



## Jagannath Cult as a Factor Contributing to Oriya Identity

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A national seminar held in a reputed institution of Orissa in recent past, had such a caption for one of its academic sessions. But excavating the creative dynamics of Orissan cultural identity, one aptly finds there are two serious misgivings, at the outset, to such a title. Firstly, to associate the term 'cult' with Jagannath Dharma' appears as preposterous as describing the Himalayas as an ant-hill. Secondly, Jagannath-Dharma is not a factor, the 'factor' of Oriya identity. An attempt is made in this paper to substantiate to these contentions.

The continuing and fluid nature of some traditional notions and their complicated interplay with feelings of localism and nationalism as a matrix of crucial understanding would feed fat the contention that Jagannath Culture and Oriya - identity are but synonyms, mutually co-relative, the former is the emblematic expression of different kinds of Oriya identities relating to gender, class and nationhood. The explosion of academic and popular interest, in recent times, on the issue of social identity is normally marked by a neglect of the historical engagement between the 'regional' and the 'local' and the 'national'. Integration of many sources and techniques, as attempted herein, would do justice to the above contention regarding Orissan identity.

That 'Jagannath Culture' and Oriya identity are corollaries may shake the sterile security of the sceptic's position; but as a statement, it is true and meaningful. A statement is true if things are as they are stated to be. As Aristotle said, "To say of what is that it is or of what is not that it is not is true." Identity in this context is a connotation of this spatio-temporal attributes. Examined from points of view of qualitative identity, synchronous identity and identity at any particular given time, the Oriya-identity merges into Jagannath Dharma. Spatio-temporal continuity is always a necessary condition for the identity of the material objects and how this condition is to be spelt out depends on the nature of the material object which is being judged.<sup>1</sup> This latter part is specified by the introduction of the proper covering requirement ranging from continuity of form to identity of parts. Man's basic problem is moral in that being responsible is the requirement for mental health.<sup>2</sup> The 'General Will' of Rousseau or the 'Categorical Imperative' of Kant were connected with religious injunctions such as justice and righteousness to roll down as a mighty stream. As Choudhury says, "In early days, religion was the cheap motivating factor for any voluntary service, but subsequently social and political consideration, too,



influenced such action."<sup>3</sup> The history of the Jagannath Temple liturgical rituals reveals the variety and splendour of Jagannath-dharma, the profundity of its theological thought as well as their deep impact on culture and society of Orissa. Its syncretism of all divergent forms of Indian metaphysical thought and spiritual faculties tend to transcend it to 'sanatana' proportions - the cumulative result of fervent and indulgent dispensations of all segments of Indian spiritual tradition. It transcends 'dharma', and, as such, to call it a 'cult' would be symptomatic of pompous ignorance. Excavating further the creative dynamics of a rich tradition, one finds no iota of truth in any inherent factionalism, sectarianism or caste-bias or narrow identity groups based on caste, ethnic or minority identities specifically when the identity-groups that uphold and represent the interest of any specific and, so called, identity-groups are functioning or made to function exclusively. The purpose of such so called identity - groups is seldom antithetical to regional or national identity and hardly smell of any lack of fidelity to collective interest.

Further, Jagannath Dharma is soaked in 'Sanatana', humanism i.e. neither materialistic nor spiritualistic but compatible with both. It neither dehumanizes nor sublimates its followers to a state of spirits. It is both preventive and curative in its pragmatic postulates in that when divinity is torn apart from humanity, a dangerous pretention or predisposition to dogmatism about divinity and religion becomes evident.<sup>4</sup> As William James said, this situation is "Most likely to make angels weep." Yet, if given to choose between theism of Jagannath and atheism, one has to take the former choice since it is this, rather than the latter, that leads one to meaningful social consequences, thereby making life worth

living. Its self-consciousness and revealing reflections on successive stages of Orissa's own past as a subject, alone, shall enable Oriya historians today to understand why their field has come to be what it is. To be shy of such an obvious and absolute historical implication would reveal an uncritical and self-effacing subjective bias.

The Jagannath culture has been a balancing act, always striking a balance between freedom and creativity on one hand and discipline and restraint on the other. The martial arts of Orissa originating from the 'Akhada' tradition of Puri for the defence of the pride and heritage of Orissa, the world-famous Odissi dance and music coming out of the temple tradition, the open air theatre of discourses known as 'Mukta Mandap' are but a few illustrious examples of the former. While this freedom has been a personal necessity, the discipline has been a social compulsion. Examples galore of the first invocation of Jagannath in each and every auspicious ceremony in the family - whether religious, social, personal or political - are found in plenty. This culture has always called for voluntary restraint of greed and conscious promotion of enthusiasm for work, whether temple architecture or arts and crafts. This dharma has been truth's embodiment of life and has always given the Oriyas the power to refashion their nature as per contemporary, moral imperatives. A conception of cultural studies rooted in the Oriya's lived experience constitutes, thus, its cultural syntax. Its flexibility is characterized by innovations that are indigenous, not exogenous or alien.

The elements of diversity in Orissan society on the basis of caste or ethnicity came to be functionally tackled by the institution of



'Chhatisaniyoga' - a complex classification of 'division of labour' for services in the temple by 36 categories of servitors represented by all castes in an egalitarian system of services in the temple, under the benign supervision of the first servitor, the king who had consecrated his empire to the Lord. For nearly a millennium till date, this system has generated a matrix of cordial intercaste relations. The perception of cultural pluralism and the levels of support for the same are ironed out by the services rendered by the monastery of each sect of India that had initially vied with others for exclusive of deification of Lord Jagannath for itself. Thus has emerged a homogeneity and the acceptance of an integrative ideology for Orissa. A study, alone, of their philosophies would not tend a scholar to exempt the 'Panchasakha' or the 'Mahima' savants from the realms of Jagannath-dharma, for, Jagannath is a Vedantic representation of the 'Saguna' and the 'Nirguna', the manifest and the non-manifest. Orissa, thus, has continued to exhibit a picture of tolerance, though stray instances of a lack of full endorsement of this unitary pluralism have blurred its otherwise flawless lexicon. Today, for example, one can find in it a picture of 'in-group bias' that flashes intermittently as a sharp crack across this bustle; but these conjunctive instances can hardly tarnish the general social picture of this unitary pluralism.

Every human being is a field of thought. Thinking, as a daily experience, is not merely an awareness of action as it is in all epiphenomenalist doctrine but is the crux of one's identity. This is the genesis of self-attitudes and identity. As he grows up, man builds himself up with "transforming stimuli into pieces of information" and then processing that information on the basis of previous experience. Every Oriya household grows up

under the influence of Jagannath, in rituals, almanac, festivities, traditions and culture irrespective of their secular or ecclesiastical contours. His self attitudes learnt early in life are carried forever by every Oriya; some allowances and modifications may later creep in under the influence of extra ordinary circumstances and through later experience. In a word, the pervasive influence of Jagannath on every Oriya is a stimulus, evoking every now and then some transactional response. The 13 festivals of Jagannath in a calendar year constitute a meticulous network for a socially programme use of time. The process may be cumbersome, successful or effective but it is always candid, always common, convenient, comfortable, collective and utilitarian way of structuring time without any fanatical solemnity. The impersonal togetherness of these all helps reiterate a unitary pluralism among the Oriyas. These shape every Oriya personality and motivation in life. Thus, the pervasive influence of Jagannath on the shaping of the Oriya identity is a conceivably valid claim and only the dogmatic shall deny it. The empiricism of Locke or Hume, the a-priorism of Plato the Cartesian inner ideas, the 'will' of Schopenhauer and the Kantian 'purposiveness without a purpose' are a few instances of contrasts of Reason versus Experience as source of knowledge which are completely resolved in Oriya identity vis-a-vis.

Ever since the empire was consecrated to the Lord making Him the temporal and ecclesiastical head of the political unit called Orissa in a St. Augustinean way, Orissa has evinced a political culture of being a 'holy Jagannath Empire' - always holy, with Jagannath as its nucleus, but only less often an empire. If the 'Khalsa' of Guru Govind Singh was launched as a religious-political



institution, the inclusion of Jagannathite Himmat Rai of Puri in the inaugural 'Panch' of the Sikh-khalsa is as vital a proof of the pan-Indian political influence of Jagannath dharma as also that of the key-liaison role of Chandan Hazuri, the scion of the Jagannath dharma. His nationalism and patriotic fervour stand out, in particular view of the fact that he was under no threat of Dalhousie's 'Doctrine of Lapse.' And he was Orissa's pioneer nationalist poet whose 'Jananas' speak for themselves on the issue. If oral history is deemed credible, some also remember, today, with nostalgia that Netaji had started his speech in Oriya, at Chandanpur in the suburbs of Puri in 1939, with a pious invocation of Jagannath. The process of Orissan politics always being on its toes in an effort to approximate itself to the Jagannath-dharma has rolled down even to contemporary times. Even today, Jagannath is invoked in every political propaganda that invariably commences from his Lion's Gate to infect the whole of the State with respective Pseudo-austerity and pretentious sincerity. Till now every family or social function begins with his invocation - including marriage invitations, dance and performing arts in general. Even political parties of the region have vied to get, as their party-symbol in the general elections, items associates with the Jagannath-triad. Confirmed atheists among political leaders have not been able to evade this aura or charisma.

Denis Kavanagh<sup>5</sup> outlines that a political culture consist of beliefs and emotions, attitudes and values of society pertaining to political system or issues. One conclusion out of this is that political stability is constituted by a consensus. It has never been weak in Orissa primarily due to the integrative political unity and solidarity of Jagannath-dharma, a political

culture that has been, both subject and participatory. The Orissa pattern is conditioned by an overemphasis on these political values and attitudes symbolic of an admirable fusion of tradition and modernity, theories and practices. The impact of history has always led to a conciliatory local government here. Geography has also fashioned this political culture. Ethnic differences on the political culture have varied only at times, but without any great significance.

The socio-economic structure of Orissa has been another determiner of its political culture. Surrender to the divine will with an emphasis on *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Mokshya*, a tendency of rendering service to the state without bothering too much for Lockean amplifications for the individual and his rights have led to a premium on what the government has done, but virtually little awareness of how these can be influenced or changed.

Stretching the point a bit further, one would find two predominant aspects of a political culture, viz. attitudes to the political agencies or institutions of the state, and the degree of self-consciousness of its citizens to participate in the process of decision-making. The less said about the latter in Orissa, the better. But such cold callousness has been born out of the political implications made to exude out of the Jagannath-dharma. A word here about Orissa's political symbols would be a pertinent pointer. The 'Nilachakra', the 'Patitapaban' flag and the obsidian eyes deemed omnipresent in Orissa express the idealized aspects of Orissan political scene. Popular emotions have always been channellised through these symbols or what Bagehot<sup>6</sup> would call "attachment to impersonal" symbols whose political value is



"inestimable". Orissa, like all other political systems, has consistently and unwaveringly put primacy on the currency on these symbols. These symbols have been religious, and in the same breath, secular. Outsiders have often times wonder in awe and incredulous amazement at the cumulative impact of these symbols on Orissan political life, even if these have not always been specifically relevant to some political systems. The intensity of this emotionalism has helped foster political values and attitudes, and sometimes governments have used them to secure legitimacy. Even the British were not exempted to this flippancy on the eve of 1803. Politically, therefore, the institution of Jagannath has been "a constant ritual bombardment" of the people of Orissa, "to provoke manifestation of unity." This political culture has been elastic and flexible, with a remarkably integrated ethos. Voluntary groups and mass media have, of late, fed this political culture fat. In a cumulative way it has led to a

process of political socialisation. Not for nothing had Swami Vivekananda said "Our national life is in religion. It is the soul."

#### References :

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