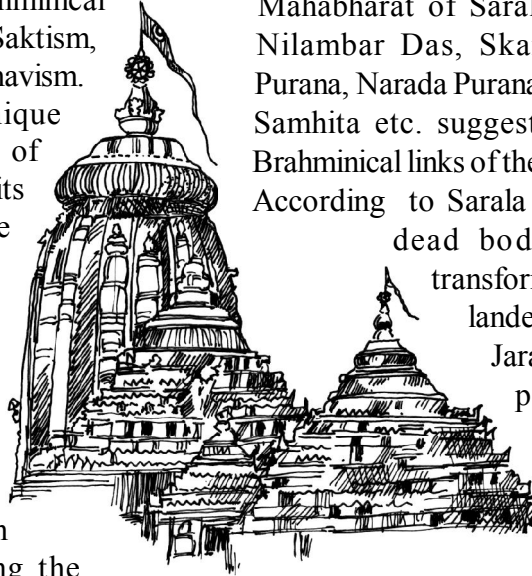




## Sri Jagannath Temple : The Nerve Centre of Orissan Culture

*Dr. Janmejaya Choudhury*

Jagannath cult exercises unique influence over the socio-religious-political life of Orissa. During the Ganga and Surya rules, Jagannath, so to say, became the state deity. Jagannath cult is an amalgamation of diverse religious cults like tribal religion, Brahminical religion, Buddhism, Saivism, Saktism, Tantricism and above all Vaishnavism. Lord Jagannath holds a unique place not only in the history of Orissa, but also in the lives of its people. To the millions of the Hindus of Orissa, Jagannath is their nearest kith and kin. But the origin of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of the holy city Puri, around whom the religious life of Orissa has evolved from hoary past has been shrouded in myths and legend. Analysing the legendary association of Jagannath with a class of aborigines called Sabaras, the peculiar nature of the wooden icon of the deity and his associates, Balabhadra and Subhadra, and association of a class of non-Brahmin priests called Daitas who are presumed to be of tribal origin with the worship of the deity, some scholars hold that Jagannath was originally a tribal deity.



If Lord Jagannath was tribal in origin, at what stage and how was He metamorphosed into a Hinduised deity? The legends regarding the origin of Jagannath, which have been recorded in various sources such as Mahabharat of Sarala Das, Deula Tola of Nilambar Das, Skanda Purana, Brahma Purana, Narada Purana, Padma Purana, Kapila Samhita etc. suggest the tribal as well as Brahminical links of the deity in the initial state. According to Sarala Das's Mahabharat, the dead body of Lord Krishna, transformed into wooden form, landed at the Puri sea shore. Jara Sabara, an aborigine, picked it up and worshipped it. Subsequently, Indradyumna, the king of Somavansa, got three wooden images made out of the log and built a temple for the deities. According to Deula Tola, Indradyumna, the king of Malava, got a piece of sacred wood, which was the metamorphosed shape of god Nilamadhava from the Sabara Chief named Viswvasu, and out of the wood he carved three images. Both the stories suggest the Vaishnavite origin of Jagannath. But Indradyumna, the hero



of these legends remains a legendary figure, and his historicity cannot be founded on any safe ground. Some have identified him with the Indradyumna of original Mahabharat and considered him to be very ancient figure of pre-Christian era. If we accept the version of Sarala's Mahabharat, we may feel inclined to identify him with Indrarath, the Somavamsi king of tenth Century A.D. But identification of Indradyumna with Indrarath is at variance with the long-accepted tradition that Yajati I the remote predecessor of Indrarath, built the Jagannath Temple at Puri. According to the Temple chronicles, when Yajati Keshari, who was a Saivite by faith, came to occupy the throne of Orissa, he enquired of the priests of Puri, 'Where is the Overlord' ? Whereupon the priests informed him that the great God Parameswara was kept hidden in Sunupura for fear of defilement in the hands of the invaders. Yajati Kesari retrieved the idol of Jagannath from under the earth and installed Him in a newly constructed temple in order to legitimatise his rule in the eyes of the people. Anantavarma Choda Ganga Dev, of the Eastern Ganga Dynasty also followed the same tradition. Chodaganga Dev hailed from the South, with Mukhalingam as his Capital. The Shiva Gokarneswara on Mahendragiri, was his family deity or Ista devata. But in course of the northward push of his empire, for strategic reasons he shifted his capital from Mukhalingam to Cuttack and reconstructed the Jagannath Temple of Puri to legitimise and stabilise his authority over Orissa. The famous Vaishnava Saint Ramanuja (1056-1136) visited Puri during his reign and is said to have introduced the Pancharatra System in the worship of Jagannath, Chodaganga Dev, who was described as a Shaivite in his earlier inscriptions, soon began to proclaim himself

as a Vaishnavite. Anangabhima Dev-III, his successor, during whose reign construction of some parts of the Temple were completed, in his 6th regnal year in 1216 A.D. called himself the "Son of Purushottam" or Jagannath. In his Puri inscription of 1237 A.D., Anangabhima Dev proclaimed Lord Jagannath, as the Emperor of Utkal and himself as only his Rauta or representative. Jagannath, identification as the State deity or Rastra Devata, was complete. In the changed context, the traditional tie between the State and Jagannath has snapped through the people of Orissa, still continue to look upto him as their Ista-Devata.

Some Scholars trace a Buddhist origin of the trinity of the Jagannath temple. It is said that the tooth relic of Lord Buddha is preserved in the image of Jagannath, that the three deities- Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra represent Buddha, Dharma and Sangha respectively, that all Snana Yatra and Ratha Yatra of the Sri Jagannath temple are of Buddhist origin and that the sharing of Kaivalya on equal footing by all castes is due to the Buddhist impact. There are some literary evidences of co-relation between Lord Jagannath and Buddhism. According to some scholars, Jagannath is a common epithet of Buddha. In Tibet, one of the names of Buddha is Jagannath. Jayadeva, the twelfth century Vaishnava poet who according to some scholars, identified Jagannath with Krishna or Vishnu also accepted Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Krishna or Vishnu. Sarala Das, the fifteenth century poet, in his Mahabharat, regarded Jagannath as an embodiment of Buddha. He wrote, "To deliver mankind, Jagannath has manifested himself in the form of Buddha", Daru Brahma Gita of Jagannath Deva says, "to assume the form of Buddha, the lord gave up his hands and legs." Some Oriya Vaishnavas



regarded Chaitanya as the partial manifestation of Buddha. In the Chaitanya Bhagavata of Iswar Das, Chaitanya is reported to have said, "I am Chaitanya in form of Buddha." Dr. Eschmann holds that in his earliest form as an image Vishnu, Jagannath was known as Nrushimha, the Lion incarnation of Vishnu. Her contention is based on the fact that the Nabakalabar ritual considers the Jagannath figure to be Narasimha. She says, "Narasimha is that iconological aspect of Jagannath, which recedes in the later theology; it can be easily associated with tribal cults and was probably instrumental for the development of Jagannath iconography."

Most of the scholars accepted that Jagannath was known as Purushottama. Vishnudharma, an unpublished Sanskrit manuscript of 3rd century A.D. says that Krishna was known as Purushottama in the Odra country. Vamana Purana, a work of seventh century A.D., refers to the Purushottama deity of Puri. Anargharaghavanatakam of Murari Mishra is a work of the middle or later part of ninth century A.D. describes Purushottama deity of Puri with his female consort, Kamala on lap. The Sarada Devi temple inscription of Maihar (Satna district of Madhya Pradesh) which is assigned to the middle of the tenth century A.D., also refers to the Purushottama deity of Odra country, located on the sea-shore. The literary and epigraphic sources affirm the reputation of the Purushottama deity of Puri in the tenth century A.D. The name Purushottama though an epithet of Vishnu, has Tantrik significance according to some scholars. It represents the erotic aspects of Vishnu. Purushottama is to be found with Laxmi, the female erotic partner. Jayadeva, in his Gitagovinda, dealt with erotic sports of

Krishna with Radha, and identified Radha with Kamala or Lakshmi, the consort of Narayan. Jayadev regarded Jagannath as Krishna. Subhadra was treated as Lakshmi in the Ganga period, and even afterwards. The Purushottama Mahatmya of Skanda Purana and Vishnu Purana referred to the female wooden image between Jagannath and Balabhadra as Lakshmi. Some Scholars are of opinion that the image of Jagannath has striking similarity with that of Ekapada Bhairava with one foot which is a manifestation of Siva, whose was prevalent during the Bhaumakara period. Some Tantrik texts refer to Puri as a seat of Shaktism, Vimala as the Shakti and Jagannath as his Bhairava. The prevalence of Saivism at Puri is proved by the existence of such Saiva shrines of Markandeswara, Pataleswar and Lokanath. The prevalence of Shaktism at Puri is borne out by the worship of Vimala inside the temple, and the existence of Saptamatruka image. The 'Utkal Khanda' of Skanda Purana describes Subhadra as the Shakti of Jagannath.

Basically the pre-Aryan autochthonous visionaries have laid the foundation of the Hindu spiritual thoughts. Even the concept of 'Soul' or the Divine ground is borrowed from the autochthonous seers and savants. The uniqueness of Lord Jagannath lies in the fact that originally a Deity worshipped by the autochthonous Sabaras, came to occupy the highest position in the Hindu Pantheon and came to be known as the Purushottama and in the process the cult absorbed all the major religious movements and philosophy which had swept the Indian sub-continent and has evolved a syncretism which is unique in character. This small treatise while emphasises on the autochthonous origin and isolates the tribal stands in the highly sophisticated cult, highlights the elements of the Nathsidha cult,



and other various cults like the Buddhist Tantric, the Sakta, the Shaiva and the various denominations of the Vaishnavites. While this work seeks to achieve nothing new, it highlights the all absorbing aspects of the cult of the Jagannath, which makes it so universal. Even Guru Nanaka had composed soulful hymns in praise of Lord Jagannath, when he had visited the temple. The sufi Muslims like Salbega and Javan Haridas were great devotees of the Lord. The iconography of Jagannath has enabled every denomination to see the God of his heart's desire in Him. The all embracing liberalism of the cult of Jagannath has also very intimately influenced the Orissan culture.

Orissa, in the pre-Chodaganga period was divided into four district cultural and political divisions, namely, Utkal, Kangoda, Kalinga and Kosala. Centering round

Jagannath, the political unification of Orissa, into one unit was brought about which ultimately helped full blossoming of Orissan culture, during the Solar Dynasty. Jagannath came to symbolise also the nationalist aspirations of Orissa, during the 19th and the early part of 20th centuries, when Orissa was lying dismembered under three separate administrative units, namely, Bengal, Central Provinces and Madras. So it will be no exaggeration to say that Temple of Jagannath has veritably been the nerve centre of Orissan culture.

---

Janmejaya Choudhury is the Lecturer in History, Sri Jagannath College, Kaipadar, Khurda.

