



Shree Jagannath Temple at Puri : A Study on Aruna Stambha, Simha Dwara and Baisi Pahacha

Dr. Benudhar Patra

The massive temple of Shree Jagannath (214 feet 8 inches high above the road level) located at Puri (the hallowed *srikshetra* or the *Purushottam kshetra*) near the sea (the Bay of Bengal), in the state of Odisha on the eastern coast of India is not only a sacred Hindu temple but also one of the *char dhamas* (four *dhamas*/ four traditional pilgrimage centres) of the Hindu devotees and pilgrims. It is the symbol and embodiment of the Odia culture and civilization. The temple was built in the 12th century CE by King Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva (c. 1078 to c. 1147 CE) of the Eastern Ganga dynasty and is moulding the social, economic, political, religious and cultural life of the people of Odisha for centuries. The temple is built in the Kalinga style of architecture and is significant for its marvellous art, architecture and sculpture. Apart from the main temple complex, the *aruna stambha* standing in front of the temple, the *simha dwara* or the lion gate or the main entrance of the temple and the *baisi pahacha* (the flight of twenty two steps) leading into the temple complex from the *simha dwara* are very noteworthy to be discussed.

Aruna Stambha

The *Arun stambha*, a striking monument of marked elegance, stands in front of the main



gate (lion gate or *simha dwara*) of Shree Jagannath Temple. The pillar is named so after the name of Aruna, the charioteer of the Sun God. It is a magnificent sixteen-sided monolithic column of chlorite stone set on an exquisite pedestal, delicately carved of the same material. According to R.L.Mitra¹ the carvings on the plinth “are of the most sumptuous description, the like of which are to be seen nowhere else in India.” It is 25 feet, and 2 inches in height, 2 feet in diameter, and 6 feet and 3.5 inches in circumference. The exquisitely carved pedestal on which the *Aruna stambha* stands is of 7 feet 9 inches square and 6 feet high, and has a capital on the top of 2.5 feet high, over which mounted an elegant statue of Aruna, the charioteer of the Sun God Surya, in



a prayer mode. The capital is formed of two rings surmounted by a series of lotus petals. The measurements, thus, give a total height of 33 feet and 8 inches from the ground, including the pedestal to the top of the capital. One significant thing about the *Arun stambha* is that originally it used to stand before the Sun temple at Konark from where it was shifted by the Marathas to its present site in the 18th century CE. It is said that this beautiful pillar was erected in honour of the sun God at Konark. But when the Konark temple was abandoned and worship ceased there, in absence of the presiding deity, this pillar was brought to Puri in the last quarter of the 18th century CE. The *Madala Panji* records that during the time of Divyasingha Deva, the Maratha Guru, Brahmachari Gosain brought this pillar from Konark and re-erected it in front of the *simha dwara* of Shree Jagannath temple where we see it now. Andrew Sterling,² a British administrator (who was secretary to the Commissioner of Cuttack and also the Collector of Cuttack) in Odisha from 1818-1822 has mentioned that the pillar has been brought from the famous “but now deserted, temple of the Sun at Konark, about sixty years ago, by a *brahmachari* inhabitant of Pooree [Puri], of great wealth and influence.” The pillar is a masterpiece of art that bears eloquent testimony to the impeccable history of Odia sculpture.³ It is worthy to mention that the placing of *Aruna stambha* in front of the temple of Shree Jagannath is quite appropriate as from the Vedic times, the Sun God is considered identical with Vishnu. On the basis of architectural execution, the date of this pillar can be traced back to the early part of c. 13th century CE.⁴

Simha Dwara

The *Simha dwara*, or the Lion Gate, is one of the four gates to the temple of Shree Jagannath and forms the main entrance. It is named so because two colossal statues of crouching lions, carved in a naturalistic style, with crowns on their heads exist on either side of the entrance. The gate faces east opening on to the *bada danda* or the Grand Road. The Lion Gate is square in structure and built with a pyramidal roof. Its door-frames are of black chlorite and most beautifully carved. The statues of the two guards to the temple Jaya and Vijaya stand on either side of the doorway. Just before the commencement of the *Ratha Yatra* (car festival), the idols of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are taken out of the temple through this gate. On their return from the Gundicha Temple they have to ceremonially placate Goddess Mahalakshmi, whose statue is carved atop the door, for neglecting to take Her with them on the *Ratha Yatra*. Normally, the devotees enter into the temple through this gate.

In the propylaeum at the Lion’s Gate on the northern side or to the right as a devotee enter the temple there is an idol of Jagannath known as *patita pavana*, which means the “saviour or deliverer of the downtrodden and the fallen”. In front of the image of *patita pavana*, a small image of Garuda has been installed. This *patita pavana* image of Jagannath, however, is different from the main deity of Jagannath. This image of Jagannath (*patita pavana*) is by Himself and not with His brother Balabhadra or sister Subhadra or with His *sudarshan chakra*. The deity has manifested



only a face, with no arms or torso. Some scholars say that Jagannath manifested Himself to give *darshana* to His devotee Salabega, who was born in a Muslim family while others claim that Jagannath manifested here to give *darshana* to His devotee Gajapati king of Khurdha, Ramachandra Deva II who was converted to Islam and was not allowed to enter the temple. However, it is generally believed that during the medieval period, the untouchables who were not allowed to go inside the temple used to offer their prayers to *patita pavana* (Jagannath) remaining outside the *simha dwara*. Even now, it is believed that if one cannot go inside the temple, can get the same benefit of *darshana* simply by presenting oneself before the all-compassionate *patita pavana* Jagannath. On the left side of the enclosure, on a long stone pedestal stands the image of Hanumana, thickly smeared with vermilion, as the guard of the temple and the *patita pavana* Jagannath.⁵

Apart from the *simha dwara*, which is the main entrance to the temple, there are three other entrances facing south, west and north. They are named after the sculptures of animals guarding them such as the *ashwa dwara* or the horse gate on the south, the *vyaghra dwara* or the *khanja-dwara* or the tiger gate on the west and the *hathi dwara* or the elephant gate on the north. The *simha dwara*, the *ashwa dwara*, the *vyaghra dwara* and the *hathi dwara* are also respectively called *purva dwara*, *dakshina dwara*, *paschima dwara* and *uttara dwara* according to their directions. Each gate located at the central

part of the walls. The gates are crowned with pyramid shaped structures. Worshipping of the gates also forms a part of the daily ritualistic services of the temple. *Navagraha* reliefs are carved on the architraves of all the gates. In almost all the gates there are small images of Shiva, Vishnu, Hanumana, Durga and Nrusimha. According to a local tradition, the four gates represent *chaturvarga* (four *vargas*) i.e. *dharma* (lion), *artha* (elephant), *kama* (horse) and *moksha* (tiger). According to another tradition these four gates symbolize the four fundamental principles of *dharma* (right conduct), *jnana* (knowledge), *vairagya* (renunciation) and *aishwarya* (prosperity) in the direction of east, south, west and north respectively. According to K.C.Mishra⁶ “The Lord Jagannatha being the monarch, is supposed to live in His imperial abode which is necessarily a fort consisting of four gates in its four sides.” He further says that these four gates i.e., *simha dwara*, *ashwa dwara*, *vyaghra dwara* and *hathi dwara* represents the strength, military prowess, energy and prosperity of the monarch i.e. of Shree Jagannath respectively.⁷

Baisi Pahacha

The *baisi* (22) *pahacha* (steps) or the flight of twenty-two steps inside the complex of Shree Jagannath temple considered not only an important part of the temple but also played a significant role in the life of the devotees. From the *simha dwara* (eastern gateway of the outer enclosure) the *baisi pahacha* leads into the temple complex (inner enclosure) in an ascending order. After passing through the *simha dwara*,



one has to go up these steps in order to get into the main temple. Though the exact time period of its construction, is not mentioned anywhere in historical record or the *puranic* literature, legends say that it was built by a king named Bhanudeva. The width and length of the steps are not uniform but vary. The width of the middle 15 steps varies from 5 feet and 10.5 inches to 6 feet and 3 inches and the height is 6 inches to 7 inches. The sizes of the remaining 7 steps are smaller both in length and width. The steps are made of felspar and khodalite. A famous Shiva Linga, named Kashi Biswanath and the idols of Ramachandra, Nrusimha and Ganesh have been installed on the southern side of the *baisi pahacha*.

The history or the mystery of this flight of steps is not properly known. However, these 22 steps are highly revered by the people as it is believed that they possess 'spiritual animation'.

Numerous holy activities are performed on these steps on different days and occasions. It is said that during the *Ratha Yatra* (car festival) several gods and goddesses, demi gods, other heavenly entities, the souls of the ancestors [near *pitrushila*], Chitrugupta (minister of Yama Raj) and Yamadootas [near *Yamashila*] descends upon these steps to witness the *pahandi* (procession of deities during the *Ratha Yatra*) of Shree Jagannath. On *chaturdashi tithi* of the dark fortnight in the month of *Margashira* (December), Madana Mohan, the representative deity of Shree Jagannath offers *pinda dana* (*shradha* or oblation) on these steps to His ancestors i.e., Nanda and Yashoda, Devaki and Vasudeva and Kaushalya and Dasharatha. Madana Mohana also offers *pinda dana* on this *baisi pahacha* to king Indradyumna and queen Gundicha since they were childless.

The devotees while going up the steps (*baisi pahacha*) must step on a stone called *Yamashila* engraved into the 3rd step, which, it is believed that frees from the reasons to be punished by Yama (the god of death). But one must not step on this stone on the way back, since it takes away the merits of the *darshan* of Shree Jagannath. The small rough stone on the seventh step is called *pretashila* or *pitrushila*. People who believe to liberate the souls of the deceased leave *anna mahaprasad* (holy rice of the temple that has been offered to Shree Jagannath) on it for feeding the ancestors.



Annual *pinda dana* (a special ritual in which food is offered to the ancestors) is performed on both the sides of these 22 steps. It is believed that ancestral souls are satiated by this. A ritual called *badabadia daka* (elders call) is also performed on the *baisi pahacha* on the day of *Deepavali*. On this day people burn *kaunria kathi* (a bundle of jute/light sticks) and show it upwards to illuminate the path of the ancestral souls.

Besides, the twenty two pious steps have also other religious merits. Children are made to roll down these steps, from top to bottom, to bring them spiritual bliss and happiness. It is believed that as countless devotees are walking on these steps, these steps are throbbing with spiritual animation. It is also believed that the devotees who walk on the steps cthrob with spiritual vibrancy. Some says that these steps represent the 22 kinds of weaknesses and faults in human beings. It is also believed that when the pilgrims are passing through the 22 steps their sins are removed. If a devotee trustingly puts on his forehead a speck of dust from the surface of the steps he gets a sense of fulfillment.

To conclude, we can say that the *aruna stambha*, the *simha dwara* and the *baisi*

pahacha plays an important role not only as constituent parts of the temple but also in the life and culture of the devotees and pilgrims through the ages.

References:

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Dr. Benudhar Patra, P.G. Dept. of History, Post Graduate Govt. College, Sector-11, Chandigarh (UT), Pin-160011, India, Email: dr_benudharpatra@yahoo.co.in.

