

Tree Worship Tradition in India and Origin of Jagannath Cult

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Tree-worship, in India, had been common since the earliest time. Among the scale of Mahenjodaro is one depicting a stylized Pipli tree with two heads or Unicorns emerging from its stem. In ancient India tree-worship was a regular feature in both Hinduism and Buddhism, the fact is well borne out by notable places like Besnagar, Bharhut, Bodhagaya, Ellora, Sanchi, Bhaja, Mathura, Amratabati, Nagarjunakonda etc. Gradually, people began to feel that the trees were sensitive and animate. This awareness further modified peoples' attitude towards trees. In Odisha there is a tradition of the Banyan tree being married to the Pipli tree.



In Odisha, however, Peepal is considered to be the symbol of male and Banyan, the female. The point, therefore, is that in ancient India all Pipli, Neem and the Banyan trees were esteemed and worshipped. The image of Jagannath at Puri is made of Neem tree. Again the Apauruseya tree

which was found floating on the sea was a Banyan tree and the Kalpa Vata, mentioned in the Purushottama Mahatyma, and worshipped in the temple compound at Puri, is also a Banyan tree. Moreover, the tree Urdha Mula Adhah Sakha,'

which is mentioned in Bhagavat Gita, is a Pipli tree.¹ This tree was famous even in the time of the Vedas.² Atharva Veda states us that Pipli is the abode of the Gods and is grown in the third loka i.e., 'swargaloka'.³

Lord Krishna also breathed his last under Pipli tree.⁴ The tree, 'Kalpa Vrksa' was famous and the religious symbol of the Jainas. The Buddha got enlightenment under the Pipli tree, which was henceforth called Boddhi tree. Lastly he died under the grove of Sala trees. On account of such associations with the Buddha, these trees are regarded as sacred by the Buddhists. This Buddhists' practice of sanctifying trees might have influenced the later

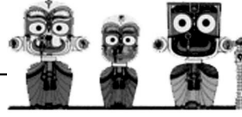


Hindu society as well. Buddhism adopted the cult of tree-worship which was already prevalent in the country. The trees which are associated with the birth of the Buddha are Sal, Asoka and Plaksa. In course of time Nyogrodha, Udumbara and Pipli were considered as the embodiment of the God Visnu.⁵ From Purushottama Mahatyma of Skanda Purana we come to know that there existed, during the Universal deluge, the sacred Kshetra and the great 'Nyogradha' tree with four branches.⁶ It seems likely that in course of time, the conception of Nilamadhava or Purushottama-Jagannath having four arms led devotees to look upon the tree itself as the embodiment of Vishnu or Purushottama. Skanda Purana stated that before the installation of the present images of Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsana, there was already one Nilamadhava with four arms, like those of Vishnu.

Iconography has represented Nilamadhava as a Vishnuite deity with four arms. The images of Nilamadhava was buried under the sand. With the passage of time, Jagannath became famous by the name of Darudevata. But it should not mean that all Daru Devatas are Lord Jagannath.⁷ Idol-worship in India was a later innovation. Earlier the stone or symbol worship, known as Pratika Puja, was customary. The image-worship was introduced to convince the mass of the people, who found symbol-worship difficult to comprehend. In this respect worship of the phallic symbol is definitely prior to the worship of other images. Purushottama Mahatyma of Skanda Purana states how the four images of Daru Brahma-Jagannath came to light from the Apauruseya trees that floated on other sea. Side by side there is the mention of the Nyagrodha tree-worship. Therefore, we may assume that Jagannath cult may have found its origin in tree-worship.

The Savaras inhabiting the deep forests usually worship tree. They cut the unnecessary branches and worship only the stem with two branches, which represent the hands of the tree-deity. On the top of it, they paint a human head. The image of Lord Jagannath resembles the stem of a tree and his hands stretch of tree. His face is painted, not carved. Therefore, it can well be presumed that originally he may have been the deity of the Savara and later accepted by the Hindus, i.e. Vaisnavas etc. Skanda Purana relates to the Hindu king, Indradyumna, who remodelled the idol and installed it in the temple at Puri. In support of this, Pandit Nilakanth Das, said "it appears that this replacement of the images for the ancient Nilamadhava was not all once universally accepted even in Orissa. The Savara Narayan, it has been said, was a pillar with a head made of Neem wood. Now-a-days the Savaras worship the Trinity, namely –Tana Penu, her husband Jakeri Penu, her brother Murvi Penu. Penu in the language of the Savara means God. All the same, ancient name of Jagannatha as currently in vogue in the Savara villages of Orissa is Jaganaelo- made of wood. The name of deity in the Savara languages is *Sanam* and the images are known as 'Kitangas'. Of all the Kitungas Jaganaelo is the greatest, and Savaras call him the Lord of Universe. The configuration must have been unanimously acceptable to the people: as Daru to the Savaras, Yupa to Vedic Brahminism, Stupa to Buddhists and Jains, Lingam to the Saivites, Stambhaja (pillar-born) Nrsimha to Vishnuvites, Girija (hill-born) Nrsimha to Sakta and Ekapada Bhairava to Tantrics.

Jagannath is the self-manifestation 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 Nrsimha over the



sacrificial fire to king Indradyumna are admittedly myths. They point to the truth that He was gracious enough to manifest to Indradyumna (literally meaning 'light of soul', a classic name for His advent. He is the lord of Grace, the latest concept in religion. His form is that of Crypto-limbed Nrsimha: thereomorphic flat topped head, a pair of sharing circular eyes with red border in lieu of eyelids suggestive of the Sun and the Moon/eternal vigilance and open hands suggestive of embrace, the gigantic shape calls to mind Purusa of Purusa-Sukta. There is, therefore, little doubt that the vast majority identify Jagannath with Vishnu. In the Puranic age Vishnu became important among the gods, though during the Vedic period, he was not considered very powerful.⁸ By the time of Satapatha Brahmana, Vishnu was again considered as the most powerful god and an embodiment of the sacrifice. Padma Purana says, "if only Jagannath is worshipped, all the gods are worshipped at the same time."⁹

Vishnu is visualized as 'Anakara' i.e., 'the formless one. The first image in the evolution of image- worship represented the worship of the formless, or Nirakara worship. Next the man, to be more sure about the existence of God, worshipped the Pratika or a formless stone, etc. And finally, to convince the ignorant and to popularize religion among them, image- worship was introduced and grew deep.

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 Vaisnavism in course of time. Jagannath stands for the highest common factor of all religion. Though enshrined in his temple, He is Universal self within the heart of everyone guiding to right action. He is the dispenser of a spiritual order based on faith, universal brotherhood and love. May that order triumphs.

References :

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