



Purushottama Kshetra : The Sacred Shrine of Hindu World

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The concept of *tirtha* or sacred shrine in the Indian context originates from the time when Puranas began to be composed around 4th century A.D. The meaning of *tirtha* is a sacred shrine charged with the power of Gods and Goddesses and resonant with purity. A *tirtha* possesses three elements that make it so sacred—it is Suchi-pure, it brings Punya-goodness and it is Subha-auspicious. This makes a *tirtha* a place where you can gain *nirvana*, enlightenment and achieve *moksha* or liberation. A *tirtha* is a place on earth where the gods descend and which facilitates the crossing over, enabling ascent of human beings from Bhavasagar or the temporal and ephemeral world of *nama* and *rupa*, (name and form), multiplicity and diversity, to the eternal abode of oneness, peace, tranquility and bliss. Tirtha really stood for knowledge as knowledge



alone helps us get over ignorance and leads to liberation. It has now come to mean a sacred place which helps one to cross over from cycle of birth and death to *moskha* or liberation. Pilgrims aspire to attain salvation by visiting sacred

shrines to prepare for release from the temporal world. Puri is known in the ancient scriptures as Shree Dham. It is recognized as Dham or a *tirtha* particularly after 9th century.

Purusottam-Puri has been described in the various Puranas as the most sacred shrine in Bharata Varsa. It is the Kshetra where the God Purusottama made his sacred shrine perpetual abode, Vaikuntha Bhuban.¹

The sacred shrines, according to the tradition, existed even during the great universal deluge and also in the beginning of this creation.² Its greatness is unparalleled, its importance is unique and its sanctity is unquestionable.³ Puri enjoys its position



as one of the foremost religious centres of India. It is one of the seven Mokshapuris or salvation centres of the Hindu faith. 'Ayodhya Mathura Mahakasi Kanchi Avantika Puri Dwaravasti caiva saptaita Mokshadayika' is a Puranic couplet. These seven places virtually cover the whole of India between them. There are four chief religious centres around which the Brahmanical religion and practices flourish. Of these, while Badrinath and Dwarka are centre of Vaishnavism and Rameswaram is the centre of Saivism, Puri fosters the confluence of all sects in and through Purusottama Jagannath, even though many regard Him as the embodiment of Vaishnavism. To the outside world and in a general sense, "The national reverence of the Hindus for holy places has been, for ages, concentrated at Puri, sacred to Vishnu under His title Jagannath, the Lord of the world."⁴ In respect of its hold on the Hindu mind, Puri is considered by some as the most sacred shrine in India, even more sacred than Varanasi. Named after Purusottama Jagannath, the city is also known as Niladri, Sri Ksetra, Sankha Ksetra, Jamanika Ksetra and Martya Baikuntha or the heaven on earth.⁵ Purusottama Jagannath is supposed to be above sectarian considerations and distinctions of caste and creed. The 'Pujaripalli' inscription of Gopalvir Deva belonging to the 11th century indicate that Purusottama Ksetra was considered as a sacred shrine among 'Kedar, Prayaga and Puskara' etc. The book 'Abhidhana Chintamani' of Hemachandra (1081-1173), alludes to the popularity of Jagannath. This Ksetra also finds reference in Satananda's Ratnamalika of the 11th century. The 12th century inscription of Malava Raja of Nagpur includes a reference to Purusottama Ksetra. The Barhaspatya Arthasastra of 11th century refers to Purusottama as one of the eight Vaishnava Tirthas of India.⁶ In the 'Tirtha Vivechana Khandam' of the Kritya

Kalpataru, Laksmidhara (early 12th century A.D.) mentions Purusottama as a place of pilgrimage on the authority of Vamana Purana.

Visnudharmattara of 600A.D.refers to the manifestation of Visnu as Purushottama in Odra country (Udresa Purushottama)⁷. The Ksetramahatmyas of Jagannath Puri have been discussed in Brahma Purana (1030A.D)⁸, Narada Purana, Kapila Samhita⁹ (1350A.D), Skanda Purana (11th-12th centuryA.D)¹⁰, Padma Purana, Vamadev Samhita (published by Mukti Mandap Pandit Mahasabha in 1972) and also Niladri Mahodaya (Published by Maharaja of Sonapur in 1970). The Pujaripali inscription¹¹ of Gopal (11th century A.D) mentions Purushottam as an important *tirtha* of India. In the inscription discovered from Govindpur¹² (in Nawdah Subdivision of Gaya District, Bihar) poet Gangadhara states that his father Manoratha visited Purushottam. As the inscription is dated in Saka year 1059 (1137-38A.D), this proves the popularity of Purushottama as a *tirtha* and the close religious contacts between Bihar and Odisha in the twelfth century A.D. The Edilpur grant of Kesava Sena says that Laksmiana Sena (1179-1205A.D) established a sacrificial pillar at Purushottama.¹³

The Kapil Samhita refers to the land as the one "that takes away sin".¹⁴ The Matsya Purana, among the oldest of the Puranas, refers to Purushottama Ksetra twice.¹⁵ The sacred tract is also known as Sankha Ksetra in the Utkal Khanda of Skanda Purana, one conspicuous point of "Purushottama Ksetra Prasasti" of this Purana, as also of Niladri Purana, is that these speak of Jagannath being established on Nrsinga's mantras.¹⁶ Purushottama in Odra is mentioned in the Saradadevi temple inscription (c.10th century A.D) at Maihar in the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh.¹⁷ The sanctity of this place and of its



presiding deity must have gained wider acceptance after the construction of the temple, as is apparent from the Kapilasa inscription of Narasimha I (1246-53 A.D) which describes Purushottama as Chaturdasa Bhuvanadhipati or the Lord of the fourteen worlds.¹⁸ The Barhaspatya *sutram* (C.6-7 century A.D) speaks of Purushottama Ksetra as a conspicuous centre of Vaishnavism and specifies its distance from Dwaraka.¹⁹ The Nagari plate of Anangabhim Dev III (of Saka era 1152-53 i.e., 1229-30A.D) describes the place of Purushottama Ksetra. "This name (Purushottama Ksetra) in the form of Purushottama Chhatar or only in the form of Chhatar was used by the Mughal, the Maratha as well as the early British rulers in their official records".²⁰ The city is referred to as Purushottama in Kalika Purana and in Yoginitantra.²¹ Puri region was also known as Utkal.²² "The name Purushottama Ksetra was also sometime known as Purushottama Puri and the word Purushottama Ksetra or Chhatra so also Purushottama Puri was expressed in the contracted form"²³ of Purushottama or Puri. Kurma Purana mentions that Purushottama *tirtha* belongs to Narayana although, it is named after Purushottama. The supreme Purusa Narayana resides here with all glory. A pilgrim after taking holy bath in this sacred *tirtha* and worshipping supreme Vishnu (Narayana) and feeding the Brahmanas secures the abode of Vishnu. Puri has the Lord Jagannath Temple, the roaming ocean Mahodadhi and the grand festival, famous Rath Yatra and the presence of Vishnu.

Puri emerges as a *tirtha* having pan-Indian character since early part of 12th century A.D., with the increasing process of ritual royalization of the deity Lord Jagannath. It was during 12th century A.D, that the temple town Puri might have assumed the greatest prominence

under the rule of Imperial Gangas (1078-1435A.D). Sri Jagannath worship was renewed and reached at its climax particularly Vaishnavism with the Bhakti movement of Sri Chaitanya. From first part of 16th century, the pilgrim movement to Puri was grown and it became the epi-centre of Vaishnava culture in the whole of eastern-India. The rituals like Nagar Kirtan brought the medium for popularization of Jagannath culture and rested deep into heart and mind of the common people. Jagannath worship on the principle of Prema Bhakti or devotion by love was only the way to attain *mukti* and became the culture of mass and thus the culture was spread over Odisha, Bengal etc. For millions of devotees, Jagannath is not merely a local deity of Odisha; He is considered as a manifestation of the Supreme Being. He occupies a pivotal position in the religious life of Hindu-world, and it is admitted that His culture, in the present form, has a distant message for the Indian People. In one senses the Jagannath cult can be described as a transcendental secularism for the fact that many individual religious faiths appear to have been transcended and synthesized in it. The Jagannath cult is more than an amalgam of Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism and Vaisnavism, etc. Thus the influences of various sects on Jagannath cult are discernible. "Jagannath cult has welcomed all and embraced all, but been overwhelmed by none and has lost itself in none."²⁴ The cult of Jagannath is an elective system that has "assimilated and incorporated in its fold the influences of divergent religious creeds and sects." But Jagannath is never a sectarian deity. He supersedes sectarian considerations and comprehensions. His image is crude and unanthropomorphic. The mode of worship of the deities is also diverse. The Mahaprasad is above caste barriers. There is seldom sect that does not deify Jagannath and claim Him to be its own at Puri. It leads one to wonder whether the



simultaneous prevalence of divergent faiths (Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Saivism, Saktism) show a heterogeneous society, too varied to be unitary.

The Jagannath cult is an attempted synthesis during the reign of the Somavamsis in Odisha from 9th to 11th centuries. King Yayati Kesari of this dynasty was the king of a unified and larger Odisha containing Kosal, Utkal as well as tribal areas of Odisha. A religious unity was imperative in such a kingdom “over which the king exercised only a ritual hegemony.” The Chakradhara Vishnu or Madhava of the Savaras, the Siva or Sankarsana of the Nagas, the dharma and Sakti of Buddhism and, above all, the Stamveswari of Kondhs, Nalas and Bhanjas came to be identified with, and symbolized in, Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshana respectively. The cult of Jagannath is an integrated whole. It has absorbed the Narayan Cult of Bhagabat religion, Madhava Cult of Odisha, the Atheist Cult of Buddhism and Gopinath Cult of Vaisnavism in course of time. Jagannath is a total symbol of Hindu’s identity. He is the source of our beliefs, social norms and relationships, cultural excellence and value systems. Devotion to Him means a way of life: no code, no canon, but feeling His presence as Universal Guide without and within and love for one and all. Jagannath stands for the Highest Common Factor of all religions. Though enshrined in His temple, He is lodged as Universal self within the heart of everyone guiding them to right action. He is dispenser of a spiritual order based on faith, universal brotherhood and love. From mid-12th century till 16th century Odisha had witnessed a continuous flow of Vaisnavism which identified

itself with the Jagannath cult and spawned forth the cult of Jagannath on a concrete basis.

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