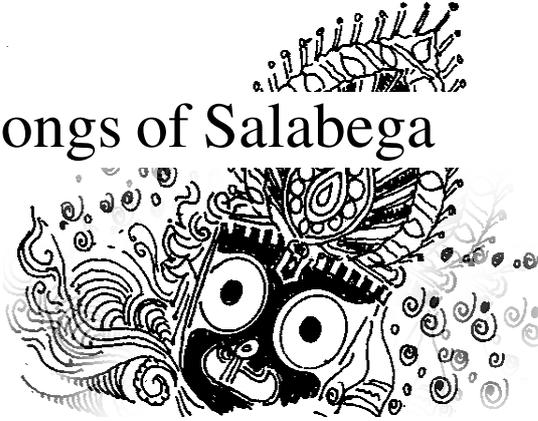




## Songs of Salabega



*Dr. Subas Pani*

Salabega lived in the first half of the seventeenth century. Neelamani Mishra, who has written the most comprehensive account of the poet and his works, determines the birth of the poet as being between Circa 1607-1608. He was the son of the Mughal subedar Lalbeg who was briefly in charge of Orissa at Cuttack in the early seventeenth century. On one of his expeditions to Puri, he was overcome with passion looking at the beauty of a Brahmin widow returning from her bath at Dandamukundapur and forcibly abducted her. Salabega was later born to this widow.

We do not have many details about the life of the poet except as given in the celebrated hagiological accounts "*Dardhyata Bhakti Rasamruta*" by Rama Dasa. It is believed that the poet suffered from some incurable ailment and through prayer to Lord Jagannatha, as advised by his mother, he was miraculously cured. While some accounts speak of this having happened in his early childhood, others indicate that this happened in his early youth on account of injury in a battle. However, the recovery from a seemingly hopeless situation was a turning point in the life of the young man. Soon thereafter, he seems to have seen developed disinterest in worldly matters and spent his time in singing praise of the Lord.

Salabega, being the son of a Muslim, was denied entry into the temple but his deep devotion was answered by his dear Lord in his manifestation as Patitapabana inside the Lions Gate. The poet could see him from the Bada Danda. The poet identified Jagannatha completely with Sri Krishna. He seems to have visited Vrindavan but spent most of his time at Puri. The poet was always eager to witness the Ratha Jatra so he could get a glimpse of his Dark Darling. Once he was held up on way while returning from Vrindavan during the festival period. Salabega prayed earnestly to the Lord that he should wait for him on the Nandighosha chariot till he reached the Bada Danda so that he would not miss the opportunity of seeing his Lord. The Lord waited there and gave a *darshan* to Salabega, his dear devotee on the Bada Danda, near Balagandi. The poet is supposed to have been buried at this site and a small memorial stands here even today. Every year the chariot of Lord Jagannatha stops here for a while in memory of this tender relation of the poet and his *ishta devata*, Lord Jagannatha.

Salabega composed numerous devotional songs but not all of them have survived. Most of his compositions are prayers and hymns to Lord Jagannatha and Krishna. He also authored songs in praise of Shiva, the



Mother goddess and some incorporating mystic thoughts, particularly those conceiving the divine as void. Many of his songs, deal with the *Krishna Leela*, as given in the *Srimad Bhagabat* and various Puranas. A good number of these deal with the romantic dalliance of Krishna with the Gopi maidens and Radha, while a few are inspired by the *vatsalya rasa*, the sweet motherly feeling of Yasoda for child Krishna.

Salabega is one of the finest composers of what has come to be known as the Padyavali literature. These are essentially short lyrical compositions meant for singing. The simple language and sweet lyricism of the compositions of Salabega have made them immensely popular with singers and the lay public for ages. The spirit of unalloyed devotion for the Lord imbues each one of the hymns. His deep devotion has intensity and passion, rare even in the devotional literature of the *Bhakti* era and is evident in the unique and somewhat unusual metaphors and similes employed by the poet to express the same. Although the poet was denied entry into the temple, his descriptions of the inner compound and the sanctum are among the most detailed and accurate in the devotional literature of Orissa. His song "*Ahe Neelagiri...*" is perhaps the best description of *Bedha Parikrama* or the prescribed circumambulation of the Srimandira. Many of the historical events of the period are recounted in his songs. The poet refers, with deep anguish, to the depredations of the marauders in their attacks on Puri and the repeated attempts to loot and desecrate the Srimandira. These frequently necessitated shifting the deities outside the main sanctum and the poet captures the situation of one such occasion with graphic details in the song "*Kene gheni jauchha Jagannathanku...*".

## Hari

*Show me that countenance of yours O Hari<sup>1</sup>  
With which your flute announces Radha's sweet victory<sup>2</sup>,  
Show me too the figure with which at Bali's door<sup>3</sup>  
As a beggar, you did appear.*

*Accepting the gift of three footholds  
You pressed Bali to the nether worlds,  
Hence an eye of Sukra , his minister  
You pierced with a blade of grass*

*When Kaikeyi turned into a foe  
Rama, in the forest, wandered in exile.  
Lady Sita accompanied her lord.  
To serve you, loyal Laxmana, too, followed.*

*When born in Gopa land,  
In the forests, their cattle you grazed.  
Amidst the young cowherds often you danced,  
Swaying from side to side.*

*On the right is the Lord  
With a plough in hand,  
Between the brothers in the centre,  
Can be seen Subhadra, their darling sister.  
On the left sits the Lord who holds  
The conch, the wheel and the mace in his hands.*

*Says Salabega, the lowly one  
By birth I am a Yavana.  
Kamsa and the eight wrestlers you vanquished,  
O Lord! Whom have you not redeemed?*

Original Oriya hymn "Mote sehi rupa dekha-a Hari...."

Source: Mishra, Neelamani. Ed. *Bhaktakavi Salabega, Jeevani O Padyavali* (Oriya). Cuttack: Grantha Mandir, 1976. pp. 163-164.

Additional Source: Nayak, Kshetrabasi. Ed. *Sri Jagannatha Padyavali- Volume I* (Second Edition). Berhampur: Pustak Bhandar, 1980. p. 34.

## Kalia

*I shall move in a hurry and proceed soon.  
I shall see the countenance of the Dark One .  
If by the guard I am restrained  
At the gate where the lions stand ,  
I won't budge an inch or yield;  
I shall, at once, push my way forward.*



*Dust of the twenty-two steps  
Shall I rub all over my limbs.  
I shall beg and receive a morsel  
Of the holy food, Kaivalya .  
The sacred banyan tree is truly blessed.  
With an ability to grant every wish, it is endowed.  
Blessed too is the dark doorway ;  
I shall see him from behind the pillar  
On which the Lord's eagle-carrier  
Garuda offers his prayer.  
I shall see the countenance of the Dark One.*

*Inside the hall of audience  
I shall join the saints with great rejoice;  
Within my heart I shall chant your name in silence.  
Says Salabega, the lowly one,  
I am a Yavana, an outcaste and fallen;  
At your lotus feet shall I seek solace.  
I shall see the countenance of the Dark One.*

Original Oriya hymn "Bahana jibi..."

Source: Source: Mishra, Neelamani. Ed. *Bhajana Sangraha* (Oriya). Cuttack: Grantha Mandir, 1990. p. 18.

#### References :

1. Hari is another name of Vishnu, Krishna and Jagannatha. The poet glorifies the Lord by recounting various deeds or *leelas* of Hari in different *yugas*.
2. The flute of Krishna is always conceived as making sweet music calling out to Sri Radha and the Gopi maidens by name. Here Salabega says that the flute is chanting the name of Sri Radha, the beloved of the Lord. It seems to announce the victory of Radha in the romantic dalliance with Krishna as also the Lord's intense desire to unite with Radha.
3. Vamana, literally the dwarf, refers to an incarnation of Vishnu-Krishna. In this avataara, the Lord asked for a gift of three foot-measures of land. In two measures he covered the earth and heaven and for the third the generous Bali offered his head on which the lord placed his foot. He pressed Bali to the nether worlds but at the same time emancipated him and accepted him as one of his great devotees and declared his eternal glory.
4. Sukracharya was the minister of the demons and having recognised Vishnu in the guise of the dwarf advised his benefactor Bali not to make a vow to gift whatever the Brahmin asked for. When Bali did not heed his advice, to save him in spite of the sacred promise made the king, he turned himself into a fly and hid in the hole of the spout of the *kamandalu*, the water-pot carried by the Vamana, the dwarf. The Lord noticing that water was not flowing from the spout, realised the little game being played by Sukracharya. He pushed the sharp *Kusha* grass into the mouth of the spout and pierced an eye of the holy priest. Thus Sukracharya became blind in one eye and in the popular parlance gained the appellation - '*Eka akhia Sukra*', the one-eyed Sukra. Also see earlier note on Vamana and Bali.
5. Kaikeyi was the stepmother of Rama, the son of Dasaratha. The episode referred to here is of the Tretaya Yuga and the famous story of Ramayana.
6. This refers to the Bala Leela of Krishna, his childhood exploits in the Dwapara Yuga.
7. This refers to the manifestation of the principal deities in the Srimandira at Puri. This is the appearance of the Lord in the Kali Yuga.
8. Kamsa, the tyrant and cruel king of Mathura had usurped the kingdom from his father and had imprisoned the latter. He had hatched a conspiracy to kill Krishna in a wrestling match but the Lord vanquished all the eight wrestlers of Kamsa and the frightened tyrant fell down from his throne and died.
9. See earlier note on Kalia.
10. Simha Dwara refers to the eastern main entrance of the Puri temple - so called due to the presence of two giant stone lions placed next to the entrance door.
11. Kaivalya means the Supreme State, the emancipated state. Here it refers to the Mahaprasada and Nirmalya, the food offerings of the temple. Its sanctity is such that it provides instant emancipation.
12. The Kalpa Bata.
13. Kalahata Dwara refers to the door of the sanctum sanctorum of the Puri temple.