



SHRIKSHETRA

A replica of Indian Culture

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Shrikshetra of Puri Jagannath, as is commonly known, can verily be said to be a truthful replica of Indian culture. To understand this culture, one has to have some idea of the history of this land, which again is different from that of other countries of the world. Indian history does not contain accounts of imperialistic aggressions or invasions into the territorial integrity of any nation. It is, on the other hand, a history of assimilation, a perfect adjustment to a specific environment which began thousands of years ago which, historians earmark as the period of Indus valley civilization. Both Mahenjodaro and Harappa reveal that it was not an incipient civilization (that had to their creation) but they had millions of human endeavours behind them. As Nehru felt, it was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thoughts, had been inscribed and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. The culture that grew up here and hinted at by Nehru, was not an anthropomorphic entity but a perfect adjustment and synthesis of diverse racial cultures. If one care to analyse further, would find out that it is a curious mixture of free thoughts and orthodoxy. Nevertheless it is the inner creativity of the people belonging to this country and their strong religious and spiritual faith that led to the growth of a dynamic Indian culture based on tolerance.

A person trying to understand the basics of Indian culture can very well study the history of Shrikshetra with its

innumerable temples, Mathas and Ashramas and, however tantalising they may appear outwardly, they would at long last espouse the essence of Indian culture which is basically a harmonious blending of diverse thoughts and philosophies, not a synthesis but a perfect agreement, each maintaining its own peculiar idea yet forming into one indivisible wholenamed India. This Indianness is an emotional experience which breeds and develops a queer feeling of oneness.

Jainism and Buddhism : Of the two, Jainism is more ancient than Buddhism and basically approved the precepts of the *Vedas*. On the other hand the Hindus were the believers in the *Vedas* from which the Brahmin religion had its impetus. The *Vedas* were casted as *Mantras* (hymns etc.) and *Brahmanas* and the *Brahmanic* religion started thriving on the tenets of the *Vedas*. The historians believe that *Rishabhadeva* or *Rishabha*, traditionally known as the founder of Jainism, is inseparably associated with the cultural history of ancient Orissa. The *Hatigumpha*, inscriptions have a reference to an image of Kalinga Jaina being carried away from Orissa by a king belonging to the *Nanda* dynasty. Whether that was the image of Sitalnath, the tenth of their *Tirthankara* (Jaina Preceptor) or none other than *Rishava*, is a matter of controversy. However, the fact remains that the gospel of Jainism had been extensively preached in Orissa and it was all time high during the reign of *Kharavela* in the 1st century B.C. Stone inscriptions and



sculpture speak galore about this impact, and finally, of the trinity of the cult.

That there had been a cross - cultural interaction between the resident non-Aryans of India and the immigrant Aryans is a foregone conclusion. It is this cross cultural interaction that precisely gave the peculiar shape to Indian culture. The appearances of the Indians residing in the foothills of the Himalayas, there living in person's pygmalion point is the Nicobar island (for that is the souther-most tip of the Indian sub continent) their language, food and dress, art and music so also architecture all point out unmistakably to this grand fusion of subcultures into the big one. When we concentrate our attention on *Shrikshetra*, we perceive immediately that it enshrines, within its limited boundaries, a fusion of various faiths, traditions and sub-cultures to give it the most acceptable shape of a replica of the Indian culture. A study of the Jagannath cult and a survey of *Shrikshetra* gives us this idea of strength.

Starting from Lord Jagannath himself, the history has it that he was a tribal deity, adorned by the *Savaras*, as a symbol of *Narayan*. Another legend claims him to be *Nilamadhava*, an image of *Narayana* made of blue stone and worshipped by the aboriginals. He was brought to *Nilagiri* (blue mountain) or *Nilachala* and installed there as *Jagannath* in company with *Balaram* and *Subhadra*. The images made of wood are also claimed to have their distant linkage with the aboriginal system of worshipping wooden poles. To cap it all the *Daitapatis*, who have a fair share of responsibilities to perform rituals of the Temple, are claimed to be descendants of the aboriginals or hill tribes of Orissa. So we may safely claim that the beginning of the cultural history of *Shrikshetra* is found in the fusion of Hindu

and Tribal Cultures. This has been accepted as a facet of our proud heritage. The three deities came to be claimed as the symbols of *Samyak Darshan*, *Samyak Jnana* and *Samyak Charita* usually regarded as *Triratha* (of the Jaina cult), an assimilation of which leads to *Moksha* (salvation) or the ultimate bliss.

Growth of Buddhism in India is also an important phenomenon since the sixth century B.C. and is considered wielding much impetus on the intellectual movement of the contemporary period. Some of the Indian historians consider Buddha to be a great social reformer while others tend to attach some importance to his humanitarian approach. However Buddhism grew up enormously and transcended the Geopolitical boundary of India.

Chandashoka (Ashoka the violent or fierce) turned into *Dharmashoka* (Ashok the religious) in 261 B.C. after the blood bath he had in *Kalinga Yuddha* (war) and ultimately the Mourya empire declined after Ashok. This *Kalinga* war was the turning point in the Indian history as the vanquished *Kalinga* conquered her victor. The holocaust witnessed by emperor Ashoka left an indelible mark on his emotive sense and he accepted Buddhism and followed the same throughout his life thereafter. Although historians differ in their opinion if *Kalinga* was the turning point in the life of Ashoka but there is no doubt that this is one of the reasons which turned *Chandashoka* to *Dharmashoka*. His rock edicts, better known as "Kalinga Edicts" say, "All men are my children. Just as for my children I desire that they are united with all welfare and happiness of this world and of the next precisely do I desire if for all men".

Some scholars have come forward to stake a claim on the Trinity on behalf of



Buddhism. According to them Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra stand for Buddhism (of the enlightened) Dharmam (the religion) and Sangham (of the organisation). It is well known that the Buddhists do have strong allegiance to these three aspects of their religion. The Hindus have also a seal of recognition on their claim by accepting Jagannath as the symbol of Buddha. That Shrikshetra does not recognise differences of caste and creed is the focal point on which the Buddhists base their claims. The caste system as it is commonly known, is a basic idea of Hinduism. Without going into the claims and counter-claims of the scholars we have noticed a fair amount of cross - cultural cohesion in the growth and development of the Jagannath culture.

Lord Jagannath is worshipped as *Vishnu* or *Narayan* or *Krishna* and simultaneously regarded as the *Vairava* (Shiva the formidable) with *Vimala* (the *Vairavi* or the consort of Shiva) installed in the campus of the temple. So ultimately we find a fusion of Saivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism of the Hindu religion with Jainism and Buddhism in the culture of Jagannath and the cultural tradition so reverently held together in *Shrikshetra*.

History has it that Guru Nanak (1469-1539) the founder of Sikhism in India travelled extensively throughout the length and breadth of India. He paid a visit to Puri with two of his disciples Bala and Manda, the former a Hindu and latter a Muslim and stayed here for some days. His disciples dug a hole in the sea beach in quest of potable water for the use of their Guru. On being considered holy, subsequently, it was converted into a well and a Gurudwara was erected in memory of Guru Nanak and the Granth Sahib the sacred book of religion of the Shikhs, placed there for reciting hymns

from it (*Sabad path*).

Muslim invasions into the Hindu Kingdom of Orissa started in the 13th century A.D. with their strong base in the adjoining province of Bengal. Those invasions were repulsed with intermittent spells of defeat on the part of the contemporary ruling kings of Orissa. This kind of attacks and counter-attacks continued up to the 16th century when finally in 1568 A.D. Orissa came under the Muslim rule. The impact of Muslim rule can not be felt so much in the Puri district although it is felt to have left permanent testimony in the District of Cuttack in the form of Muslim monuments and burial grounds. Although Shrikshetra does not contain any such monument, it can boast of the burial ground of Salabeg, a muslim yet a great devotee of Lord Jagannath who composed a lot of devotional poems for the Lord. Haridas, (c 1450-1530) a muslim disciple of Sri Chaitanya, is more known as *Javan* Haridas (Haridas the muslim). He died in the *Shrikshetra* and his mortal remains were buried in the sea shore by Sri Chaitanya himself.

At the outset we have mentioned that *Shrikshetra* represents the essence of Indian culture, Unity in diversity. Till now we have tried to present legendary so also historical facts to prove our contention that Shrikshetra stands for its unique cross cultural phenomenon and the fact is unchallengeable that Lord Jagannath is a symbol of diverse concepts and ideologies with regard to gods and religions. With its origin as a tribal deity in the hoary past, Jagannath plays the multifaceted role of *Vishnu* and *Siva* on one hand and the trinity as the symbol of Jainism and Buddhism. Even the Muslims like Salabeg and Haridas offered Him prayers for their salvation. It has



to be accepted therefore that the philosophy that grew up in *Shrikshetra* with Lord Jagannath in the centre-stage defied a simplistic or for that matter a dogmatic definition. More over, the shrine known as *Shrikshetra* is a place with monasteries performing diverse rites according to their ideology. It is the most liberal outlook of the contemporary king of Khurda or the Raja of Puri who granted pieces of land to the founders of these monasteries.

Historically Govardhan Pitha of the Sankaracharya sect seems to be the oldest of the monasteries in Puri established by one of his disciples. Sankaracharya preached *Advaita* philosophy. Nevertheless *Shrikshetra* can boast of monasteries belonging to the seats preaching *Dvaitavad*, *Dvaitadvaitavad*, *Vishista Advaitavad* and so on and so forth. So there are monasteries belonging to *Ramanuja* sect, *Ramanandi* sect, *Nimbarka* sect, *Goudia Vaisnav* sect, and the list is endless. Some other monasteries are there which preach slightly different religious philosophy besides the eminent ones mentioned above. They follow different rituals and ways of life. Kalitilak Math, Balabhadra Akhara, Bada Oriya Math, Ramkrishna Mission Ashram and the rest of others belong to this category. Outwardly, they may be having different religious philosophies and different missions to perform, but this can be said for certain that all these institutions have been taking part in the temple rituals on a routine basis for centuries past. So it can be said that other organisations are now ingrained in the infrastructure of *Shrikshetra*.

Some of these monasteries are having rich libraries containing printed books and

manuscripts. They also offer shelter to people belonging to their sects while some of them have arrangements to provide temporary shelter to pilgrims. Most of them also carry out charitable works in some form or the other. Taking all these pieces of brief informations about their organisations alongside the colourful administration in the temple complex engaging hundreds of sevakas, their supervisors and top administrators, the total picture is almost incomprehensible. But the aspect one can gain out of the whole discussion is that *Shrikshetra* stands out uniquely and pre-eminently as a replica of Indian history and culture. Whether it is a *Shaiva Kshetra* or a *Vishnutirtha* is entirely out of context and not in conformity with the philosophy that has grown up here during the centuries past with Lord Jagannath as the pivotal force. The only consideration that prevails here is that everything belongs to Him and He belongs to everybody, every organisation or even every dwelling house of common people and the palace of the king as well. Nothing in *Shrikshetra* the holy concourse can be conceived of without *Purusottama* or Lord Jagannath as the Lord of *Shrikshetra* and the symbol of universal humanism. He is the great synthesizing force behind the entire gamut of *Shrikshetra* and therefore, it has assumed a stature which can unmistakably be claimed as a faithful replica of India.



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