



Jagannath culture is the culture of a casteless humanity. Originally venerated by the Nagas and Savaras as *Darudevata*, Jagannath was later on subjected to an attempt of Aryanisation as a prelude to a monopoly hold over him by the high-born Aryans. But it is doubtlessly clear that such attempts of the Aryans to monopolise on Jagannath culture from time to time had always been rendered futile in the teeth of vehement opposition of the local tribals of Odisha for whom Jagannath is still the symbolic summon bonum of their culture. Out of this resistance was born a new culture, corroborated by tradition, in the Lakshmi Purana of Balaram Das in which the

on those who propitiated her with austerity. On one occasion she went out of the temple before sunrise to watch the performance of her Puja. She wondered to see the nice Puja arrangement of Sriya, a lady of Chandala caste. She was performing the ritual with utmost devotion. Getting up very early in the morning she had daubed her palace with cow-dung water and painted the floor of her cottage with different designs in rice-water known as '*Jhoti*'. She appeared in her Puja Mandap and bestowed grace on Sriya indicating her to ask for a boon. Sriya in sheer devotion prayed for one lakh of cows, wealth and prosperity, offsprings and finally immortality. She

Cult of Goddess Mahalakshmi

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story has been developed surrounding the Lord Jagannath and Balabhadra on one side and Goddess Mahalakshmi on the other, in order to establish some principles of Jagannath cult.

The story in the Lakshmi Purana highlights the importance of Lakshmi in the religious life of the people and her role in the religious complex of Sri Jagannath. The story runs as follows. Maa Lakshmi, the divine consort of Lord Jagannath used to round the *nagaras* and *gramas* particularly on every Thursday in the month of Margashira to mark her Puja performance by the people. This ritual is known as '*Manabasa Gurubara*'. She bestows her boon and grace

granted all the boons except the term of immortality.

Sri Balaram, the elder brother of Lord Jagannath did not approve of Mahalakshmi visiting the cottage of a low-caste woman. He directed Jagannath not to allow Mahalakshmi to enter the temple on her return. At this Jagannath was greatly flabbergasted. He did not expect this sort of behaviour from His elder brother. He was helpless at that moment. Feeling abandoned he had to carry out the instructions of His brother. Now the two Lords drove away Maa Lakshmi after mistreating, misbehaving and disorning Her and even scolding Her innocent father. When



Maa Lakshmi prayed them to excuse Her, they closed the palace door turning a deaf ear to Her prayer. This infuriated Maa Lakshmi to curse them to suffer to their misdeeds by becoming poor and not getting food to eat for complete twelve years till they surrender to Her with a request to serve the food.

Under the direction of goddess Lakshmi, Biswakarma built a gigantic palace for Her. She then called for eight *vetalas* (divine minions) and ordered them to spoil the kitchen and fetch all the treasures and other belongings from the *Ratnabhandara*. They were afraid of entering the temple when the Lords were awake. She instantly ordered the goddess of sleep to lull the gods asleep. The *vetalas* took away all the cooked and uncooked foods in the kitchen. Finally, Ratnabhandar was also taken away. The *vetalas* were suitably rewarded and sent back to *vaikuntha*. She called on Saraswati asking her to direct the people not to offer food and drink to Jagannath and Balabhadra.

When the brothers woke up, they found the palace deserted and everything gone. Jagannath said, "This is what happening when Lakshmi leaves." Balabhadra said, "Don't say such things about a mere wife. If a wife is lost, does it mean that the husband has to go hungry?" They then went to the kitchen and the pantry, but there was nothing inside. They went to the Indradyumna tank, but there was not a drop of water in it. Having spent the day without food and water, they decided to go out for begging. Wherever they went for begging, they were turned out by the residents; they came to the house of the *Badapanda* with a hope of getting food. There they were treated warmly. When the wife of *Badapanda* proceeded to serve them with food, the cooking pots which were full



of cooked rice and vegetable curries were found empty. Thinking them to be bereaved of Lakshmi (*Lakshmichhada*), she turned them out angrily. They went from door to door but nobody entertained them. The tired brothers thought to eat lotus-seed from the Padma tank, which was also found full of mud. Then they proceeded to drink saline water from the sea. In the meanwhile under the orders of Lakshmi the Sun radiated scorching rays. As a result it was difficult for them to move on extremely hot sand.

In such a critical situation the palace of Lakshmi came to their sight. Balabhadra rushed to the Lions gate of the palace. The female



attendants of the palace recognized Him but first turned him out. Sri Jagannath who was following him at a distance was intimated of the rough treatment of the attendants. Both brothers again came to the gate chanting the hymns of Vedas. Mahalakshmi was pleased at the advent of Her husband and Balaram. She sent her attendants to enquire their whereabouts. The attendants told them that the Palace belonged to a *Chandaluni*. Should they take food in the house of a *Chandaluni*? The hungry brothers consented to cook food themselves if they were provided with the new earthen pots and the food materials. Everything was supplied to them; they started cooking. She made a plan in such a way that they failed to cook food. At last the angry Balaram dashed the earthen-pots to pieces. In the meantime bathing oil was served to them requesting them to take bath. Ultimately the Lords agreed to take cooked food from the hands of *Chandaluni*. Lakshmi eagerly cooked all items of food, offered to them in Shree Mandira. They took their bath and ate all items of cooked food to their full satisfaction. Balaram indicated that the preparation was similar to what Lakshmi used to cook in the Shree Mandira. Both brothers then realised the absence and significance of Lakshmi. Ultimately Balaram asked his younger brother to search for Lakshmi. At last reunion of Jagannath and Lakshmi took place and all went back to the temple with all the materials taken away after her separation.

It is not definitely known as to the time of the coinage of the story; undoubtedly the story has a historical significance. Most probably the legend and the worship of Lakshmi amply spread



after Her enshrinement in the Lakshmi temple in side the Jagannath temple complex as the presiding deity and as Parsvadevata. It is pertinent to mention that the Purana raises voice against the evil practice of untouchability in society. It also stresses importance on feminism and empowers the female power to resist male hegemony. Another important aspect of the story is that there is no caste bar in propitiation of the goddess Lakshmi. This eclectic attitude prevails upon in the service pattern of Jagannath temple where the people irrespective of castes and creed partake of the *Mahaprasad* of Lord Jagannath together.

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