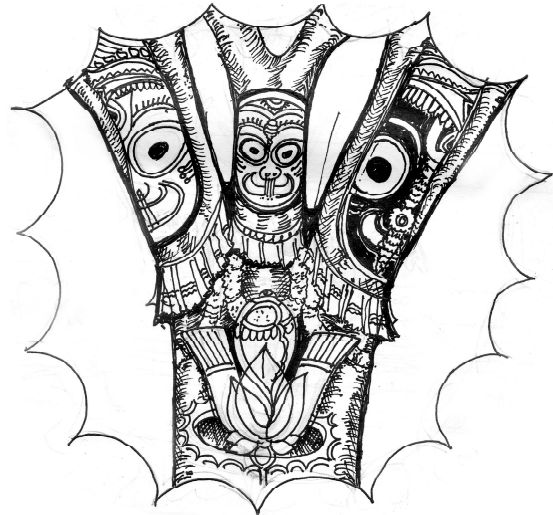




### Fascinating Deities :

Worshipping nature by man especially the extra-terrestrial bodies like the sun, the moon, the stars and terrestrial things like the stone, the trees, the fire were not uncommon from time immemorial. Indians too were such worshippers from ancient times. Idol worshippers made their deities out of stone, wood, metal, earth etc. The principal deities worshipped inside the Jagannath temple at Puri are all carved out of the wooden logs of the “neem tree” (*Melia Azadirachta Indica*).



## Fascinating Renewal of Deities

*Sashibhusan Rath*

Neem has never been a rare species of plant in India and over centuries has been available in abundance, hard, deep-rooted and due to its bitterness is not affected by borer insects. It is therefore “neem” has been the most suitable tree for making principal deities.<sup>1</sup> It is considered to be a male tree in ancient texts .

As per the Shabara Tantra on a no moon night<sup>2</sup> of a specific month the primeval *purusha* manifests only in the predestined neem tree. That day onwards the tree emanates sandalwood odour instead of bitterness ! Such a tree, after identification through esoteric processes, is cut

in summer and the log<sup>3</sup> is made ready for carving out the deities in prescribed dimensions.

The average height of the deities is between 2.5 to 3 meters. Those who have touched the deities have felt a kind of strange softness instead of the hardness of wood. It is because of the layers of pure silk wrapped on the core wooden body of deities.

The colours of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra are black, white and yellow respectively. In the empirical language of physics black is the most ideal absorber of radiation, white a good reflector and yellow being one of the unadulterated primary colour.



One often wonders why these earless, legless forms with oversized heads beckon to people ! Interestingly the eyes of Jagannath are regular circles whereas the eyes of Subhadra and Balabhadra are oval. The head-top of Balabhadra is scalloped with a semi-circular lobe indicating the hood of a serpent; Subhadra's head-top resembles a tiara and Jagannath's head-top simply a straight line. Different meanings have been attributed to such forms.

### Renewal of Deities :

In a peculiar periodicity of 8,11,19 and 27 years an overstretched rainy season Aashaadha<sup>4</sup> occurs when the renewal of the gross body of the deities. Such renewals have occurred, as per available records :

During 1000-1800 AD it has occurred at a gap of 8,11 & 19 years. Only once after a gap of 27 years it is reported to have occurred in 1039 AD.

During 1800-2015AD it has been reported to have occurred in 1809(+19), 1828(+8), 1836(+19), 1855(+19), 1874(+19), 1893(+19), 1912(+8), 1920(+11), 1931(+19), 1950(+19), 1969(+8), 1977(+19), 1996(+19), already due in 2015.

Every year the temple activities are suspended for 15 days but during this closure is extended for one and a half months in those years when renewal of the bodies are scheduled as it was in the year of renewal in 2015. During this period only the tribal relatives, considered to be the descendants of the initial ancient worshippers and caretakers of the deities, enter into the temple and stay<sup>5</sup>; others are not allowed during this period.

Initial activities of the renewal process starts in the month of Chaitra, Shukla Dasami (fell

on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2015). The search team takes the betel nut as a token of permission and commitment for the work to be executed. The team members go to Kakatpur (NE from Puri) and after taking bath in the river Prachi pray in the holy shrine of the reigning Mother Goddess Mangala and continue to fast and lie prostrated.<sup>6</sup>

Rationalists will raise their eyebrows high if they hear that the Goddess directs the senior-most team member in the dream about the location of the neem trees destined to be the body of the deities and in utter faith he with all his team members go to the “dreamt locations” by barefoot. Though it might seem incredible, all the four neem trees (fourth one being that of Sudarshana) satisfy the following qualifying prerequisites defining the suitability of the trees :

- # Must have a wheel (chakra) sign on the body of the tree.
- # Poisonous snakes like cobra must be hiding under or in nearby anthill.
- # A tamerind tree must be in the vicinity.
- # A funeral yard in the vicinity of each tree.
- # Each tree must have 4 to 7 branches over the main trunk.
- # From ground level upto 10/12 feet it should be straight and solid.
- # No nest on treetop.
- # No creeper/parasite on the tree.

After the prescribed rituals like 3 days of fire sacrifice<sup>7</sup> the identified trees are cut with golden axe, silver axe and iron axe in succession. A small cart with four wheels is made out of residual smaller branches and the main trunk of each tree is transported separately to Puri. The residual parts of the trees are buried there itself.



The carts are pulled all the way to Puri by the people of the villages en route. Nearly 3000 people accompany the logs, assisting the pull and other allied activities. The logs earmarked for the new body of Sudarshana, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath, in the same sequence one after the other arrive at Puri, near Nrushingha temple, Gundicha altar, on the Grand Road. The Gajapati King of Puri is informed about the arrival of the sacred logs.

Transportation of all the logs into the main temple through its north facing gate<sup>8</sup> are to be completed much before the ultimate deadline of “annual bathing ceremony”<sup>9</sup> of the deities which occurs in June (occurred on 2<sup>nd</sup> June in 2015). The existing deities are bathed on the open platform and the new logs are also separately bathed with ritual water drawn from prescribed sources.

Next day onwards, from 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2015, the carving activities on the new logs commence in secrecy at the southern point of a specific place named Koili Baikuntha,<sup>10</sup> situated at the North Gate of the temple, very much within the temple premises. At this spot the carving is done out of the trunks as per the laid down norms.

Before the specific no-moon night<sup>11</sup> the new deities are fully carved out. All are taken on the carts to the sanctum. On this specific night, which occurred on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2015, from 8pm till 12noon of the next day, all doors are closed tight and nobody is allowed inside the temple premises except those associated with the secret procedures. At midnight hours the something mysterious is transferred from the existing old bodies to the newly carved deities by a member of the specific family, who is thickly-blindfolded and with thick wrappers on hands so that he can

neither see nor feel anything of the job being performed by him ! Some say nothing is shifted only they pray with covered open palms facing upwards and after sometime once there is a heavy-feel again prayer is recited to occupy the new deities, completing the transfer of spiritual power ! Mystery remains veiled.

Interestingly all the old deities are removed by the same carts to the Koili Baikuntha, from where they were once brought as new deities 19 years back. Humbly they are buried there. The close relatives observed the mourning rituals in all austerity till 24<sup>th</sup> June 2015, after that they tonsure and lead a normal life. In a sense Koili Baikuntha is the spot of creation and annihilation ! This cycle of creation and annihilation goes on and on.

During the first fortnight freshly installed deities are covered with seven layers silk wrappings (saptavarana) of esoteric and secret emulsions which is bright white, followed by whole body decor (purna-angaraga) including the complete face-painting, during the next fortnight matching with the Anabasara period. These jobs are done by hereditary functionaries. Their generations have thrived over centuries on the land provided by the temple. After completion of one month, like this, the deities appear for public gaze known as Navajaubana Darshan which fell on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

The new deities will occupy the Rathas (chariots) on Rath Yatra (the Car festival) every year like all the previous years. It falls on 18<sup>th</sup> July in 2015. The legend has it that a famous festival was going on in the eastern India where a deity seated on a chariot was being drawn by the people. Attempts to immolate themselves under the chariot are recorded in history. One



ponders, is it for the primeval and savage quality of the deity that we want to worship or for the sake of tradition that we want to pull the chariots lest the ominous might befall on mankind or is it a Grand Festival of Joy ? Although there is no specific answer but it is definitely a unique experience to be present as a part of the festival.

The process is on and we all are in it ! It is only a matter of the seekers for looking into it and understanding the meaning underneath.

### **Cult as Panacea :**

Jagannath cult is deep rooted, mysterious and esoteric. This cult is the preserver of peace and human life since time immemorial. Yogis understand a little and the wise pray to know more:

- # Eko aham bahusyam (He alone desired to be many)—the primordial cause and effect of creation.
- # Akaybaham jagatyatra dwitiya ka mamapara (In this existence I alone am present, except me none else).
- # He is also the proverbial Patitapabana (Redeemer of the fallen).
- # He is the Hiranyagarbha and this word has relevant and interesting meaning.
- # Hiranya means gold, golden emanation. Hiranyagarbha means “Womb within which all radiations are contained”.
- # Jajurveda says, “Vishwam jyotijachha” (14/14) meaning the universe is shining from your emanations only.

In 1803, Lord Wellesley, in a letter to Col. Campbell and John Melville, “On your arrival at Juggernaut you will employ every possible

precaution to preserve the respect due to the Pagoda and to the religious prejudices....”. Later in 1868 Dr. David B. Smith who came to Puri to diagnose the cause of cholera, observed the feeling of an unnamed pilgrim who loved the hallowed place so much that while leaving Puri uncertain whether he would be able to come again, “he takes a fond look at the of the temple sharply defined against the evening sky”. Even today each pilgrim coming to Puri carries home the same feeling !

There is a strangeness to this cult for which there are 2760 Jagannath temples in India and 289 abroad as per 2010 statistics. Interestingly US has 56, Bangladesh 46, Nepal 36, Indonesia 21, Russia 26, Germany 29 etc. Further, devotees have donated landed property to Lord Jagannath to the tune of 53201.896 Acres in Odisha itself and 812.746 Acres in other states like West Bengal, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnad. As per 1910 records 435 types of preparations were offered to the Lord Jagannath, the Lord who lured the devotees to travel long distances just for a glimpse of the deity. Those who could not reach were satisfied seeing the Neelachakra (the blue wheel fixed at the topmost position of the temple with a long waving flag) or the Gajapati King (who is considered to be key servitor of the Lord).

Seeing the deities inside the temple or on the chariot is a cosmothetic experience, an experience rich in spiritual consciousness. It is a matter of seeing and experiencing.

### **References :**

01. “Nimba pradhan metesham pratima nam binirmitow” is the Sanskrit saying.
02. Amabashya mithuna Sankranti – a specific day calculated on lunar calendar.



03. Daru means a log of wood. Brahma Daru is that log which is exclusively carved to contain the divine element to be worshipped.
04. Joda-Aashaadha: Rain month Aashaadha is counted for two months. It is a long period of rainy season as per Hindu calendar. The second month in July is named *mala* (inauspicious month) during which no auspicious work is normally done. But in Jagannath cult it is also named as Purusottama month, during which crucial rites are performed, which are auspicious for the temple and its ancient rites.
05. Shabaras or primitive tribes, are the ancient descendant relatives of the deity. They only stay informally. No rituals, no routines.
06. Adhia : It means continuous fasting and prostration before a deity seeking spiritual guidance, instructions etc.
07. Homa is fire worship (including sacrifice of cereals, forest products, animal products etc. as prescribed).
08. Uttara-Dwara : the northern gate of the temple. The temple has four gates facing east, west, north and south; each having a history and a significance.
09. Devasnana Purnima : Bathing ceremony of the deities, held annually on this day.
10. Koili Baikuntha : An area inside the temple where secret rituals like carving deities at southern point and burying the old deities at northern point etc. are executed.
11. Aashaadha (mala) Chaturdashi: A specific date in Hindu calendar which is in June.

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