Srimandira

## Of Customs, Kings and Common Men

**'O**nce there was a king" - This wellknown statement has always been an open sesame to an imaginary kingdom vibrant with love, adventure, chivalry, wit and wisdom. King Solomon, King Arthur, King Vikramaditya and a lot others have left their indelible foot-prints on the sands of time as prototypes of the richness and variety that celebrate the very principle of life. This shipwrecked generation of ours can hardly conjure up the visions of those bygone days when intellectual aristocracy ruled the roost despite abject poverty brewing mischief around. Commoners thronged the streets to witness a procession led by a king in a full panoply. They stood enraptured when the pageant passed by amid a rich orchestra of colour, sound and scent. Its aesthetic aspect touched them to the core. The desire was both primeval and elemental. It gave them a sublime transport and a pleasant existence which is the result of a momentary trascendence. After all, one does not live by bread alone. Respect for the institution of kingship has been sanctified by tradition. All ancient literature, especially poetry has chosen kings as protagonists because of their irrestible appeal. Rightly does Shakespeare observe :

When Beggars die there are no comets seen, But heavens blaze forth, the death of kings.

It is sheer argumentative madness to wrench the above lines out of their proper context and to look for a political overtone therein. Life is larger than any doctrine and

## Prof. Markanda Chandra Mishra (Rtd.)

there can't be a why? to every feeling spontaneously welling up in man's breast. Love for what is grand and great is deeply ingrained in man and he derives a vicarious pleasure from spectacles of glory and grandeur without the least taint of malice or jealousy. So where else can they trace it in greater abundance if not in a king and his bearings? Monuments of flamboyant architecture and some masterpieces of world literature owe their origin and patronage to kings and emperors, who would otherwise have passed into oblivion. Hence the people go into ecstasy while uttering - Once there was a king.

During the spacious times of king Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva, Utkal stood at the top of her golden hours. He started the building of the temple of Lord Jagannath around 1135 A.D. In order to commemorate his victory over Utkal. It was he who initiated some seminal reforms in the administration of the temple for the first time. With a view to consolidating his sprawling regime which extended from the River Godavari in the south to the River Ganges in the north, he declared Shri Jagannath the state deity and carried out his kingly duties as His deputy. The dawn of a new era broke. The king was no more the sovereign lord. The repressed hostility towards an alien conqueror got sublimated in a quiet acquiescence. It was the Lord who was the catalyst. Sri Anangabhima Deva, another of his worthy successors dedicated his empire to Shri Jagannath and declared himself his most humble servant. His

## Srimandira

complete spiritual identification with the Lord earned him the unique appellation of THAKUR RAJA, which has since been applied to every Gajapati King. An offence to the king was viewed as an offence to their Beloved Lord. In these days of shifting paradigms of morality we can hardly imagine how it all happened. The kings were always benevolent and charismatic. Decentralisation of power was not unknown. Democracy ceased to be a drunken Cleon, surrounded by an yelling mob.

Thus the twilight ushered in by the Ganga Kings broadened into high noon during the reign of those of the Solar Dynasty. Under the unstinting patronage of the Gajapatis a cultural renaissance overtook Utkal with Puri as its cradle. Mystic poets scaled new heights of metaphysical speculations taking Sri Jagannath to be the main motif or theme. Puranas and epics, coloured by the contemporary milieu, were composed in order to cater to the growing needs of the people. Music, dancing, art etc. were all spiritualised by virtue of their ritualistic association within the Lord. The mellifluous melody of Gita Govindam resounded inside the sanctum sanctorum to the nimble foot-steps of 'Devadasis'. However, military valour was never relegated to the background in spite of Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramanand - two major prophets of the period.

Misfortunes started raining on Utkal by and by, but the kings and their people bore it all bravely. They protected the Lord and his culture from the rapacious greed of marauding bands bent upon destroying all that was good. As saviours they were as good as the Lord Himself.

Customs die very hard and harder still is the extinction of a trait which is so inextricably woven into the very psyche of the Oriyas. The Gajapati Maharaja or the Thakur Raja is just not an individual, but a phenomenon. He is the epitome of an emotional and intellectual complex - a reminder of the glory that was Orissa and the grandeur that was Puri.

The present Maharaja, His Royal Highness Sri Dibyasingha Deva IV, the scion of the mighty line referred to above, was born in 1953 and coronated king in 1970. As per tradition he had to drop his earlier name Kamarnava. It is customary to adopt one from a panel of four names only by rotation. The order is : Rama Chandra, Birakeshari, Dibyasingha and Mukunda. The queens do also follow the same regular pattern, the order being - Rani Saheba Padmavati Patta Maha Dei, Suryamani, Lilavati and Chandramani. H.H. Dibyasingha graduated from Delhi University with a degree in Law and did his P.G. programme at the north-western University of Chicago, U.S.A. He got married to a princess related to the royal family of Kashmir in 1978. Having practised law for about 5 years in the Delhi High Court and The Supreme Court of India he returned to the fold of his first Love- Sri Jagannath of Puri. His palace, popularly known as SRI NAHAR, an organic part of the temple so far as rituals are concerned, stands majestically beside the Grand Road only a few yards away from the Lion's Gate. A glance at the blue wheel (Nila Chakra) is inevitably alternated by one at the solemn facade of Sri Nahar guarded by two rampant lions brooding over the glory that has departed. But to an average Oriya, 'though much is taken, much abides.' The Maharaia of Puri is the first servitor of the Lord. In fact he is the prime mover of all important rituals and festivals including the world-renouned Car Festival. His role

Srimandira

becomes prominent and public on occasions like the Car Festival (Ratha Yatra) Return festival (Bahuda) and Bathing festival (Snana Yatra) when he performs the symbolic act of sweeping (Chhera pahanra) before the functions get off to a colourful start. The people of Orissa do not look upon him as a person shining in reflected glory by reasons of his birth and association with the Lord. He is a veritable part of the Lord Himself flashing a glimpse of His divine glories (Bhibuti). In common parlance the Maharaja of Puri is the Chalanti Vishnu or mobile god. In Bhagabad Geeta the Lord says :

Know Me as Ucchisravas, born of nectar, among horses;

Among lordly elephants

I am the Airavata ; And among men, THE KING. (Ch.X-27)

Yet he is an humble servant of the Lord - the topmost bonafide servitor heading a list of around 140 different categories of functionaries mentioned in the Records concerned. A crowned servant of gueer icons ! Inscrutable are the ways of the Lord. During his occasional visits into the precincts of the great Temple the treatment meted out to him is commensurate with that rendered unto the Lord. Of course time has its toll on the paraphernalia but the Kahali (pipe, blown), Chhati (wellwrought umbrella) and Suna Beta (gold-cane) reign supreme still. On Car Festival he glides like an angel in his sumptuous "Tamzan" (palanquin) led by a caparisoned elephant and ceremonially armed attendants amid chanting of soulful Vedic hymns. Surging crowds rend the sky with cries of victory. It is indeed a day when they have a tryst with their great tradition and culture. The king's meditative posture before the images followed by the long awaited "sandal-sweeping" (Chhera

Pahanra) of the chariotfloor wafts up a vibration too intractable for words.

The very dynamics of Hindu culture which is essentially humanitarian and flexible also characterizes Sri Jagannath culture. Equality and fraternity provide the pillars on which it rests. Religion, philosophy and rituals constitute three major strands of the same river which quietly flows as the religion of man. "Cult" is too poor a word to contain its vast expanse. The Republic of Gods noticed inside the great temple prove it beyond any reasonable doubt. The absence of hierarchy among the 'Sevayats' of various castes and the status assigned to "Mahaprasad" are cases in point. The present Maharaja of Puri is wedded to the mission of propagating this eternal culture both inside the state and outside, through lectures, discourses and tours. New centres of Jagannath Consciousness, the essence of which is unflinching faith and pure devotion, are sprouting up in every nook and corner of the world in the form of temples and societies. Gracing such occasions as a spiritual ambassador he is trying to usher in a renaissance of peace, bliss and brotherhood in a world torn by strife and unrest. As the chairman of the Temple Managing Committee he is trying hard to initiate certain seminal measures for the benefit of the million pilgrims visiting Puri every year. His uncommon bonhomie, unfrozen geniality and passionate eloquence have swayed people irrespective of their status.

May the Lord fulfil Himself through him for many more years !

May the posterity go into raptures while uttering - Once there was a king !

> SATYASRI Subhadra lane, Puri