

The Cult of Jagannath

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The political greatness of Odisha is long past, but her religious greatness continues unabated. Her temples, images and many other monuments that stand proudly to-day rising above the ravages of the time bear eloquent testimony to her predominance in the religious sphere and establish beyond doubt the antiquity of the sanctity of her soil. Most of these monuments now stand forlorn and forsaken, but in the days gone by, they were the centres of varied activities of a brave jolly folk vibrating with rich gay life. These brave people are gone, and with them has departed the soul of all those that they created, loved and respected. Their gods and goddesses, their temples and stupas and all that they held so dear to them are mostly dead things today lying uncared for here and there. Out of these gods and goddesses, Tathagatas and Tirthankaras have emerged the great Lord Jagannath as the soul representative of all the extinct gods and goddesses embodying in Him the chief elements of all. So the cult of Jagannath is a curious mixture of many elements heterogeneous and homogeneous, welded into one thought, a long synthetic process of evolution.

We find the earliest reference to Lord Jagannath in Puranas and ancient Literature, though the details of His origin are still shrouded in mystery. According to Legendary Sources, Jagannath was originally worshipped by a tribal

(Sabara) known as 'Biswabasu' in the form of Nilamadhab. The most important evidence of this belief is the existence of a class of Sevakas known as Daitapatis who are considered to be of the lineage and who still play a dominant role in the various services of lord in his temples. It is totally a strange feature, nowhere seen in any Vaishnavite shrine.

In course of time, the cult of Jagannath took an Aryanised form and various major faiths like Saivism, Saktism, Vaishnavism, Jainism and Buddhism have been assimilated into this cult. In Jagannath temple, Jagannath worshipped as Purusottam or Vishnu, Balabhadra as Siva and Devi Subhadra as Adyasakti Durga. Finally the fourth one Sudarsana Chakra symbolizing the wheel of Sun's Chariot attracts the Sauras to the centre.

Among the celebrated deities of India, Lord Jagannath stands out unique with His uncouth shape built of Daru and peculiar customs connected with His worship, According to some, Jagannath existed from Vedic times and in support thereof they quote the following Sloka from the Atharva Veda which contains the word 'Daru'.

*“Adou Yaddaru Plabate,
Sindhon pare Apurusam
Yada Labhamdha Durdhano –
Tena Yahi Param Sthalam.”*



The supporters of the above theory explain 'Daru' as meaning the deity made of wood, while others, like Macdonelle, Keith etc. hold that the word has been used in connection with rope, earth and other words of hymn.

We come across the word Purusottam (Tirtha) in the Matsya Puran.

*“Gangayam (Gayayam) Mangalanam
Bimala Purusottam
Gokarna Gaja Karnana
Tathacha Purusottam.”*

Matsya Puran is ascribed to the close of the 3rd century A.D. In the Tantra Jamala, Jagannath made of wood is mentioned.

*“Bharate Chotkale Dese
Bhuswarge Purusottam
Darurupi Jagannath
Bhaktanamabhayapradam.”*

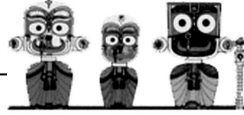
Jantra Jamala is mentioned in Kurma Puran which is assigned to 4th century A.D. or earlier. So Tantra Jamala might have been written sometimes in 2nd or 3rd century A.D. In Rudra Jamala Tantra we come across the name 'Jagannath' twice. In the Skanda Brahmanda and Siva Puranas there are detailed accounts of Jagannath Kshetra. They are comparatively later in age and may be assigned to the 7th century at the earliest. Thus we trace the origin of Jagannath to 3rd century A.D. Jagannath must have been existed long before Matsya Puran had acquired celebrity to merit mentioned in that Puran. In that case we may reasonably place Him in the First or Second Century A.D. We have nothing to place the origin of Jagannath in the Pre-Christian era excepting the doubtful Sloka mentioned in the Atharva Veda referred to the above. The 'Savara' origin of Jagannath may be considered in this connection.

Many eminent scholars are of opinion that Jagannath was a Buddhistic deity. According to

them the three deities are the representatives of the 'Triratna' of the Buddhists and that the uncouth forms of the deities represented the Buddhist Stupas. The similarity between Buddhists Chaitya and the shape of Jagannath is so little that the supposition appears to be baseless and imaginary. Nowhere we do find a 'Chaitya' in human form. More probably Jagannath is the representation of the original 'Savara deity' mentioned in the mythology regarding Savara Origin of Jagannath. The Savaras are mentioned in post-Vedic literature. Pliny's Sauri and Ptolemy's Sabaroi were Savaras. They were the original inhabitants of Orissa. When the Aryan came they had to face these animist Savaras. Gradually the Savaras of the plain region were Aryanised and a mixed race was the outcome. It is very probable that Jagannath was the cult image of the Savaras.

Scholars like Pandit Nilakantha Das opines that three main images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra represent the Jain Trinity of Samyak Jnana, Samyak Charit and Samyak Drusti. It is also believed that the soul of Jagannath, most secretly hidden within the image of Lord Jagannath is nothing but Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha. The Philosophy of Tantra, which in course of time became an integral part of Buddhism has also significantly influenced the rites and rituals of Jagannath temple.

The Saiva elements in the Cult of Jagannath are co-related with the doctrine of Tantricism and Sakta Dharma. According to Saivas, Jagannath is Bhairav. The Tantric literary texts identify Jagannath with Mahabhairav. It will not be out of place to mention here that Lord Jagannath sits on "Sri Yantra" and is worshipped in the Vijamantra "Klim" which is also the vijamantra of 'Kali' or 'Sakti'. The representation of Balaram as Sesanaga or Sankarsana bears testimony to the influence of Saivism on the cult



of Jagannath. It may be pointed out that the third deity, 'Subhadra' who represents the Sakta elements is still worshipped in Bhubaneswari Mantra.

The Tantric texts also point out the name of Jagannath and His worship. According to these texts, Jagannath is Mahabhairab and goddess Vimala is His Sakti. The Prasad of Lord Jagannath becomes Mahaprasad only when it is re-offered to Vimala. Nowhere we notice this unique feature except in the temple of Lord Jagannath. Similarly, different tantric feature of Yantras have been engraved on the Ratnavedi where Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra are worshipped. Kalika Purana depicts Jagannath as Tantric God.

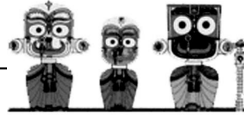
Jagannath is both Sankara's Advaita Brahman and Mahayanic Sunya. During 16th Century, Achutyananda Das, the famous Saint Poet of Orissa in his Sunya Samhita has conceived both Krishna and Jagannath as Sunya Purusa or Void Personified. Frequent mention of Jagannath is found in the Mahabharat of Sarala Das (Adi Parva, Sava Parva, Musali Parva etc. and in the Daru Brahmagira of Jagannath Das. The absence of caste distinction in the temple of Jagannath, especially in partaking of the Mahaprasad; the Car Festival of the Lord is ascribed to Buddhist influences. The humanization of the Lord is manifested in His Car Festival, which is otherwise known as Patitapaban Yatra. It may be pointed out that during Car-Festival, Gajapati king works as a Sweeper and cleans the Chariots in which the deities are placed. Nowhere, we see such a unique feature, where a king sweeps the chariot. One thing is clear from the Car Festival that no labour is detestable if it is required for a great cause.

In the true Catholic tradition of Jagannath, attempts have been made to accommodate and absorb the Neo-Vaishnavism of Chaitanya with

its embracing fold. Yosavanta Das in his Premavakti Brahmagita describes Nilachal as the embodiment of all the holy places which sanctity baffles description; Gokul, Mathura, Vrundaban, Dwaraka, Kasi, etc are all present here. Achutyananda Das in his Sunya Samhita writes that all the ten incarnations emanate from this Daru Brahma (Jagannath) and are again absorbed in Him. In the same book Lord Jagannath Says, an aspect (Kala) of mine will go to Navadip and will manifest itself as Chaitanya. Krishna has not merely been identified with Jagannath by Odishan Vaishnavas, but has been depicted by some as the Anasavatara (part incarnation) of the later. In Jagannath Charitamruta, a work of post Panchasakha Period, Jagannath has been described as the Supreme Lord or Purna Brahma, whereas Krishna, the son of Nanda represents only a part of this glory.

When Jagannath is worshipped at Ratnavedi, He is Narayan Manchasina, He is Rudra during Car-Festival and He is Surya Narayan while enjoying divine slumber. He takes the form of Durga. Thus, He combines in Him all the Pancha Devatas belonging to different sects just as the Jagannath cult is an assimilation of various forms of religions and modes of worship so also there is undercurrent of some philosophical system like 'Abheda' 'Bhedaveda', and 'Achintya Bheda' as revealed Veda in the ritualistic Practices.

Jagannath, the Lord of the Universe, is an emblem of an ideal and pure individual, a symbolic representation of socialist concept. The cream of humanism is evident in all His qualities, attributes, functions, concepts and spiritualism. He functions like a human being; the basic substances of socialistic thoughts like love for humanity, social co-existence on cordial lines are discernible on Him. A sparkling example of this socialistic thought



is evident on the Car-Festival when countless devotees irrespective of caste, creed, religion merge and converge to catch a glimpse of the great humanist god Jagannath and drag the ropes of His Chariot with a sense of enrichment and spontaneity. Jagannath culture epitomizes the qualitative transcendence of humanistic individuality from one to another. Intrinsic worth and talent not background of high caste, is the primary consideration for participating in the Mukta Mandap is a rare example of the ideal of establishing a classless society. The beholding of Lord Jagannath, joint eating of Mahaprasad, participation of Mukta Mandap deliberations as well as the human elements in the rites and rituals of the Lord help kindle an inevitable and inescapable sense of universal brotherhood. If lakhs of devotees still throng the Jagannath temple to-day, the basic concept of egalitarianism and camaraderie lie at the root of it all. That is because the Jagannath Dharma is humanistic and introspective. This egalitarianism of fellow-feeling touches the core of every heart and permeates their will and intellect and affects a kind of transcendental oneness. Though he is the God kind-designate of Jagannath, the Gajapati king also does not hesitate to stoop to the role of an untouchable. All are equal before Lord Jagannath.

The Jagannath Trinity exhibits these three colours that are Balabhadra White, Jagannath Black and Subhadra Yellow. Such colour combination is unique in the pantheon of gods and goddesses worshipped in the whole world. There can be no more convincing symbolic representation of whole world concepts as in the holy trio of Jagannath on the basis of four combinations.

Starting from Socialist Philosophy to universal brotherhood, nationalistic ideal to patriotism, devotion, dedication and perseverance – all have been mingled with the vast ocean of

religious conviction and consciousness. Lord Jagannath of Puri, Who is so elaborately mentioned in our holy books – as Nilachal, Purusottam Kshetra etc has not only diffused to the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal where he has been assimilated into the wider religious spectrum of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, but the cult of Jagannath has reached the soil of America. This shows the wider acceptability of the religious philosophy and social tolerance of Jagannath Cult. The Lord of Universe Sri Jagannath has rightly cut across the administrative and political boundaries of the country to bring and strengthen the socio-religious solidarity in the universe. As it is Dham of Kaliyuga, it turns out to be the confluence of all religious beliefs of all social standards. It is most probably the vivaciousness that has kept the Jagannath cult alive through ages. Sri Jagannath is really a symbol of love, truth and tolerance and diffusion of the cult to other parts of the globe is due to this universal approach of its consciousness.

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