Vaishnavism in Orissan Inscriptions

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Vaishnavism, like Saivaism is a very old cult and its origin goes back to the Rig Vedic period when God Vishnu was conceived as a member of the Solar family. Lord Vishnu, the supreme God has been worshipped in various names and forms, from time to time with different modes of doctrines and rituals. The literary and epigraphic sources throw considerable light on the revival of Vaishnava cult.

In Orissa, the earliest epigraphic evidences on Vaishnavism is traced in the copper plates grants of Mathara dynasty who ruled about 4th/5th Century A.D. The Ningondi grants of Prabhanjanavarman record that he was the devout worshipper at the feet of Bhagavat Svami Narayana. In the Andhavarm grants of Anantasaktivarman there is a description that the Maharaja Anantasaktivarman, who is the Lord of Kalinga and a devout worshipper at the lotus-feet of the God Narayana whose chest was embraced by Kamalanilaya (Lakshmi).

The Nala dynasty who ruled over Western Orissa was great patron of Vaishnavism. From the epigraphic record that "Padamulam Krutam Vishnu Rajna Sri Skanda-Varmana". Which proof that Skanda-Varman was an ardent devotee of Vishnu and an active patron of Vaishnavism. From the epigraphic evidences of Podagada stone inscription and Rajim stone inscriptions, it is evident that Vaishnavism which revolves round the supreme God Vaishnu and its diverse manifestation at different places of Nala kingdom.

The first verse in the Podagada inscription of Skandavaran contains a glorification of Hari in his aspects, as the essence of victory. Line 5th and 6th record his foundation of a Padamula or foot print of Vishnu, for the worship of which he made the gift of money in shape of Bhuri-dakshina to the donee Chakradrona. In the next verse it is stated that "he who conforms to the good path followed by king for long find refuge in God Vasudeva."

The object of the Rajim stone inscription is that a king named Vilastunga, constructing a temple dedicated to Vishnu under the name of Rajivalochana (lotus eyed). In the 4th line it describes a form of dialogue between Hari and
Lakshmi, while the 5th mention the Dwarf incarnation of Vishnu.

Thus we find definite references to the worship of Vishnu in Orissa in the early period. The Sailodbhavas who reigned in the Kongoda mandala in the 7/8th Century A.D. were followers of Saivism, but some of them had Vaishnave leaning. The Puri plates of Dharmaraja states that "his ever increasing fame could not be contained in the three worlds even as the legs of Hari in the Vamana incarnation." About his successor Madhyamaraja III, the Takkali plates states that Lakshmi who formerly had taken shelter under Lord Madhusudana enjoying sleep in the ocean of milk, had today like a veritable house wife taken shelter under the son of Manabhita and forgotten all her previously enjoyed facilities".

The earlier rulers of Bhaumakaras who ruled in the 8th/9th Century A.D. were ardent Buddhist, but the later rulers were eclectic in their faith. There is a reference of Paramavaishnavi in the Dhenkanal grant of Tribhuvanamahadevi.

But during the reign of Bhanja, Vaishnavism seems to here progressed. We find a number of rulers of this dynasty professing devotion to Vishnu. Sotrubhanja and Ranaka Ranabhanja called themselves devout followers of Vishnu and used the epithet as Paramavaishnava. In the Juruda Grant of Nettabhjanadeva, the king is described as a Parama Vaishnava and the grant commences with an invocation to God Narayana, who is stated to be the family deity (Kula-devata) of the Bhanja. In the Sonpur copper plate charter Sotrubhanja described as a fervent devotee of God Vishnu (Parama-Vaishnava).

The Panduvamsi, copper plates grants contains elaborate prasasti. They used the title of Parma-mahesvara, Paramabrahmanaya etc. But in the Sirpur stone inscription of Mahasivagupta, begins with an invocation to Purushottama. The first three verses are elevated to the praise of Narasimha incarnation to Vishnu and construction of a temple for Hari by the Vasta the mother of Mahasivagupta Balarjuna. She was the daughter of Suryavarman king of Magadha. She became a widow and caused to be constructed a temple of Hari.

Though the Somavamsi ruler were great patron of Saivism but their Charter contain their homage to Aditya, Varuna, Vaishnu, Soma, Hutasana and Sulapani.

Practically the same state of Vaishnavism continued in the early period of the Ganga rule. The Ganga ruler were at beginning Parama Mahesvara devout followers of Siva, but since the time of Anantavarman Chodagangadeva they changed their faith from Saivism to Vaishnavism D.C.Sircar thinks that the annexion of Puri region to the Ganga empire may have had something to do with change in the religious faith of Anantavarman Chodagangadeva. But this change may also contributed to the preaching of Vaishnavism by Ramanunja who flourished in the 12th Century A.D. He visited and stayed at Puri, probable this converted Anantavarman into a Paramavaishnava from a Paramamahesvara. In the Chatesvara temple inscription Chodagangadeva described at an incarnation of the Narasimha avatara of Vishnu. As we know from other records that Chodaganga ancestors were all staunch devotee of the God Siva and that Chodaganga himself was one such in the earlier part of life, later on a devotee of Vishnu alone.

In the Vizagpatnam inscription Chodaganga assumed the title Rajadhiraja Paremesvara, Paramabhattaraka, Paramavaishnava which means he was devout follower of Vishnu. In the Nagari plate of Anagabhima III there is a reference of Gangesvara Chodagangadeva, built a temple for the great God Purushottama.
The Kapilas inscription of Narashimhadeva, record that the king was the devotee of God Purushottama Jagannatha identified with Vishnu. He is described as Purushottama Putro and compare him with great Boar (Vaishnu in his Varaha Avatara) incarnation. Further the charter describe that the king succeeded in subduing by the power of his arms the pride of his enemies in numerous battles at the command of the God Purushottam, the Lord of the fourteen world.

In the Draksharama temple inscriptions, Anangabhima III himself is called both Paramavaishnava and Paramamahesvara as well as Purushottama putra, Rudra-putra and Durga putra.

Since the time of Anantavarman Chodagangadeva, Vaishnavism received royal patronage of the Gangas and acquired a dominant position. It becomes a great force in the religious life of Orissa, several Vaishnava temples came to be constructed. The great Vishnu temple built during the Ganga period was the famous Jagannath temple at Puri.

The Jagannath temple at Puri was the most important center of Vaishnavism in Orissa in the 12th Century A.D., even now it is one of the holiest places of India. Generation after generation Vaishnavas or Devout Hindus have visited the holy Purushottama Kshetra to offer worship and secure immunity from sins and the institution of Jagannath has influenced the life of the Oriya people from the early of times to the present day.

**Reference :**

17. Ibid, p.43.

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