

*Govindajee Temple, Manipur*

## Jagannath Cult in North - East India

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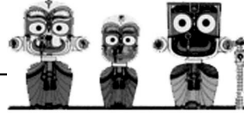
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The renowned temple of Purushottama Jagannath at Puri, Odisha, is one of the sacred centers of India, which attracts pilgrims and devotees from every part of India. With the erection of new Jagannath temples in different parts of India, the cult of Jagannath is assuming Pan-Indian popularity and the Rath (chariot) Festival has almost become a national festival. Studies are revealing that Jagannath, Lord of the Universe has been worshipped not only in Odisha but also in other parts of India since medieval times. Historical sources in the form of literature, epigraphs, sculptural art, paintings, monuments, folk art and folk traditions provide indications of the worship of Jagannath ever since the early medieval period. The geographical unit of north-eastern India, which consisted of three independent states like Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and some tribal area, before 1947 AD, has had a long tradition of the cult of Jagannath and this is well attested by literary as well as archaeological evidences.

### **Jagannath Cult in Assam :**

The State of Assam, earlier known as Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa, had close contact with Kalinga (Odisha) at least from the early historical period, which facilitated some socio-cultural exchanges. It is not certain as to when

and how the Jagannath cult became popular in Assam. However an analysis of the Kalika Purana, which was composed in Assam in or around the 8<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup> century AD. leads one to understand that at the time of the compilation of this text, Jagannath was already a known deity. The Kalika Purana, considered to be the earliest literary document of Assam glorifying the Jagannath cult, mentions that the first Brahmanical Tantric Pitha in India originated and developed in Odradesa (Odisha), where the goddess resides in the form of Odresvari Katyayani and Her consort as Odresa Jagannath. The Yogini Tantra, another Tantric text of Kamarupa, of the 16th century A.D. while mentioning the greatness of Jagannath, attempts to link the celebrated Hayagriva Pitha of Kamarupa with that of Jagannath at Puri. The work provides an account of the origin of the stone image of Hayagriva Madhava, the celebrated Vaishnava Pitha of Assam in the light of the story of the wooden images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra of the great temple of Puri as recounted in the Brahma Purana. The text recounts how King Indradyumna of Odisha, came across, in accordance with a dream, a big nameless tree, which was floating by the seashore and he made seven pieces of the log; two pieces of wood were taken to Kamarupa to prepare images of Vishnu



and still another piece to Manikuta, to be converted into an image of Hayagriva Madhava. The Assamese work, Manikuta of 1680AD. repeats the same tale. In fact the system of worship and various Mantras of Hayagriva worship recorded in the final chapter of the Yogini Tantra, are based on or are copies of the code Jagannath as recounted in the Brahma Purana. Besides, those in the charge of the administration of the Hayagriva Madhava temple have tried to keep the traditional similarity between their temple and the Jagannath temple at Puri. The Buranjis, the traditional historical literature of medieval Assam, while providing some insights into the Assam-Odisha relations, throw light on the Jagannath Cult in Assam. One Assam Buranjis, written by Harkanta Sadar Amin, states that the Ahom king, Suhungmung or Swarganarayana, (c.1497-1539AD) deputed one Chankham Ghar Sandikai as head of a delegation to proceed to the Jagannath Thakur (Puri) for worship and for constructing a tank for the deity. It is recorded that on behalf of the king, the pilgrim offered to the deity, a gem, which they had collected from a cobra at Suryapahar, situated in the modern Goalpara district of Assam. The chronicle further mentions that the Ahom king had provided two hundred gold coins to the deity, Jagannath, and the remaining forty to the king of Odisha. The text throws some light on the management system of the Jagannath temple and states that both the king as well as the people of Odisha were the subjects of the Lord. The chronicle further mentions that the visit to Jagannath Kshetra was arranged through Vikramisena, the then king of Odisha. Chronologically the contemporary of the Ahom king Suhungmung in Odisha was Prataprudra Deva (1497-1533AD) the Gajapati ruler of Odisha, who was probably referred to as Vikramisena in the Ahom Buranji. This story has been attested by another Buranji known as Purani

Asam Buranji said to have compiled in latter part of the 17 century AD.

A mention has been made of Lord Jagannath in the biographical literature of Mahapurusha Shankaradeva, the great reformer of medieval Assam. Shankaradeva is said to have visited the Jagannath Dham, Puri, twice: once in 1490 AD and again in 1550 A.D. In those days, the Jagannath Kshetra was the seat of Vaishnava inspiration. It is said that while staying at Puri, Shankaradeva used to read and explain the Brahma Purana which centered around the cult of Jagannath, to the priests of the deity and other people. Aniruddha Kayastha, a Vaishnavite writer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century has beautifully described Shankaradeva's visit to Puri where he is said to have served the feet of Lord Jagannath and returned to his native place (Assam) after receiving ajanya or divine orders. Ramnanda Dvija, a biographer of Shankaradeva further states that once he visited the temple of Jagannath, Shankaradeva resolved not to bow his head to any other deity. It is also mentioned how at the bidding of the Lord, one Brahmin from Puri named Jagdish Mishra, came to Assam to hand over a copy of Bhagavata Purana to Shankaradeva. The Vaishnava literature Kathaguruchitra corroborates the fact and tells us how after having receiving the Bhagavata Purana, Shankar praised Lord Jagannath in twenty one Kirtanas. The Uresavarnana section which seems to be the earliest Kirtanas of Shankaradeva, describes the mythological origin of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra, besides describing the story of the legendary king Indradymna, and the installation of the three deities at Puri. The twenty first Kirtana speaks of the results that accrue from singing the glory of Lord Jagannath and taking Mahaprasada. Daityari Thakur, another biographer mentions how at Shankaradeva's



instruction, an image of Jagannath was made by one Karala Badhari, an artisan and was installed at Dhuwahat. The praise of Lord Jagannath is reflected in the writings of Shankaradeva. Specifically in Ajamil Upakhyana, Anadipataka and Sansara Chakra, another work, entitled Ghunucha Kirtana, composed by the famous medieval Assamese poet Sridharakandli of the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD made people familiar with the episodes of the life of Jagannath. There is no doubt that Shankaradeva had a major role in popularizing the cult of Jagannath in medieval Assam.

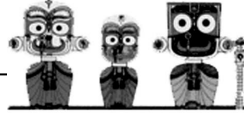
That the Jagannath cult was in vogue in medieval Assam is attested by a copper plate land grant, dated Saka 1709 (1787 AD) found at a Vaishnava institution named Ketakibari Sattrā near Gauhati. In the preamble of the land grant, it is stated that a Vighraha of Jagannath was given to a Brahmin along with the donated land and the donee has been specially instructed to perform daily bath along with nama-kirtana three times daily with recitation from the Bhagavata in the Sattrā. A few temples of Jagannath though of late period, are noticed in district Kamarupa, particularly in lower Assam area. Mention may also be made of the Jagannath shrine of the late medieval period, in the village near Khetri railway station of Assam, which was famous for its sculptural art depicting icons of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Other temples of the deity are noticed at places like Kotalkuchi, Belbari and in various parts of the district Kamrupa. At Khetri, three wooden icons of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are noticed besides the four wheels of Mahāprabhu's stone chariot near the temple. A banyan tree called akshaya-vata can be seen near the temple and the festival like the Snana-yatra, the Dola-Yatra are regularly held here. The Lord is also depicted in the folk art of late medieval Assam, as one can

notice various images of Jagannath made of pith, particularly in the princely state of Gauripur in Goalpara district of Assam.

The worship of Jagannath in Assam was so popular that the Assamese womenfolk of the district of Kamarupa not only composed prayer songs but also performed various ceremonies regarding the deity. During the months of Vaishakha-Shravana (May-July) various group Kirtanas take place at places of worship, made especially for the deity and various devotional songs are sung in His honour. The most interesting ritual is that of the unique mock marriage of the Lord with Ghunucha. The people believe that by propitiating the deity they would be protected from floods, various ailments and diseases throughout the year. Even the medieval smriti-literature of Assam like the Smriti-sagara-sara and vyavahara Darpan attest to the popularity of the Jagannath cult in medieval Assam by stating that the people not only participated in the Ratha Yatra but also used to observe fast on that day.

### **Jagannath Worship in Manipur**

In the adjoining state of Manipur, one notices the influence of the Jagannath cult in the life of Manipur Vaishnavites. Though Vaishnavism entered Manipur fairly early, it was not a popular religion till the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. King Charai-Rongba (1697-1709) was the first Manipuri king who was formally initiated into Vaishnavism. It is said that a Brahmin, Rai Vanamali an authority on the cult of Radha-Krishna, who arrived in Manipur in 1703 AD from Shveta Ganga, Puri (Odisha), initiated the King and some of his subjects into the fold of Vaishnavism. However, the Manipuri King, Gambhira Singh, is said to have started the Rath Yatra locally called as Kangchingba in 1832 AD. The Manipuri Vaishnavites observed the Rath Yatra of the Lord



on the model of the Puri festival. On the days of the Rath Yatra (2<sup>nd</sup> day of Ingen) and Purnayatra (10<sup>th</sup> day of Ingen), at the main gate of the palace of the King at Imphal, thousands of people, including the royalty, considered it auspicious to pull the ropes of the Ratha. According to Meitei tradition, every temple in the state observes the Ratha Yatra with the active support of the people, who contribute their mite to its success. It is a nine-day programme of devotional music and dance, followed by the preparation of Khichri and Mangalutti on lotus leaves. In fact, two kinds of dance, the Jayadeva and Khubak Isei dance, are the gift of the Rath Yatra to Manipuri culture. The Darbar of Manipur Maharajas used to make special allotment of funds for the celebration of the rathayatra, which every year starts from Sri Gobindji temple, near the royal palace at Imphal. Icons of wood of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra have been noticed in various part of Manipur. An icon of Jagannath located at Bijoygovinda temple, Imphal is represented with arms but no hands and the body is without legs and the head is almost flat. He is painted in black colour. Balabhadra and Subhadra are also of the same form though different in size and white in colours. The cult of Jagannath is still followed by the Vaishnavas of Manipur, who consider Puri, the abode of the Lord as the holiest place.

### **Jagannath Worship in Tripura**

In the state of Tripura, some evidence has been found regarding the practice of the cult of Jagannath. It is worth mentioning that the Tripura Maharaja Kalyanmanikya performed Tulapurushadanam. Mahadanam, Kapitadanam and during the performance of Tula-purushadanam, many renowned scholars from Mathura, Benaras, Odisha and Setubandha arrived in Tripura to receive awards and Dakshinas from the king of Tripura in 1600 AD.

This incident would have ushered a new era in the socio-cultural contact between Tripura and Odisha. Maharaja Krishnamanikya, the Manikya ruler of Tripura, is said to have donated fifteen drones of land to Brahmin to conduct the daily puja of Lord Jagannath in Tripura era 1186 (1766AD). A few Jagannath temples are constructed in Tripura by the royal family members in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Even in a few tribal areas, the deity is said to have been worshipped. Mention may be made of a tribal ruler of the Kachari family of Assam named Krishnachandra who was formally converted to Hinduism in 1790 AD and was a great worshipper of Kali and Jagannath. From a memoir compiled by a British military officer in 1819, it is learnt that Hinduism was the prevailing religion of Cachar, where Kali, Jagannath and Vasudeva were the Principal deities worshipped by the people.

In conclusion, one may say that a perusal of various sources provide much evidence regarding the prevalence of the Jagannath cult in some areas of North-eastern India. This may have been possible due to the socio-cultural contact of Odisha with some North-eastern States. Archival records mention the flow of pilgrims from various parts of Assam, Manipur and Bengal to Odisha, to have a darshan of the Lord and of the Ratha Yatra during the British period. This reveals the reverence for Lord Jagannath of Puri shown by some people of the North-east during medieval times.

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