



The Evolution of Sri Jagannath Cult

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The name of Jagannath tallies with His primordial religio-philosophical concept. Philosophically conceived, He is the ultimate Reality-the cause, the substance, and the effect of all things and beings, the subject of all actions and thought. Jagannath is the Supreme Being solicited by us as Lord and the Dear within and without. In form He is worshipped as the Supreme Divine, our near and dear Lord, in His grand temple at Puri, the city of Lord. His ineffable name Jagannath, unlike that of other premier Deities, Badrinath, Balaji, Venketeswar, Veetalnath, Ramanath and Dwarakanath etc. is all assuring universal and highly connotative. The cult of Jagannath is the rendezvous of religion with philosophy. Of the four Dhams, the last one Puri is the most popular for its presiding Deity is acknowledged as complete Godhead (Purna Brahma) transcending sectarian consideration¹.

Rig Veda - Taittiriya Sruti,² Atharva Veda and Utkal Khanda of Skanda Purana explain about "Aporusa Daru", Uttarakhanda of Ramayan mentions the worship of Lord Purushottama.³ The Santi Parva of Mahabharat also describes the same thing.⁴ Vishnu Puran,⁵ Matsya Puran,⁶ Skanda Purana, Agni Puran, Padma Puran, Kalika Purana, Tantra Yamala, Rudra Yamala, Kapila Samhita etc, mention variously about Odra/Puri/Nilagiri/Purushottama

Kshetra/ Nilachala Kshetra/ Jagannath Kshetra/ Daru Brahma/ Indradyumna etc. In the Kailan copper plate of Sridharana Rata, the chief of Samanta, which has been dated to the second half of the seventh century A.D., there is a reference to Bhagvan Purushottama Jagannath, as the Creator, Preserver and the Destroyer of the world. In the Neulpur Plate dated 790 A.D. of Subhakara Deva-1 (780-800 A.D.) of Bhaumakar Dynasty, lands were donated to two hundred brahmins, all of whom are named in the record. In this list there are four persons bearing the name of Purushottama, three persons bearing the name of Balabhadra, and one person of the name of Haladhara, which suggest that Purushottama and Balabhadra were popular deities of the region by this period. The Copper plate grant discovered in the village of Maihar in Satna District of Madhya Pradesh, and which has been dated to the middle of the 10th century A.D, mentions Purushottama. The invocation to the Kalidindi grant dated 1031 A.D of the Eastern Chalukya king Rajaraja 1, who ascended the throne in 1022 A.D, speaks about Purushottam of Sri Dhama. Similarly, the Pujari Palli inscription and the Boram Deo Temple inscription (1033 A.D) of one Gopal Deva of the Naga family and the Nagpur stone inscription of 1104 A.D. of the ruler of Malwa mention Purushottama/ Purushottama Kshetra⁷.



Indrabhuti, the king of Uddiyana in the 7th-8th century and the founder of Vajrayana, begins his “magnum opus” “Jnanasidhi” by offering obeisance to Jagannath (Pranipata Jagannatham). Trikhandasetha, a 9th century lexican by Purushottama Deva has listed Jagannath in the category of name of Vishnu. Another 9th century drama, Anargha Raghava by Murari Mishra is said to have been staged in the yatra of Purushottama of Sri Jagannatha.⁸ The Sanskrit drama Prabodhachandrodaya written by Krushna Mishra, the court poet of Chandalla king Kirtivarman (1041-70A.D) mentions the Devayatana of the God Purusottama.⁹ Anangabhimadeva III (1211-38A.D) and his son Narasingh Deva (1238-64A.D) regarded themselves as the Raut and the son of Purushottama. Sri Jagannath was regarded as the Gajapati of the empire of Utkal. Kapilendra Deva (1435-68A.D) described himself as the Sevaka or servant of Sri Jagannath. Sri Jagannath is the focal point of the cultural synthesis that is Orissa. Here, at the shrine of Sri Jagannath, various religious cults, creeds and strands-Saivism, Saktism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, Jainism, Tantricism, Surya-cult, Ganapati-cult etc. were welded into an organic entity called the Jagannath Dharma. Scholars like Cunningham, Wilson, Fergusson, Louis Rozvit, N.N Bose, R.L. Mitra, H.K. Mahatab etc. have discerned Buddhistic influence on the cult of Sri Jagannath. The Oriya Mahabharat of Sarala Dasa, Garuda Gita and Sunya Samhita of Achyutananda, Sashisena Kabya of Pratap Ray, Deulatola of Nilambara Das and Gupta Geeta of Ananta Narayan Das describe Jagannath as Buddha or Baudha. Scholars like Binayak Mishra, Kedar Nath Mohapatra, Nilakantha Das etc have traced Jain influence on Jagannath cult. Yet others scholars like Peterson, M.Ganguly, S.N.Das, Sadasiva Mishra, P.Mukharjee etc. have upheld Jagannath to be a Bramhinal deity.

Sri Jagannath and Sri Krishna have been held to be one and the same. Brahma Purana, Skanda Purana, the Copper Plate inscription dated 1198 A.D of Rajaraja Deva, the stone inscription dated 1278A.D of Chandrika Devi, daughter of Anagabhimadeva¹⁰, Sri Krishna Lilamrita of poet Nityananda, Musali Parva of Sarala’s Mahabhaarat, Jagannath Charitamrita of Dibakar Das, Sunya Samhita of Achyutananda, Gopakeli and Parimal Kabya of Narasingh Sena, Runkini Bibaha Kabya of Kartika Das, Rahasya Manjari Kabya of Deba Dullabha Das—a succession of inscriptions, Puranic and literary works have proclaimed Sri Jagannath and Sri Krishna to be one. Again, Jagannath Charitamrita of Dibakar Das, Vedantasara Gupta Geeta of Balaram Das¹¹, Namaratna Geeta and Rasokollala of Dinakrushna Das, Solachaupadi of Jagannath Das, Premabhakti Geeta of Yasobanta Das, Sunya Samhita of Achyutananda Das have described Sri Jagannath as the prime cause or source of all incarnation means Abatari not Abatara. The Trinity- Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra have been variously conceived of as being the symbols of various “Principles”. Some hold that they represent Vishnu, Siva and Durga; that is Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism. Others hold that they are Vishnu, Siva and Brahma, that is, they symbolise the creative, destructive and preserving principles. Some have said that they represent the principles Kling, Hling and Sling; others have held that they represent the principles Kling, Sling, and Hling respectively. Some scholars have propounded the view that they represent respectively the cultures of the Aryans, Jainism or Dravidas and Savaras. Balaram Das portrayed them as Rama, Laxman and Sita. Other scholars have said that they represent the Buddhist Triratna; Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The Sun worshippers treat Jagannath as the Sun, Ganapati worshippers treat Him as the Ganapati and so on.¹²



Mayan civilisation flourished before 500 B.C.¹³. The tradition of making gods out of wood by God carvers, closeted in a room seem to be a general feature of ancient civilisations. It may be reasonable to assume that on the evolutionary ladder of a society, such traditions appear as a part of a natural growth process in certain particular stages of evolution of that society. On this basis, the tradition, culminating in the incomplete images of Jagannath Trinity, can be held to be remote antiquity and of possessing a historic perspect. The evolution of Jagannath-trinity apper to be unsatisfactory and insufficient. Here, it may be in order to ask whether this process of evolution of Trinity can be looked upon as a part of the natural outcome of the process of Daru-worship in the context of the particular stage of evolution of the society in which it appeared.

Jagannath is the self-manifested Lord of the masses. The legends about His origin from a log of wood come ashore floating and carved by none but Himself as carpenter, or His appearance as pacified Nrusimha over the sacrificial fire to king Indradyumna are admittedly myths. In the post - Vedic era, this holy land that has come to be known as Orissa was being inhabited by both the Austric population popularly known as Savara and the Arya people of diverse faiths, Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism including its several component sects. All of them had had their Adorables for community worship in form of log (Daru), Pole (Yupa), Pillar (Stambha), Altar (Stupa) and so on. Meanwhile the Agamas came forward recommending worship of images (Archhabigraha) with rituals like Prana-pratistha, Nyasa and Uppacharas. The tidal waves of Bhagabat religion founded by Vasudeva Krishna in the north-east of the Vedic mainland began gradually to sweep the coastland of Orissa. What with the benign influence of the aforesaid

circumstances and what with the awakening of unifying spirit of devotion for a single personal God, the time must have been ripe for a religious synthesis. That universally accepted single deity was the Lord of the laity, Jagannath. The cult of Jagannath is a natural outcome of the religious aspiration of the people intent upon devotion-based worship of a single personal God (Aikantika Bhakti). This must have happened in the post-Vedic period when the common men ceased to take interest in Brahminical polytheism demanding ritualistic sacrifices (Karma/Yajna) in honour of unseen Gods as well as Upanisadic monotheism requiring realisation (jnana) of the imponderable self. The Upanishads term Him as Brahma, the eternal entity without any before or after, both in formless and formed aspects. Religiously viewed, He is the Supreme Divine, also Sat-chit-ananda, pervading the Universe and transcending it simultaneously. In His iconic manifestation He is invested with a gracious personality possessed of lordly Attributes- knowledge, power, majesty, strength, energy and self-sufficiency, to quote the classic six-Sadguna people with insight envisage Him as Lokayata Brahma. To the devout He is God in person invoked in a variety of terms ranging from your Majesty (Manima) down to the commonest terms, even by name¹⁴.

Jagannath, has two very characteristic names, Purushottama and Jagannath; the former may be from the knowledgeable inception till the 13th century, the latter overshadowing the former since then. The universally accepted name Jagannath was the name of the family deity of the Ganga kings and has been a name of Purushottama according to Saradatilaka. But more than these incidental reasons are three other, scriptural, historical and popular.

Scripturally, He is the supreme God (sarvadevamaya devah), the Incarnator of



incarnations. Historically, king Anaghabhima III in 1230 A.D declared Him as Lord of the Universe and Emperor of Purushottama Samrajya, reducing the sovereign to the position of His deputy (Rauta).

In the course of history the image formation of the Lord has changed from a single figure to four, or rather Seven (Saptavarrana). The initial single figure changed to a two with the addition of Laxmi under the Agamic model by about the 6th century A.D. Next, the transformation into Trinity was as much a political consideration as a religious necessity. Chodagang Deva used to worship the Trinity in Nrusimha temple. The Triad was extended to Tetrad in the 11th century when the Pancharatra system of Vyuhā worship was reinforced under the influence of Ramanuja. The 4th constituent now added, Sri Sudarshana symbolizes the active power (kriya sakti) of Jagannath, while serving as a complement to the Lord's volitional power (ichha sakti) represented by Subhadra. The Tetrad form has been still further extended to Septad by the addition of three more figures-Madhava, the representative of Lord Jagannath for going out on all festivals except Rathayatra, Bhudevi and Sridevi, two forms of Laxmi presiding over land and wealth respectively.

Lord Jagannath is a total symbol of Orissa's identity- social, cultural, religious and spiritual. He is the source of our beliefs, social norms and relationships, cultural excellence and value systems. But the cult of Jagannath is an integrated whole. It has absorbed the Narayan cult of Bhagabata religion, Madhava cult of Orissa, the atheist cult of Buddhism and Gopinath

Cult of Vaishnavism in course of time. Jagannath is primarily the Lord of devotion. Jagannath is the Deity most widely studied, intensively researched and extensively written about. His worship as an institution has spread far and wide in the country and to several parts of the Universe.

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