



## Of Customs, Kings and Common Men

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"Once there was a king" - This well-known 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 transcendence. 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 irresistible 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

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



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 Maharaja 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-renowned Car Festival. His role

