The history of religion in medieval Odisha from 12th Century AD onwards is of immense importance. Different religious cults flourished side by side and every faith had its culmination in the cult of Jagannath. There are three distinct features. First, the continuance of the cosmopolite homogeneity in the midst of diversity. Second, predominance and supremacy of Vaisnavism as a major religion of Odisha as well as the erection of remarkable religious structures. Third, the inspired influence of the saints of Odisha. The role of Ramanuja and Chaitanya created a magnificent chapter of dedication and devotion in Odisha.

Medieval period in Odisha was a great age of religious achievements. The suitable geographical location and the favourable cultural atmosphere of Odisha have provided opportunity since ancient times for the growth and progress of various religious cults like: Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism. This age is also remarkable due to the contribution of religious personalities. Proofs exist to show how they won innumerable number of hearts for their sparkling humanity, brilliant optimism and catholicity. Among the Vaisnavas of South there were two classes of teachers, viz, the Alvars and the Acharyas. The Alvars were interested in devotion for Vishnu or Narayana and they expressed their loving devotion in composing songs, while the Acharyas were engaged in their arguments and controversies to establish their own theories. Ramanuja was the Alvar, who was the successor of Yamunamuni. The philosophy of Ramanuja is called Visistadvaita. From the commentary on Brahma Sutra, the keynote of his entire work can be summed up. Himself a devotee of Visnu, he derived his metaphysical doctrines from the Upanisads and Brahma Sutras. R. G. Bhandarkar opines that, the Vaisnavism of Ramanuja is the Vasudevism combined with the Narayaniya and Visnu elements.

Most of the historians agree that Ramanuja visited Odisha between 1122 to 1137 AD. His visit to Odisha was a great event indeed. P. Mukherjee states that Ramanuja visited Puri to preach his faith, as a part fulfillment of his mission. The religious history of Odisha reveals the fact that, popularity of any religion used to depend on royal patronage. Anantavarman Chodagangadeva (1078-1147 AD) of Ganga dynasty was at first a Paramasaiva. But Ramanuja, a Srivaisnava exerted a remarkable influence on Chodagangadeva. As a result he was mentioned as a Paramavaisnava. The grand temple of Lord Jagannath was built by him. This fact is mentioned in Chodagangadeva’s grandson Rajaraja’s Dasagoba Copperplate of 1198 AD. Even some of the functions of the Srivaisnavas were introduced in Jagannath temple. W. W.
Hunter points out that, during thirteenth and fourteenth century AD, a reformation took place, as a result of which Vishnu worship became the ‘National Religion of India’. Vaisnavism flourished in Odisha and at last it had its culmination and synthesisation in the cult of Jagannath. Jagannath is regarded as Visnu and Jagannath temple became the centre of various religious cults. K. C. Panigrahi opines, “Jagannath grew into an institution embodying the principles of all the sects and cults known to India”. It has been a historically established fact which has been accepted unanimously by historians like K. C. Panigrahi, M. M. Ganguly, H. K. Mahtab and P. Mukhjerjee that the important centre of religious movement in Odisha during medieval period was Puri, which is otherwise know as ‘Srikshetra’, ‘Visnukshetra’ and ‘Purusottamakshetra’. But Odisha was studded with several religious centres connected with Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism. The worship of Panchadevas or the five deities was quite popular. Jajpur, a Sakti Pitha, is famous for Viraja temple, Bhubaneswar for Lingaraj temple, Konark Sun temple is a silent testimony of Sun worship while Mahavinayak is famous for the worship of Lord Ganesh. Especially Puri became the highest centre of Vaisnavism, delighting in religious activities for the magnificent Jagannath Temple.

The worship of Saptamatrikas was prevalent in Belkhandi in Kalahandi district. Hirapur and Ranipur Jharial are famous for worship of Yoginis. Hirapur is situated near Bhubaneswar and Ranipur in Bolangir district. Rise of Tantrism expressed itself in several temples, like temples of Chamunda, Varahi and Saptamatrika. Even after the construction of Jagannath temple at Puri, Sakti cult gracefully retained its former popularity. Subhadra and Vimala both of them are regarded as Sakti. So Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism were interrelated. The cult of Gopinath was very popular in the coastal area of Odisha. During the reign of Anangabhimadeva-III, Narasimhadeva I and Narasimhadeva II, the cult of Gopinath Krishna was popular. In this way several places of religious significance are situated all over Odisha.

Particularly ‘Puri’ became a magnetic centre of pilgrimage. Predominantly this place is connected with Bhakti or devotion. The doctrine of Bhakti or loving devotion is the most important doctrine of the Vaisnavas. It created a sharp difference between sacrificial and devotional religion. Non-violence or Ahimsa is an important doctrine of Vaisnavism. The worship of the Avatars or incarnations of Vishnu forms another doctrine of Vaisnavism. The purpose of Avataravada is connected with the benevolent aspect of divinity. Jayadeva, the great poet has beautifully described the ten incarnations of Vishnu in his literary work ‘Gita Govinda’. Singing of Gita Govinda, in Jagannath temple was introduced during the reign of Narasimha –II (1278-1306 AD). Not only literature but also architecture depicts the popularity of incarnations. In Odisha the ten incarnations are Matsya (Fish), Kruma (Tortoise), Varaha (Boar), Nrisimha (Man Lion), Vamana (Dwarf), Parsurama, Rama, Balabhadra, Buddha and Kalki. Scholars have used the terms, ‘Anthropomorphism’ and ‘Theriomorphism’ while describing the incarnations. Vaisnavism had its culmination in the cult of Jagannath. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was a great devotee of Lord Jagannath. He was a Gaudiya Vaisnava who belonged to Nadia in Bengal. In 1510 AD he arrived in Puri. Impressed by the religious atmosphere he cherished the desire to stay at Puri. He was so popular that, his name has become a household word in almost every village and town. Chaitanya always identified himself with Sri Radha, the beloved of Srikrishna. As he was devoted to Lord Krishna, for him there was no difference between Lord Jagannath and Lord...
Krishna. Chaitanya was the contemporary of Pratapprudrdeva, the then ruler of Odisha who ruled from 1497 to 1534 AD. Like his predecessors he was also a man of spiritual disposition. He was very much impressed by Chaitanya. Panchasakhas in Odisha were deeply influenced by the outlook of Chaitanya. He used to experience the vision of God in ecstasy.

Jelal Uddin (1207-1273 AD), Hafis (1300-1388 AD) and Jami (1414 – 1493 AD), were Muhammadan Sufi poets who expressed similar feelings. Not only Hindus, but also Muhammadans were impressed by his personality. Chaitanya made people acquainted with Nagarsamkirttana. Sama, a kind of devotional dance prevalent among the Sufis has similarity with Samkirttana. The Sama was introduced by Rumi, who was the founder of Vedantic type of Sufism in Islam. Embodiment of love, Chaitanya was the champion of equality, compassion and above all the angelic messenger of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Medieval period is remarkable for the study of religion. The study is fact revealing as well as enlivening. Different religious cults had their origin and every faith attained a process of development. No doubt excessive devotion and admiration for Lord Jagannath, gave rise to a cult and other religious faiths such as Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism absorbed themselves in this cult without losing their identity, because there was enough spiritual space for the growth of faith and worship. Different cults contributed generously to the cultural heritage of Odisha. The deity and the saints, the ruler and the ruled, the divinity and the devotee played an epoch-making role in the religious history of medieval Odisha.

References:


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There is a village today called Damilo close to Bhubaneswar. Presiding deity of the village is Jagulai, also called Janguli. Janguliki it is said, was the name of Kalinga princes who was an expert in Tantra, having specialized in removal of all forms of poison from the human body through Tantrik rituals.

Janguli is also the name of a Buddhist goddess who like goddess Manasa Devi, worshipped by Hindus, was a dispeller of all forms of poisons. Worship of Janguli as a Goddess whom the Buddhists adopted later as their own was prevalent in Kalinga ages before the birth of Buddha.

‘Dhama’ stands for upward direction and Mil stands for mix-up or mingling. Dhamilo is also a Sanskrit word having local origin which stands for a particular hair style which ties the hair of a woman and makes it stand upward in a form. Dhamilo stands for a beautiful woman with a rich growth of hair nicely tied upwards. Very often this Dhamilo stood for braided hair of a woman decorated with flowers and ornaments. In Odia Dhamilo means Juda, Braided hair of a woman.

From a few Bouddha Jataka stories it is known that the name of mother of Ashoka was Dhamma. Dhamma in pali stands for Dharma in Sanskrit. The place name of Dharma (Dhamma) as time passed could also have been called Dhammilo.

‘La’ or ‘Lo’ was a very ancient tribe of Vietnam (Indo-China) in the South East Asia. Within a radius of fifteen kilometers of Bhubaneswar, there are many villages with names ending with ‘Lo’ which are as follows. They are Kanchilo, Andilo, Dandilo, Gandilo, Barubilo, Pampalo, Sisilo, Kwainlo, Arislo, Shathilo, Suanilo, Ratilo, Mahulo, Subalo, Amilo, Dedhalo, Gavilo, Harilo, Sainlo etc.

Bouddha "Jataka" says that in Majhima Desha (Middle land) there was a river called Solavati. By the side of Dhamilo flows today a stream called Sola. In Vietnam and other ocean of South East Asia, there used to live a tribe known as ‘Lo’ or ‘La’ around 150 B.C. These tribal people could have come to Toshali, Utkala, Kalinga and Koshala by the sea and the river routes and some of them staying in these areas is not ruled out. ‘Lo’ as a suffix is used as a mark of affection in addressing daughters and girls even today in Odisha (The Early Voyagers of the East, Vol.-I, Published by Pratibha Prakashan, Delhi, Page-417).