



Evolution of Jagannath Cult

Dr. Atul Chandra Pradhan

The Origin of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of the holy city of Puri, around whom the religious life of Orissa has evolved from hoary past has been shrouded in myths and legends. Analysing the legendary association of Jagannath with a class of aborigines, called *Sabaras*, the peculiar nature of the wooden icon of the deity and his associates, Balabhadra and Subhadra, and association of a class of non-Brahmin priests, called *Daita*, who are presumed to be of tribal origin with the worship of the deity, some scholars hold that Jagannath was originally a tribal deity. Anncharlott Eschmann holds that the *Navakalevar* ritual, i.e. the ceremony of periodical renewal of the deity, is a tribal custom. Such practices of renewal of wooden deity are to be found among the primitive tribes like Saoras and Khonds.

If Lord Jagannath was tribal in origin, at what stage and how was he metamorphosed into a Hinduised deity? The legends regarding the origin of Jagannath, which have been recorded in various sources such as *Mahabharat* of Sarala Das, *Deula Tola* of Nilambar Das, *Skanda Purana*, *Brahma Purana*, *Narada Purana*, *Padma Purana*, *Kapila Samhita* etc. suggest the tribal as well as Brahmanical links of the deity in the initial stage. According to Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*, the dead body of Lord Krishna, transformed

into wooden form, landed at the Puri sea shore; Jara Sabara, an aborigine, picked it up and worshipped it; subsequently, Indradyumna, the king of Somavamsa, got three wooden images made out of the log and built a temple for the deities. According to *Deula Tola*, Indradyumna, the king of Malava, got piece of sacred wood, which was the metamorphosed shape of god Nilamadhava from the Sabara chief, named Visvavasu, and out of the wood he carved three images. Both the stories suggest the Vaishnavite origin of Jagannath. But Indradyumna, the hero of these legends remains a legendary figure, and his historicity cannot be established on any safe ground. Some have identified him with the Indradyumna of original *Mahabharat* and considered him to be quite an ancient figure of pre-Christian era. If we accept the version of Sarala Dasa's *Mahabharat*, we may feel inclined to identify him with Indraratha, the Somavamsi king of tenth century A.D. But identification of Indradyumna with Indraratha is at variance with the long-accepted tradition, that Yayati-I, the remote predecessor of Indraratha, built the Jagannath temple at Puri.

Some scholars trace a Buddhist origin of the trinity of the Jagannath temple. It is said that the tooth relic of Lord Buddha is preserved in the image of Jagannath, that the three deities



- Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra - represent Buddha, Dharma and Sangha respectively, that the *Snana Yatra* (bathing festival) and *Ratha yatra* (car festival) of the Jagannath temple are of Buddhist origin and that the sharing of *Kaivalya* (sacred food) on equal footing by all castes is due to the Buddhist impact. There are some literary evidence of co-relation between Lord Jagannath and Buddhism. According to some scholars, Jagannath is a common epithet of Buddha. In Tibet, one of the names of Buddha is Jagannath. Jayadeva, the twelfth century Vaishnava poet who, according to some scholars, identified Jagannath with Krishna or Vishnu also accepted Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Krishna or Vishnu. Sarala Das, the fifteenth century poet, in his *Mahabharat* regarded Jagannath as an embodiment of Buddha. He wrote, "To deliver mankind, Jagannath has manifested himself in the form of Buddha." *Daru Brahma Gita* of Jagannath Das says, "To assume the form of Buddha the Lord gave up his hands and legs." Some Oriya Vaishnavas regarded Chaitanya as the partial manifestation of Buddha. In the *Chaitanya Bhagavata* of Isvar Dasa, Shri Chaitanya is reported to have said, "I am Chaitanya in the form of Buddha." Evidently there was a synthesis between Buddhism and Vaishnavism at some stage, and Jagannath cult bears the imprint of that synthesis.

Even if we accept the hypothesis that Jagannath was originally a tribal deity or Buddhist deity or both, we can not rule out the possibility of his metamorphosis into Vishnu or Krishna at quite an early stage. Eschmann holds that in his earliest form as an image of Vishnu, Jagannath was known as Nrusimha the Lion incarnation of Vishnu. Her contention is based on the fact that the Navakalevar ritual

considers the Jagannath figure to be Narasimha. She says, "Narasimha is that iconological aspect of Jagannath, which recedes in the later theology; it can be easily associated with tribal cults, and was probably instrumental for the development of the Jagannath iconography."

It is accepted by most of the scholars that in the earliest phase Jagannath was known as Purushottama. "Vishnudharma", an unpublished Sanskrit manuscript of 3rd century A.D., says that Krishna was known as Purushottama in the Odra country. *Vaman Puran*, a work of seventh century A.D., refers to the Purushottama deity at Puri. *Anargharaghava natakam* of Murari Misra, which, according to some scholars, is a work of the middle or later part of ninth century A.D. describes Purushottama deity of Puri with his female consort, Kamala, on lap. The Sarada Devi temple inscription of Maihar (in the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh), which is assigned to the middle of the tenth century A.D., also refers to the Purushottama deity of Odra-country, located on the sea-shore. The literary and epigraphic sources affirm the reputation of the Purushottama deity of Puri in the tenth century A.D. Such was the importance of the deity of Puri, when the Somavamsi rule was established in the coastal belt in the tenth century A.D., that Yayati-I (922 A.D.-955 A.D.) had to construct a temple for the deity. Some scholars are of the opinion that some sculptural remains of the Somavamsi period are still to be found in the premises of the Jagannath temple. As the Somavamsis were primarily Saivites, the shrine of Purushottama appears to have been neglected during the Somavamsi period.

Though by the tenth century A.D., the presiding deity of Puri was known as



Purushottama, which is one of thousand epithets of Vishnu, yet during the Bhauma period, the deity appears to have been profoundly influenced by Saivism, Shaktism, Tantricism and Buddhism which were simultaneously prevalent. Scholars are of the opinion that the image of Jagannath has striking similarity with that of Ekapada Bhairava (Bhairava with one foot, which is a manifestation of Siva, whose worship was prevalent during the Bhauma period). Some Tantrik texts refer to Puri as a seat of Shaktism, Vimala as the *Shakti* and Jagannath as his Bhairava. The prevalence of Saivism at Puri is proved by the existence of such Saiva shrines as Markandeyesvara, Patalesvara and Lokanath. The prevalence of Shaktism at Puri is borne out by the worship of Vimala inside the temple, and the existence of Saptamatruka image. The 'Utkal Khanda' of *Skanda Purana* describes Subhadra as the Shakti of Jagannath.

The name 'Purushottama', though an epithet of Vishnu, has Tantrik significance according to some scholars. It represents the erotic aspect of Vishnu. Purushottama is to be found with Lakshmi, the female erotic partner. In the *Anargharaghava natakam*, Murari Mishra describes Purushottama with Lakshmi on his lap. Jayadeva, in his *Gitagovinda*, dealt with erotic sports of Krishna with Radha, and identified Radha with Kamala or Lakshmi, the consort of Narayana. Jayadeva also regarded Jagannath as Krishna. Subhadra was treated as Lakshmi during the Ganga period, and afterwards. The *Purushottama Mahatmya* of *Skanda Purana* (a work of 13th century A.D.) and of *Vishnurahasya* (a work of 16th century A.D.) referred to the female wooden image between Jagannath and Balabhadra as Lakshmi.

The propagation of Vaishnavism by Ramanuja early in the twelfth century A.D. resulted in the reinforcement of the Vaishnavism of Orissa which had grown around Purushottama - Jagannath, the incarnation of Vishnu. Such was the predominance of the cult of Purushottama-Jagannath that Chodagangadeva, the founder of Ganga empire in Utkal, had to erect a temple for him and another for his consort, Lakshmi, even though in his private life Chodagangadeva remained a devotee of Siva. The Ganga period saw the recognition of Jagannath as the patron deity of the royal family. A powerful Ganga Monarch like Anangabhima-III, called his empire the Purushottam *Samrajya* (the empire of Purushottama) and himself the *Rauta* or representative of Purushottama. The same importance of Purushottama-Jagannath continued in the *Suryavamsi* period. Kapilendradeva, the founder of Suryavamsi empire, invoked the name of Jagannath in the day-to-day administration of the state. He prayed to the deity for permission to punish some recalcitrant or rebellious officers of the State. Kapilendradeva constructed the outer wall of the Jagannath temple in his fifteenth regnal year. Purushottamadeva, the son and successor of Kapilendra, was greatly devoted to Jagannath for singing whose glory he wrote *Abhinava Gitagovindam*. According to the tradition, recorded in the *Madalapanji*, Lord Jagannath helped Purushottama, to conquer Kanchi and marry Padmavati, the daughter of the Kanchi ruler. During the reign of Prataparudra, Shrichaitanya came to Orissa in 1509 A.D. Shrichaitanya completed the process of identification of Jagannath with Krishna which had been begun by Jayadeva.

During Ganga and Suryavamsi periods kingship and cult of Jagannath got interwoven.



Calling themselves the *Rauta* of Lord Jagannath the kings justified their action in the name of Lord Jagannath. In the words of H. Kulke "kingship became part of the cult and the cult became part of the Orissan kingship and its main source of legitimation."

Jagannath cult exercises deep influence over the socio-religious-political life of Orissa. During the Ganga and Surya rules, Jagannath, so to say, became the State deity. Jagannath cult is an amalgam of diverse religious cults like tribal religion, Brahmanical religion, Buddhism, Saivism, Shaktism, Tantricism and Vaishnavism. Puri has been visited from ancient times by founders of different religious cults, who left their legacy through the monasteries. It has become one of the four important places of pilgrimage for the devout Hindus not only of Orissa but also of all parts of India. Largest crowds of devotees are to be noticed in Puri at the time of the car festival of Lord Jagannath. It is the belief of Hindus that on seeing Lord Jagannath, the manifestation of supreme being, in his chariot one never falls into the mire of the cycle of rebirth.

References :

1. M.N. Das (ed.), *Sidelights on History and Culture of Orissa*, Cuttack, 1977.
2. N.K. Sahu, *Buddhism in Orissa*, Utkal University, 1958.
3. K.C. Mishra, *The Cult of Jagannath*, Calcutta, 1971.
4. Prabhat Mukherji, *The History of Medieval Vaishnavism in Orissa*, Calcutta, 1940.
5. R.P. Mahapatra, *Jaina Monuments of Orissa*, New Delhi, 1984.
6. A. Eschmann, et.al. *The Culture of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, New Delhi, 1978.
7. G.N. Mahapatra, *Jagannath in History and Religious Tradition*, Calcutta, 1982.
8. B.M. Padhi, *Daru Devata (Oriya)*, Cuttack, 1964.
9. L.K. Panda, *Saivism in Orissa*, New Delhi, 1985.
10. H.S. Patnaik, *Lord Jagannath, His Temple, Cult and Festivals*, New Delhi, 1994.

Dr. Atul Chandra Pradhan is the Professor of History in Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar.

IMPORTANT TELEPHONE NUMBERS OF PURI TOWN

Srimandira Office Control Room	-	222002
Srimandira Office (Garada)	-	222001
Administrator, Srimandira	-	223002
Information Centre, Singhadwara	-	220901
Information Centre, Srigundicha Mandir	-	232507
Control Room, Collectorate	-	223714
Control Room, S.P. Office	-	223940 / 223558 / 222058
Police Outpost, Srimandira	-	223470
Town Police Station	-	222039/100