

Entry of Non-Hindus to the Jagannath Temple, Puri : A Study

*Dr. Rekharani Khuntia
Dr. Brajabandhu Bhatta*

Since time immemorial, Odisha has been the hunting land for different religious faiths, like Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism and Sakti cult. By the course of time, these religions synthesized themselves in the Cult of Jagannath. Jagannath, the presiding deity of Odisha is considered as the Lord of the Universe. He holds a unique place in the history of the land and in the lives and customs of its people. Jagannath cult is unique cult—an all embracing synthesis of cults.

Jagannath culture believes in universality and not in sectarianism. Jagannath is the God of the masses and hence Jagannath culture is a mass culture. In different ages, he has been worshipped by the primitive tribals, Aryans, Dravidians, Hindus, Jainas, Buddhists, Sikhs, Saktas, Shaivites and Vaishnavites. Apart from influencing other culture, it has incorporated into its fold the cultures of various faiths. It aims at bringing the entire human community of the world into the ambit of one family.

This cult has a unique quality of tolerance. It tolerates all religions, races, castes, customs, and cultures. It is the positive approach to other groups and communities. It stands for religious tolerance, co-existence of religions, communal harmony and international integration. Irrespective of caste, creed, colour and community, Lord

Jagannath is worshipped by all. The messages of unity, equality, peaceful co-existence and fraternity are the different qualities of Jagannath cult.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the entry of Non-Hindus to the temple of Jagannath. There is not any authentic data about this subject. When we call Him as the Lord of Universe, question arises regarding the non-entry of Non-Hindus to the temple of Lord Jagannath. Many politicians, leaders, reformers and eminent personalities have very often given positive views about the entry of the Non-Hindus into the temple. Biswanath Das, late Prime Minister and Chief Minister of Odisha and one of the followers of Mahatma Gandhi supported the entry of Dalits and Non-Hindus to the temple of Jagannath. Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab, the first Chief Minister of Odisha had supported the entry of all castes, to the temple. In 1948 A.D, with his direction the police made lathi charge on the people who opposed the entry of Dalits to the temple. He also tried hard for the entry of ISKCON devotees but in vain. In 1996, Shri Janaki Ballav Pattnaik, the then Chief Minister of Odisha had also given proposal for the entry of ISKCON devotees to the temple. In 2011, proposal of Shri Pyari Mohan Mahapatra, an M.P of ruling B.J.D in Odisha supporting the entry of Non-Hindus to Puri temple created a storm among the Hindu devotees of



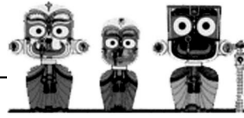
Odisha. He also apologized that, he had no intention to hurt the sentiments of Hindu devotees.

There are many examples of the non-entry of Non-Hindu into the Jagannath temple. In 13th century A.D. when saint Kabir, one of the pioneers of Bhakti Movement had come to Puri, he was not allowed to enter the temple due to his wearing of dress like Muslim. In that night, Lord Jagannath had given direction to one of the Sevayats in dream about the service of Kabir. Again in 1508 A.D; Nanak, the guru of Sikhs had come to Puri with his Muslim follower Mardhani. The Sevayatas of Puri had not allowed them to enter the temple. But Lord heard the prayer of the devotees with the request of Lord in the dream, the Raja of Puri allowed them to enter to the temple. But after that day the Sikhs were not allowed to enter into the temple.

Lord Curzon became the Viceroy of India in 1899 A.D. He had very much interest to know about the geography, history, and archaeology of India. But in 1900 A.D when he went to Puri, he was not allowed to enter into the temple of Jagannath. In 1934 A.D, when Mahatma Gandhi and his follower Binoba Bhabhe wanted to enter the temple with their Muslim, Christian and Dalit followers, they were not allowed. They protested against it before the Lions' Gate. Noble laurate Rabindranath Tagore was also not allowed to enter the temple of Puri. In 1945 A.D Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, founder of Constitution of India and crusader of depressed classes had come to Puri in the month of July. But he was not allowed. In 1984 A.D, Smt. Indira Gandhi the Ex-Prime Minister of India was not allowed to enter the temple of Puri because she had married a Persian Firoze Gandhi. In 2005 A.D, the queen of Thailand Mahachakri Siridharan had come to Odisha but as she was the follower of Buddhism, she was not allowed to the temple. In May, 2006

A.D, a citizen of Switzerland named Elizabeth Jigler, who had donated 1.78 crore money to the temple of Puri was not allowed to enter into the temple because she was a Christian. In 1977 A.D. Bhakti Vedanta Swami Pravupada, one of the founders of ISKCON movement had come to Puri. Through his devotees were not allowed to enter the temple, he also declared not to enter the temple.

The most interesting and distinguishing visit to Lord Jagannath temple after the Independence was of Babu Jagajiban Ram, Union Minister who belonged to the Scheduled Caste; but nobody resisted his visit. Then the Brahma Samaj followers were not allowed to enter the temple. In this matter the Pandits of Muktimandapa Sabha had consulted Niladrij Mahodaya, Bamadeva Samhita and Matsya Purana and arrived the decision that the followers of the Brahma Dharma followed a Dharma having no sanction of the Vedas. They do not observe any caste system. They dine together irrespective of caste difference. These habits of life are against the Vedic principles and the traditions which govern the management of the temple of Lord Jagannath so they had been forbidden to enter the temple. But at present they are allowed to the temple because a sense of liberal view prevails among the Hindus. There was also some laws for the Hindus who had been to foreign. Those who have been to overseas for prosecuting their studies and in obedience to the unavoidable order of the Government and at the time of emergency which do not amount to pleasure trip to the islands across the sea and on returning home now have undergone ritual purification and are readmitted to our society- and can enter to the temple. But this decision is not enforced by Mukti Mandapa any more. Another liberal view of Mukti Mandapa Sabha was it allowed Brahmins to act as priests in the houses of Scheduled Caste population.



But one surprising thing is that Sri Dayamata, an American Lady, successor of Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, head of the Yogoda Satsanga Math was the first Hindu convert who visited the inner sanctum of Lord Jagannath temple of Puri on Feb. 7 1959 along with the then Gajapati Maharaja of Odisha. Here question arises when many great men of India had not been allowed to enter the temple of Puri, how the law now changed in case of an American lady. Her appeal to the Mukti Mandap to allow her entry to the temple was granted because at that time, after many discussions among the Pandits and the priests, the law had been changed to allow; foreign born Jagannath devotees to enter the temple. Hence there are certain regulations in connection with the entry to the world famous temple.

But regarding this right of Hindu converts, a decision taken by Mukti Mandap Sabha in March 1986 is noteworthy. It says that, if a person of a famous religion accepted Hinduism and maintained the Hindu way of life would be accepted as a Hindu and be permitted to enter the Jagannath temple. But as far as the entry of foreigners and Non-Hindus is concerned, the Mukti Mandap strongly denies it.

Before the construction of present day Mukti-Mandap, there was one in front of the southern side of the main temple, which played a vital role in religious and cultural affairs of the state. The great Pandits like, Murari Mishra, who composed 'Anargha Raghava' and Krishna Mishra, the author of 'Prabodha Chandrodaya' proved their talent and merit on this Mandap. According to tradition, convert Kalapahada, before his invasion of Odisha, had come to Puri and sought the permission of Mukti Mandap to come back to Hindusim which was turned town by the Mandap.

This proves the existence of Mukti Mandap is considered as the assembly to decide the Prayaschitta or rectification of sinful acts. In the beginning of 16th century, during the rule of Prataprudra Deva, eminent scholars like Balabhadra Rajaguru and Purandara Puri were delivering valuable religious decisions on this Mandap. Hence, without any doubt it can be asserted that there was a Mukti Mandap earlier before the present structure was built by Gaurarani, wife of Mansingh (the general of Akbar). However, the date of the construction of the old one can not be ascertained due to lack of any authentic proof.

After all, the Mukti Mandap plays a vital role in administration of the temple. Any dispute arising out of religious matters with regard to worship of Gods is referred to this Council and the head of the Pujapandas is consulted before declaration of any verdict. Now there is a Secretary of Mukti Mandap, who has been given importance in management. The final authority is vested in the Temple Management Committee and the Secretary maintains the systems of this Mandap.

In temple administration and policy decision, there is a hierarchy of management from top to bottom level. At the top level, Jagatguru Sankaracharya, Mukti Mandap Pandit Sabha, Rajguru Parichha, Minister in charge of the temple administration, Gajapati of Puri are involved. They guide the Sevayatas, the second strata of temple management is directly connected with execution of the decisions of Advisory Council and implementation of "Record of Rights" and other official documents. According to "Sri Jagannath Temple Act", passed in 1955 and subsequent amendments, a Committee with the chairmanship of Gajapati Maharaja and chief of administration, District Collector, representatives of different



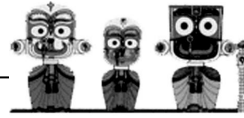
Nijogas, a group of employees, as members look after temple administration. Thus the temple appears like a legal authority or an autonomous institution having three necessary functions legislative, executive and judiciary. After all, Mukti Mandap Sabha has a vital role in the temple administration.

Here a probability comes into mind that constant attacks by the Muslims on Puri temple in the past may be one of the causes for not allowing the Non-Hindus to the temple. During the Muslim period, the temple of Jagannath was considered as one of the richest temples of India, for which the Muslim plunderers had attacked upon the temple of Puri many times. According to Madala Panji, the first attack was made by Raktabahu, the Muslim Sabedar (319-323 A.D) during the period of Sobhana Dev's rule. The attack was made by Iliyas Shah, the Sultan of Bengal (1328A.D), Firoz Shah Tugluq (1352-1378A.D), Ismaili Gazi (1509 A.D), Kalapahara, the Afagan General of Sulaiman Karani (1510A.D), Sulaiman and Osman (1529 A.D), Mirzakhuram (1601 A.D), Hasim Khan (1607 A.D), Kalyan Malla, the then Subheddar of Odisha (1611 A.D), Makram Khan (1617 A.D), Mirza Ahmed Beg (1621 A.D), Fate Khan (1645-1648 A.D), Muhammed Takki Khan (1731-1733 A.D). In this way within 165 years, the Muslims had attacked the temple continuously. They had plundered the temple, even some of them burnt the cars and images of Lord Jagannath. It is said that for the safety of the Lord Jagannath Rama Chandra Dev, the Raja of Khurdha converted himself to Islam. For which he was deprived of the grace of Lord Jagannath. So we may guess that due to the frequent attack of Muslim invaders, the Sevayatas of Puri Temple might have restricted the entry of non-Hindus to the temple.

Although, we cannot say definitely whether or not Muslims had access in to this Hindu Shrine during the Maghal period, it is evident from 'Haft-Iqllim' by Amin Ahmed Raja that in the medieval period there was no objection to Muslims to enter into the temple of Jagannath. The Muslims used to honour the Hindu shrine and the Hindus too honoured the Muslim shrine. There are also records in Odisha State Archives, Bhubaneswar testifying to Hindu-Muslim cultural assimilation through the ages. The Hindus have donated land and money for the maintenance of Muslim Shrines and the Muslims too donated land and money for the maintenance of Hindu Shrines. There are also many non-Hindus who were anxious of getting grace of Lord Jagannath by the course of time became His devotees. Among those devotees, Bhakta Salabeg was the prominent one.

Ghulam Husain Salim, author of Riyadies Salatin, throws light on the spirit of harmony and brotherhood that prevails at Puri. He says, "when the Hindus reach Purusottama first they shave their head like Muslims and at the first door of the house of Shaikh Kabir who was a great saint of his time and whose parents were weavers; they eat and drink and eat his food and water which is called in the language of that country Torani. Here, in Purusottama, the Hindus unlike their practice elsewhere eat together with the Muslims and other races. All sorts of cooked food are sold in the bazar, and Hindus or Muslims buy them and eat together and drink together".

So, the temple of Jagannath is unique centre of cultural synthesis in this regard. It may be mentioned here that the Mahanta Seva of the temple was usually entrusted to a person belonging to Muslim caste. Jagannath culture does not admit any distinction with regard to caste, creed, colour and sex. Here, the Brahmin Pandit Jagannath Das



could become the disciple of the Non-Brahmin devotee, Balaram Das. Achyutananda Das, a milkman could become the friend of Chaitanya. It has allowed inter-caste marriage in the hoary past. The marriage of the Brahmin Vidyapati and Lalita, the Saura girl bears testimony to this fact. The descendants of this couple are called Daitas and they have got the monopoly to serve the deities during Anabasara every year.

Jagannath culture aims at the upliftment of the poor, the fallen and the downtrodden. Lord Jagannath is called as Patitapaban, the saviour of the fallen. Leaving behind his golden throne in Badadeula he comes into Badadanda once a year during the car festival in order to be in the midst of His devotees. This is a unique feature of Hindu culture. The temple entry is restricted to the persons of other religions. It is unconventional and unique that the peculiar God Lord Jagannath, the epitome of socialism comes to the mass, crushing all barriers of communal distinctions. The individual identity gets merged in such a collective and mass consciousness which is being experienced by everybody irrespective of caste, creed and colour.

Jagannath culture displays a unique feature of unity in diversity and it has integrated human society with the help of human values that are mentioned above. This culture has passed through many ups and downs. Surviving many onslaughts, it has consolidated its position and proved itself to be an effective and ideal culture. Human values such as tolerance, fellow feeling, unity, equality, fraternity, modesty and self-sacrifice contained in Jagannath culture have sustained and will continue to sustain human civilization for all ages to come. But in this context the purpose of our study is to allow or disallow the entry of Non-Hindus to this world famous temple. Considering different angles of such an important issue, it

would be wise not to allow the non-Hindus to the temple of Puri. From the above discussion we know that Muslims had attacked and plundered the temple of Lord Jagannath several times which greatly hurt the sentiments of the Hindus. Hence many rules and regulations were made later restricting the entry of Non-Hindus to the temple. If they are allowed to enter to the temple, it will surely hurt the sentiments of the Hindu devotees in Odisha. Lord Jagannath is the God of Universe for which once in a year, He comes to Badadanda in Car Festival to fulfill the thirst of His devotees of different religions, sects and creeds. It is also sacred duty and responsibility of the administration to provide basic amenities to lakhs of pilgrims irrespective of caste, creed or religion who come to Puri during Car Festival to have His Darshan. Service to mankind is service to God. This is the guiding factor which motivates all concerned with higher degrees of commitment and dedication.

Despite the universal tolerance of Jagannath cult, there has been made no laws in temple administration to provide rights to the non-Hindus to enter the temple. Of course, some liberal thinkers opine that provision of such an act would attract more and more tourists and pilgrims from different parts of the country and outside to come to Puri which would encourage tourism and add to the state exchequer. But a larger opinion goes against this view. At the very entrance of Lion's Gate of the temple an inscription has been written on a small marble plate which indicates that only orthodox Hindus are allowed to enter the temple of Sri Jagannath. As per this inscription, entry of non-Hindus to the temple is strictly forbidden. There is no doubt that Jagannath culture gives emphasis on religious tolerance and communal harmony. It does not admit any distinction with regard to caste, creed and colour. Still, while framing the rules and regulations for the administration of the temple, the management



might have taken into account the ravages of the Muslim attacks on the temple several times in the past. That might have induced the Sevayatas to impose restriction on the entry of non-Hindus to the temple. This restriction has been continued for nearly 500 years. Hence it is not so easy a task to change this tradition on the insistence of an individual or a group of individuals or of an organization. If at all such an agency arises to modify any of traditions of the temple, the views or opinions of Sankaracharya of Puri, priests and Pundits of Mukti Mandap Sabha, Gajapati of Puri, Sevayatas, temple administration, a number of scholars researching on Jagannath culture and lakhs of Jagannath devotees should be taken into account. Till then the age old practice of forbidding the non-Hindus to the temple should go on.

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Dr. Rekharani Khuntia & Dr. Brajabandhu Bhatta,
Department of History, Dharmasala Mahavidyalaya,
Jaraka, Jajpur.

