



Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Puri, into whose shrine sometimes curious visitors from the West, as it is reported in the Press, try to enter is today well-known all over the world. As a religious town Puri has drawn pilgrims from outside from ninth-tenth centuries A.D. onwards. There is mention of Jagannath as Purushottam and of Puri as Shrikshetra or Purushottam or Purushottam Kshetra or Shankha Ksherta in Sanskrit as well as Odia Puranas. Some of the Puranas which mention Puri and its presiding deity are mentioned here - Bamana Purana, Skanda Purana, Shiba Purana, Bruhat Nrusingha Purana, Utkal Mahatmya, Tantra Jamala, Brahma Purana, Kurma Purana, Padma Purana, Narada Purana, Sarala Das' Mahabharat and Nilamabar Das' Deula Tola etc. Some

Puranas highly glorify Puri and Purushottam. Bruhat Nrusingha Purana says: "There is no place on earth holier than Purushottam. It is a veritable paradise on earth; even gods aspire to see it". Shiva Purana says: "Purushottam is the only place on earth which can confer liberation from earthly bondage; it is the place where the Supreme Lord has assumed wooden form."¹

According to "Vishnudharma," an early Sanskrit manuscript (belonging to 3rd century A.D.) Krushna was known as Purushottam in the Odra country. Vaman Purana, a work of seventh century A.D. mentions Purushottam deity of Puri. Anargha Raghava Natakam of Murari Mishra, composed in mid-ninth century A.D. describes the Purushottam deity of Puri with consort Kamala

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on His lap. The Sarada Devi temple inscription of Maihar, which is situated in the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh and assigned to tenth century A.D. refers to the Purushottam deity of Odra country, located on the sea-shore. Literary and epigraphic evidences show the reputation of the Purushottam deity of Puri by the tenth century A.D. When Somavamshi rule was established in coastal Odisha in tenth century, A.D. in recognition of the importance of the Purushottam deity of Puri, Yayati-I (922 AD. to 955 A.D.) constructed a temple for the deity. Some scholars are of opinion that the sculptural remains of the Somavamshi period are still to be found in the premises of the Jagannath temple.



Vaishnavism appears to have spread in Odisha during the Mathara rule, i.e. from mid-4th century A.D. to the end of fifth century A.D. The propagation of Vaishnavism by Ramanuja and Jayadeva in the twelfth century AD reinforced the Vaishnavism of Odisha which had grown with Lord Jagannath as the central deity. Chodaganga Deva, who founded the Ganga empire in Utkal early in twelfth century A.D. attached due importance to the cult of Jagannath and raised a gigantic temple for the deity, even though personally he was a devotee of Shiva. He and his successors regarded Jagannath as their patron deity. A powerful Ganga monarch like Anangabhimadeva-III called his empire Purushottam Samrajya and himself the deity's Routa or deputy. The same importance of Purushottam-Jagannath continued in the Suryavamshi period. Kapilendra, the founder of the Suryavamshi dynasty claimed to have become the king of Utkal at the command of Purushottam²; he invoked the name of Jagannath in the day-to-day administration; he sought the blessings of the deity by visiting Puri for suppressing the rebellious feudatories.³ Purushottam, the son of Gajapati Kapilendra Deva, who became the next Gajapati, superseding his elder brother Hamvira according to the so-called wish of Lord Jagannath professed great devotion to the deity, gave costly presents to the deity after ascending the throne in 1497;⁴ he wrote Abhinava Gitagovindam for singing the glory of Lord Jagannath. Gobinda Vidyadhar, the Bhoi king who killed the two sons of Prataparudra and usurped the Gajapati throne in 1541 sought to secure people's allegiance by invoking Lord Jagannath; he threatened his rebellious feudatories with the wrath of the deity.⁵

During Ganga and Suryavamshi periods kingship and cult of Jagannath got inter-woven; calling themselves the Routas or deputies of Lord Jagannath, the kings justified their actions in His

name. In the words of Hermann Kulke, "Kingship became part of the cult and the cult became part of Orissan kingship and its main source of legitimation".⁶ The traditional practice of Chhera Panhara (ceremonial sweeping at the time of car festival by the Gajapati) is attributed by many to the acceptance of overlordship of Lord Jagannath. Kapilendra's usurpation of the throne and choice of Purushottam as the heir-apparent were legitimized by invoking the so-called will of Lord Jagannath.

The Puranas give a mythical account of the origin of Lord Jagannath which is not historically acceptable. These myths however suggest tribal as well as Vaishnavite links of the deity in hoary past. Analysing the legendary association of Lord Jagannath with a class of aborigines, called Sabaras, the peculiar nature of 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, many hold that Jagannath was originally a tribal deity. Ancharlott Eschmann holds that the Navakalevar i.e. the ceremony of renewal of the deity is a tribal custom, as practices of renewal of wooden deity are to be found among the primitive tribes like Saoras and Kandhas.⁷

'Jagannath', the name by which the deity is today known came to be used in literary texts and inscriptions at a later period. Perhaps it was first mentioned in the Sanskrit text Jnana Siddhi, a work of eighth century A.D., composed by Indrabhuti, a Tantrik Buddhist. Epigraphically speaking, it was for the first time used in a fourteenth century inscription of the Ganga king Bhanudeva-II. According to some, the word 'Jagannath' is derived from the tribal name of the deity 'Jaganta' or 'Jagun'. Some say that as Jagannath was identified with Buddha, the ninth



incarnation of Vishnu and that as Jagannath is one of the epithets of Buddha, the deity was called Jagannath. Though in Brahmanical literature Purushottam has been mentioned as the name of the deity, probably in popular parlance Purushottam and Jagannath were used interchangeably or together as Purushottam - Jagannath. Eschmann holds that in his earliest form as an image of Vishnu Jagannath was known as Nrusingha, the lion incarnation of Vishnu. Her contention is based on the fact that Navakalevar ritual considers Jagannath figure to be Nrusingha. She says: "Narasingha is that iconological aspect of Jagannath which recedes in later theology; it can easily be associated with tribal cults and was probably instrumental for the development of the Jagannath iconography".⁸

The name 'Purushottam' has always clung to the deity. 'Purushottam' represents the erotic aspect of Vishnu and is to be found with Laxmi. In Anargha Raghava Natakam Murari Mishra described Purushottam with Laxmi on lap. Jayadeva, the twelfth century poet who regarded Jagannath as Krishna, while describing the erotic sports of Krishna with Radha in Gita Govinda has identified Radha with Kamala or Laxmi. The Purushottam Mahatmya of Skanda Purana (a work of 13th century A.D.) and Vishnu Rahasya (a work of 16th century A.D) refer to the female wooden image between Jagannath and Balabhadra as Laxmi. Probably initially Purushottam-Jagannath was worshipped with Lakshmi; at a later stage Balabhadra and Subhadra were seated in the sanctum and Lakshmi was worshipped in a separate temple.

ShriChaitanya who was regarded by his devotees as the embodiment of Jagannath completed the process of identification of the deity with Krushna, begun by Jayadeva. Though overwhelmingly influenced by Vaishnavism, Puri in general and Jagannath temple complex in

particular bear the imprint of other religious movements such as Buddhism, Jainism, Shaivism and Shakti cult. Some Tantrik deities such as Vimala have been absorbed into the Jagannath system. The prevalence of Shakti cult at Puri is borne out by the discovery of Sapta Matraka image near Markandeya tank. Some Tantrik Buddhists like Indrabhuti attributed Buddhahood to Lord Jagannath. Others treated Lord Jagannath as a Tantrik deity. The Kalika Purana declares Jagannath and Katyayani as the presiding deities of Odrapitha (Puri).⁹ The Bata Avakasha of Balaram Das, the early sixteenth century poet holds that Jagannath is attended by sixty four yoginis, Katyayani, Saptamatruka, Vimala and Viraja. The Utkal Khanda of Skanda Purana describes Subhadra as the Shakti of Jagannath. The prevalence of Shaivism in Puri is borne out by the existence of Shiva temples like Markandeyeshwar, Pataleshwar and Lokanath. At one time these Shiva temples were looked after by the authorities of the Jagannath temple. In 1805 Charles Grome, the Collector of Puri observed: 'The Deul Purchas of the Temple of Jagannath were accustomed to superintend and manage the Thakurs, Nirsingnath and the five Mahadebs, Lokenath, Jumessur, Kapaul Mochun, Markund Isser, Nilkaunt Isser in the town of Poorshootum, besides all the other Thakoors which surround Juggunnath but now they have entirely neglected them, they should therefore be compelled to pay them the usual and customary attention.'¹⁰

So far as the influence of Buddhism on Jagannath cult is concerned, the deity himself has been identified with Buddha by Sarala Das and Jagannath Das. Sarala Das thus invoked Lord Jagannath: "You have appeared as Buddha in the Kaliyuga to redeem the sinners of the world".

Jagannath Das invoked the Lord as follows: "Oh Prabuddha you have appeared as



the incarnation of Buddha to turn away the mind' of people from the dharma of Vedas."

'It is said that the tooth relic of Buddha is preserved in the image of Jagannath, that the three deities - Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra represent Buddha, Dharma and Sangha respectively, that the Snana Yatra (bathing festival) and Ratha Yatra (Car festival) are of Buddhist origin. The sharing of Mahaprasad on equal footing by people of all castes high and low is attributed to Buddhist impact. Evidently there was a synthesis or compromise between Buddhism on one hand and orthodox Hinduism on the other hand and Jagannath cult bears its imprint.

From religious point of view a temple is meant for the worship of glorification of the transcendental power. But as a social institution it is bound to be influenced by the movements within the society. Jagannath Dharma as it is found today is the outcome of Sanskritisation of the indigenous tribal deity and culture. The sharing of Mahaprasad on equal footing by the people of all castes appears to be the result of a conflict or compromise between the socially deprived or subalterns and privileged sections, which is allegorically represented by Balaram Das, the leading figure of Panchasakha movement which was basically a heterodox movement in his poem Laxmi Purana. In this poem through the challenge of Goddess Laxmi to her husband Lord Jagannath and his elder brother, Lord Balabhadra by accepting the worship of an untouchable lady, named Shriya for which she was ousted from the temple. Balaram Das has advocated feminism, caste equality and primacy of material needs over

social status and gender inequality and articulated consciousness and identity of the oppressed.

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