



## A friend In Need.....

*Lokanath Mishra*

Jajpur is a holy place. It is an important place in the history of Orissa as well. The river Baitarani flows by its side. On auspicious days, a dip in this river is as holy as that in the river Ganga. Here the presiding deity is Devi Biraja, the saviour goddess of the area. She is revered as the most benevolent goddess who mitigates all the misery and hardship. The place is considered a sacred Pith of Devi Durga because when Lord Shiva carried the corpse of Sati, Her navel fell here. King Yajati of Keshari dynasty held a great yagnya here and invited Bramhins from distant a place like kanauj. He also constructed Dasaswamedh Ghat on the bank of river Baitarni to commemorate this great yagnya. Jajpur continues to be a spiritual and cultural centre of Orissa to this day.

Long long ago here lived a poor but devout man called Bandhu Mohanty. He had no land and property at all. His family consisted of his wife, two young daughters and a son. Being poorest of the poor he lived almost on alms. But he was a devout Bhakta of Lord Jagannath and

beseeching His divine grace. He had no worries what so ever as he considered Lord Jagannath a friend ever vigilant of his condition and ever ready to mitigate his misery.

But nothing goes on well forever. One year the rains failed miserably. Months of Asadha and Sravan passed by without a single drop of rain. No crop grew on vast tracts of land. People's misery had no end. They did not have a morsel of food for days together. A great famine ensued and people started dying. Misery and despair were quite large every where. Needless to say Bandhu Mohanty's condition started worsening day by day. His family went without food for days.

Bandhu's wife was a pious lady and had great faith in her husband. But the plight of her children unnerved her and she implored her husband

saying, "you have always been telling of your friend at Puri who is not only rich but very kind and generous. Should he not help us in our hard days? How can I tolerate the condition of my children who have not even a morsel of





food for so many days? My good husband, let us not make any delay, and proceed to Puri".

But Bandhu Mohanty was not willing to embarrass his friend the Lord for his own sake but finding no other way he agreed with his wife. So one day the family started on their sojourn to Puri. He carried his son on his shoulder and held a daughter's hand. His wife carried the other daughter in her arms. It took them full four days to reach the Lord's place, Srikhetra.

It was evening when they approached the temple of Lord Jagannath. The temple was illuminated with bright light and stood majestic with all its splendour and glory. But there was great rush at the entrance of the temple. Pratiharis were controlling the crowd. Their sacred canes were touching the head of every Bhakta as a token of divine blessing. As Bandhu Mohanty and his family members were almost in tatters they did not dare to enter the temple, lest the Pratiharis drove them away. So he bowed to Patitapaban with all reverence and walked away to look for a shelter for the night. He however reached Pejanala and decided to spend the night there. (A huge quantity of rice is cooked daily for Lord's Bhog. The drained out rice gruel gets accumulated at Pejanala). His wife asked him as to why they had come to this place instead of going to his friend's house. Bandhu Mohanty replied that his friend had a lot of guests that-night so it would be convenient to meet Him the next morning. After a long journey his children were obviously very hungry. Bandhu Mohanty, brought some rice gruel and asked his wife to feed the children. He and his wife also took some rice gruel and went to sleep.

It was dead of the night. Ghastly silence was pervading all over the place. Suddenly

someone appeared where Bandhu Mohanty's family was resting and called aloud Bandhu's name. Bandhu Mohanty woke up but could not mark if it was he who was being called. At last there was a call, "oh, the friend from Jajpur, don't you here the call ? Please come". Being sure it was him who was being called, he went to meet the man. He saw a Brahmin told him, "Your friend has sent this Mahaprasad by me. All of you partake of it to your heart's content. Tomorrow morning some arrangement will be made for you." Saying so he handed over the big Thali to Bandhu Mohanty. Bandhu's surprise and happiness had no end when he saw the Thali overflowing with Mahaprasad. There were fine rice, various types of curries, lots of condiments, Khechudi, Payas, Nadi, Amalu and Sarapuli etc. He woke up his family members and all of them partook of the Mahaprasad to their hearts content. Then Bandhu Mohanty washed the Thali clean and went to return it to the Bramhin. But, no body was there. The Bramhin had vanished in the meanwhile. Thinking to return the Thali next morning he wrapped it in a rag and kept it near his head. He bowed in silence to his Lord for His graciousness and went to sleep.

Next morning Lord's temple was opened to the chanting of hymns and devotional songs. Sevayats started arriving to attend to the daily chores of the Lord. The Bhandar Mekapa opened the Ratna Bhandar to bring out various pots and pans needed for the daily Nitis of the Lord. But to his great suprise he did not find the gold Thali in which Bhog is offered to the Lord. He was terribly upset as he perfectly rembered to have kept the Thali inside the Ratna Bhandar last night and looked the door firmly. He immediately raised a hew and cry and declared that Lord's gold Thali had been stolen away by some miscreant. Everyone of



the temple was aghast with the news and there was a great uproar inside the temple. All the Sevayats were examined but no clue could be found about the missing Thali. So the Dewan immediately sent out sepoy to every nook and corner of Puri town in search of the Thali.

One sepoy while passing by the side of Pejanala saw Bandhu Mohanty and his family lying there in a corner. Out of curiosity he approached them and to his great surprise saw the gold Thali kept there wrapped in a piece of rag. Bandhu Mohanty tried to narrate the last night's incident before him. He tried to convince the sepoy of his innocence but the sepoy was thoroughly unmoved. He was convinced that no one other than this man was the thief who had somehow managed to steal away the Thali from the Ratna Bhandar. The sepoy arrested Bandhu Mohanty and dragged him to the temple. Every one hurled abuses on him and some also dealt blows to this person. He was branded a thief and lodged in a cell of the King's Jail.

Bandhu's plights had no end. He was utterly distressed but he did not lose hope in the graciousness of Lord Jagannath. He prayed Him with all his heart beseeching Him to give him strength to withstand the ordeal. He knew that he was innocent so he completely surrendered himself to the lotus feet of Lord Jagannath and waited.

On the Ratna Singhasan Lord Jagannath felt disturbed. How could a little act of his kindness not been understood by His Sevayats ? A true devotee was being harassed for no fault. It was He who took Mahaprasad to Bandhu Mohanty in the gold Thali. Had all the people concerned gone out of there wits ?

King Prataprudra was then staying in his royal palace at Khurda. So in the dead of the night Lord Jagannath boarded the great Garuda and flew over to Khurda. The King was fast asleep, so He appeared before him in a dream and narrated the whole incident. He ordained that Bandhu Mohanty should be released forthwith and made a Sevayat in the temple. Arrangement should also be made at Srikhetra for his stay with dignity and honour. The king should also apologise for the injustice.

No sooner than the king had heard all this in his dream he hastened to Srikhetra to do whatever the Lord had desired. He immediately released Bandhu Mohanty from the jail, prostrate before him and apologised for all the injustice done to him. Bandhu Mohanty and his family members were bathed in scented water, given finest garments to wear and were led to Ratna Singhasan for the Darsan of the Lord. The King appointed him a Kharasodha (Keeper of accounts in the temple) and arranged a house at the south gate of the temple for his stay. This appointment was hereditary and was to continue for generations to come.

Bhakta and Bhagban are inseparable. The unflinching devotion of Bandhu Mohanty for Lord Jagannath had its effects on Lord Himself. The Lord never forsakes His true devotee. He is really a Friend in need.

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Lokanath Mishra lives at Plot No.4936, Tankapani Road, Bhubaneswar - 14.