Odisha, the land of art and architecture, has not only excelled in art, architecture, Music and dance but also has carved a niche in spiritual culture of the world. Odisha has become famous worldwide in her heart-touching elegant creativity in art and architectural beauty in Konark, Rajarani and innumerable temples in Patta-paintings, Odissi dance and Odissi Music. In the world of spiritual culture, the Jagannath cult has also got worldwide recognition in fostering equality, fraternity, brotherhood, religious tolerance irrespective of caste, creed and region.

Shree Jagannath, the Lord of universe and His colourful car festival attract lakhs of pilgrims during car-festival which is celebrated annually on second day of bright fortnight of Asadha (June-July). This is considered as the biggest colourful festival in the world. It consists eight phases of festivities such as (1) Snana Jatra (2) Anasara (3) Netra Utsaba (4) Naba Jaubana Darshan (5) Pahandi, the ceremonial processes of the images (6) Chhera Panhara – which means, sweeping of floor of the cars by the golden broom by king of Puri (7) Sojourn of the Deities in Gundicha Ghar for 9 days (8) Lastly the Bahuda or the return Car festival.

When three chariots such as Nandighosh of Lord Jagannath, Taladhwaja, the chariot of Lord Balabhadra and Deba Dalana – the chariot of Devi Subhadra roll on “Bada danda” with colourful dresses, innumerable devotees irrespect of caste, creed and religion are enthralled in gaiety with devotional emotion. W.W. Hunter one of the well known historians of Odisha has described this colourful scene of Car-festival of Puri in his book titled “A

Jagannath Cult and its Impact on Odishan Music and Dance

Indu Bhusan Kar

Lord Balabhadra and Deba Dalana – the chariot of Devi Subhadra roll on “Bada danda” with colourful dresses, innumerable devotees irrespect of caste, creed and religion are enthralled in gaiety with devotional emotion. W.W. Hunter one of the well known historians of Odisha has described this colourful scene of Car-festival of Puri in his book titled “A
History of Orissa”. He described this wonderful scene as follows –

“Music strikes up before and behind drums beat, cymbals clash, the priests harangue from the cars, or shout a sort fescinnine medley enlivened with broad allusions and course gestures which are received with roars of laughter by the crowd, and so the dense mass struggles forward by convulsive jerks tugging and sweating, shouting and jumping, singing and praying and swearing”. Besides the colourful car festivals there are nearly two sub-festivals being observed, throughout the year at Puri-Srikshetra. But only 12 other festivals, such as Jhulan Jatra, Janmastami, Kumar Purnima, Basant Panchami, Sibaratri, Sriram Nabami and Chandana Jatra etc. are celebrated. In all these festivals Sri Jagannath is dressed with different Veshas (dresses), such as Chandan Vesha, Ganesh Vesha, Naba Jaubana Vesha, Radha Damodar Vesha, Gaja Uddharan Vesha. In the book titled “Niladree Mahodaya”, name and description of various Veshas of Jagannath has been enumerated. All these major festivals center around Shree Jagannath to the aspiration of Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina and Vaishnavite devotees. The rituals of all religious sects have been accommodated in these celebration of festivals. This shows the syncretism of the cult of Jagannath. In this context, it is pertinent to know the salient features of Jagannath cult.

SALIENT FEATURES OF JAGANNATH CULT:

Shree Jagannath from time immemorial was being worshiped by Sabar Tribe as “Daru Devata”. There is a belief that their Devata Kitung (in their language) lives in the tree. Their God Who is residing in tree is called “Jaganti”. In the mythology of Sabara culture, Kitunga manifests in ten incarnations. One of these ten incarnations is Jagannath. Affectionately these tribals – Sabars, call Jaganti as ‘Jagaboi’ which means “Jaga Devati”. In Odishan villages, Odia devotees, respect Jagannath and call Him as Jaga Thakura.

Dr. Beni Madhab Padhi, a distinguished scholar & writer, has also discussed tribal origin of Jagannath cult in his widely acclaimed book titled in Odia “Daru Devata”. The legend of Viswabasu, worshipping Daru Devata in a jungle at Niladri Sundar hill named Blue hill confirms that the worship of Sri Jagannath was of tribal origin. Sarala Das, the great poet of Odia “Mahabharat” has elaborately described the legend of origin of Jagannath cult in “Musali Parva” of his Mahabharat. Surendra Mohanty, a well known novelist of Odisha has opily summed up and said – “In the Musali Parva, Sarala Dasa has attempted a synthesis of autochthonous tribal genesis of cult of Krushna and also the Jagannath Buddha. The narration of the Musali Parva is of great help in constructing the chronological evolution of the cult of Jagannath.” [Lord Sri Jagannath, Page-16]

In course of time, many saints and religious leaders like Ramanuja, Sri Sankaracharya, Sri Chaitanya and Nanak, Sikh Guru visited Puri and accepted Sri Jagannath, as Lord of Universe. They found their religious aspirations fulfilled in the cult of Jagannath. The most notable factor of cult of Jagannath is that not only Brahminical rituals, but also Buddhist, Jain, Saivite and Vaishnavite rituals have been accommodated in Pujas and festivals of Sri Jagannath. Thus, there is great assimilation of essential rituals of all major religious sects of Hindu Dharma.

That is why the cult of Jagannath is called syncretic in nature. Men are equal irrespective of caste, creed and sect. All devotees are brothers. There is great reverence for all religions and the
religious tolerance is an important features of the cult of Jagannath. Unity in diversity is an ideal philosophy in India. The same is true in the cult of Jagannath.

At “Ananda Bazaar”, inside the Puri temple, it is heartening to see! all men, women and children of different castes of society share Mahaprasad as members of one community. Sri Jagannath is considered as Gana-Devata (God of people irrespective of caste, creed & religion.) He is regarded as “Patita Pavan” (the savior of downtrodden). The cult of Jagannath pervades in all walks of life of Odishan people. This cult of Jagannath has enriched the cultural heritage of Odisha – such as art, literature, music, drama and dance.

In religion practice, Sri Jagannath is worshipped like a living human being. He gets up early, takes bath, takes food, have snacks; suffers from sickness, hears music, sees dance and have fun and quarrels with Laxmi. This is unique in the system of Jagannath seva, pujas, activities.

Impact of Jagannath cult on Odishan Music and dance

If we look back to cultural history of Odisha, we find that musical tradition is more than 2000 years old. Dating back from the rule of Emperor, Kharavela of 1st century B.C. the Odias have developed their creative genius in music and excelled in it. The Odissi music of Chhanda, Chautisa, Janana, Bhajan has its classicism and originality.

The documentary evidence of Odishan ancient musical tradition has been discovered in the Hati Gumpha inscription of Udayagiri and Khandagiri hills situated in the western side of the temple city, Bhubaneswar. In this Hatigumpha inscription (called elephant cave is one of the 117 caves constructed by Emperor Kharavela, who was a great patron of Gandharva Kala (Music and dance). This inscription has been carved in prakrit language in the Brahmi lipi. The fifth line of Hatigumpha inscription mentions “Expert in Gandharva Veda Kharavela arranged for entertainment of his subjects the musical instruments and items such as DAPA (combat, Nata), dance, Gita (Music, Vadita) (Orchestra) MSABA, Festival SAMAJA (Play or drama or Jatra). Dhiren Das, a quoted scholar in performing art of Odisha has opined in his book, titled “Jatra” that Rani Gumphaa cave was an Arena Theatre. Thus, this ancient musical tradition flourished gradually with royal patronage of subsequent rulers of Kalinga. During Gupta and Bhaumakar dynasty spanning from 681 AD to 717 AD, many talented Gurus, wrote – “Boudgaon Doha” in Prakrit mixed with the then Odia colloquial language. In ancient temples, many scenes of musical instruments such as Veena, Flute, Mardala, Dambaru, Kahali and Mrudanga indicate that these musical instruments were prevalent and popular among Odia people. The ancient Odishan musical and dance tradition continue to be fostered and flourished centering around Sri Jagannath’s Puja service. Music, dance with musical instruments, became the integral part of puja, service of Lord Jagannath. Acharya Jayadev a celebrated poet and scholar in Sanskrit language wrote famous Geeti Kabya titled “Geeta Gobinda” in Sanskrit language during the rule of Ananga Bhima Chodaganga Deb (1175-1202). Poet Jayadeb of 12th Century was also an ardent devotee of Jagannath. His “Geeta Gobinda” was sung in the Jagannath temple. The rulers of Ganga dynasty, favoured, that “Geeta Gobinda” should be integral part of puja ceremony of Lord Jagannath as they were Vaishnavite, though earlier, some of them were Shaivites.
Ananga Bhima Deb III, during whose rule the constructions of temple were completed in his 6th regnal year in 1216, proclaimed himself as son of Purusottam or Jagannath. He declared Lord Jagannath as Emperor of Utkal or Rastra Devata and he is His Routa or representative.

According to the Madala Panji (Temple chronicles) Kabi Narasingha Dev (1282-1307 AD), the successor of Langula Narasingha Dev, the illustrious builder of the Konark Temple introduced singing “Geeta Gobinda” in the temple [vide P 36 of the Madala Panji – Prachi edition].

In the field of dance, “Mahari Dance” was introduced in the temple. Mahari dance is said to be oldest form of modern Odissi Dance. In course of time, Debadasi Nrutya by dancing girls (Devadasis) was introduced and it became the part ceremonies of Lord Jagannath. At the time of Badasinghar ritual “Deba Dasis sing” Geeta Gobinda and also dance, when Lord Jagannath goes to bed for sleep. Therefore it can be said that Jagannath temple gave a great platform for enrichment of Odishan music and dance.

Sarala Das, the epic poet of Mahabharat during the rule of Kapilendra Deb, (1452-1479 A.D.) has written about many legends of Lord Jagannath and enlightened Odias with many raga of Odissi music. Innumerable devotional songs, Bhajans, Jananas, were composed by Odia poets for Lord Jagannath.

Eminent medieval poets like Jagannath Das, Balaram Das, Achyutananda, Jasobanta, DinakrushnaDas, Madhavi Das composed Bhajans in praise of Lord Jagannath. Upendra Bhanja, Gopal Krishna, Banamali Das, Kabisurya Baladev Rath also enriched musical tradition basing on cult of Jagannath. In the 17th century, Salbeg a Mahedan by birth, became ardent devotee of Sri Jagannath. He wrote heart – touching Bhajan (devotional song) on Lord Jagannath. His famous song “Ahay Nila Sails Prabala Matta barana – Mo Arata Nalini Banaku Kara Dalana” is very popular among the devotees. It is a land-mark in tradition of devotional songs composed for Sri Jagannath, the Lord of Universe. Gopal Krushna Pattanaik of Parlakhemundi has shown his excellent musical talent on multitude aspects of cult of Jagannath. Similarly, Abhimanyu Samanta Singhhar, Chandan Hazuri, Rajakabi Jadunath Mahapatra have been influenced by cult of Jagannath and composed soulful Bhajans. Therefore it can be concluded that the syncretism of the cult of Jagannath has not only enriched Odia spiritual life but also fostered Odishan music and dance tradition and mesmerised the mass with awe and wonder.

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A PRAYER

Sugyan Gourab

O Generator!
Don’t exempt me-
from punishments of my faults.
But teach me-
ot to make mistakes.
Teach me-
to do the right
being in the right track.

O Operator!
Punish me mercilessly-
as a father punishes his child.
Punish me-
making realize
not to repeat mistakes
as a blind looses his
stick only once in life.

O Destroyer!
Don’t help me-
when I fall.
But teach me-
to raise myself of my own.

O Lord!
Don’t help me-
when the world hurts me.
But teach me-
to escape of my own
and convert all
the wrongs into the rights.

O Almighty!
Don’t help me-
when enemies are all around
and play tricks.
But bless me-
with wit to transit all plans.

O Omnipotent!
Don’t help me-
during hard times.
But teach me-
to be calm as You.
Teach me-
to speak sweet and judge
the right from the wrong.

O Omnipresent!
Don’t help me-during the odd times.
But teach me-
to do the evens
using me head, heart, hand.

O Omniscient!
Don’t help me.
But teach me-
to punish all evils
transforming the wrong acts
in the right ways.

O Boss!
Teach me,
Teach me always-
to be in the right path
converting all the weaknesses
into my saintly strength
empowering me to transform tomorrow…