



A Cult to Salvage Mankind

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The cosmic and terrestrial : both realities are reflected in the Jagannath cult of Orissa. The cosmic reality of the undying spirit which abides, endures and sustains; the cosmic reality of birth and death, as well as the beauty and refinement of the terrestrial world are mirrored in this all-inclusive religious practice. "*The visible and invisible both worlds meet in man*", sang the British poet T.S.Eliot in the *Four Quartets*. We may say that the Jagannath cult is designed to reflect both the visible, this-worldly realities as well as the cosmic phenomena. Hence, the cult reflects a life style of a god who has numerous human attributes.



This makes the God and the cult unique. Several traits characterize the God: the everyday rituals of bathing, brushing of teeth, dressing-up and partaking of food materials. But the traditions like the Car Festival (*Ratha Yatra*) and the adornments (*Beshas*) sets the deity apart, suggestive of aristocracy and refinement.

The Hindu inclusiveness is nowhere as evident as in the rituals of Lord Jagannath. Even romance is not excluded in the deity's schedule: Once in a week the God is closeted with his consort Lakshmi (in the ritual *Ekanta*). The *Sayana Devata* golden sculpture used in the mid-night ritual after the *Bada Singhara Dhupa*, is not only suggestive but even explicit.

Over a year Lord Jagannath, like human beings, is engaged in multification activities. On one occasion (Banabhoji Beshha) He sets out on a picnic trip, to an idyllic forest land, which is suggestive of the God's love for natural beauty. On the other

occasions (seven times in a year), the Lord goes for hunting expeditions. During the summer he goes for boat rides for twenty-one days consecutively, which is known as the Chandana Yatra. The God also supposedly subdues a venomspewing wicked serpent as celebrated in the Kaliya Dalan Beshha, as if to suggest that the wicked and evil-minded are to be sternly



dealt with. The God's love of pomp is only too evident in the Ratha Yatra during the rainy season.

In several ways Lord Jagannath resembles human beings. Man is compelled to perform myriad duties on earth, and this message is brought forth in the Jagannath temple rituals. Numerous activities are attributed to the Lord eloping with a woman and marrying her, boat rides and hunting expeditions, swinging with consort Lakshmi, wearing *sraddha*-costume for a sober ritual, modifying an enraged spouse with sweetmeats, enjoying family happiness with elder brother Balaram and sister Subhadra (as reflected in the Krushna-Balaram Besha), trampling a malevolent serpent, going for a picnic etc. A vast variety of activities indeed ! And yet the idol is still. And though on two occasions the Lord's idol moves from the pedestal, the God's image of unbroken placidity persists. The message is clear as sunlight: even while engaging himself in manifold activities the God has an inner calmness, an absolute detachment. He is involved and yet aloof ! And that is the core message of the *Bhagavat Gita*.

A life style is evident in the cult of the Puri God: a profound though joyful approach to life. But this approach has taken into account a basic premise without which no philosophy may sustain an ideal social atmosphere. This is reflected in the handling of the Mahaprasad at the Ananda Bazar, (the market place within the temple complex) and elsewhere. Even a low-caste person has the same right on the Mahaprasad as the high-born, and shares this sacred food with him, even from the same earthen pot or banana leaf. This is suggestive of universal brotherhood. This practice accepts and spreads the ideal of equality of mankind,

especially in the basic requirement of food. No philosophic approach in individual or social life can sustain without this basic premise. And Jagannath culture stresses this in practice.

There are other rituals and traditions which make a social philosophy explicit. An ideal is brought home when the king of Puri (the Gajapati) sweeps the chariots during the Car Festival. A king-any king-symbolizes power, wealth, honour, influence; he is held in high esteem by the multitude. But whatever may be the king's status he must have the virtue of humility; a sense of values. Unless the king submits humbly to higher values, he will fall short in performing his duties. The Jagannath cult has been spreading this message for centuries.

The range of feelings reflected in the rituals is also quite wide. The Ratha Yatra symbolizes the God's love for pomp and ceremony. But there are rituals which evoke many other feelings: pathos and suffering and death.

The Sraddha Besha held in early winter for three consecutive days reflects the austerity of a bereaved soul. Sraddha is a ritual in remembrance of a departed person and hence pathos is inherent in this practice. Jagannath is supposedly observing the rite for King Indradyumna who built the first temple for the God. The deity wears white, befitting the mood on this occasion.

Sickness too is a very common failing of all human beings, and the God also supposedly gets bed-ridden for fifteen days at a stretch during the early rainy season. This is a period when the God's usual diet is replaced with medicines and restoratives. The helplessness of man on earth, for whom



suffering is inevitable, even inherent, characterizes the God.

Even death is not excluded in this religious practice. Death is inevitable; and this inevitability is incorporated in the Jagannath cult. The only difference is that while man does not know exactly on which day or month he would depart from the earth, a particular month is being specified when the God supposedly dies. When Asadha (the third month in the Indian calendar) falls twice in succession in a year the God embraces this inevitable reality known as death. That this invincible metaphysical reality is included in the Jagannath cult shows its philosophical approach.

And yet the negative elements do not predominate the worship of the deity.

While admitting the inevitability of death, the immortality of the soul is accepted by the *Brahma* substance, which is transferred from the old images to the new. What predominates in this cult is a sense of joy and celebration. The essential nature of the creator, *sat*, *chitt* and *ananda*, that is holiness, wakefulness and joyfulness are reflected in the practices and rituals. All the blessings of life are accepted here: good food, finery, romantic

feeling, aesthetic beauty, celebration. But everything must be charged with holiness, must be *sattwik*: food must be sanctified by incantations, adornments must reflect taste, joy rides or pleasure trips must have significance. A poet of the 16th century, A.D. Jagannath Das declared in his transcreated "Oriya Bhagavata", *Jagate thiba jete dina, Ananda karuthiba mana* that is (fill your mind with joy so long on earth). Most of the rituals in the Puri temple reflect a celebration of life.

Pleasures of life therefore are not excluded in the Jagannath cult; but what is stressed in many ways is to transmute pleasure into joy. Mahaprasad is tasty as well as sacred. The message is to elevate pleasure to a sublime level. This is the only way to save mankind.

Religions which overlook the basic nature of the mankind are based on false promises, since man's essential nature is to seek joy. Abstinence may also be an ingredient in this quest; but a feeling of joy is what the human soul longs for. The Jagannath cult shows the way.

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