



Jagannath Worship in North-Eastern India

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Jagannath, the Lord of the universe, is worshipped not only in Orissa but also in different parts of India since ancient times. Historical sources in the form of literature, epigraphs, art, paintings, temples, folk tradition etc, do indicate the worship of the God from early historical period. With the erection of Jagannath temple in different parts of India, Jagannath has assumed pan-Indian popularity and the Car Festival has become a national festival. The temple of celebrated sacred centre in India, has been attracting pilgrimage from the nook and corner of India throughout the ages. In this paper, an attempt have been made to highlight the spread of Jagannath cult in various parts of eastern India, (except Orissa) including statas of north-east India, specifically in Assam, Manipur and Tripura in a historical perspective.

JAGANNATH WORSHIP IN ASSAM :

The state of Assam, earlier known as Prag-Jyotisha and Kamarupa had intimate socio-political-cultural contact with Kalinga (Orissa) at least from early historical period. We are not certain as to when and how Jagannath cult became popular in Assam. However, an analysis of Kalika Purana (datable to 11th century or may be earlier) make us to understand that at the time of the compilation of the celebrated text of Kamarupa, Jagannath was already popular in various parts of India. The Kalika Purana is perhaps the earliest literature of Assam, in which reference to Jagannath can be gleaned. The work states that the first Brahmanical tantrik pitha in India originated

and developed in Odradesa (identified with Oddiyana or modern Orissa), where the Goddess resides in the form of Odresvari Katyayani and her consort as Odesa Jagannath. The Yogini Tantra, a tantrik text of Kamarupa of 16th century further mentions the greatness of Jagannath, and attempts to link the celebrated Hayagriva image of Kamarupa with that of Jagannath at Puri. The work throws an account on the origin of the stone image of Hayagriva Madhava, the celebrated vaisnava pitha of Assam, in the light of the story of the wooden images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra of the great temple of Puri as recounted in the Brahma Purana. The text mentions that king Indradyumna of Orissa dreamt at night regarding a big nameless tree, which would come floating by the sea shore and he was to take an axe, and cut it into seven pieces, out of which two pieces of wood were taken to Kamarupa, to prepare images of Visnu and still another piece to Manikuta, the latter to be converted into an image known as Hayagriva Madhava. All the three images were of stone wood - Silamaya Darumaya. The Assamese work, Manikuta of 1686 A.D. repeats the same tale. It is to be noted here that Yogini Tantra has been strongly influenced by the Brahma Purana, which centered round Jagannath worship. The system of worship of various mantras of Hayagriva worship in the final chapters of the Yogini Tantra are based on or copied from the code of Jagannath as given in the Brahma Purana. In fact, those who are incharge of the administration of Hayagriva Madhava temple affairs have tried to keep



the traditional similarity between their temple and the Jagannath temple at Puri. Even it has been the custom to care visitors on the entrance of the Hayagriva Madhav temple at Hajo, near Gauhati as in the Jagannatha temple of Puri. Here, we may mention that both Kamarupa and Uddiyana (Orissa) were the primary pithas of Vajrayana and the temple of Jagannatha at Puri and the temple of Kamakhya, near Gauhati respectively were established on the spots bearing identical name Nilachala and this name is still attached to both the celebrated shrines.

The Buranjis, historical literature of medieval Assam, while referring to Assam-Orissa contact, give some insight on Jagannatha worship in medieval Assam. One Assam Buranji, written by Harkanta Sadar Amin states that the Ahom King Suhungmung or Swarganarayana (c 1497-1539 A.D.) of Assam, after his successful conquest of Kamata kingdom, deputed one Chankham Ghar Sandikai as his envoy to instal Kamateswar (king of Kamata), on the throne of Koch Behar and ordered him to proceed to the Jagannatha Thakur (Puri) for worship and constructing a tank for the deity. It is recorded that on behalf of the king, the pilgrims offered to the deity Jagannatha, a gem, which the pilgrims said to have collected from a cobra at Suryapahar (Surya hill) in modern Goalpara district of Assam. The chornicle further mentions that Suhungmung had provided two hundred gold coins to the party, of which, forty were paid as bonus to the labourers engaged in excavating the tank, sixty to the Brahmins, sixty gold coins to the deity Jagannatha and remaining forty to the king of Orissa, the superintendent of the temple. In this connection, the text throws some light on the management system of the Jagannath temple at Puri and states that both the king

as well as the people of Orissa were the subjects of the Lord. It is also known as that the king was merely a servant of the God Jagannath and many families of Orissa depended for their livelihood upon the great temple of Jagannath. At least eighty nine thousand people used to take Mahaprasada (bhoga) of the temple everyday. For the worship of Jagannath, five hundred loads of dhupa and equal quantity of duna were required every year. The chronicle further mentions about the popular and famous legend of Kanchi-Kaveri, related to Jagannath temple. It is told that the visit to Jagannath Kshetra was arranged by the mission through Vikramisena, then king of Orissa. Chronologically, the contemporary of Suhungmung in Orissa was Prataprudradeva, the Gajapati ruler of Orissa, who was most probably referred to as Vikramisena in the Ahom Buranjis. But so far we do not have any idea whether Prataprudradeva was known as Vikramisena, in any literature of Orissa. Another Buranji entitled Purani Asam Buranji, said to have compiled in latter part of 17th century, corroborates the evidence of the excavating a tank by a Kamarupa Mission at Jagannath Kshetra in 1483 A.D. Thus, the Buranjis are not unanimous regarding the year of the visit of Kamarupa Mission to Puri. However, we have strong reasons to believe that most probably the Mission visited Puri during the end of fifteenth or beginning of sixteenth century A.D.

A mention has been made of Lord Jagannath in biographical literature of Sankaradeva, the great reformer of mediaval Assam. Sankaradeva is said to have visited the Jagannath Dham, Puri twice, first in 1490 A.D. and then in 1550 A.D. In those days, the holy Jagannath



Kshetra was the seat of Vaisnava inspiration, where Vaisnavas and Bhakti reformers from all parts of India used to assemble. We are told that while staying at Puri, Sankaradeva used to read and explain the Brahma Purana, which mainly centered round the cult of Jagannath to the priest of the God and other people. Aniruddha Kayastha, a Vaisnavite writer of seventeenth century has beautifully described how Sankaradeva visited Puri, served the feet of the Lord Jagannath for a long time and returned to his native place (Assam) after receiving agnya or divine orders. Ramananda Dvija, another biographer, further states that once he visited the temple of Jagannath at Puri, Sankaradeva resolved not to bow down his head to any other deity. It is also known that Sankaradeva received a copy of Bhagavata Purana from one Jagadish Misra, who came from Puri to Assam at the bidding of Lord Jagannath to recite the scripture before Sankaradeva. Vaisnava chronicle, Kathagurucarita informs that after having received the Bhagavata Purana, Sankara celebrated Jagannath in twenty-one kirtanas. The Uresa Varnana section, which seems to be the earliest kirtana of Sankaradev, describes the mythological origin of the images of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannth. The story of king Indradyumna and the installation of three deities, Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra have also been described. The twenty first kirtana speaks of the results that accrue from singing the glory of Lord Jagannath and taking Mahaprasada. Daityari Thakur, another biographer, while referring to worship of Jagannath by Sankaradeva records how at the instruction of Sankaradeva, an image of Jagannath was made by one Karala Badhai, an artisan and was installed at Dhuwahat and at the time of Sankar's departure from

Dhuwahat, this image was left on a tree, later to be installed by Vamsigopala, a Vaisnava guru in his Debarapar Sattrra. In other writings of Sankaradeva like Ajamil Upakhyana, Anadi Pataka and Sansara Chakra, the greatness of Jagannath is reflected. Another work, entitled the Ghunucha Kirtana, composed by Sridhar Kandli, a celebrated medieval Assamese poet of 16th century A.D. also made people familiar with the episodes of Jagannatha. Reference to worship of Jagannath can also be noticed in the writings of British period as well as in archaeological source of Assam. We are informed that the tribal ruler of Assam, Krishnachandra of Cachari family of Cachar of 18th century was a great worshipper of Kali and Jagannath. The British record of 19th century also attests to the fact that Kali, Jagannath and Vasideva were the principal deities worshipped by the local people of Assam.

Regarding, archaeological sources, mention may be made of a copper land grant dated Saka 1709 (A.D. 1787) found at a Vaisnava institution at Gauhati near Ketakibari Sattrra, which in its preamble mentions that a vighraha of Jagannath was given to a Brahmin along with the donated land and the Brahmin donees have been specially instructed to perform daily bath along with Nama-kirtana for three times daily and recitation from the Bhagavata in the Sattrra. Representation of the deity Jagannath is also noticed in the scruptural art as well as folk art of Assam. Even a few temples dedicated to God Jagannath can be noticed, particularly in lower Assam region. A famous old Jagannath temple is reported from a village Mitani near Khetri railway station in modern district of Kamarupa, where wooden icons of Jagannatha, Balabhadra and Subhadra are



worshipped daily. The four wheels of Mahaprabhu's stone chariot can be located near the temple and the festivals like the Snana-yatra, Dalo-yatra and Ratha-yatra are regularly held here. Temples of Jagannath are also noticed in the village Belbari, Kotalkuchi and other parts of Kamarupa.

The cult of Jagannath became so popular in Assam that the Assamese womenfolk not only composed prayer songs eulogizing the glory of Lord Jagannath, but also performed various ceremonies regarding the deity. One of the prayer songs, known as Jagannatharnam, is said to be popular in Kamarupa area, in which songs of Jagannath are sung by the womenfolk every evening during the whole month of Vaisakha. The song reflects the popular belief that in the beginning of the year i.e. the month of Vaisakha, Lord Jagannath pays a visit to the village to rescue the people from epidemics, financial hardship and brings prosperity and happiness to the royal family as well as to the common people. Hence for his propitiation, the prayer service is held in the beginning of the year. The ceremony is generally held by the roadside under a wood apple or banyan tree, otherwise a tulasi or young plantain tree is planted in the courtyard of the house to perform the said ceremony. In this ceremony, a small pedestal of earth surrounding the tree or the plant is raised, in which a naivedya (offerings) of rice, mangudal, varieties of fruits, earthen lamps, incense and a pair of arecanuts and betel leaves are kept as offering to the deity. The prayers continue for about an hour and after the prayer, the naivedya is distributed among the devotees.

A unique form of ceremony performed in honour of Lord Jagannath in

various villages of Kamarupa is the mock marriage of the deity. In the village Chamarkuchi of district Kamarupa, this ceremony is held regularly. There are two nam-ghars in the village, which play an important role in the mock marriage ceremony. On the Chaitra Sankranti, four plantain trees are erected in four corners of each nam-ghar and from that prayers are held regularly with the offering of naivedya to Jagannath for the whole month of Vaisakha. The mock marriage takes place on the Vaisakha Sankranti i.e. the last day of the ceremony. On the day preceding the marriage, two young banana plants are fixed vertically on a raft made of banana trunks, in one of the nam-ghars. Of the two plants, one is considered as bridegroom i.e. the Lord Jagannath and the other as 'bestman' of the marriage. In the same manner, three young banana plants, symbolic of the bride Ghunucha, her mother and friend are kept in the other nam-ghar of the village. All the five banana plants are bedecked with vermilion, flowers and garlands. On the next day, the mock marriage takes place with Sastric rites and social customs. Rituals like fetching of water, Sraddha ceremony, bridal procession and tying of nuptial knot are performed. At the end of the ceremony, the banana plants representing the 'pair' and their attendants are immersed. During the mock marriage, Nandi-sraddha i.e. paying homage to ancestors of the groom and bride is also performed. It is followed by another simple ceremony known as Duni-bhananam. Duni (Droni) is represented by a bamboo basket in which rice, potatoes, betel nuts and coins etc. are kept on the occasion of Nandisraddha. These articles are preserved till the fifth, seventh or ninth day after the marriage day, when certain devotional folksongs are sung by the womenfolk in honour of Jagannath. At the



end of the ceremony, the articles offered to Lord Jagannath and contained in Duni and naivedya are distributed among the womenfolk. In some places, particularly in village Sandheli of Nalbari subdivision and Sundandiya of Barpeta, a kind of religious fair, known as Jagannathar Sabha is held where the womenfolk use to collect money and rice from the neighbouring villages and offer prayers.

JAGANNATH WORSHIP IN MANIPUR :

In the north-eastern state of Manipur, the influence of Jagannath cult is clearly noticed in the socio-cultural life of Manipuri Hindus. Though Vaisnavism entered Manipur fairly early, it was not the religion of the masses till the beginning of 18th century. King Charai-Rongba (1697-1709) was the first king of Manipur who was formally initiated into Vaisnavism. It is told that a Brahmin named Rai Vanamali, an authority on the cult of Radhakrishna arrived in Manipur in 1703 A.D. from Sveta Ganga, Puri (Orissa) and he initiated the king and many of his subjects into the fold of Vaisnavism. However, the earliest reference to Jagannath and Ratha yatra in Manipur is known from the time of Manipuri king Gambhira Singh, who is said to have started the Ratha yatra festival in 1832 A.D., locally called as "Kangchinba". The darbar of Manipur Maharajas used to make special allotment of funds for the celebration of various Hindu festivals including that of Ratha yatra every year. The main Ratha yatra starts in Manipur from Sri Gobindinji temple, near the palace of the king at Imphal. All the rites and rituals as observed at Puri during the Ratha yatra are followed in Manipur. Even icons of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra all made of wood of 19th century and early part of 20th century have been noticed in Manipur. An image of

Jagannath is located at Bijoygovinda, Imphal, where the deity is shown having arms but no hands and the body is leg-less and the head is almost that. The deity is painted with black colour. Balabhadra and Subhadra are also of the same form except the difference in size and white colour. Even today the cult of Jagannath is followed by the Vaisnavas of Manipur, who consider Puri, the abode of Jagannath as the holiest of the holy.

JAGANNATH WORSHIP IN TRIPURA :

In the state of Tripura, we do get some references about the worship of Jagannath. Here it is interesting to note that, the Tripura Maharaja Kalyanmanikya performed Tulapurusanam, Mahadanam, Kapitadanam and during the performance of Tulapurusanam, many renowned scholars from Mathura, Benaras, Orissa and Setubandha arrived in Tripura and received awards and Dakshinas from the king in or around 1600 A.D. This reference provides some clues regarding cultural contact of Orissa with Tripura in medieval period. It is worthy to note that Maharaja Krishnamanikya, the Manikya ruler of Tripura is said to have donated fifteen dronas of land to the Brahmins to conduct the daily puja of Lord Jagannath in Tripura era 1186(1766 A.D.). This is perhaps the earliest historical reference to Jagannath worship in Tripura. In fact, a few Jagannath temples of 18th-19th century, built by the members of royal family are reported from Tripura.

Thus, a perusal of historical datas throw light on the spread of Jagannath cult in various regions of eastern India. The literature of British period attests to the fact that people from Assam, Bengal,



Bihar and neighbouring states used to visit the holy city of Puri, to worship Jagannath and witness the famous Ratha yatra. It is significant to note that as early as 10th century or so, the popularity of Jagannath as a celebrated deity, was known to the people of Assam. But when and how the cult spread to different parts of eastern India and even to other parts of India is a matter of academic research. We hope that further studies on the spread of Jagannath cult in various parts of India as well as outside India (like Bali island), should be undertaken at the right earnest, so that we can know more about the importance of the cult of Jagannath, the greatest symbol of Oriya culture.



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