

The Contemporary Relevance of Sri Jagannath Dasa's Srimad Bhagavata in Oriya

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Like Sarala Dasa's Mahabharata in oriya, Srimad Bhagavata of Sri Jagannatha Dasa is not a literal translation of the sanskrit original. But all the same, the Oriya translation of the Srimad Bhagavata by Sri Jagannatha Dasa is a marvel of creation with its sparkling originality and scintillating clarity. The Sanskrit Bhagavata was never so completely adapted by the readers and the people of Orissa as the oriya version of Sri Jagannatha Dasa was.

The immense popularity of the book, as Dr. Manasinha asserts, "reminds one of that of the Authorised Version of the English Bible" (93).

It is infact difficult to exaggerate the role and relevance of the Oriya Bhagavata (of Sri Jagannatha Dasa) in reinvigorating, reinforcing and completely revolutionizing the oriya life and language. It is interesting to note that as per the 1901 census Orissa enjoyed the highest position in literacy among all the states of India. All critics and historians ascribe this credit to the Oriya Bhagavata.

Commenting on the massive popularity and influence of Sri Jagannatha Dasa's Oriya Srimad Bhagavata B.C. Majumdar writes :

"There must be few books in the whole of Indian literature that can compare in depth and pervasive influence with the Oriya Bhagavata of Jagannatha Dasa."

(Typical selections from Oriya Literature. Manasinha, 92)

Sri Jagannatha Dasa was a contemporary of Sri Chaitanya. He was born at some closing moment of 15th century. Thus, his creative years mostly fell into 16th century. There is no document or any evidence available on his childhood and early youth until Sri Chaitanya noticed him. Hence, as the matter stands, this literary and creative genius was in obscurity till one fine moment when "Sri Chaitanya met him under the so-called Kalpa Bata within the precincts of the Jagannatha temple, reciting there his recently composed Oriya Bhagavata to illiterate folk" (Manasinha, 91).

Sri Jagannatha Dasa was almost of the same age as Sri Chaitanya. Soon after their chance meeting under the Kalpa Bata there grew a lasting spiritual kinship between the two that developed into a warm, life-long friendship. Sri Chaitanya was an avid admirer of Sri Jagannatha Dasa. He in fact called him "Ati Badi" ("very great" in Bengali). Thereafter Sri Jagannatha Dasa has been widely known as Ati Badi Jagannatha Dasa. His historic creation, the oriya Bhagavata, continues to shine brilliantly through ages with its great spiritual fervor, ethical values, literary finesse and, above all, its phenomenal liberating dynamism. It serves as an unfailing guide to everyone to cruise the troubled and murky ocean of life.

It is fascinating to study the very context and background of the composition of the original Srimad Bhagavata in sanskrit. It came about a time when mankind was under a grave threat of degeneration. It was an atmosphere of complete gloom and despondency when lord Krsna succumbed to Jara's arrow. All the intellectuals, thinking responsible denizens were concerned about the situation and the impending disillusionment. In the Naimisharanya there was a congregation of 60 thousand Rishis (Wise men, intellectuals and philosophers). It was convened by Saunaka Muni and the key-note address was given by no less a genius than Sree Suta Muni. The issue was "Whither light!" It was a historic convention taken up in a note of extreme urgency as "righteousness" / "dharma" was facing imminent threat for want of light and guidance in the wake of lord Krsna's sudden disappearance. In the profound, thoughtful discourse of Suta Muni the message was loud and clear. As he asserted unequivocally :

True, lord Krsna has gone back to his abode (Heaven); but there is no reason to panic. There is light. And that light is Srimad Bhagavatam like the shining Sun. (Srimad Bhagavatam : 1-3-44).

The historic convention of Naimisharanya infused light and vitality into the moribund spirit of the whole Indian sub-continent and charged it with a renewed vigour. That had an electrifying effect on the drooping spirit during the most critical years that came during the transition between Dwapara and Kaliyuga. Srimad Bhagavata, undoubtedly, played the vital role in reviving, revitalising and sustaining the reghteousness and faith in mankind.

Indeed, there are umpteen evidences in the Bhagavatam how this great treatise has helped resolving doubts, conflicts and scepticism of such spiritual giants like Sukadeva, Vyasa, Narada and

Brahma. The illustrious origin of this great treatise goes back to the bank of the holy ganges where it (Srimad Bhagavatam) came out of the lips of Sukadeva in the spiritual fiesta organized by king Parikshita.

That was no doubt a transitional phase of human history. Once again the mankind passes through a phase of terrible transition. The entire human race is threatened by an imminent moral, physical crisis. Terrorism (the term tends to have an ever-widening definition) hits mankind from every angle. Financial insecurity, physical horror, moral crisis arising out of reckless materialism (and in the complete absence of a spiritual anchorage) has shaken the human race at its very core. An ever-growing sense of terror, insecurity, unpredictability, distrust and disillusionment take its toll. The 21st century man has become more fragile and more vulnerable than his war-torn traumatized counter-part of 20th century.

The oil wells of Middle East have become the safest passage to hell. Money and wealth (instead of buying peace and pleasure) has become the surest means of losing rest and happiness. Thus, once again we see history being repeated. Once again we see the cry for peace and light. The situation once again calls for a massive moral and spiritual relief operation.

The urgency is as grave as, rather more than, the phase of human history when the Indian sub-continent was reeling under an unprecedented moral and spiritual crisis after Sri Krsna's sudden demise. Hence, the only viable escape route out of this dead-end is to remember and follow the Srimad Bhagavatam.

Trails of terror and the tentacles of violence, as such, are spread across the world from Kandhamal to Kandhahaar, and from New Delhi to New York. It has affected one and all; the poorest and the richest; the most helpless and the

most powerful. Even the top most man in the American Presidential House (the White House in Washington D.C.) loses his sleep, while the hapless vendor in the market place of Kashmir or Mumbai is scared of losing his life. The filthy-rich stock-brokers in New York, Marhattan, or Dalal street Mumbai attempt to commit suicide as financial insecurity sends chill down their spine. Sceptre of terror haunts every soul, everywhere, every moment in to-day's world. On one hand, it is true that man has excelled in the field of materialistic, scientific achievements. He sits pretty at the very pinnacle of glory and success. But ironically, this man of 21st century on Moon and Mars has gone far behind the ancient man in the cave in his elemental animal instincts and senselessness. The reason : selfishness, distrust, fear and hypocrisy.

If one is asked to define the life of modern man, one can only round it up with one word; STRESS or TENSION. From a school-going child to an octogenarian, every individual is affected by this disturbing syndrome today. What is the way out? How to get over this? Medical science, Psychiatry, the entire package of counselling and confidence-rebuilding measures prove ineffectual to handle the situation. Both the East and the West look around desperately, try to adapt the yogic therapy of the ancient Indians. But without adapting the basic life-style and the attitude of the ancient Indians all these cosmetic additions wont solve the crisis. And that precisely takes us into the ageless classic Srimad Bhagavatam. While the entire text is a very ocean, we can pick up a few lines to explain the originality and the relevance of Bhagavata for the materially drunk modern man. As Jagannatha Dasa rightly diagnoses :

Exactly like water being drawn from the very bottom of the well, materialism and passion take away everybody's peace of mind and sensibility. (Bhagavata in Oriya).

As a panacea for all these, Sri Jagannatha Dasa suggests :

"All should repose their faith in Sri Krsna to liberate them from this terrible world".

Elaborating further this point, the great saint says that to sanitise all complexities and impurities of mind one must attain detachment, disinterestedness, Bairagyaa. And Bairagyaa is the only and the surest path to happiness. Love can't generate from a heart without Bairagyaa. That explains how such words could come out of the lips of Jesus (Oh God, Forgive them...) who was being crucified on the Cross. This is an example of the highest manifestation of love that can come only from a detached soul- that is the very essence of Bhagavata. Hence, medical science, psycho-therapy or even yoga without a basic change in attitude and perception is like cooling the surface while the core remains as hot as ever. The impact is temporary and the result is doubtful. The surest path is the one that the holy Bhagavata prescribes : Bairagyaa.

Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha are the four founding pillars of the highest knowledge. As Jagannatha Dasa writes, Dharma leads to moksha (the first to the last) only when the two middle ones (Artha and Kama) are successfully overcome. That gives the realization of the transience of this worldly existence which liberates one from the worldly bondage and the fear of death. That is the mark of supreme knowledge. Ironically, the modern man is indulged in the Artha and Kama, and yet striving to attain Moksha. Hence the suffering. Bhagavata has the key. We must follow it.

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