



Anthropomorphism in the culture of Lord Jagannath

● Dr. Balaram Das

The holy land of Orissa belongs to numerous Gods and Goddesses. Since time immemorial many a folk deity are worshipped in addition to the Vedic and Puranic ones. But the prominent deity among them in Orissa is Lord Shri Jagannath. In the Psyche of the Oriya nation Shri Jagannath is not only regarded as the greatest of Gods but is treated as a King who is loved the most. That is the reason why the culture related to Jagannath is anthropomorphic in nature.

The culture of Jagannath is a vast one. In it are assimilated the religion, philosophy, social mores, rituals and tradition and culture of Orissa. Like the ocean, the expanse of this culture is so vast and the depth so significant that the inquisitive Mind is annoyed while taking a dip into it. For centuries this culture has accepted in the journey of its glorious evolution whatever has come on its way as beneficial and the best. As a result this culture has gone beyond the narrow limits of all other cultures as has become a culture marked by hospitable openness. The generosity and nobleness of this culture have been the inspiration behind its anthropomorphism. The significance can be felt in the system of worship, offerings and the festivals related to the Lord.

The great Lord Shri Jagannath is not only worshipped as God but also the king of Orissa. While at the core of the Oriya nation was nothing but the echoes of despair resulting from exploitation and coercion from the foreign aggressors, Shri Jagannath was the only symbol of faith who generated the indomitable

spirit for survival. The divided Orissa could re-establish her political unity as a whole only banking upon Jagannath as the centre. The feudal Lords were reunited and reorganised forgetting all their past differences and mean rivalry. That helped the Gajapati Kings of Orissa to gain strength and resources to fight the external forces. In Orissa Jagannath is the Lord, the sovereign in every body's thinking. The ordinary laymen and the men of letters all think in the above way about the Lord. That is why in his rituals (from leaving the bed to going back to it again at night) Jagannath is treated more as a human being than a God. Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh has aptly said that, "Jagannath is the God of the people among all Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Among all the deities of this subcontinent Jagannath has evolved out of the spiritual wishes of the ordinary man. If the common people of Orissa have ever been benefited by the patriot kings it has been because of the ideologies of Jagannath. He was the real Lord of the vast Gajapati empire. The kings and Lords have never thought of their kingdoms as personal wealth to be consumed at their whims. Rather they have treated their states as trust property. Since Jagannath has entered in to the life of Oriyas as a native, the Oriyas in turn have offered the best of their culture in His service like dance, poetry and epic, culinary art and the precious luxury items".

Just as the kings hold their courts everyday and the common man enjoys the right to meet the king in the court with his appeals, the system in the culture of Jagannath offers the same kind of facility. Shri



Jagannath grants to every body from a close proximity. This 'Darshan' open to all without discrimination is called 'Sahanamela'. During this period any body can come to him freely, express his miseries, touch the throne called "*Ratna Singhasana*" and get the rare opportunity of communicating with Him.

On the "*Ratna Singhasana*", Shri Jagannath is accompanied by the elder brother 'Balabhadra' and sister 'Subhadra'. That means his fond brother and sister are staying with Him. Mahalaxmi, though she is the wife of Jagannath, is worshipped in a separate temple and does not stay on the "*Ratna Singhasana*". Because, in Oriya cultural system, the younger brother's wife and the elder brother can not stay together. That apart the sweet human relationship between brother and sister is reflected in the culture of Jagannath.

Among the twelve annual festivals of Sri Jagannath the important ones are '*Chandana Yatra*', '*Snana Yatra*' and '*Ratha Yatra*'. In all these three festivals the human aspect of the culture is more evident. It is very hot in the month of '*Baisakha*' (Summer). Because of heat, Jagannath suffers like an ordinary human being inside the shrine of '*Bada Deula*'. To be relieved of that suffering, the '*Chandana Yatra*' of the Lord begins. This is a twenty one days long festival, beginning on the day called '*Akshaya Trutiya*'. All these twenty-one days, the deities are treated with cool ingredients like sandal wood paste and camphor.

With a cool composure, under the cool air, across the cool water of 'Narendra Sarobara', Madan Mohan, representative of Sri Jagannath Mahaprabhu, along with Sridevi, Bhudevi, Rama, Krishna and Pancha Pandva (five Shivas viz. Lokanatha, Jameswara, Markandeswara, Nilakantha and Kapala Mochana) plays water sports. This

makes the unbearable Summer bearable. On the occasion of '*Snana Yatra*', the deities ascend over the bathing platform, known as '*Snana Mandap*'. As they bath in the ice-cold water of the well, they suffer from cold and fever. They retire to the '*Anasara*' chamber meant for rest and convalescence for a fortnight. All usual rituals are kept suspended during this period. He rests in this solitary enclosure taking medicines and restrained diet. He does not give darshan to anybody nor listens to any body's appeal during this phase. Perhaps in no ritual related to other deities one comes across such anthropomorphic treatment and its symbolic excellence.

Ratha Yatra (Car festival) is treated as the best yatra among all the festivals of Shri Jagannath. It starts from the second of the bright lunar phase of '*Ashadha*' (*Asadha Shukla Dwitiya*) (June to July). This yatra celebrates His visit to Gundicha Temple accompanied by His brother and sister in three different chariots. As if to listen to the endless voices of conflicts and miseries of the mass. He embarks upon this journey outside His abode 'Sri Mandira'. Since He is treated as a fond kin by every body in Orissa, He comes down to the Grand road outside to greet them all. Since He does not ask Laxmi, His wife to join Him in this trip, she feels neglected. Irritated one breaks portions of His *Rath* (Car) parked close to the Gundicha Temple. This rite is observed on the day called '*Hera Panchami*'. On His return journey by chariot on the road side after 'Balagandi' comes the house of His Aunt, a small temple compared to the huge structure of the Temple of Lord Jagannath, it appears to be a small hut. Whether She lives in a hut or under a tree, She is His Aunt. How can He come back without meeting her, without exchanging fond words with her ! What would She think of Him !



A great man - so He ignored her. That is why Jagannath stops for a while near "Mausi Ma Temple", on His way on the chariot. After sharing some feelings with Her, He resumes His journey. The feelings of love, anger, expectation and neglect among Gods and Goddesses related to the culture and religion of Lord Jagannath are structured in semblance with that of the ordinary human beings. The whole culture of Jagannath is orchestrated with human feelings.

'Shri Mandira', the Temple of Lord Jagannath is a lovely symbol of our familiar culture. In spite of being a God, Shri Jagannath is more related with the norms and mores of the society of men. That is why He suffers if He takes a bath in cold water. His body is scorched by the heat of the summer Sun. In winter he needs winter clothes. In 'Shri Mandira', the little quarrels usual to married couples too happens. Mahalakshmi has to bear the insults from Her husband as She had accepted the offerings of Shriya (a woman of lower caste). She even goes to Her father's palace leaving Jagannath in a state called '*Lakshmichhada*'. In place of sixty tonnes, his due, he does not get even sixty grains of rice. He faces trouble when He finds the main entrance of the Temple (Sinhadwara) locked by angry Laxmi on His return from car festival. If one watches all these, one can feel that Jagannath in His temple lives the life of a 'Grihastha', a husband Lord in an Indian household. So in the rituals of His worship there is more of familiar human feelings than divine awe.

'Nabakalevara' is a great festival in the religion and culture associated with Lord Jagannath. This too is an extreme and supreme expression of human consciousness. On the eve of 'Nabakalevara', the new idols are built for four deities

(Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsana). After the 'Brahma' is replanted into the newly built idols the old ones are buried in the premises of 'Koili Baikuntha'. The 'Daitapatis', the first kins of the Lord observe '*asoucha*', a kind of mourning for the buried deities. They observe the rituals similar to what is observed in family after the death of a member. Except Shri Jagannath (alongwith Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarsana) no Gods or Goddesses change bodies in such manner, nor the ablution etc. Followings of one's death are observed in their cases. This rituals is totally anthropomorphic in nature. The 'Nabakalevara' of Shri Jagannath tells the whole world that even God incarnated on earth in the form of human body has to die, like birth, death is inevitable in this world. On this earth everything dies, except death itself. That is why it touches man and God irrespectively. Even Lord Jagannath is not free from this final consequence of life.

A study of all the aspects of the culture of Jagannath proves that the human expression and signs of the human are more prominent in it than that of the divine. That is the reason of the global popularity of this culture not as noble culture in itself but as a culture, signifying human goodness. Lord Jagannath is a mystery and more mysterious is the culture of Jagannath. But the anthropomorphism involved in the culture keeps it alive through centuries. And for centuries the rhapsody of human feelings embedded in this culture will be vibrating in the hearts of millions.



**Convent Area
V.I.P. Road, Puri**