



Lord Jagannath - The Tribal Deity

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The sacred temple of Lord Jagannath stands on the hillock "Blue Mountain" in the heart of Puri. It represents a lovely picturesque panorama of great Orissan Architecture. It's a monument of the 12th Century A.D. with all the richness and novelty of the Kalingan style of architecture known as "Sikhara", which is mainly predominant in Eastern India. The temple of Jagannath Puri was built by Ananta Barma Chodaganga Dev during 12th century A.D. and was completed by Ananga Bhima Dev, and this temple is one of the tallest monuments in the country; height is about 65 metres i.e. 214 feet 8 inches from the ground level. It stands on an elevated platform of stone measuring about 10 acres, which is located in the heart of the town and presents an imposing sight. The temple is bounded by two enclosures. The inner enclosure is 400' x 278' size and known as Kurma Bedha. The outer enclosure is of 665' x 644' size with the height varying from 20' to 24' and popularly known as Meghanad Prachir. The temple has four gates at the eastern, southern, western and northern midpoints of the Meghanad Prachir. They are called Lions gate, Horse Gate, Tiger Gate and the Elephant Gate.

Legends of the Lord

Legendary account as found in the Skanda-Purana, Brahma Purana and other Puranas and later works in Oriya state that Lord

Jagannath was originally worshipped as Neela Madhab by a Savar king (tribal chief) named Viswvasu. Lord Nilamadhaba (formerly worshipped as Kitung) appeared in a dream of Indradyumna, the legendary king of Malawa, and told him to bring back the Lord to "Malawa". Then the King sent "Bidyapati" to trace out the deity who was worshipped secretly in a dense forest by Viswvasu. Vidyapati tried his best, but could not locate the place. But at last, he managed to marry Viswvasu's daughter Lalita. At repeated request of Vidyapati, Viswvasu took his son-in-law blind folded to a cave where Neelamadhab was worshipped.

Vidyapati was very intelligent. He dropped mustard seeds on the ground in the route. The seeds germinated after a few days, which enabled him to find out the cave later on. On hearing from him, king Indradyumna proceeded immediately to Odra desha (Orissa) on a pilgrimage to see and worship the Deity. But, the deity had disappeared. The king was disappointed. The Deity was hidden in the sand. By seeing this, Indradyumna made his mind that without having a darshan of the deity he would not return to his palace. Then he observed fast unto death at Mount Neela. Then a celestial voice cried - 'thou shalt see him.' Afterwards the king performed a horse sacrifice and built a



magnificent temple for Vishnu. Narasingha Murti brought by Narada was installed in the temple. During sleep, the king had a vision of Lord Jagannath. Also an astral voice directed him to receive the fragrant tree on the seashore and make idols out of it. Accordingly the king got the image of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Chakra Sudarshan made out of the wood of the said tree and installed them in the temple.

History of Jagannath cult

The Hindu devotee believes that Lord Jagannath is eternal. Thus, we have two versions of the origins. One is the popular legends based on Puranas and Folklore. The other is the statements of the scholars who have tried to collate evidences from known history, archeology and ancient literature to draw surmises about the history and the origins. Eminent writers and poets

like Sarala Das, Jagannath Das, Balaram Das, Achyunda Das propagated the cult of Jagannath. After the visit of Shri Chitanaya in A.D. 1501 this cult of devotional love predominated in Orissan religious life and literature. Orissa came under the Muslims in 1586, after which profound changes took place in the social and religious life of the Oriya People, the impact of which fell on the worship of Lord Jagannath. Under the Maratha Rule, Orissa got no patronage and religious peace, but the institution of Jagannath flourished, because of the zeal of the Maratha nobles. Not only architectural additions were made by way construction of "Meghananda Pachery of 20 feet height but an all-round architectural and religious development was made in this sacred Temple. Brahmachari Gosain, a Maratha Saint who had political influence got the dilapidated temple of Jagannath decorated with these relics. The famous work of



this saint was the removal of one Aruna Pillar from Konark to the Singhadwar of Puri Temple where it is found today.

Tribal Deity-Legendary and Historical Views

Although scholars differ on the origin and evolution of Lord Jagannath, all of them agree that Lord Jagannath is basically a tribal deity from legendary as well as from historical evidences. According to some, this evolution has started with the appearance of the primitive man and has undergone the process of evolution till ultimately worshipped as Rastra Devata, Jagannath. From legendary point, it can be stated clearly that Biswabasu belonged to Savara tribe, who worshipped the Lord Jagannath. Apart from the above mentioned faiths, all historians agree that Vindhya region in the west constituted the habitat of the Savaras. Savaras speak Mundari dialect. The Mundari dialect is the primitive form of modern Oriya and Purva Magadhi language. Though the tribals speaking Mundari language were divided into different tribes like Savar, Kandha, Munda and Gonda etc., they primarily belonged to a larger community. The descendants of these primitive people still inhabit the hilly regions and forest lands of Orissa. Some of them use Mundari dialect as means of communication. Besides language, close similarity is noticeable in their religious thought and worship, and in the form of their presiding deities. Among these tribals who spoke Mundari dialects, tree or khamba (pillar or post) worship was in vogue. In trying to give a human shape to the tree or Khamba (post) they in fact gave it strange shapes. Perhaps that might have originated the shape of Lord Jagannath. We see a unique combination of shape and shapeless in this tree or Khamba deity. This structure is their own original creation. That, Lord Jagannath is being worshipped in Shreekshetra Puri from time immemorial is based on Puranic evidences given

by scholars. However, there is no historical evidence of worship of Jagannath at Puri prior to the 10th century A.D. when Yayati Kesari was the ruler. But we come to know from the Indrabhuti's Jnanasiddhi about the place of Jagannath. Pt. Neelakantha Das has mentioned that the Savaras were worshipping the image of Jagannath made of neem wood in a place called Sambal (Samal, now in Talcher of Angul District) in Uddiyan, the kingdom of Indrabhuti. We can say that Jagannath was worshipped in some part of Uddiyan prior to the rule of Yayati-I. Indrabhuti has described Jagannath as Buddhist deity in Jnanasiddhi. In the opinion of Indrabhuti Jagannath was worshipped by the Savaras in one of the Budha Viharas.

The Puspagiri Vihar which has been mentioned in Hieun-tsang's travelogue has not yet been discovered. Possibly it has been completely destroyed. Although history is completely silent over this issue, it may be said that it was destroyed due to anti-Buddhist activities of King Sasanka and his feudatory chief Madhav Raj-II in the 7th century A.D. Prior to its destruction Jagannath was shifted to a place in Sonepur in Uddiyan and kept hidden under the earth. Jagannath was shifted before the arrival of Hieun-Tsang and Puspagiri Vihar was destroyed after his departure. But by that time Jagannath was accepted and recognised as the most popular deity. Therefore, after 80 years from the rule of Sasanka and Madhav Raj-II, we see Indrabhuti as a worshipper of Jagannath in 717 A.D. There are various opinions about the place where the image of Jagannath was lying buried. Madalapanji (the temple Chronicles) identifies this place with the village Gopali of Sonepur. The Madalapanji records legend of King Yayati recovering the wooden images of Jagannath from the Sonepur region where it lay buried for over 144 years. Since, the images were damaged, new images



were made out of the trees brought from Sonepur. Even now in the forest of Kakdein and Kotsamalai of Sonepur lives a Savar tribe that knows the technique and art of making Jagannath images out of neem wood. A good number of them in the past were settled at Puri as tribal priests through the patronage of Yayati-I for worshipping Jagannath. The odra kingdom inhabited mostly by primitive Savaras was famous even from the time of Mahabharat. We find the mention of Odras in the Dharma Sastra of Manu. The name of an Odra king is found in the Mahabharat. From the ancient time, the primitive Savaras were the worshipper of Khamba.

Whether the Khamba tradition came to Orissa through the practice of Vedic religion or through primitive tribal worshipping is not very clear. It has to be noted that the concept of Lord Jagannath has a tribal history behind it. Sabaras, the earliest tribal inhabitants of Orissa, were tree worshippers, and all their rituals involved dancing and singing before the 'Kitung' or 'Jaganata' or God. It is believed that when the Vedic people occupied Orissa, they adopted many of the local tribal traditions, which included the transformation of Jagannath from 'Jaganata'. 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

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 Hindu 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 a 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 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.

Regarding tribal origin of Lord Jagannath, it is said that Nilamadhava was worshipped by Savara King Viswabasu inside the dense forest



of Nilagiri (the Blue Mountain). Subsequently Nilamadhava disappeared and reincarnated in the forms of three deities Lord Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra. These three deities together symbolize Nilamadhava (Nila-Ma-Dhaba). Nila (Blue) represents Lord Jagannath, Ma (Mother) represents Goddess Subhadra and Dhaba (White) which represents Balabhadra who are worshiped at Puri. The Savaras became known as Daitas who are the hereditary servitors of Lord Jagannath. They observed the funeral rites of Lord Jagannath during Navakalevara (when the deities change their body) and the sole responsibilities of Snana Jatra and Sri Gundicha Jatra are bestowed upon these Daitas. The worship of Lord Jagannath by Savara is also mentioned in Darubrahma Gita written by Jagannath Das in 16th Century AD and in Deula Tola written by Nilambara Das in 17th Century AD. Regarding origin of Lord Jagannath, historian William Hunter also remarked that the aboriginal people worshipped a Blue Stone inside dense forests as Nilamadhava the Dravidian God, who was offered kacha (Raw) food by the primitive tribes and with the passage of time as the Aryan elements introduced Jagannath into Hinduism he is worshipped as God of Aryan (a more civilized race) who is offered pakka (cooked) food. At present these two fold worship coexist side by side. Till today the Sauras or Savaras worship trees "the Nature God" known as "Kitung" which means God. They do not cut trees because they

believe that Kitung dwells inside the tree. Kitung is otherwise known as Jagant and according to them Jagant is the 10th incarnation of Vishnu. As it is said the word Jagannath is not a Sanskrit word nor it is a Pali word but a derivation of Austric word Jagant.

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