



Distinctive Lifestyle of Puri People

Sarat Chandra Mohapatra

Puri, though a small temple town, attracts large number of people from different parts of India, many of whom wish to settle down here for its status as the ultimate place of salvation. It is thus evident from the fact that when the population of the town was only about twenty three thousand in 1840-41, it has now touched more than two lakhs in 2001. The colonies of the Temple town Puri can well be divided into two parts-of the earlier residents and the later-day inhabitants. The earlier small population of the town was centering round the temple of Lord Jagannath of whom, most were the servitors of Sri Jagannath Temple. But at present, the new inhabitation has extended in all the four directions for miles together.

The very ground around Puri for ten miles is to the Hindu mind of such sanctity as to absolve from the deepest sin all who proceed thither. It is, as depicted in different sacred texts, the heaven upon earth and each and everything of this land is holy. In the eyes of certain foreign scholars: "It is to India what Jerusalem was to the whole land of Israel."

As far back as in 1632 AD William Bruton has described Puri Town as 'Garden City'. Thus the natural scenario with a green belt all around with sand dunes has made the

people more exposed to the nature which has generated a broadness of mind and heart.

Normally, Puri people mean the original inhabitants of Puri, mostly consisting of the priestly order, artisans and others connected with the great temple. The localities like Markandeswar Sahi, Harachandi Sahi, Bali Sahi, Daitapada Sahi, Dolamandap Sahi etc. are inhabited by the temple servitors and other castes directly or indirectly connected with the temple. A major segment of them are Jatri Pandas, Gumastas and Dhulias. Flow of pilgrims from different parts of India in almost all seasons has afforded the scope of entertaining them and earning their livelihood. They are used to be conversant in different regional languages to guide the pilgrims of different states.

The general occupational structure and the socio-economic condition determine the lifestyle of the people of a particular locality. Puri being a cosmopolitan culture entertains various classes of people. The traditional class of persons of Puri consists of Temple Sevayats, Supakars and others as stated earlier. But the most significant are the artisans, which consist of carpenters (Badhei), Painters (Chitrakaras), Potters (Kumbhakarars), Stone- carvers



(Pathurias), Applique workers and other artisans engaged in manufacturing of different handicrafts like Patta Paintings, Palm-leaf carving, Seashell products etc. All such artisans have linkage with the Jagannath Temple and the products have tourist's attraction. Their economic activities are more oriented and influenced by the lifestyle of Sevayats. The carpenters (Badheis) of Puri are engaged in the construction of the massive chariots (Festive Car) every year. Similarly the Tailors (Daraji) stitch the cloth for the chariots (Festive Car) and flag (pataka) for the temple, the jewelers (Bania) are associated with the preparation and repair of ornaments of the temple Lords, the carriers (Bojhia) of Mahaprasad all entertain a sense of pride being associated with the service (Seva) to Lord Jagannath Temple.

The lifestyle of artisans is imbued with a super sense of imagination. The artists have succeeded in giving form to their inner aesthetic realisation. Celestial beings with fully developed body, swelling busts, rounded hips, delicate curves and divinely ecstatic face with an expression of grace and elegance cast a memorable impression of the viewers.

Similarly other artistic products contain a perceptible touch of imagination indicative of stabilised traditional skill and expertise.

The Brahmins play an important role in rendering different religious service to the pilgrims like Sradhha, Sankalpa, Jagnya etc. The Brahmins of nearby Sasan villages around Puri use to sit on Mukti Mandap and offer prescription (Byabastha) containing purificatory advice (prayaschita Bidhi) for different social sins. The gifts and donations of the pilgrims constitute their livelihood. Dhoti, Chadar and napkin are their usual dress

with sacred mark on the forehead make them distinct from other people.

Puri District Gazetteer records six thousand male adults as priests, brahmins and pilgrim guides who roam throughout India enlisting pilgrims and rendering required hospitality to them. Pilgrim guides are attached to different Pandas who act as the hereditary intermediary between the Lord and the devotees.

Their clientele spread all over India and divided amongst themselves. As such there is professional rivalry, which is a part of their lifestyle. Many a time such activities embitter the social life and annoy tourists and pilgrims.

The most noteworthy part of the lifestyle of Puri people is to earn livelihood without much investment or labour. Their convincing capacity to the pilgrims is the main source of their income. Their children usually follow the footprints of their father and attach less importance to formal education.

Pleasure seeking is the basic principle of the life style of Puri people. Collective activities with feast and merrymaking is their usual way of spending leisure and recreation. The local life style of Puri people consist of Sanga (friends), Bhanga (taking Canavis Indica), Sangeeta (music), Pangata (feast). This is called Mauja (recreation) in singular term and the traditional Puri people is somewhat philosophical in substantiating the validity of mauja in following words -"Marigale Pani Patrie paibu mauja paibu kahun? (After death, one is only entitled to get a spoon of water as homage; but can he get recreational pleasure like this?). The cultural centres of Puri grown through unbroken tradition of the town are 'Jaga and 'Akhada'. Such forums are meant for training the youths in physical exercises,



gymnastics, music and other social and ritual services of the Temple during 'Sahijata' commencing from the birth of Lord Rama and His coronation after killing demon Ravana. Each Sahi has traditional mode of participation spread over seven cantos of great epic 'Ramayana'. The lifestyle of the youths of traditional families of Puri are shaped considerably by such youth organisations. With the commencement of winter, the Sahi youth go to Jaga for massage, wrestling and other physical exercise. During such period they are refrained from taking any intoxication and observe complete celibacy (Brahmacharya). Thus Puri's traditional youth maintain a muscular and well-built body. Jagas also impart musical lesson particularly Odissi, Chhanda, Champu etc. with Mrudangam. Usually collective feasts are arranged in such Jagas, which is one of the major attractions to participate in Jaga activities. The apex bodies of such Jagas are Akhada, Kota etc. Apparently such organisations have been set up as military mechanism against invaders. The Puri people, mostly the youth mass, participate and play a major role in different festive events such as Ratha Jatra, Chandan Jatra, Jhulan Jatra etc. On the occasion of one noteworthy festival Chandan Jatra, during which the festive deity Madan Mohan go with a procession with their divine associates Panchu Pandava to Chandan Tank for pleasant boating, Puri people in general and youth of Jagas in particular participate with great enthusiasm which is a distinctive lifestyle of Puri people. Jhulan Jatra is another popular festival where Odissi music and 'Gotipua' dance are notable items performed by local people. Cultural involvement has been the most prominent feature of Puri people since centuries despite of several odd phases in the history.

Some of the traditional Puri people, though minimal in number, nurture a fond habit of domesticating or patronising pets and playing with them. Such pets include birds like Para (pigeons), Gobara (a small brown- coloured bird), parrot, animals like monkey, Neula (Mongoose) and even bulls. Occasionally they organise various contests among them. They look after the pets with much affection and care.

The daily routine of a traditional common Puri man begins with going to Jaga, taking full body massage and bathing in pond, taking heavy breakfast and going to respective profession to the temple or Lion's Gate for motivating pilgrims for Darshan of the deities, then going to home for food and fiesta and in the afternoon go to Jagas to paste and take Canavis Indica (Bhanga), go for open air toilet (Pokhari Pani) and bathing in pond. Habitually they wear Dhoti and Punjabi and walk in majestic style with swinging shoulder called 'Mani Bimana Chali'.

The dialects of Puri people is peculiar with a commanding personal touch usually qualified by some obscene words called 'Do-akhari' by which they don't mean anything but it is their style of speaking. Sometimes people take exception to it. However, they have the unique quality of establishing friendship with unknown man within no time.

They are respectful to the elders and lovable to the youngsters but become arrogant while dealing with other professional rivals while with pilgrims. They always prefer to remain with friends and show more interest in collective feasts in different picnic places in and around the town. Most of the traditional Puri people are expert in cooking.



In family life, the traditional Puri people are orthodox to some extent though they are not captives of blind-beliefs or narrowness. This contradictory attitude was possible due to their constant exposure to wider public life. While on one hand they try to retain their distinct identity that is bound to age-old custom and tradition, on the other they make themselves comfortable with relatively modern lifestyle without surrendering their originality. Rather, they encash upon modernity which is evident from the fact that some of the traditional Puri People, in particular the Sevayats, are equally successful in business at present while keeping continued their familial profession such as serving the Lord and the pilgrims.

In general the lifestyle of Puri people are distinctive and unparallel and tension-free. They enjoy even the adversities and usually do not get worried in personal problems. They assign everything to Lord Jagannath and believe that He will take care of everything.

The unworried attitude of Puri people in any problem, small or big, is sometimes construed as traditional incorrigible lethargy. They are complacent and lovers of leisure or entertainment. They sidetrack the problems particularly relating to family and get involved in collective merry-making. This speaks of, apparently, social irresponsibility, but if viewed with deep insight, it is a unique mental makeup not comparable with common psychosis of people of other places. Usually on any small problem, others get worried and run places for solution of the same. Not that Puri people are

totally oblivious of their problems but the only distinctive factor, they usually do not get perturb and face it gracefully with a spirit of tolerance. A spirit of carelessness or Nawabi attitude by which they take day-to-day matters with utter casual manner without considering the next consequence is another facet of their personality.

In a world of problems, crimes, sex nuisance and apprehension all around of terrorist attack, the lifestyle of Puri people can definitely be construed as distinctive and perhaps the only panacea for this tension-torn present society. A sense of fraternity, which is emanated from the Supreme Lord Jagannath, the Puri people are friendly and embrace everybody with a sense of fraternity. They get distinctive pleasure in extending hospitality to outsiders, which is a noteworthy distinctive attitude of Puri people.

Though with the onslaught of modern culture, rapid urbanisation, commercialisation, consumerism, socio-economic traumas and spread of hatred and narrow feelings, the basic tenets of Puri culture are gradually being shattered. But still considerably a sizeable amount of it remains to which we may identify as the true distinct feature of Puri and its people.

Sarat Chandra Mohapatra is the Secretary in the Sri Jagannath Research Centre, Puri-7.