” (function) was started during the time of Maharaja Kapileswar Deb. Before his reign, the Herapanchami function was being observed in a symbolic way with recitation of Mantras. As per a narrative on this score in “Madala Panji”, Maa Mahalaxmi and Sri Jagannath were being worshipped with divine salutations accompanied by the offering of sacred light along with other sacred materials. As further stated in “Madala Panji”, it is Kapileswar Deb, who substituted this practice with the introduction of an idol of Mahalaxmi made of gold and thus converted the entire divine practice to an elaborate ritual in a very organized way making the function more realistic with a good number of spiritual additions. It is under these conditions that “Herapanchami” is also known as “Herautsav” over the period of time.

There is another aspect of Herapanchami as mentioned in "Bamideba Samhita". It is written here that when Lord Jagannath wishes for "Patitapabana yatra" in the company of His brother, sister and other gods, Mahalaxmi remaining in the Grand Temple alone, the latter expresses Her distress before Bimala Thakurani who advises Her to win over the Lord to Her side by speaking enchanting words and in the ultimate course, the Lord would be moved to take a decision to return to the Temple early. Maa Mahalaxmi obeys the advice of Bimala Thakurani and undertakes Her journey to "Gundicha Temple" to get back the Lord.

As mentioned in the "Yatra Bhagabat" written by a famous spiritual writer of the 18th century namely Balunki Pathy, on the Herapanchami day, the "Sabayats" of the Temple take Mahalaxmi to Gundicha Ghar in a special palanquin. They halt for a while near the chariot of the Lord in front of the Gundicha Ghar. Mahalaxmi in anguish breaks a piece of wood from the chariot of Lord Jagannath as a mark of her woes mixed with anger. This action of Mahalaxmi expresses the fact that as the Lord didn't like to take Mahalaxmi in His Company, She expressed Her anger in retaliation by breaking His chariot in that way.

The scripture further says that to reveal the reaction of Mahalaxmi, the Sabayats of Mahalaxmi in a symbolic way get in to a dual of words with the Sabayats of Lord Jagannath.

Mahalaxmi next proceeds to Gundicha Temple to meet the Lord on His divine alter. And as the meeting between the two of them takes place, Mahalaxmi expresses Her gratefulness and the Lord, as if anxiously waiting to see His consort comes out of the Temple and offers Her a garland taking it out from His own self. In Her

reciprocatory action, Mahalaxmi follows the instructions of Bimala Thakurani and behaves with great affection.

As per Mr. Pathy's writing, there is, in the first instance, display of anger from Mahalaxmi's side and this has been very nicely depicted in the said writing in the form of breaking a piece of wood from Sri Jagannath's chariot. This fact has also been very nicely displayed in the next stage of Her meeting in the Gundicha Temple. Here Mahalaxmi is very cool, calm and most endearing to the Lord in obedience to the instructions of Bimala Thakurani.

The "Vaishnabites" hold a different view on this score. Their belief is that on this day, Krishna Chandra does roaming in the forest with the Gopies of Brundaban where Radha is not present. So Radha misunderstands the spiritual happening and sends out a message to Krishna expressing Her anguish. She asks Him a question. "How can your roaming with the Gopies in my absence be "Rasha" as the term obtains"? So on the Herapanchami day at Puri, the "Vaishnabs" see Krishna Chandra in Lord Jagannath and Radha in Maa Mahalaxmi.

There is another version about Herapanchami as described in "Gundicha Champu" written by Chakrapani Pattnayak. This book dates back to 18th century. It is a spiritual poetry. It deals with the various aspects of Jagannath cult. Here the function of Herapanchami has been described in the most enchanting couplets composed in a rhythmic style.

The poet says that the ritual of Herapanchami depicts a situation where Maa Mahalaxmi is drawn to an emotional discord with the Lord. She has deep anguish but it is not imbued with either rancor or enmity. It is a

sequence depicting the common outpouring of a wife's remorseful concern as the Lord has set out on a divine outing in the company of His brother and sister leaving His beloved consort alone. Awfully dejected, Mahalaxmi fumes and sends goddess, Bimala, Her well-wisher to Gundicha Temple where the Lord has delightfully encamped. Seeing Bimala in the Gundicha Temple, the Lord with concern enquires about Mahalaxmi and says that Mahalaxmi must have taken Him amiss for His aberration in His social behaviour. Bimala explains the entire situation and the Lord at last promises her to return back to the Temple at the earliest and the Lord also wants Bimala to convey this fact to Mahalaxmi.

Bimala returns to the Temple. She conveys the message of the Lord to Mahalaxmi. And Mahalaxmi is now satisfied with solace in mind in the midst of Her dejection.

As can be noted from the above description, Bimala has acted as a messenger of Mahalaxmi and gone as Her emissary to the Lord. This is a unique description enshrined in this Champu. This is more or less an endeavour on the part of the author to make the function more lively in a picturesque depiction.

We have got another poetry known as "Niladri Vihar" written by the court-poet, namely Gopinath Singh of the 19th century. As described here, when Mahalaxmi comes to know that the Lord is happy in His new encampment, She gets infuriated and asks the attendants to break a portion of His chariot in revenge for the Lord's aberration in His dispensation. Not only this, as described further in this poetry, She directs Her attendants to inform this happening to Subhadra, the Lord's sister as a mark of Her retaliatory action.

In literature, minds differ as rivers differ. In this sense, the same happening may have different looks in the eyes of different poets. In describing Herapanchami function, the poets have held out different narratives from their respective poetic angles. Nonetheless, the ritual is tethered to one main theme. And this is on the point of Mahalaxmi drifting away from the mainstream of Ratha Yatra for which reason, She is leading a life of seclusion in the Temple away from the companionship of the Lord Who joins Her again when He returns to the divine throne.

Whatever be the twist of facts in the scriptural reference as described in the aforesaid paragraphs, Herapanchami as a religious ritual of the Temple depicts for our purpose a typical family situation where the husband has distorted the peace of the house by sheer negligence of the rights of the wife. This is to illustrate the fact that no husband should ever commit such an aberration in his social life. Not only this, the wife should also on her part behave like a life-partner and try to understand her husband shorn of any emotion. Mahalaxmi while being emotional in Her behaviour had never transgressed the barrier of Her Dharma for which reason the discord between Her and Her consort was later amicably settled. This is in a nutshell the Herapanchami function of the Lord as it is described in different scriptures.

Durgamadhab Dash, House No.138, Ananta Vihar,
Phase-II, Pokhariput, Bhubaneswar.