



## Ratha Yatra with a Difference

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It is quite interesting to note that Maharaja Birmirodaya Sing Deo in his novel *Nilakuntala* (1927) quotes the authority of *Niladri mahodayah* (1922) dedicated to Niladri Sing Deo (1841-91), Raja of Sonepur, to show the immemorial link of this State with Indradyumna, the legendary king of Avanti. Indradyumna during his historic march to Puri reportedly crossed over from the left to right bank of the Mahanadi and stayed overnight at Subarnapur, overwhelmed by its scenic beauty:

*Avantinagarastheischa chachara nilabhudharam  
Uttasam teramasadya nahenadya manoramam  
Visramya bhojanadingscha chakruh sarve mudanvitah  
Tato mahanadim tirtwa Punya rane provesitah.<sup>1</sup>*

Birmirodaya claim that Prithviraj Chauhan too on his way to Puri stopped over at Subarnapur, enraptured, feasted and fed with its ethereal enchantment.<sup>2</sup> And Birmirodaya was no historian. We do not know whether Prithviraj Chauhan during his brief, brave career marked by the blood-red to the land of Lord Jagannath in order to seek His blessings. But we know the highway from Delhi to Puri lay through Suvarnapur.

### **The Jagannath temple of Savarnapur:**

In my book, *Gachhnatale O Gumphabitare*, published by Orissa Book

Stores, Cuttack, I have for the first time, claimed that the original seat of Lord Jagannath was the Sonepur region and Yayati II of Subarnapur



enshrined the Lord in the temple at Puri. I claim to be no historian, either But the recent findings of the store images of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra at Tentelkhunti on the bank of the river Tel (brought to light by Sri Sasanka Sekhar Panda, Joint Director, Public Relations Department, Govt.of Orissa) traceable to the 8th century AD have carried the hypothesis close to history. It has also proved the assumption by the well-known scholar and historian, Padmasri Satyanarayan Rajaguru, that the original images of the Trimurty must have been made of stone. I have appended a list of Jagannath and



Dadhivaman temples to my book on Sonepur and Sri Jagannath to show how such a small place like Suvarnapur could contain so many temples consecrated to the cult of Jagannath. And yet the list is complete.

There is a Jagannath temple in the Rajbhawan dedicated to 'Kotha Jagannath'.<sup>2</sup> But the main Jagannath temple of the town was set up by Raj Sing Deo (C. 1700-1725), a temple beautiful with its flag flying in the sky" : *ruparuchiram khelatpatakamvaram*.<sup>3</sup> It is on this temple which is one of the *Asta Visnu* temples of Suvarnapur that the successive Chauhans paid their attention and concentration. While Prithvi Sing (1786-1841), great grandson of Raj Sing Deo, established the shrines to the Sun-god and to goddess Vimala, Niladri Sing, son to Prithvi Singh set up the Lokanath temple on its precincts. Niladri Sing's daughter-in-law, Rani Amulyamani Devi enshrined the Mahalaxmi temple, and her grandsons, Somabhusan and Sudhansusekhar are associated with the construction of Saraswati temple and Bighneswar temple respectively.

The wooden Snanamandap in front of the temple which caught fire in 1884 was rebuilt by Birmitrodaya Sing Deo (1902-37).<sup>4</sup> It was here that the new Raja used to wear the royal *pagri* and the Brahmapura, like the Muktimandap of Puri, used to hold its sessions. The resemblance of this Jagannath temple with its counterpart in Srikshetra was complete with the construction of the tall boundary wall comparable to the *Meghanada Prachira* of Puri temple along with the four gates in four directions. The wheel had come full circle. It is this Jagannath temple that turns the centre of activities during the Rath yatra.

### **Ratha yatra at Subarnapur**

Just as there is a division of labour among the *Niyogis* or *Sebaiyats* of Puri, there is a *Pataki* system prevalent at Subarnapur which facilitates

the smooth conduct of *Ratha yatra*. The *Badheis* or carpenters construct the *Ratha*, the *Luhuras* or ironsmiths provide the nails, the Maharanas paint the images, the Bhandaris arrange the *tahiyas* (crowns), the goldsmiths wash the gold and silver ornaments, the *dhobis* clean the cloths of the deities, the *Darjees* or tailors stitch the striped wrappings round the Rathas, the *malis* supply flowers, etc. Thus the *Ratha yatra* is a *ganaparva* or the people's festival.

The stage is set from *Jyestha Sukla Purnima* called *Snana Purnima*. On *Jyestha Sukla chaturdasi* night the *trimurtis* are carried ceremonially to the *Snana mandap*. This is called *chakachhada* (unseating ceremony). There they are bathed, sometimes, with water obtained all the way from river Yamuna. The *snana yatra* is held in the presence of the Maharaja in the midst of *sankirtana*. From *Krusna Pratipad* or *Amavasya*, there is a fortnight-long silence in the Jagannath temple. This period is known as *Anabasara* when the *darsan* of the *Trimurtis* is forbidden. This is the period of indisposition of the deities, the period of rest and repose when they subsist on drinks called *Anasara pana* only.

*Asarh Sukla Pratipad* is the day of *Netrotsava*, unlike in Puri where *Netrotsava* is observed on *Amavasya Asarh Amavasya* of 1802 the Marathas had entered the Sonepur fort through the south gate since then known as 'Chandal Bhadi' and got Rajaprihvi Sing arrested. This day is, therefore, considered inauspicious. *Netrotsava* is also known as the occasion for the renewal of youth of the deities or *Navayauvana*. The Raj Panigrahi offers the sacred thread and the Mahalik offers upan bhoga to the deities on behalf of the keots and receives a lat (a piece of cloth) from the hands of the Maharaja. The Maharana also gets a lat for painting the images.



*Asarh Sukla Dwitiya* is the day of Ratha yatra. Unlike in Puri, here are two chariots in which the three deities are seated. Every year a new chariot is made for Lord Jagannath. The old one is meant for Balabhadra and Subhadra. Two small chariots are also made for Kotha Jagannath. Only after the chariots of Kotha Jagannath are drawn by the *Bhiritias* from the Rajbhawan to the gate of the garh and back does the pahandi ceremony from the Jagannath temple start.

The *pahandi* of Sri Baladev and Subhadra is performed by the Brahmins of Barbazar while that of Sri Jagannath is jointly conducted by the Brahmins of Ghodaghatpra and Garhvitara in the midst of recitations from *Bidagdha*, *Chintamani* and *Mathuramangala* to the rhythmic sound of gongs and trumpets and conchshells. The *pahandi* is accompanied by groups of *Samkirtana* and the cacophony of drums and cymbals and human voices fills the air. The gun booms. The cannon roars.

The Rajpurohit performs the puja from the gate of the temple to the gate of the garh which is a furlong away *upan bhoga* is offered by the Rajbhawan and the Gopalji *Math* which goes to the *Bhiritias*. The *bhoga* offered in the chariot goes to the *Badheis* and *Kalapithias* of keot caste. Here the chariot of Lord Dadhivaman of Ghodaghatpara stands ready. The Mahalik, the Badhei, the chaprasi, the dhobi and the mali receive lats from the Rajas. The Raja like his counterpart of Puri performs the *chandanchhera* after which the three chariots are drawn. The chariot of Lord Dadhivaman stops that evening at Ramji temple of Majhipara which is its terminal point, while the other two chariots take a couple of days to reach their destination. While the *Baradanda* of Puri runs straight to the Gundicha temple, here it runs from the Rajbhawan via Majhipara and Barbazar on a semi-circular.

Trajectory one of the significant distinctions of the Suvarnapur Ratha yatra is the *Dwadasvatara* or twelve incarnations the deities assume during this yatra : Machha and Kachha on *Trutiya*, Varaha and Nrusimha on *Chaturthi*, Rama and Balarama on Panchami, Bamana and Parsurama on *Sasthi*, Kaliyadalana on *Saptami*, Padmamukha on *Astami* and Kalki on Navami. The *avatara* of Buddha stands significantly omitted. *Asarh Krushna Panchami* is called *Hera Panchami* when the *Vijaya Pratimas* of goddess Mahalaxmi and goddess Saraswati are carried from the Jagannath temple to the house of Rajpanigrahi - a custom unique in Orissa. To this place the Maharaj himself comes down to pay his *darsan* to the deities. Herefrom they are carried in the night to Gundicha mandap and back. After the formal *vachanika* or dialogue where through goddess Mahalaxmi's displeasure at the delay of Lord Jagannath's return is articulated, too through what is called 'Rathabhanga' the symbolic breaking of the chariot of Lord Jagannath, Goddess Mahalaxmi returns.

The *Saptami* day is the day for *Ratha Leuta*, turning the chariots back. This is done by the people of Keot, Gingra, Bhulia and Dhivara caste. Special *upan bhogas* are offered by the yuvaraj, the Maharani and the Maharaja on the third, eighth and ninth day of the bright fortnight of *Asarh*. From the second to the ninth day 108 rounds of *Vishnu Sahasra Nama* chanted.

The Bahuda yatra begins on *Asarh Sukla Dasami*, and *upan bhog* is offered by the Keots of Lankabahal before the deities leave Gundicha Mandap on their return journey to Jagannath temple. It may be mentioned here that the Gundicha temple of Suvarnapur located in Barbazar plays a crucial role during the Ratha Yatra. This temple was built by Rani Gundicaha Devi, mother of Raja Niladhar Sing Deo whose



birth on the Ramanavami day of 1837 it commemorates. The Rani spent around Rs.12,000/- and the temple, the tallest in west Orissa, took around 20 years to complete. Like its counterpart, the Gundicha temple of Puri attributed to another Rani Gundicha Devi of the Gajapati, it had a wooden Nrusimha image which was subsequently substituted by a massive bran image of Lord Laxmi-Nrusimha installed by Rajarsi Prataprudra, grandson of Gundicha Devi. About 90 feet in height, this tallest monument of Subarnapur represents the last flicker of the Chauhan's architectural glory.

The Ratha Yatra is great festival at Subarnapur. Children put on new clothes and gifts of money are exchanged between families for *Khajakhia* ( taking sweets). Babies in new clothes carried by parents are made to touch the chariots, which is called *Rathachhuan*. Not only in the capital town, but also at Menda, Khandahata, Paligan, Kartang, Mursundhdi, Suballaya, Bagbar, Kamalpur, Pitamahul, Kobsamalai, Lachhipur, Binka, Tarabha etc.. This festival is held with fervour and to all these places, provisions for the gods called *Pahur* (*Upahar*) or *Upam* (*Upayana*) are spent by the Rajbhawan of all these, the Tarbha Ratha Yatra occupies a pride of place, it is believed that those who are too exhausted to cover the long distance to Puri are directed in their dreams to witness the Tarbha Ratha Yatra, instead :

*Yo viswasya samastakarya karane daksha  
dadhivamarah*

*Yanmahatmya marekshitum vahujana ayanti  
duattatah.*

*Asadhasya site dwitiya divase tisthan rathe madhavah  
Gachchhan rajapathe avyadhachcha taraabha grame  
subham gundicham.*

Thus for the famous Ratha yatra of Puri, Tarbha Ratha Yatra visited by the people from Patna, Kalahandi, Kahariar, Bargarh, Rairakhoh, Boudh, Kanker, Kashipur, Barhampur, Ganjam, Manjusa etc. is considered a convenient substitute.

#### References :

1. BM Sing Deo. *Nilakuntala* (Puri: Jagannath Press, 1927), Foreward.
2. *Ibid.*
3. BM Sing Deo. Comp. *Swarnapura Swarnapura Maharaja Gruhakrutya Chandrika*, Vol.I (Calcutta: As Press, 1937) P.99
4. Pt. Jagannath Misra. *Utsavatangani Champuh* (Puri: Madan Mohan Press, 1910), P.31.
5. Pt. Gopinath Panigrahi, *Brata Charita* (Cuttack: Utkal Sahitya Press, 1915), P.93
6. Pt. Damodar Misra. *Swarnapura Gunadarsah.* (Balasore: De's Utkal Press, 1921), P.16.

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