The Cult of Lord Jagannath

Basant Kumar Das

Centuries of myths, legends and history are blended into a grand composite culture, which is centered round Jagannath, the Lord of Universe, one of the most revered and ancient of the deities of the Hindu pantheon. The earliest references to Lord Jagannath are found in the Puranas and ancient literature though deities of His origin and evolution are still shrouded in mystery.

Legendary sources suggest that Jagannath was originally worshipped by the tribals, the Savaras. The most important evidence of this belief is the existence of a class of Sevakas called the Daitas who are considered to be of tribal lineage and who still play a major role in various Seva to Lord Jagannath in the temple.

In course of time, the cult of Jagannath took an Aryanised form and various major faiths like Saivism, Saktism, Vashnavism, Jainism and Buddhism were assimilated into the concept of Jagannath as an all pervasive and all inclusive philosophy, symbolizing unity in diversity.

Some scholars think that the three main images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra represent the Jain Trinity of Samyak Jnana, Samyak Charitra and Samyak Drusti. Many other say that the three images represent the Buddhist triad of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. It is widely believed that the soul of Jagannath, most secretly hidden within the image of Lord Jagannath, is nothing else than the tooth relic of Lord Buddha. The Philosophy of Tantra which in course of time became an integral part of Buddhism too has significantly influenced the rites and rituals of the Jagannath temple. But it may be taken as an individual opinion.

The Philosophy of Lord Jagannath, thus defies all definitions and yet comprehensive enough to perceive unity among beliefs, sects and castes.

In other words, in the eve of the Car Festival, He is Lord Jagannath-the Nath (master) of Jagat (universe). He is a master who does not believe in ruling His Kingdom from his,
Ratnasingasana and wait for His subjects to come to Him. He comes out of his sanctum every year to mingle with his devotees and rule them with His love, affection and benediction. He inspires and enriches the consciousness of all, who are unable to come to Him. Being the Patitapaban i.e. the saviour of the fallen, depressed or oppressed, He purifies them with His Darsan and makes them fit to join the mainstream. This splendid occasion of the coming together of the ruler and the subject is popularly known as the "Ratha Yatra" or Car Festival, which is held every year on the 2nd day of the bright fortnight of Asadha.

As the legend goes on, the day Lord Jagannath along with his elder brother Lord Balabhadra and sister Goddess Subhadra, goes to his aunt Gundicha's house, keeping old promise made to her. They return to their divine abode on the 10th day of bright fortnight of Asadha.

The Jagannath Culture from time immemorial preaches the words of love, integrity and peaceful co-existence among the human community. The character of culture is generocity, endurance and co-ordination. No culture or religion is equal to this. Jagannath is worshipped all over the world because He is generous and kind to all. He is looking at great and small, rich and poor, ruled and ruler, Brahman and Chandal with an equal eye. In this look there is no question of caste, creed or religion. No place of egoism or aristocracy- No place for communalism. Here worshipped and worshipper are equal. Lord symbolises universal love and humanism.

Rituals of Sri Jagannath temple are quite different from the rituals, system of puja or offering performed in other temples. It is an accumulation of many faculties of Hindu religion which synergises here in one platform and rituals are performed. "Arya", "Anarya" and "Brahman" represented by called Aryan Raja "Indradyumna", Savar Srestha "BiswaBasu" and Brahman "Bidyapati" are associated with Him. His seva and puja are traditionally performed by sevak called Gajapati, Daitapati and Brahmin.

Myths, history and legends mingled over centuries and formed a grand composite culture of Lord Jagannath. He is not only the God of the Hindus or the Indians but also the God of the entire humanity, the redeemer of all and His infinite glory is always immutable.

Banta Kumar Das lives at Siddha Barang Pitha, Jagatsinghpur - 754 103.