



Jagannath : The Epitome of Supreme Lord Visnu

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In the cosmological trinity, Visnu is the name given to the cohesive or centripetal tendency. All that in the universe tends toward a centre, toward more concentration and more cohesion. More existence, more reality, all that tends toward light, toward truth, is the Visnu tendency. Visnu pervades all existence, hence He is known as the Pervader. The name Visnu comes from the root *visir*, which means "to spread in all directions," to pervade. As the inner cohesion through which everything exists Visnu dwells in everything, owns everything, defeats the power of destruction." He is Visnu, he overcomes all.

All the qualities and attributes which are inherent in the nature of the pervader and which are found in his manifestations are symbolized by the different qualities and attributes of his image. The significance of the icon of Visnu is explained in the *Puranas* and several minor *Upanisads*. The two most common

representations show him sleeping above the Ocean on the coils of the Serpent Remainder (Sesa-naga) or standing with four arms and a number of attributes as the ruler of *Sattva*, the cohesive or centripetal tendency.

The worship of Visnu or Vaisnava cult was prevalent in Orissa long before the advent

of Shri Chaitanya. The 9th-10th century grants of Dandi Mahadevi and Tribhuvana Mahadevi, two renowned queens of the Bhauma Dynasty, tell that they were great followers of Vishnu. *Shrimad Bhagavata* had already been translated into Oriya before Shri Chaitanya came to Orissa. With the rule of Chodaganga Deva in 1078, Orissa also came in contact



with the Alvar School of *Vaishnavas*. Rai Ramananda was a learned *Vaishnava* poet who flourished even before Shri Chaitanya came to Orissa.

The *Padma Purana* describes twenty-four epithets of Vishnu (Kesava, Narayana,



Madhava, Govinda, Visnu, Madhusudana, Tribikrama, Vamana, Sridhara, Hrisikesa, Padmanabha, Damodara, Sankarsana, Vasudeva, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Purusottama, Adhoksaja, Narasimha, Achyuta, Janardana, Upendra, Hari, Krisna).

In Orissa, Narayana, Madhava and Krisna forms of Visnu have gained immense adoration. And all these forms have been symbolized in the form of Lord Jagannath. Lord Jagannath has been undoubtedly taken as the epitome of Supreme Lord Visnu.

He is the beloved Krisna Gopinath, He is Madhava, and He is Purusottama. He is the outcome of many shapings and reshapings by the religious cross-currents of this land.

The peculiar iconography of the wooden images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra with their thick and massive heads and stumps emerging out of the middle of the head; devoid totally of the legs, speaks of its tribal origin and character even to a layman. Long after the total integration of the Jagannath figures into Hinduism, their iconography persistently reminded the people of their origin.

During the period when the wooden image or images of Jagannath were accepted in the Hinduistic fold, the most popular Visnu images in Orissa were those of Madhava, who was also known as Nilamadhava, since those images were carved out of the black chlorite - black or blue being the body hue of Vishnu. Madhava, (as it is said earlier) is a standing form of Vishnu with four arms in which he holds (beginning from the upper left) a conch, a mace, a lotus (in Orissa, however, this lower right mostly displays the *varada-mudra*) and a discus respectively. A number of such images belonging to the 8th - 10th centuries

have been found and excavated in the valley of the river Prachi not far from Puri.

In the beginning of the present millenium therefore when the worshippers of Jagannath felt the necessities to explain to themselves and others this strange form and wooden character of their deity, they naturally thought first of Nilamadhava which was the most common form of Vishnu in those days. Initially the Lord was worshipped by Viswavasau, a Chief of the Sabara race. Bidyapati, a Brahmin emissary of king Indradyumna of Malava wanted to have a *darsan* of the Lord. He discovered the Lord. But the Lord vanished and a divine voice was heard to the king that the Lord would now no more be visible to the people in his Nilamadhava form which was appropriate only for the golden age of humanity (*Krtayuga*) but would instead assume a new shape more suitable to the prevailing time to be worshipped as a deity made of wood.

Why the wooden images of Jagannath etc. have exactly these peculiar and uncommon features, has also been explained either as the will of Visnu who himself appears as carpenter to fashion the images or as a result of the uncalled for curiosity of Gundicha, the legendary queen of Indradyumna, who opened the doors of the Carpenter's Workshop after the lapse of fourteen days whereas they were to remain shut up for three weeks, an act which offended the divine carpenter so much that he disappeared leaving the work unfinished.

The effort to explain the strange form and unusual substance (wood) of Jagannath which at no stage seem to have just been taken for granted is the beginning of the speculations, not only about the origin of Jagannath, but also about his true nature. Leaving aside here the question, how this wooden image was



identified with Visnu, we may recall that Jagannath has very often been characterized as the Buddha incarnation of Visnu in the Orissan literary tradition. Sarala Das, (first half of the 15th century A.D.) refers to this identification several times in his *Odia Mahabharata*. This tradition persisted and flourished in the works of the *Panchasakha* (beginning of 16th century A.D.) and others.

Buddha is not the only form of Visnu, with whom Jagannath is identified. There are sufficient evidences in the cult practices to show that atleast in a certain phase of his development, Jagannath has really been considered as identical with Narasimha, the man-lion. The *Purusottama Mahatmya* of *Skanda Purana* for example, mentions Narasimha as a combined form of all the three deities, Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra.

It was the Krisna incarnation, however, which was to succeed in the end partially due to the reason that, the cult of Krisna became increasingly popular in the beginning of 11th and 12th centuries in Bengal and Orissa owing to the tremendous influence of *Bhagavata Purana*. Latest by 1250 A.D. there stood three images in the temple of Puri, which were identified with Krisna, his elder brother Balarama and their sister Ekanamsa. The identification of Jagannath with Krisna was so popular that Sarala Das was inspired to evolve an interesting story about the material identification of the wooden image of Jagannath with the dead body of Krisna.

Gradually, the relationship between Krisna and Jagannath was changed. The Oriya poet Karttika Das, writing a little later in the same 16th century, tells us that it was Jagannath

who became the son of Devaki in the *Dvapara Yug* not the other way round.

That Jagannath is the *avatari* from whom all the ten *avataras* have emanated is propagated vigorously in the 17th century also by the poet Dinakrusna Das in his work '*Rasakallola*' and especially by Divakara Das in his *Jagannath Charitamrita* who declares Krisna to be only the 16th part (one Kant) of Lord Jagannath.

Kavindra Upendra Bhanja, the greatest of the Oriya poets, writing in the second half of the 18th century, describes the images of Jagannath etc. as shapeless, devoid of form being the *svarupa* of Visnu. Jagannath, to him, represents the *Nirguna* (non-qualified) form of God.

Thus the development of the concept of Jagannath is also the history of the development of philosophical speculations in Orissa.

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