



## JAGANNATH PURI - the Abode of the God of the Universe

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**J**agannath Puri, which is simply called Puri, the abode of Sri Jagannath, the God of the Universe, is mentioned in the Puranas as *Shri Kshetra*, *Purusottama Kshetra* and *Nilachala*. The temple of Sri Jagannath is well known throughout India as a place of pilgrimage from days of yore, along with its antiquity. In this temple are installed Sri Jagannath Deb, his elder brother Balabhadra, their sister Subhadra and Sudarsan Chakra.

History is silent about the origin of Sri Jagannath. Even then we collect informations from the Vedas, the Upanishads; ancient epics like the Ramayan, the Mahabharat, various Puranas, and the legends, which bear testimony to the fact that Purusottama Kshetra, the seat of the God of the Universe is a heaven on earth. It has been conceived by the Gods. *Kshetram*, *Devaistu Kalpitam*. Of all the places of the earth, India is the noblest and of all the States of India, Utkal boasts of the highest renown as the seat of the Sri Jagannath of the universe.

### **Sri Jagannath in Indian literature :**

The worship of Jagannath at Shrikshetra Puri, in Orissa is so old that its history is lost in obscurity. The God has been enshrined in many temples which have perished in course of time before the construction of the present temple. From time immemorial, Puri has been a leading pilgrim centre in India. Roads of pilgrimage carrying millions of devotees

every year have converged towards Puri from different parts of India and abroad since the days of the Vedas and Puranas. On the sacred soil of Orissa, the God has become the most popular God of the Hindu pantheon. Gradually, he has been worshipped as the God of the Universe. Evidences to this effect are found in the *Rig veda*. In a *Sukta* there is reference to Daru which runs thus "*Ado yaddaru plavate sindhoh pare apurusam, tada rabhasva durhano tena gaccha parastaram.*" Sayanacharya has interpreted this *sukta* in the following manner. There exists on sea-shore in a far off place, the image of a deity of the name Purusottama, which is made of wood floating as it were in the sea. O ye, by worshipping that wood indestructible, attain the supreme place of the Vaisnavas. There are other three *Suktas* in the Rig Veda which regard the Daru as the symbol of Brahman.

In post Vedic period, the Upanishads described *Purusa* as the creator of the Universe. The *Swetaswatara Upanishad* and the *Kaivalya Upanishad* give descriptions about *Purusa*. The *Purusa* is one who is not having hands and legs. He has no eyes but sees, no ears but hears. He is unknowable but knows everything. He is the supreme being, Jagannath is the symbol of this *Purusa*.

Chapter XV of the Bhagavad Gita describes the God of the Universe as Purusottama. He who recognizes the God as Purusottama shifts his love from the



entire universe and focusses it wholly and solely on Purusottama.

In the Ramayana, we find description of Jagannath. In the Uttara Khanda of the Valmiki Ramayana, Sri Rama advises Vibhisana to devote himself to the worship of Sri Jagannath, the family deity of the *Ikshvaku Kula* or *Surya Vamsa*.

Even today, the ritual *Vibhisana Bandapana* is observed in the temple of Shri Jagannath. In the Kiskinda Kanda of the Ramayana, there are references to the names of Sri Jagannath and other deities. Thus in the age of the Ramayana, Sri Jagannath was a popular deity in India.

In the epic Mahabharata, we find the story of Indradyumna and the tank named after him. In this epic, there is description of Vedi, which is identified by the scholars as Antarvedi or the seat of Sri Jagannath. In the Santi Parva of the Mahabharata, we find a reference to Jagannath Dharma.

We also find references about Sri Jagannath and the Purusottama Kshetra in Matsya Purana, Vishnu Purana, Agni Purana, Padma Purana, Narada Purana, Brahma Purana and Skanda Purana. In some famous Sanskrit texts like Kapilasamhita, Tirtha Chintamani, Niladri Mahodaya, Rudrayamala, Tantrayamala, Purusottama Tatwa etc. we find references to Sri Jagannath. The Jagannath Astakam of Adi Sankaracharya is another important text on Jagannath which provides information about the temple of the God. It stands on the top of the Blue Mountain near the sea. Some famous Oriya authors like Sarala Das, Sishu Krishna Das and Jagannath Dash identify Sri Jagannath of Kaliyuga with Srikrishna of Dvapara yuga and try to

prove that Jagannath is no other than God Krishna. The famous poets Balarama, Achyuta, Jasobanta, Ananta, Upendra Bhanja, Baladeva, Dinakrushna, Jadumani have all sang invocations, songs and prayers in honour of Jagannath. Even the poet Salabega, who was a Muslim, was no exception. Thus since the writing of the oldest Vedic verses, we find references to Sri Jagannath.

### **The visit of spiritual personalities :**

Many spiritual personalities have visited Jagannath Temple in the past. Sri Ramanuja, the great Vaishnavite preacher of Visistadwaita philosophy visited Puri in course of his journey from Melukote to Delhi between 1107 to 1117 A.D. and stayed here for sometimes. Under his influence Chodaganga Deva, the king of Orissa became a Param Vaishnava. The present Ramanuja Math has been named after him. His disciple Govinda established the Emar Math, which is the biggest Math of Puri.

Vishnuswami, another famous preacher of Vaishnava Dharma in south India also visited Puri in the second half of the twelfth century and established a Math near the Markandeswar tank, which is called the 'Vishnuswami Math.'

Nimabarka, another famous Vaishnava reformer of south India visited Puri and established a Math of his religious faith. Among the five Maths of his sect at Puri, the Radhaballava Math is well known. It is situated just to the east of the Lion's gate of the Jagannath Temple.

In the last part of the twelfth century, Madhavacharya or Ananda Tirtha, a Vaishnava reformer of south India came



to Puri. The visit of these four famous Vaishnava reformers of south India made Puri the centre of Vaishnavism in India.

Sankaracharya, the greatest Hindu philosopher visited Puri and established the Gobardhana Math. His text "Jagannath Astakam" provides information about the environment of Puri.

Kabir came to Puri and preached harmony between Hinduism and Islamism. He advocated that the God of the Hindus is not different from the God of the Muslims.

After Kabir, came Sri Chaitanya, during the 15th and 16th centuries. He was a great devotee of Sri Jagannath. He spent the last 12 years of his life here at Puri, in a tiny room called Gambhira. He walked on foot to south, Dwarka and Brindavan and convinced people that Sri Jagannath is the supreme deity who can give salvation to man.

William Bruton, an English traveller visited Puri in 1633 and published his account in 1638 on Jagannath Temple. Another foreigner named T. Matto who came to Orissa in 1776 mentions Puri town as the capital of the Gajapati kings of Puri where existed the Jagannath Temple. Thus Sri Jagannath became famous both inside and outside India. The visit of these personalities popularised Jagannath culture both inside and outside India.

### **The cycle of festivals :**

The annual cycle of festivals of Sri Jagannath begins with the *Abhiseka* or the coronation ceremony of the God on full-moon-day in the month of Pausha. It is known as Pusyabhiseka.

The *Dola Yatra* is a great festival at

Puri when Madana Mohana, the representative deity of Sri Jagannath is ceremonially installed on a swing and *Abir* is placed on his feet by pilgrims from different parts of India.

*Chandan Yatra* is another important festival observed at Puri. This festival lasts for 42 days. First 21 days are known as the period of *Bahara Chandan*, because during this period Rama, Krishna, Madana Mohana, Laxmi and Saraswati are taken outside in procession to Narendra tank. There they play in the boat and enjoy different types of worship. The other 21 days are known as the days of *Bhitara Chandan*. During this period, the festival takes place inside the temple. Millions of devotees come to Puri and pay their homage to the God.

On Jyestha Purnima day, the *Snana Jatra* or the Bathing Festival of Sri Jagannath is observed. The main images of Sri Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra along with Sudarsan are brought to the *Snanamandapa* (Chaka) by processions known as *Pahandi* and at about midday 108 pots of water is poured over the deities.

On this occasion, the devotees and pilgrims are allowed to touch and embrace the images. A large congregation of men, women and children from different parts of the country see this festival. After this festival, the four deities go back to the temple in *Pahandi* and remain there in the *Anasara* for 15 days.

On the day of the Ratha Yatra the four deities appear before the public on the *Bada Danda* through *Pahandi Bije*. This *Pahandi Bije* is a colourful show.

The deities sit on their respective Rathas and the Rathas travel about



three kilometres. In Gundicha Ghara, they remain for 7 days and come back to the main temple on the 9th day i.e. on the day of Bahuda Dashami. The return festival is known as Bahuda Yatra. The Ratha Yatra is an important part of the cycle of festivals observed for the God. Pilgrims and devotees come to Puri in large numbers from different states of India and also from outside the country to see the festival. They pull the ropes of the Rathas with great enthusiasm and derive celestial joy which cannot be expressed in words.

### The Vesas :

The Vesas of Sri Jagannath symbolise various cultural and religious synthesis in the shrine. Since he has been adopted by the tribals and the Aryans of different faiths like Vaishnavism, Jainism, Buddhism, Tantricism, the three images are decorated in various ways in order to satisfy their spiritual aspirations. During *Snana Yatra*, the three images wear the mask of the elephant. This vesa is known as *Hati Vesa*. According to legend. Ganapati Bhata, a devotee from Karnataka came to Puri on the day of Snana Yatra, but was disappointed because he could not see the Ganapati image on the bathing platform. To satisfy the sentiment of this devotee, the God appeared in the form of *Gajanana*. Since then the *Hati Vesa* of the deities is being observed on the day of *Snana Yatra*. At the time of the termination of the car festival; *Suna Vesa* is observed near the Singhadwara. The images wear huge golden ornaments. Apart from *Hati Vesa* and *Suna Vesa*, 18 other Vesas are

performed inside the temple during a year. *Banabhoji Vesa, Kaliya Dalana Vesa, Pralambasura Badha Vesa, Rama-Balarama Vesa, Raja Vesa, Rai Damodara Vesa, Thiakia Vesa, Bankachuda Vesa, Padma Vesa, Gaja Udharana Vesa, Tribikrama Vesa, Bamana Vesa, Nrusingha Vesa, Adakia Vesa, Dalikia Vesa, Raghunath Vesa, Laxmi Narayan Vesa* and *Nagarjuna Vesa* constitute the list.

The great Jagannath Dharma established and enriched in this holy land, is the greatest contribution of Orissa to Indian culture. The Jagannath Dharma preaches equality in the right to worship and discards all distinctions of caste and creed. Everybody can take *Mahaprasad* together. Such universal qualities are found nowhere in India. Sri Jagannath therefore assumes the name of *Patitapabana*. The Hindus, the Buddhists, the Jainas, the Savaras, the Dravidas, all find a harmonious blending of their varying faiths and beliefs in this universal *Dharma* that Sri Jagannath represents. In recent years the fame of Sri Jagannath reached new dimensions touching the land of America, England and other European countries. Therefore Sri Jagannath is called the God of the Universe, thus becoming the spiritual power of different countries of the world.



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